

Thorne Mabel, Thorne Paul

# The Secret Toll



Mabel Thorne  
**The Secret Toll**

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**Thorne M.**

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# Mabel Thorne , Paul Thorne

## The Secret Toll

### CHAPTER I – THE TOLL IS EXACTED

"I'm damned if I give up a cent! I'll die first!"

"You very likely will. Others have. To refuse these people is the first step toward suicide."

"But are the police so impotent that a gang like this one can operate unmolested right under their very noses?"

"The police are efficient in ordinary cases. These people, however, operate mysteriously. So far, the police have been helpless."

The two men who thus discussed a criminal clique which was extorting money from prominent and wealthy citizens were seated in an exclusive Michigan Avenue club. From their deeply upholstered leather chairs they looked out across the busy street, with its hundreds of automobiles and strolling pedestrians, to the green lawns and leafing trees of Grant Park, awakened into renewed life by the soft breezes and warm sunshine of early June.

To the first speaker, Robert Forrester, lately returned from army service in Europe, and familiar with the privations, struggles and horrors of the great war, it seemed ridiculous that a band of criminals could endanger life in the heart of this bustling, crowded, well-policed city. Yet the threat was in his hand, and his older and presumably wiser companion assured him that they could make good the threat.

Robert Forrester was a young man of thirty – tall, dark and broad shouldered; his face deeply tanned by long army service. As a member of an old and wealthy family, of which he was the sole male survivor and head, Forrester might have followed the path selected by many of his boyhood chums and spent his life in the pursuit of pleasure or more or less indifferent occupations. He had chosen, however, to become a civil engineer; was graduated with honors, and had taken active part in the completion of several big railroad projects before the great war.

When the United States entered the war he at once enlisted and went to France as an army engineer. He had been home now for several months and was planning to resume work in his profession at the first opportunity. The financial and business condition of the country did not favor large construction work at this time, so he was still lingering in Chicago, spending much of his time at the club, where he could keep in close touch with some of the far-sighted and influential men who planned and made possible the big undertakings which would give him the opportunity he sought.

His companion and confidant of the moment, Frederick Prentice, was past middle age. The possessor of large, inherited wealth, he was totally unlike the younger and more energetic man. He had never entered business, and the only times he ever condescended to visit a business office were occasioned by infrequent plunges into speculation through a broker friend, or the necessity of calling on his lawyer.

In his easy-going, well-financed existence he had had few problems or worries. To Prentice the easiest way out was the logical course.

Forrester knew this as well as any man, and was therefore little inclined to heed the well-meant advice which Prentice was giving him – to yield without a murmur to the outrageous and exorbitant demand that had been made upon him.

The young man opened the clenched hand in which he had crushed the warning message when making his vehement declaration. He smoothed out the offending paper on his knee and glared at it – reading again the words that enraged him more each time he studied them. The message was crudely

hand-printed on a square of ordinary wrapping paper such as can be found in any store. At the top was the rough drawing of a human skull. Forrester read the words aloud.

**In Jasper lane two hundred feet west of Sheridan Road**

**you will see a great oak tree on the left side. Before midnight**

**Saturday place\$10,000 in the opening you will find in this tree**

**Failure to comply means death. Be warned!**

### **Friends of the Poor**

"On the other side," declared Forrester, "we lived and tramped and fought with spies and informers at our elbows. Enemy agents, ready to turn a dastardly trick at any moment, were on every hand. Though conditions were just ripe for them, sooner or later we spotted them – practically every one. Do you mean to tell me that here, in a peaceful, law-abiding city, with trained police and intelligent detectives, we can't run down a blackmailing crew like this one?"

"That is exactly what has happened," said Prentice.

"And you want me to believe that every one of the victims has given up without a fight; that no real effort has been made to apprehend these desperadoes?"

"My, no!" exclaimed Prentice. "Several of the men threatened went to the police. The police put their best men on the case for weeks, but so far as I know, they never discovered a worth while clue."

"What happened to those men who resisted?" inquired Forrester.

"They either finally acceded to the demands, or were found dead. That is why I warned you to pay and say nothing. Remember, Bob, you have been away for a long period, while I have stayed on right here in the city a greater part of the time. I know exactly what has transpired in this matter; I speak from *actual experience*."

"Experience?" questioned Forrester, noting something significant in the stress which Prentice laid on his last words.

"Young man," said Prentice, shaking a finger at Forrester, "you may have had wider experience with some angles to life than I have had. On the other hand, I possess the calmer judgment that comes with advancing years. And I know more about *this* situation than you do. I advise you to draw ten thousand dollars from that ample bank account of yours, put it in that tree before midnight Saturday, and consider yourself lucky to get off so easily."

"I'll not do it!" declared Forrester.

Prentice extended his hand. "Let me see that paper, Bob," he requested. The paper was handed over and Prentice studied it carefully.

"Yes," commented Prentice, slowly, as he handed back the message. "It is unquestionably from the same people. That is a duplicate of the warning which I received."

"Did you get one, too?" exclaimed Forrester.

"A year ago – just about this time," divulged Prentice. "In fact, so far as I know, I was the first man upon whom the demand was made. When I went to the police about it, they claimed that it was the first time anything of the kind had come to their attention."

"Tell me about it, Prentice," urged Forrester.

"I will," agreed Prentice. "After you have heard *my* experience, you will realize more fully why I have told you to pay and say nothing.

"As I said before, it was just about this time last year that a duplicate of that notice was fastened to my front door with a knife. A maid found it when she went to bring in the morning paper, and presented it to me at the breakfast table. I had much the same feeling that you have regarding it; although I did not take it quite so seriously. As a matter of fact, I regarded it as a joke, until a few days later a second warning came in the mail.

"I had, of course, destroyed the first warning, but the second I took to the police, and laid the matter before them. They arranged with me to try to trap these people. The night that my time expired I took a dummy package and placed it in that tree. The police kept watch in the woods all night without seeing or hearing anyone. In the morning, they found the package still in the tree, but attached to it was a note stating that these people were not to be fooled, and allowing me three days in which to pay or take the consequences.

"For two weeks after that the police watched the tree, and a detective accompanied me wherever I went. There was no attack upon me, and the police assured me that it was undoubtedly the practical joke of some friend. They withdrew my detective guard and I thought the matter had ended.

"A few days later, however, as I was returning home along the North Shore in my car one night, a figure leaped upon each running board. They wore long black hoods with nothing save their eyes visible through openings cut in the hoods. These men pointed revolvers at me and ordered me to stop. They said that they represented the 'Friends of the Poor,' and told me that the time had come to pay the penalty for not complying with their demands. You can imagine my state of mind. I saw that the matter was really serious, and not a practical joke after all. I told them that I had thought it a joke and pleaded with them. They finally allowed me to go upon my promising to place the money in the tree the following evening.

