

Alfandega 49 A

By Edward Lucas White

I

The Alders was the last place on earth where anyone would have expected to encounter an atmosphere of tragedy and gloom. The very air of the farm seemed charged with the essence of cheerfulness and friendliness. There appeared to be diffused about the homestead some subtle influence promoting sociability and cordiality.

Perhaps it was merely that the Hibbards had miraculous luck in attracting only the right kind of boarders; possibly, they possessed an almost superhuman intuition which enabled them to avoid accepting any applicant likely to be uncongenial to the others, to themselves or to the place; maybe it was merely the personal effect of the Hibbards and of their welcome which seemed, in some magical fashion, to make all newcomers as much at home as if they had lived at the Alders from childhood. Certainly all their boarders were mutually congenial.

Never was summer-boarding-house so free from cliques, coteries, jealousies, enmities, bickerings and squabbles. The children played all day long apparently, but never seemed noisy or quarrelsome. The old ladies knitted or crocheted, teetering everlastingly in their rocking-chairs on the veranda, beaming at each other and at the landscape. The almost daily games of cards gave rise to scarcely any disputes. The folks at the Alders were very unlike an accidental gathering of summer boarders and much more resembled an unusually large and harmonious family.

This, I suppose, was due to the Hibbards' positive genius for managing a boarding-house and to their genial disposition. Naturally, from their temperament, they enjoyed it, they showed that they enjoyed it and they made everybody feel that they enjoyed it, so that each boarder felt like an invited guest.

The girls never seemed to have anything to do except to make everybody have a good time. Yet they had a great deal to do. In the heyday of the Alders the four girls divided their duties systematically.

Susie, the eldest, and the head of the house, rose early, oversaw the getting of the breakfast, and superintended everything. After dinner she always took a long rest and nap. Then, after supper, she stayed up until the last boarder had come indoors and said goodnight, chiefly occupying herself with seeing to it that all together were enjoying themselves, and each separately. She did it very well too. It was a sight to see her, the moment she was free from presiding at the supper table, appear out on the lawn or on the piazza, or in the parlor, according to the weather. She was tall, plump and handsome, held herself erect and had the art of making herself look well in very inexpensive dresses, mostly of her own devising. She was always smiling, her light brown hair haloing her face, her blue eyes shining. As she came she swept one comprehensive glance over her guests, unerringly picked out that one, man or woman, lad or girl, child or baby, which seemed enjoying life least, made for that particular individual and wholeheartedly devoted herself to affording enjoyment. She could afford it, too. She was jolly and had an infectious gaiety that was irresistible. She talked well. She was a fair pianist and a really splendid singer. She played, if need be, and sang, too, indefatigably. Never did a party of boarders have a more conscientious, more solicitous or more tactful hostess.

Mattie, who was taller and stouter than Susie, with brown eyes looking out of a face generally expressionless, but sometimes lit by a sympathetic smile, habitually slept late and was abed early. But she bore valiantly the brunt of the long middle of the summer days, took upon herself all that pertained to personal dealings with the servants, engaged them, dismissed them if unsatisfactory, controlled them when restive or cajoled them if dissatisfied, oversaw the getting of the dinner and supper, and made the desserts and ices. Among the boarders her chief activity was the foreseeing of incipient coolnesses and the tactful dissipation of any small cloud on the social atmosphere. It was chiefly due to her that no germ of antipathy ever developed, at the Alders, into dislike, that no seed of aversion, ever, in that atmosphere, ripened into enmity. She did her part so cleverly that few of the boarders realized that she ever did anything at all, or suspected that she had any social influence.

The two younger sisters superintended the sweeping, dusting, bed-making, lamp-cleaning and all the other details contributing to the comfort of the boarders outside of the dining-room. Also Anna made the always abundant and miraculously appetizing cakes in great variety.

The Alders was always full to its capacity, which meant thirty in the house and any number of boys up to nine in one of the out-buildings, a one-story stone cottage which had once been part of the slave quarters. In it were two double-beds, three canvas cots and at least seven boys; increased to eleven, sometimes, by casual transient guests of the boy-boarders.

The three boys of the family lived out there in summer with the boarders and visitors and kept them in a perpetual good humor.

The Hibbards had learnt this not by precept, but by example. They had grown up to it with their growth. For Susie had been a small girl, Buck a small boy and the rest little children when their widowed mother had begun to take boarders. They had learned much of her art, unconsciously and without knowing that they were learning it.

She was dead and gone before I first knew the Alders. But her spirit still informed the life of the place. She must have been a real lady, every fiber and breath of her, and she must have been a levelheaded, practical woman. They quoted some of her aphorisms.