"After drawing the money from the bank, I informed the police about my adventure, and they arranged to watch the tree again that night. I placed the money in the tree, and although five detectives remained all night only a little distance away, they heard and saw nothing. *In the morning the money was gone!*

"During last summer several other wealthy men received demands for money. So far as I have knowledge of the matter, they either paid the money, or were later found dead. With the first fall of snow the activities of this band ceased. A detective, detailed to the case, told me he thought they had stopped operations because of the snow. When they approached the tree, he explained, they would naturally leave tracks in the snow, in that way giving some hint to the police. I was inclined to believe, on the other hand, that they had obtained all the money they wished; or else had concluded that the police were aroused to such an extent that it would be dangerous to keep on. This notice to you, however, seems to indicate that the detective with the snow-theory was pretty nearly right. Probably this warning to you is the beginning of another war to be waged upon the wealthy men of the city this summer."

"Your story is certainly interesting, Prentice," said Forrester, "but something really ought to be done. If these men are allowed to prey upon wealth in this mysterious way, there is no limit to the harm which they may accomplish. Why, just think of it! Unmolested, they might become bolder and bolder, and by steadily levying this secret toll, practically ruin every wealthy man in Chicago."

"Well," returned Prentice, "probably sooner or later the police will get them. So far as I am concerned, however, I would pay over the money at any time rather than have another experience such as the one I described to you. If you want to hire detectives, Bob, or stir up the police as I did, do so, by all means, but in the meantime take my advice and pay the money."

At this moment an attendant approached, informing Forrester that he was wanted on the telephone. Excusing himself to Prentice, Forrester went to the telephone to find that his mother was calling him.

"Son," she said, "Mr. Nevins has met with a serious accident. Josephine and I are going over to see Mrs. Nevins. She has just telephoned, asking us to call and stay with her the rest of the day; so we shall not be home to dinner. I wanted you to know so you would not worry about us."

"All right, Mother," replied Forrester. "I'll phone the house later and if Charlie is going to be in this evening I'll run over and bring you home. Good-bye."

The Nevins family and his own had been close friends for years. This friendship was about to be turned into relationship through the recently announced engagement of Forrester's sister, Josephine, to Charles Nevins, the banker's son.

Forrester hung up the receiver and returned to the lounging room to rejoin Prentice. As he crossed the room he saw that Prentice was reading one of the sensational evening papers, for even from a distance Forrester could read the glaring headlines:

## **"FRIENDS OF THE POOR"**

### **COMMIT NEW MURDER**

Prentice held the paper out for Forrester to see when the young man joined him, with the remark, "Evidently you did not get the first warning of the season, Bob, as I thought. Here's a man who received a notice two weeks ago, and assumed the same attitude that you did this afternoon toward this mysterious band."

"Who was he?"

"George Nevins, the banker!"

"George Nevins!" repeated Forrester, aghast at the news.

"Yes, old George Nevins – the tightest man in Chicago. I'll wager *he* fought as hard as any one could, but see what happened!" Prentice paused a moment, then added, impressively, "Do *you* still want to fight?"

"Harder than ever now!" asserted Forrester.

This was bringing it very close to home. Forrester wanted to be alone to think it over, so he gave his telephone call as an excuse, and took leave of Prentice.

"Failure to comply means death!" quoted Prentice, warningly, as Forrester turned to go.

## CHAPTER II – "FRIENDS OF THE POOR"

On leaving the club, Forrester strolled slowly and thoughtfully north along Michigan Avenue. The knowledge that old Mr. Nevins had met his death at the hands of the same people who now threatened him, impressed Forrester with the seriousness of the situation. Always a fighter, his army training had developed this side of his nature to a point where it was practically impossible for him to accede to an unjust demand without a struggle.

It was Tuesday. Forrester reflected that he had but four days in which to freely carry out any plan which he might decide upon. In view of Prentice's experience, and the startling death of Mr. Nevins, there was no question that after midnight Saturday every move Forrester made would be attended with danger.

Immersed in these thoughts, Forrester suddenly found himself in front of the public library building at Washington Street. It reminded him that the city detective bureau was on La Salle Street at about this point. In spite of the apparent non-success of the police, he decided that his first duty would be to report to them the demand just made upon him. A few minutes later Forrester entered the detective bureau and sent in his card to the Chief of Detectives. After being admitted to the Chief's office Forrester laid the message from the "Friends of the Poor" before the head of the detective bureau, with the remark:

"I'm next! What shall I do about it?"

"Mr. Forrester," said the Chief, after only a hasty glance at the notice, which showed his familiarity with the subject, "sorry as I am to say it, the Department has made little progress in this matter. We have a half-dozen detectives working on the case right now. Detective Sergeants Cahill and O'Connor have given it special study. They have been working among the West Side joints for some time, and today they reported to me that they think they have a line on some of these men. Nothing definite, understand, but it is the first suggestion of a clue which we have had.

"The probabilities are that between now and Saturday you will not be bothered. After Saturday, however, if we have made no further progress, I suggest that you stay off the streets at night, and that during the day you select only the main thoroughfares for going about the city. If you have any friends in the North Shore suburbs, and you probably have, I recommend that you do not visit them for the present. If you wish it, I will put a police guard at your home."

"I don't want to be coddled," objected Forrester. "I'm an ex-service man and I think that I can take care of myself."

"You needn't be ashamed to take precautions in a case like this," explained the Chief. "This gang is both dangerous and clever. If Mr. Nevins, whose death has just been reported, had allowed me to give him a police guard, as I wished, he would probably be alive today. You are really helping the police when you allow us to give you a police guard, for if these fellows show themselves in any way, our man is there ready to act. If anything happens to you when no one is around, then we are simply confronted with another mystery and have much of our work to do over again."

"That's very logical reasoning, Chief," agreed Forrester, "and I thank you for the offer. But I would not have a moment's peace of mind with a detective or a policeman hanging around my heels. I am perfectly willing to take my chance. In fact, I did not come to you for protection, but simply to talk this matter over with you, and see if something definite cannot be done to eradicate these criminals. I am doubly interested, not only because I have received this notice, but from the fact that my sister is engaged to Mr. Nevins' son, thus practically bringing his death right into our family. It is the principle of the thing which I want to fight – and if there is anything I can do to help, outside of having a detective trailing me around, I want to do it."

"Well, of course," replied the Chief, "we cannot force a police guard upon you, but outside of that there is really nothing that you could do. It takes both experience and a special kind of ability

to carry on detective work. To be perfectly frank with you, *novices only hamper us*. All I can say is, leave this notice with us and we will do what we can in the matter."

"No," returned Forrester, "I don't want to leave this notice. I want to keep it for my own use. My mind is fully made up to take an active part in this hunt myself. I should appreciate it if you will tell your men about me and explain that if they find me doing mysterious things in out-of-the-way places, not to mistake me for one of the criminals. If I find out anything, or have any suspicions, I will let you know."

"All right," laughed the Chief. "Play around if you want to, but for the love of Mike, don't get under our feet." The Chief and Forrester exchanged friendly good-byes and the young man passed out into La Salle Street.

Forrester reflected that Prentice was right. While the detective chief had maintained an encouraging attitude, it was clear that this was merely to "save the face" of the Department so far as it was possible. Between the lines of the Chief's words Forrester had read the helpless and hopeless position in which the police were placed. It seemed like pure egoism for him to attempt to accomplish something in which experienced detectives had failed, yet Forrester felt that he should make some effort to solve the mystery behind this menace. After all, he reasoned, could the solution to this problem be so much more difficult than many of the engineering problems which he had attacked and mastered.

It now occurred to him that he had not thought to ask Prentice if any private detective agencies had ever been put on the case. So far as his present knowledge of the matter went the problem had been left entirely in the hands of the police, and yet he knew that in many instances private agencies had been successful where the police had failed. Forrester decided, therefore, that his next step would be to consult with one of these agencies. He went to a nearby cigar store and consulted the classified telephone directory. Under the heading of "Detectives" he found a long list of agencies and independent operatives. Several famous names stood out in this list, but Forrester fancied that these big agencies would merely put an ordinary operative on the case, while he felt that the matter needed the attention of a bigger man. Obviously, by going to a smaller agency, it would be easier to get the head of the agency to do the work. While these thoughts were passing through his mind, Forrester's eye caught a small advertisement in the center of the page.

## **GREEN'S NATIONAL DETECTIVE AGENCY**

### **SECRET SERVICE OF ALL KINDS**

#### **Correspondents in All the Leading Cities of the World**

**Benjamin F. Green, Principal**

**Commercial Building, *Chicago***

Forrester decided to call on Mr. Green.

He found "Green's National Detective Agency" to consist of two small rooms. In the outer room he was met by a woman of uncertain age and colorless personality who immediately ushered him into Mr. Green's office. Green was a large, strongly built man with thin black hair, carefully

brushed over a bald spot, and a bristling black mustache. The detective was in his shirt sleeves, a half-burned, unlit cigar gripped in the corner of his mouth, and a well-polished badge gleaming on the left breast of his unbuttoned waistcoat.

"How-do," he said, rising to greet Forrester, and added, "Have a chair," pushing one in the direction of Forrester with his foot.

The two men sat down and after Green had shifted his cigar to the other side of his mouth, he inquired, "What can I do for you?"

"Ever hear of the 'Friends of the Poor'?" inquired Forrester, going straight to the point.

Green sat up in his chair with a jerk.

"*You* been gettin' one o' them notices?" he asked.

Forrester took out the warning message and laid it on Green's desk. The detective's eyes sparkled as he leaned over and closely examined it.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, at length. "I've just been dyin' to get onto this case. So *you're* one o' them rich guys they're after, eh?"

"I gather from what you say, Mr. Green, that you know something about the matter," said Forrester.

"*Do* I?" cried Green. "I'll show you how I've been followin' that thing up." He reached into a drawer of his desk, drew out a folder and opened it before him. Forrester saw that it contained newspaper clippings and various hand-written notes.

"I'll tell you, Mister," said Green, "I've been followin' this here case right from the start. I've got some theories, too, that I ain't been tellin' to nobody. I've just been itchin' to get busy on it, but you know us guys have to make a livin' – we can't work on a case for nothin'."

"Well," informed Forrester, "I'm going to give you a chance to see what you can do." Forrester was not wholly taken with Green's personality, but the man certainly seemed to know something about the case, and the fact that he already had theories was a hopeful sign. "There's the notice," continued Forrester, "which I received in the mail this morning. It gives me until Saturday at midnight to pay over the money or take the consequences. Now, I'd rather present you with the ten thousand dollars than give up to these people."

Green bounced in his chair.

"Do you *mean* that?" he gasped.

"Certainly," answered Forrester. "You bring these men to justice and the ten thousand is yours. In the meantime, I'll pay you your regular fees and expenses."

Green ran a finger around inside of his collar and stared at Forrester for a minute or two. It was quite evident that he was thoroughly stunned at the offer which had just been made to him. Then, realizing that he was making a poor showing before an important client, he straightened up in his chair and assumed the dignified attitude which he thought in keeping with his profession and the handling of such a momentous case.

"I'm glad to see that you have such a complete record there," commented Forrester. "I'm anxious to get the full details and history of this affair."

Green laid his dead cigar on the edge of the desk and pulled his chair closer, clearing his throat as he did so.

"The case o' the 'Friends o' the Poor'," he announced, "first became known to the public about this time a year ago. Here we have the matter o' one Frederick Prentice." Green picked up the first clipping.

"Yes, I know all about that case," interrupted Forrester. "Prentice is an old friend of mine."

"Ah – h – h!" breathed Green, looking much impressed as he laid the clipping and a few others aside. "Maybe you knew *this* guy, too – Booth Warren, the banker?"

"Yes, I knew him very well," returned Forrester.

"Ah – h – h!" sighed Green, expressively. Never before had he floated into such an environment of millionaires.

"But," added Forrester, "I don't know the details of his case. In fact, I had not heard of his death."

Green cleared his throat once more.

"Booth Warren," he explained, referring to his notes and clippings, "was vice-president o' the La Salle National Bank. In July o' last year this criminal organization demanded twenty-five thousand dollars, which he refused to pay, placin' the matter in the hands o' the police." At this mention of the police Green gave Forrester a ponderous wink. Then he continued, "After ignorin' three notices, Warren was found by the roadside one mornin' just beyond Evanston. The police surgeon o' the Evanston Police Department could find no signs o' violence, or any evidence as to how the man had been killed. He said he would diagnose the case as one o' – " Green paused a moment over the pronunciation of the word – "asphyxia."

Green thumbed over his clippings.

"Then followed three cases where the guys lost their nerve and paid up. I guess you're chiefly interested in the guys that got *killed*, though," added Green, turning to Forrester.

"Yes, I think so," answered Forrester. "I want to know just what happens to a man who turns these people down."

"Well, he gets *his*– that's all I can say," replied Green, emphatically. "That is," he added, realizing his slip, "unless he comes to me."

"Then it is to be expected that I shall escape?" said Forrester, smiling.

"I said I had some theories, Mister," returned Green, assuming a wise expression. "I ain't tellin' *all* I know, but you can bet your life I'll be on the job between now and midnight Saturday.