“You cannot make money on twenty-one really good meals a week when you only charge six dollars board,” she was reputed to have said. “See that everything is eatable and every meal abundant and give them fried chicken and ice-cream, all they can eat, on Sundays and Thursdays, and they’ll always be enthusiastic about the table.”

“People can have a good time only in their own way. Find out what they like to do and encourage them to do it, if it is not wrong. That is the only way to please anybody.”

“Either don’t take boarders at all or make them feel as welcome as cousins.

“Leave out what you can’t afford altogether. People never miss what no one has and no one can see. But never skimp anything you have. It is economy to offer everyone a third helping of everything.”

“Season the food with good nature.”

“Be easy-going about everything.”

They were easy-going about everything. I’ve seen Susie tired to death, but gaily hiding it under an exterior of spontaneous vivacity, come back into the big parlor at eleven o’clock Saturday night with two handfuls of cornmeal to scatter on the floor to make it more slippery for dancing. And she did it graciously. They all did such things, and did them instinctively.

They had the faculty of foreseeing when any amusement was palling on the participants and of starting something else before the boarders had time to find out that they were getting tired of what they were doing. They could always lead their guests into anything they began. On Sunday

nights Susie sat at the piano and the rest stood around her and they all sang hymns in which all the singers on the farm invariably joined. Two or three nights a week they gathered similarly and sang college songs or popular tunes. Nearly every weekday evening they danced and of course the guests danced too. Then there was Jack Palton, who foraged among Uncle Hibbard's guitars, found one with four strings left, tuned it like a banjo, and accompanied himself and a bevy of girls in singing glees. Mostly the boarders were too lazy to play tennis and most of the Hibbards were too easy-going to see that the court was kept in order, but nobody missed it. If they played tennis they suited themselves to the court as it was.

The Alders was an easy-going place, full of merriment, of gaiety, of diversion, of singing and dancing, of lovemaking and flirtations.

Especially of flirtations.

That was where the three boys came in strong.

Inevitably the boarders at the Alders were mostly women and young women. Before they were half grown the three boys learned to act as beaux for little girls, misses, hoydens, old-maids and grass-widows. They had learned how without knowing it, without knowing it they made an art of it. They did their best, quite spontaneously, to see to it that every unmated feminine creature at the Alders had a good time.

Incidentally they had a good time, for attractive girls were always present in abundance.

The result was as good as a comedy to watch.

Whenever a pretty girl, without a gallant in attendance, came to the Alders, she was promptly annexed by the second brother, who had been christened Ernest Paca Hibbard and was always known, spoken of and addressed as "Pake."

Pake was neither tall nor short. He was broad and thick. Also he was fat, not too fat, but pleasantly fat. He had a bullet head, a short neck and a round ruddy face. Withal he was good looking. He affected bright hat-bands on his new stylish straw hats; bright effective neck-ties, tan shoes, white duck trousers and blue coats. He looked attractive, felt attractive and was attractive. Nearly every newcomer liked Pake and, if he liked her, she was within three days spoken of as "Pake's girl."

He was a born flirt, could have flirted if he had been walking in his sleep, and he flirted well. Few girls could resist the charm of his frank and ingenuous overtures or the sparkle of his brown eyes.

Then after Pake had annexed the girl, Buck would look her over. He was in no hurry. He was tall, heavily built though spare, had a good-natured countenance, in which blue eyes looked out of a tanned face, and wore clothes which neither he nor anyone else ever noticed.

If Buck liked a girl well enough he took her away from Pake. Nobody could ever describe or specify how he did it; but he did it. Buck's advances threw Pake completely into the shade.

Buck was the head of the family, ran the farm, gave orders to the tenant-farmer, directed the selection of the calf that was to be slaughtered every two weeks and of the two lambs killed each week, talked fascinatingly of pigs and crops, had to ask no one but himself when he wanted a horse hitched up to take a girl out driving, and was generally jovial and delightful.

The girls he liked always liked him better than Pake. He had more conversation and never bored anybody.

Then after Pake had transferred his attentions to some newcomer and Buck and his girl were together during all Buck's leisure as naturally as cup and saucer, Rex would look her over deliberately. He was even less in a hurry than Buck.

Rex was slight and silent, with a melancholy air and melting yellow-brown eyes. He was, to the few girls he fancied, altogether irresistible. Therein lay his fault. Rex took flirtation too seriously. It was likely to slip into love making, which is not sound boarding-house ethics.

But Rex never caused any trouble or got into any trouble. If things looked serious to the gossips or the family, they never felt serious to Rex or the girl.