"The next case o' a death," Green resumed, taking up another clipping, "is that of James Ingraham, capitalist and director of the Cook County Trust Company. He was ordered to pay fifteen thousand dollars, and ignored the demand – except for reportin' it as usual to the police. Ingraham was found sittin' under a tree in Lincoln Park early one evenin', and the hospital they took him to, and where he died, reported that all the symptoms showed that he had been – asphyxiated.

"In the early fall, two more guys was threatened and decided to pay up.

"Now," concluded Green, closing the folder and leaning back in his chair, "I want you to notice two things strikin' me as funny. These here guys apparently knock off in the winter time. Another thing is that the poor devils that get took off is always – asphyxiated."

"But," protested Forrester, "how could they be asphyxiated when the bodies are always found out in the open air? I thought that a person must be shut up in a closed room to be asphyxiated."

"Ah-ha!" cried Green. "Now you've got the idea! These fellows have a headquarters somewhere. After they kill a guy they bring him out in an automobile and throw him alongside the road somewhere. The thing to be done now is to locate their headquarters. *That's* what little Benny is goin' to do!"

"How do you propose to find that out?" inquired Forrester.

"Watch the tree and follow 'em!" replied Green, decisively.

"That sounds all right," objected Forrester, "but the police have been watching that tree for months without getting sight or sound of anyone."

"Leave it to *me*," assured Green, with a wide sweep of his hand. "I know things these here city dicks never think about. Now, Mister – Mister – , by the way, you ain't told me your name yet."

Forrester handed his card to Green.

"Now, Mr. Forrester," continued Green, as he glanced at the card, "take my advice and don't let nobody bunco you into any strange place. And I wouldn't take no rides in strange automobiles, either. I'll let you hear from me in a couple o' days. In the meantime you can count on findin' me around that tree o' nights. I kinda got an idea that there tree's a mighty busy place these nights. The 'Friends o' the Poor' seem to be makin' a big drive right now. I suppose you heard about the banker, Nevins, today?"

"Yes," said Forrester, rising to go. "I shall probably have full details of that shortly. My sister is engaged to Mr. Nevins' son."

"Ah-h-h!" sighed Green again, as his new client passed out of the door.

## CHAPTER III – ENGINEERING-CRIMINOLOGY

Although the yearly hegira from town to suburb was well on, the Forresters had delayed their departure and were still residing in the town house on Bellevue Place. To a man of Forrester's active disposition Bellevue Place meant a comparatively easy walk from the downtown section. Moreover, in the present troubled condition of his mind, the exercise would be conducive to clearer thinking, so he started out with the intention of walking home. As he was crossing the Michigan Avenue bridge over the Chicago River, a motor car slowed up by the curb and Forrester heard someone call to him. Glancing around, he saw that it was Prentice.

"On your way home?" inquired Prentice.

Forrester answered in the affirmative.

"Then jump in with me," said Prentice.

"Thanks," returned Forrester, "but I had decided to walk home."

"Better change your mind," urged Prentice. "It's a fairly long walk, and I should like your company. Remember that after you leave me I have a long and lonesome drive."

"You are out on the North Shore now, are you?" queried Forrester, as he climbed into the car.

"Yes," answered Prentice. "We closed the town house on the first. I'm surprised that your folks are still in the city."

"We hope to leave soon. The decorators are still busy at our place. We gave 'Woodmere' a good overhauling this spring. I should think you would rather take the train than have such a long drive when you are alone."

"I very seldom use the train," explained Prentice. "You know that time is of no great value to me, and I enjoy the motor ride. The cool lake air and the scent of the woods are really very refreshing after being in the hot city – and certainly preferable to the gas, smoke and cinders that are inseparable from the train."

"By the way," continued Prentice, after a pause, "have you done anything further about that message we were discussing today?"

"Yes," replied Forrester. "I have taken very definite action since I left you."

"Drawn the money from the bank, I suppose."

"I certainly did not!" declared Forrester. "I went first to the police, and then engaged a private detective agency to look into the matter."

"What did the police say?" inquired Prentice.

"Oh, I guess it was the same old stuff," admitted Forrester. "Although they did say that they believed they had a clue at last."

"Well, I hope it is a better clue than some of the others they have pretended to discover. It is certainly time they did something. And what is your private detective going to do?"

"Not very much, I'm afraid," said Forrester. "He proposes to keep his eye on this mysterious oak, which I believe is just what all the detectives have done so far without results."

"Exactly," agreed Prentice. "But it is the first time, I think, that anyone has employed a private detective. Perhaps he will be more successful than the police. Well, here you are," he added, as he swung the car to the curb and stopped.

"Thank you for the lift," said Forrester, as he stepped out. "I'll let you know how my private detective gets on."

"Yes, do," urged Prentice. "I should certainly like to get some revenge for the money those people took from me. I suppose I shall see you at the club as usual tomorrow."

"No," returned Forrester, "between now and Saturday I am going to be very busy on this 'Friends of the Poor' matter. I don't intend to let any grass grow under my feet in running them to

earth." Then he added, laughing, "However, after Saturday I may have to hang around the club for protection."

"If I can be of any help, don't fail to call upon me," offered Prentice. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye!" called Forrester, as the car shot off up the drive.

Forrester was glad that his mother and sister were not at home. His mind was concentrated on the peculiar situation in which he now found himself, and he felt little inclination to talk. His mother certainly would have noticed his preoccupation and guessed that something was wrong. It would have been difficult to keep up the pretense of having nothing on his mind. At this time he did not intend to tell his family anything about the warning he had received, for it would worry them unnecessarily, especially after the fate which had overtaken Mr. Nevins.

After dinner Forrester went to the library, hunted up his pipe and sat down to think. He had just settled back in his chair when he heard the door-bell, and a minute later a maid announced that a reporter from the *Times* wished to see him. Forrester hesitated as he ran the matter over in his mind. He disliked publicity and this call certainly meant publicity. On the other hand, he was seeking all the information and help which he could get, and it was a well-known fact that newspaper reporters frequently solved mysteries which baffled the police. Forrester decided, therefore, that he really had little to lose and perhaps much to gain by allowing the reporter to interview him, so he instructed the maid to send the man in.

The young man entered the library briskly, giving a quick and comprehensive glance around the room before addressing Forrester.

"Mr. Forrester?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied Forrester, affably. "Take this chair and make yourself at home."

As the young man sat down, Forrester turned back the lid of a humidior and pushed it along the library table.

"Gee!" said the young man, selecting a cigar. "You seem glad to see me. I don't always get a greeting like this."

"Well," explained Forrester, smiling, "I'm in deep trouble and you, as a newspaper man, may prove to be a friend in need."

The young man visibly expanded as he remarked, "That's right! We newspaper men can be a lot of help sometimes. If there is anything I can do, say the word. My name's Humphrey."

"I'm very glad to know you," said Forrester. "Now, may I inquire how you happened to call on me?"

"Sure thing," returned Humphrey. "You see, our police reporter informed us that you had been to the detective bureau today – that you had received one of those notices from the 'Friends of the Poor.' Owing to the death of a prominent man like Mr. Nevins, which is attributed to these people, our paper is going to run a special feature article tomorrow morning, reviewing the whole history of this affair. Naturally, we want to know all the details of each case, and what every one connected with it has to say. As you seem to be the latest victim, we are interested in the particulars of your case, and your personal views regarding it."

"I am afraid," declared Forrester, "that the details of one case correspond very closely to those of any other case. I have merely received a warning to put ten thousand dollars in a certain tree by midnight Saturday or take the consequences."

"You're quite right," agreed Humphrey. "The method in each case is the same. But the outcome is not always the same. What do *you* propose doing in the matter?"

"Well, for one thing," asserted Forrester, "*I do not intend to pay!*"

"That's the stuff!" approved Humphrey. "If everyone would fight, we'd soon put those fellows out of business. But," he added, leaning confidentially toward Forrester, "*how* do you propose to fight them?"

"That," said Forrester, "is a question I have not entirely settled as yet. As you know, I went to the detective bureau this afternoon."

"Poof!" grunted Humphrey, leaning back and flicking the ashes from his cigar.

"And I have also engaged a private detective," added Forrester.

"Who?" queried Humphrey.

"A man named Green – Benjamin F. Green."

"There are detectives – and there are detectives," commented Humphrey. "Green falls in the first class."

"I think I get your meaning," smiled Forrester, "and I am inclined to agree with you. That, in fact, is the great problem which confronts me now – how to get a *good* detective at work on the case. Any suggestions, Mr. Humphrey?"

"I'm a better knocker than I am a suggester," explained Humphrey. "I can tell you the faults of detectives as easily as I could run over my A-B-Cs. I'll admit, though, that there *are* some good ones. Sooner or later one of them will get on this case and solve it. I wouldn't care to take the responsibility of recommending anyone."

"I know you came here for an interview, Mr. Humphrey," said Forrester, "and I realize how dangerous it is to tell all your plans to a man who is seeking news. But on the other hand, I have a very high opinion of the ability and cleverness of newspaper men. That is why I am going to take you into my confidence."

"I'm enjoying it," assured Humphrey, selecting and lighting another cigar.

"The fact is," announced Forrester, "I am thinking of becoming a detective in this matter myself. The question is, can I do it – have I the ability to be a detective?"

"Why not?" queried Humphrey.

"Well, what, in your opinion, makes a good detective?"

"Brains!" shot back Humphrey. "Look here, Mr. Forrester. As a reporter I can scent the biggest story ever scooped up by a Chicago newspaper. A rich man, in the face of dangerous threats, turning detective and running down a criminal band which has defied the best efforts of the police department. All I ask is that you give me the dope first!"

"Then I may count on you to keep my plans quiet and give me a certain amount of assistance?" questioned Forrester.

"You bet!" exclaimed Humphrey. "To tell you the truth, you've actually got me going. I can see real possibilities to the idea. Now, look here, Mr. Forrester; my paper assigned the 'Friends of the Poor' story to me the first time the matter came up. They have kept me at it since because I was familiar with the details. I don't pretend to have any detective instincts, but just my share of common sense, and I have thought the whole matter over pretty carefully. The police, of course, would laugh at any theories from me, but you, perhaps, might like to hear my ideas on the subject."

"Go ahead," urged Forrester.

"In my opinion," Humphrey explained, "the police have fallen down so far on this case because they are sticking too close to the rules. The average city detective becomes familiar with the ways of the average thug-type of criminal. Give him an ordinary murder, burglary, or blackmailing case and he knows just about where to go to get his hands on the people he wants. But when a different class of criminal begins to operate, the average detective cannot see the new conditions. He goes floundering along the same old lines and lets real clues slip through his fingers."

Humphrey paused to relight his cigar.

"Go on," again urged Forrester. "I am learning something."

"Now," continued Humphrey, "the crooks that compose the 'Friends of the Poor' have been operating for about one year. In that time they have received various sums running from ten thousand to twenty-five thousand dollars. I venture to say that in one year's time they have taken in pretty close to two hundred thousand dollars! Now, I ask you, Mr. Forrester; if you were taking in that amount

of money, where would you have your hangout? In some West Side saloon or tenement, or in a high class neighborhood – perhaps even in some fine hotel? Do you get my thought, Mr. Forrester?"

"I think I do," said Forrester.

"All right, then," went on Humphrey. "I happen to know what the police are doing in this matter. They are dividing their time between watching an old oak up on the North Shore, and rummaging around West Side dives. Somewhere, *in between*, our men sit laughing at them!"

"I am strongly inclined to believe you are right, Mr. Humphrey," assented Forrester. "But the important question is: How are we going to locate that place which lies in between?"

"That's where you come in," maintained Humphrey. "That's where your money, social position, training and brains are going to enable you to give the ordinary detectives the go-by. When you mentioned becoming a detective, an idea hit me with an awful wallop. Now, Mr. Forrester, you're an engineer."

"How did you know that?" queried Forrester.

"We usually look up a man before we interview him. We know all about you."

"I see," smiled Forrester. "Well, then, as an engineer how am I going to solve this problem in crime?"

"By triangulation!" exclaimed Humphrey.

Forrester laughed. "Now you *have* got me guessing, Mr. Humphrey. As a civil engineer I have used triangulation in my surveying work on many occasions, but how I can apply it to a criminal problem is beyond me."

"Well," explained Humphrey, "the first thing to do in a criminal case is to take a good survey of the problem and the ground it covers – just as you do when you build a bridge, a dam, or open up a mine. The higher type of criminal investigator usually falls back upon his study and knowledge of criminology, which is a broader and more scientific development of the ordinary *facts* with which the city detective starts to work. What I am going to suggest to you is a new branch of criminology. For want of a better name at this time we'll call it Engineering-Criminology. I am not an engineer myself, and what I know about surveying and triangulation could be put into a thimble, but I think I know enough to give you an idea of what I mean.

"As I said before, the detectives are wallowing around in the mire of the lower West Side – they are in the valley, so to speak. Now, if you, as an engineer, were about to survey a certain unknown and inaccessible territory, you'd go up on the nearest high hill and pick out two other prominent points in the landscape, so as to form a triangle. Then you'd take sights, or whatever you would call it, from one point to another. A little figuring would give you the exact distance from one point to another, and a lot of information about the lay of the land in between. Am I not right?"

"You've put it very roughly, but I think I can see what you are driving at," returned Forrester.

"Continue the idea a little further, Mr. Forrester," went on Humphrey. "If you were making a mine survey you would first lay out your boundaries, tunnels and so on, on the surface, wouldn't you?"

Forrester nodded.

"Then you would carry those lines below the surface. In other words, the lines you had laid out *on* the surface would be a guide to you when you got *below* it."

Again Forrester nodded.

"All right," said Humphrey. "I think you've got my idea about this case, and what I mean by solving it by triangulation. You will take the people, and the events which have occurred, and use them as your prominent landmarks; that is, points for your triangles. You will then study what lies between those landmarks, and also what lies under the surface. By that means I think you will eventually discover some clues that will be worth while.

"For example; take Mr. Nevins, who was the last victim of the 'Friends of the Poor,' as the first point of your triangle. Take his bank as the second, and his home as the third point. Instead of measuring the distance between these points by feet or rods, measure it by people and events. Set

down, just as you would the figures of a survey, the names of his friends and acquaintances, the men with whom he has done business, and any little out-of-the-way events which have taken place in his life, so far as you can ascertain them. Do this with the other people who have been concerned in the blackmailing activities of this band. By arranging your triangles so they will overlap if possible, you will get at a starting point. *Somewhere the lines will cross*, and at the point of intersection a definite clue may form."

"Mr. Humphrey," laughed Forrester, "you are giving me a man's-size job."

"I know it!" admitted Humphrey. "But the man who solves this case has got to put more than ordinary brains and ability into it. You have got to forget the old rules and theories and formulas. That is why the experienced detectives are falling down. They can't forget the rules! When you suggested a while ago that you thought of turning detective, I immediately saw its possibilities. Your engineering training has taught you how to study cause and effect, and work out plans for meeting unusual conditions. You start with a mind trained to solve difficult problems, but at the same time your mind is free of all the traditions of the detective craft. Things they wouldn't notice, or consider important if they did, will impress themselves upon you and start a train of thought."

"Now then," exclaimed Humphrey, jumping to his feet, "I have over-stayed my welcome and I must get back to the office and write up my story for tomorrow's paper. You can rest assured, however, that the important details of this conversation will not get into print until you say the word. But remember, when the big scoop comes —*it belongs to me!*"

"I promise you that," returned Forrester, rising and extending his hand. "We'll shake hands on it."

"And you may count on me to help all I can in the meantime," declared Humphrey, as he grasped Forrester's hand.

"Let me offer you a suggestion for that article which is to appear tomorrow," said Forrester.

"Shoot!" replied Humphrey.

"Announce that I have given up all idea of fighting the 'Friends of the Poor,' and say that Saturday, before midnight, I shall place a package containing the money in that tree."

"I get you," smiled Humphrey. "I'll be there!"

## CHAPTER IV – THE CAR IN THE FOG

Forrester glanced at his watch. It was just nine o'clock, not too late to make his promised call on the Nevins.

The Nevins' residence was on Dearborn Parkway, only a fifteen-minute walk for Forrester, so he sauntered west after leaving the house. A heavy mist was gathering on Lake Michigan and rolling through the streets before a gentle breeze from the east, completely shutting from view all but the nearest street lights and any pedestrians who might be abroad at this hour. Always a quiet neighborhood, the mist-hidden streets now seemed somber and deserted, and so still were his surroundings that Forrester's attention was presently attracted to the soft chug-chug of a motor somewhere in the fog behind him.

When the sound first caught his ear it had made little impression, but as the purring of the engine continued, apparently always at the same distance, it struck him as peculiar that the car did not catch up with and pass him. The threat which now hung over his head, as well as his recent interviews with detectives and the reporter from the *Times*, had made Forrester more alert than usual. He was keenly on the watch for anything that might appear out of the ordinary in character. Although he continued at the same pace without looking back, Forrester listened attentively to the sound of the motor and noted instantly that as he turned north on Dearborn Parkway, the motor followed him. He was convinced that he was under surveillance, and as detectives were not likely to keep guard over him from a motor car, it was clear that the persons who followed him had some other motive.

Forrester was well aware that auto bandits were active at all times in the city streets, and it was more than likely that a foggy night would prove especially inviting. Still, he could not recollect ever having heard of a hold-up of this character in his immediate neighborhood. As he deliberated on the matter, the suspicion grew stronger that the car which now followed him through the fog was connected in some way with the "Friends of the Poor." If that were so, there seemed little risk in allowing them to follow him, for it was certain that the ten thousand dollars they had demanded was of more importance to them at this time than his life, and as they had given him until midnight Saturday to pay the money, it did not appear likely that they would harm him before that time.

On the other hand, he realized that he had been especially active that day in taking steps to thwart them. It was not improbable that an organized band of this kind would have underground methods of gaining information and therefore might be familiar with everything he had done. Forrester recollected with a start that he had taken Humphrey for granted. Might it not be possible that Humphrey had merely been a spy sent to ascertain his attitude? As he recalled the young man's discourse it seemed strangely fanciful and might have been planned merely to add to his perplexities in seeking a solution. He had been extremely frank with Humphrey, and the supposed reporter would have a very comprehensive tale to unfold to his associates. Informed that Forrester planned to go further in his fight against them than any previous victim they had selected, was it not possible that they had decided to disregard his money, which might be easily replaced by a demand upon someone else, and make away with him before he had an opportunity to disrupt their plans? Forrester admitted to himself that he felt decidedly nervous and quickened his pace. He glanced back once or twice and saw the blurred but unmistakable outlines of a motor car without lights. Although the speed of the car had been slightly increased when he hastened his steps, the distance between them was maintained, and Forrester's mind grew easier as he became convinced that the sole purpose of the car behind him was to watch his movements. Very probably, he reflected, the "Friends of the Poor" kept track of their victims so that they could not escape by leaving the city or concealing themselves in some out-of-the-way place. Though he was probably safe for the moment, Forrester realized more fully now the dangerous nature of the task he had set himself.

By the time Forrester reached the Nevins home and rang the door-bell, the lesson had had its effect. He had acquired part of the attributes of a good detective – caution, and a suspicion of everybody and everything. In the future, so he assured himself, he would be more guarded in his conversation, not only with new acquaintances, but with his friends as well. At this moment a servant opened the door and Forrester stepped into the brilliantly lighted hallway with a feeling of relief.

As he was well known in this home he went immediately to the library without being announced. There he found his mother and sister with the Nevins family. Evidences of grief were apparent on all their faces and after a general exchange of subdued greetings, young Nevins led Forrester to a sofa in a corner and said, "I suppose you've heard about Father, Bob?"

"Yes," replied Forrester, "and I'm mighty sorry, old man. It must have been a great blow."

"It was a dreadful shock to Mother. You know when a person is ill, and death is momentarily expected, you are sort of prepared for the final end, but when you find your father dead on the front steps, and you know that he has been murdered, it is an awful stroke."

"If you don't mind talking about it, Charlie, I should like to hear some of the details."

"I don't mind, Bob. The fact is, that is about all we have been able to talk about. There is very little to tell, however."

"It seems that Father received a notice about two weeks ago from this damnable blackmailing society which calls itself the 'Friends of the Poor.' About that notice, and what happened subsequently, we know practically nothing outside of the few details we read in the newspapers, and a little that the police were willing to tell us. Father never said a word to either Mother or myself about it. I believe he did not even tell his business associates, simply putting the matter into the hands of the police and going on about his business as usual. The Chief of Detectives called in person this morning, and during his visit, told me that he had offered Father a police guard, but that Father refused it."

"Last night Father attended a dinner of the *Midland Bankers' Association*, and as we naturally did not expect him home until quite a late hour, Mother and I retired at our usual time. The first we knew, therefore, that Father had not been home all night, was when we missed him at breakfast. When a maid went up to call him she found his bedroom door open and saw that the bed had not been occupied. I was just about to call up the police when the patrolman on our street rang the door-bell and asked the maid who answered the door if she knew the man who was lying on our steps. Of course, she immediately recognized Father, and when we heard her scream we all hurried to the door. The patrolman helped me carry him in. This man waited until the doctor came, as he said he would have to make a report and he wanted to know if foul play were suspected."

"Our doctor lives just across the street. He was here in five minutes, but there was nothing that he could do. He said that Father had unquestionably been dead for many hours."

"Could he tell the cause of death?" inquired Forrester.

"Yes," returned Nevins, "he stated that it was clearly a case of asphyxia. Father, of course, had been murdered by the same method as all the other victims of the 'Friends of the Poor.'"

"But," protested Forrester, "how could they get at your father? It was my impression that he always went about in his car with a chauffeur driving."

"That is quite right," answered Nevins, "but Fate was with these people last night. They had evidently been watching for just such an opportunity. When our chauffeur drove the car up at nine o'clock this morning, which was his custom, to take Father down to the bank, I called him in and questioned him about last night."

"He said he had called for Father at eleven o'clock, as he had been instructed to do, and they started for home. Just as they reached Oak Street something went wrong with the motor. The chauffeur spent a half-hour trying to discover the trouble and he says that Father grew very impatient. Father, it seems, tried to get a taxicab, but all the cabs that passed were going north and had people in them. You know it is not much of a walk from Oak Street up to the house, and the chauffeur said that Father finally told him to take his time in fixing the car and he would walk home. The chauffeur

saw him start off up the Lake Shore Drive and that was the last anyone saw or heard of Father until he was found on our steps this morning."

Forrester's thoughts reverted to the car which had followed him through the fog. There was little doubt in his mind that this same car had followed the elder Nevins, waiting for the opportunity to strike. Forrester did not question that the banker's murderers were in that car now. At this very moment they might be waiting outside for Forrester to reappear. It flashed through his mind what a simple matter it would be for him to notify the police and have them ready when he started out.

"Mother," said Forrester, "how soon do you expect to go home?"

"I suppose we could leave at any time now, Son," replied Mrs. Forrester.

"How did you plan to go home? I did not see the car outside when I came in."

"No," explained Mrs. Forrester, "it was such a pleasant evening that I told William he need not return. After the excitement and worry we have been through I thought it would be good for us to walk home."

"It is not at all nice out now," said Forrester. "A heavy fog has come up. I think I would better call a taxicab."

Forrester went to the telephone and ordered a taxicab. Then he whispered to Nevins, "May I use a phone upstairs where I can talk without being overheard?"

"Yes," informed Nevins, "you will find a phone in Father's room."

Forrester went upstairs and called police headquarters. He briefly explained who he was, what had occurred on his walk over, and suggested that they watch for the strange car as he returned home.

"Leave the house in exactly fifteen minutes," instructed the man at headquarters, "and we'll be ready for you."

After returning to the library Forrester took an occasional surreptitious look at his watch and was pleased to hear the taxi driver ring the door-bell just as the fifteen minutes expired.

As Forrester assisted his mother down the steps he glanced hastily around. The fog was still heavy. He could make out nothing save the taxicab at the curb, but just as he was giving the address to the taxi driver he noticed a small man of slight build appear out of the fog. This man stopped quite near to him and lit a cigarette. Aside from noting the man's build and the fact that he wore a cap and had very dark hair, Forrester could make out no other details, for the man stood with his back to Forrester and the lighted match really served only to throw him out in silhouette. Forrester entered the cab and it started off. As he leaned back he reflected that the man he had seen was of too small a stature to be a detective. His act of stopping so close to them might have been mere accident, but to Forrester the thing had a significance which could not be overlooked. He was confident that this was one of the men they wanted. He hoped that the police, although not visible in the fog, had arrived as promised. If so, he felt that their problems were pretty close to a final solution.

They reached Bellevue Place without incident. The whirl of the taxicab's engine had effectually drowned any sound of pursuit and though he had glanced back several times, Forrester had been able to see nothing save a wall of fog back of the cab. Yet somewhere in that fog-draped street he was sure the murderers' car was lurking.

There appeared to be no one around as they left the cab, but Forrester, after his mother and sister had gone into the house, lingered for a moment in the dark doorway. He could hear the hum of the taxicab's engine as it passed down the street toward the Lake Shore Drive. Otherwise the night was silent.

Suddenly Forrester heard the roar of opened mufflers in the other direction, and the next instant two black shapes passed swiftly by through the fog. Red flashes leaped out of the darkness and sharp reports resounded through the street as they passed the door.

"The police are on the job!" exulted Forrester.

He hastily stepped inside and closed the door, for his army experience had shown him the danger of stray bullets.

## CHAPTER V – THE HAUNTED TREE

Twice before he retired that night Forrester sought information from the police. By one o'clock, however, when no report had been turned in, he decided to wait until morning.

Early Wednesday morning he called the detective bureau on the telephone to find out what the police had accomplished. The voice at the other end of the wire was apologetic.

"We're sorry, Mr. Forrester, but the men got away from us. Had it been any other kind of a night we would have had them, sure. The fog prevented the detectives from seeing the car distinctly, so that after it turned into the Lake Shore Drive, and mingled with other cars, it was impossible to pick it up again.

"Our men were sure that their bullets struck the car. After giving up the chase they spent half the night on the West Side trying to locate an automobile with bullet holes, but were unsuccessful."

"Then you have made no progress at all on the case," said Forrester.

"No, I wouldn't say that," was the reply. "We now have some fairly definite people to look for. Before the incident of last night the whole thing was a mystery that did not present a single tangible point on which to base our investigations. Now, we believe that these people are just an ordinary auto bandit gang, and we know how to take steps to look them up."

"If anything of a hopeful nature occurs," requested Forrester, "I will appreciate it if you will call me on the telephone and let me know about it."

"We will be glad to do that," agreed the man at headquarters. "You may expect to hear from us at any time. And in the meanwhile, we will also appreciate any further tips similar to the one you gave us last night."

Forrester then called the garage and ordered his roadster sent around to the house.

Although the police seemed to be trying, and were under the impression that they were making some progress, Forrester decided to make a few efforts on his own account as he had originally planned. Even if he did not get very far in his investigations, he at least might discover something that would be of assistance to the police. He had little faith in Green, yet he realized that with this private detective, the police, and himself all working along individual lines, it was possible that the sum of all their discoveries might convey some hint of the lines that must be followed to bring the criminals to justice.

Forrester was not much impressed with Humphrey's triangulation theory. It was too far fetched and fanciful. Moreover, he realized that before putting even this surveying method into actual practice, he must first look over all the ground carefully. At the present moment, the only prominent and definite landmark in the case was the oak tree. He knew that this had already been the starting point for all the detectives who had been conducting investigations, but it was possible that because of his freedom from traditions, as Humphrey had put it, he might discover something which the more experienced detectives had overlooked. As soon as his roadster arrived, therefore, he planned to visit the oak tree in Jasper lane.

This analyzing of Humphrey's suggestions recalled to Forrester his suspicions of the night before. He decided, before going further, to make sure of Humphrey, so he got the *Times* office on the wire and inquired for the reporter. He recognized the young man's voice immediately and it lifted a considerable load from his mind.

"This is Forrester," he told Humphrey. "I called up to see if you had any new information for me."

"Oh, hello!" called Humphrey. "No, I haven't any new tips – but say – did you see my article this morning?"

"No," admitted Forrester, "I haven't had time to look at the paper."

"Don't miss it!" cried Humphrey. "I'll bet I've killed any idea those fellows might have had that you would put up a fight."

"What did you say?" queried Forrester.

"Why, I described how I called on you last night, and stated that I found you in a blue funk. Without actually saying so, I intimated that the cold sweat was standing out in beads on your forehead and thrills of fear running up and down your spine."

"I'm afraid," laughed Forrester, "that you have given my friends an idea that I hid in a dugout all through the war."

"Not on your life!" protested Humphrey. "You just read that article. You'll find that I'm an artist when it comes to descriptive writing."

"All right," agreed Forrester, "I'll read it tonight. I'm starting out now to have a look at that oak tree."

"Good luck!" said Humphrey. "Let me know if you spot anything. I've got to break away now. The Chief's shouting. Good-bye!"

The most direct route to follow in starting out for the North Shore would have been to go straight up the Lake Shore Drive and Sheridan Road. Forrester, however, had become cautious since his experience of the night before. He turned his car west and followed less used thoroughfares as far as Devon Avenue, glancing back from time to time. The few cars which he saw at these times all turned off at various streets before he reached Devon Avenue. Forrester, confident that he was not followed, swung east on Devon Avenue and soon turned into the north bound traffic on Sheridan Road.

Twice before reaching Jasper lane he stopped his car at the side of the road and pretended to adjust his engine. What he really did, however, was to carefully inspect the cars which passed him so that if he met any of them again they would be easily recognized. But when he turned into Jasper lane it was quite evident that no one had followed or paid any attention to him.

The surrounding country appeared lonely and deserted at the point where Jasper lane branched off from Sheridan Road. In this locality there were only large estates and vacant tracts of land, all heavily wooded. Jasper lane, which sloped slightly upward as it left Sheridan Road, was an unfrequented byway sometimes used as a short cut to a few large estates that lay along a prominent road farther to the west.

Forrester figured that two hundred feet would bring him to the crest of the rise before him and he kept his eyes on the left side of the road as he drove slowly along. He did not need any special guide to locate the oak tree, however, for its gigantic form towered above all the other trees in the neighborhood. He turned his car to the opposite side of the road, stopped his engine, and inspected the tree. The trunk, which was fully six feet in diameter, rose to a height of about fifteen feet, at which point it branched into two parts. Forrester's engineering mind took in this detail at once and it occurred to him that the space thus formed would make a roomy and comfortable perch from which to keep a watch over anything that might take place at the tree. He surmised that the detectives who had previously watched the tree had merely concealed themselves in the surrounding undergrowth where clever people, familiar with the locality, might have been able to espy and avoid them in approaching the tree. If at any time he decided to do a little watching on his own account, Forrester concluded that this was the point of vantage which he would occupy.

Forrester now jumped down from his car and strode across the road to take a closer view of the tree and its surroundings. The tree stood back from the road a few feet, and an open grass-covered space surrounded it for a distance of about ten feet. Beyond this clear space were thick undergrowth and young saplings, and a little farther back the woods began. From the road to the tree was a well-defined pathway. As Forrester approached the tree he found that this pathway wound around it and led off toward the right through the thick woods.

The opening referred to in the demand he had received was noticeable at once – a hole about a foot high by six or eight inches across. It had probably been caused by some fungus growth or

insects eating into the tree and gradually rotting away part of the wood. The opening was about four feet from the ground and Forrester had to stoop slightly to put his arm into it. The space inside was comparatively small. Forrester was under the impression that oak trees were seldom, if ever, affected in this way, but as he felt around, digging his fingers into the rotting wood, there seemed no reason to believe that the opening was other than a natural one. While his arm was still inside the tree, Forrester was startled to hear a voice close behind him, for he had not heard anyone approach.

"What yo'all doin' dere?"

Forrester withdrew his hand and turned swiftly to find himself facing a coal black negro. Though Forrester was himself a tall man he found that he had to slightly raise his eyes to look into those of the man before him. They looked each other over for a moment and then the negro repeated his question.

"What yo'all doin'?"

"I don't know that that's any of your business," said Forrester.

"Dat's all right, Boss. Ah don't mean no offense. Dat tree done have a bad name, an' us folks aroun' yere has begun to kinda keep our eyes open."

"Well," inquired Forrester, "what do you think I'm doing at the tree?"

"Ah dunno, Boss. Dat's what Ah'm tryin' to fine out."

There was a slight pause as the two men again looked each other over. To Forrester, the negro, in spite of his size, appeared to be really a harmless individual. Possibly he was a gardener in the vicinity. The negro on his part could see that Forrester was a gentleman, and therefore hardly likely to be one of the supposed blackmailing gang who had made this tree famous for miles around. His changed attitude was clearly apparent in the manner in which he next addressed Forrester.

"Yo' mus' scuse me, suh, fo' buttin' in on yo' disaway, but mah Missey done tole me to watch eberybody dat hung aroun' dis yere tree. Ah only been doin' mah duty, suh."

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