Such was the Alders in its prime, which lasted some few years, during which I was a resident there, first in the "Club," as the boys called their whitewashed stone cottage, later in the house itself. I was happy those four summers, and became almost an honorary member of the family. The honorary members of the Hibbard family were numerous. The Alders had entertained nearly two hundred individual boarders a year for fifteen years. At least one in ten of them felt like an honorary member of the family. Many of those who came there for a second summer were treated as honorary members of the family, and I had spent four summers at the Alders.

So I was treated quite as an honorary member of the family and enjoyed it.

The family, in fact, was the best feature of life at the Alders. Seldom could one encounter seven brothers and sisters so loving to each other, so devoted. They had no motto, but they behaved as if their motto were "all for one, one for all." A pleasant feature of each day was the sight of their habitual morning gathering, all to themselves, on the small side porch. There they would sit for half an hour or more, holding a sort of family council on the problems of that day. They were a most united family, solicitous about each other, perpetually interested in each other's welfare.

II

The Alders changed like everything else. Susie married and lived in Baltimore, Anna married and lived in Washington. Pake went to Pittsburgh. Rex married a widow with two children and settled in Chicago. Buck was away from home a good deal. Mattie married a man who did not make the family feel enthusiastic. The Alders continued full of boarders, all in the care of Leslie, the youngest sister, whom I had last seen as a shy girl.

For I had not visited the Alders for a dozen years, and in that time had scarcely seen any of the family except Pake, jolly old Pake, a prosperous bachelor, as much of a flirt as ever, even more of a flirt than in his youth; a short, florid, jovial man, young-looking and handsome, who made love to every new girl he met as naturally as he breathed.

Then, one afternoon early in July, I encountered Rex on the platform of a railroad station, just as we were about to take trains leaving in opposite directions. He glowed over conditions at the Alders, averred that Leslie ran the place as well as ever all four sisters together had, that it was always full, that it was as delightful as ever.

Within a week I encountered Susie and her two tall girls in the waiting room of Union Station. They were off to the Alders for the summer and Susie invited me up over any Sunday I chose.

As with Rex, so also the time I had with Susie was too short for me to ask a tenth of the questions I wanted to ask or for her to tell me a tenth of what she had to tell.

The first Saturday I could get off early I ran up to the Alders. Buck met me at Jonesville station, a little more bronzed than I had last seen him, otherwise the same youthful-looking giant.

The house, of course, was the same tile-roofed brick house, big and plain, neat under a new coat of bright lemon-yellow paint. The barns were the same weathered gray, unpainted, ramshackle barns I remembered, not a bit more decayed nor less dilapidated than a dozen years before. The grove behind the barn was unaltered, not a tree gone as far as I could judge, and all

its big oaks, tulip-poplars and hickories rustling delightfully. The outbuildings near the house were as of old and the brook, just as of yore, not fifty feet from the front porch, rippled across the lawn between its rows of alders. The ailanthus trees west of the house and the locust tree by the well seemed exactly as formerly. They were so big they did not show their growth. But the catalpa by the bridge over the brook had taken on a new lease of life and was flourishing, whereas the lombardy poplars across the brook were gone. The chief change was in the maples. In my time they had been young trees, with trunks too slender to support a hammock rope without bending when anyone sat in the hammock. Now they were large trees, shading the entire front yard from the brook to the porch with an almost continuous canopy of green.

The place was full of boarders and their children, though the family themselves took up a larger part of the house than of old. Susie was there with her two girls, Anna with her two manly boys and Rex and his wife and his two step-children. Leslie had grown into an entirely adequate housekeeper and hostess and presided admirably. As of yore, the homestead tinkled with banjo music and rang with laughter.

Mattie, of course, was not at the house, as she and her husband lived a quarter of a mile down the road on the farm that had been Aunt Cynthia's. Everything and everybody was as I expected except that I missed Pake.

"Where's Pake?" I queried.

"Pake!" Susie exclaimed. "Didn't you know Pake was in Rio de Janeiro?"

"No!" I answered; "why, I saw Pake on Washington's birthday and he said nothing about going abroad."

"He went in March," Susie rejoined; "late in March, I think. He likes it down there."

Somebody interrupted and we did not mention Pake again until after supper. Then we were all out on the long front porch, grouped about Susie. Buck and Tom Brundige and I, scattered among the ladies, had our cigars drawing well. Rex, as always, was smoking one cigarette after another. A V.M.I. cadet, a crony of one of Anna's boys, was seated on one rail of the rustic bridge over the brook, twanging a banjo at three girls who sat on the other rail facing him. In the lulls of our talk and of the banjo, the chuckle of the brook over its pebbles emphasized the silence, into which broke the undertones of a pair of lovers, swinging in a hammock off to the right. The stars twinkled through the tree-tops, the cigar ends glowed red in the darkness, which was cloven by shafts of lamplight from the windows and mitigated afar to the left where, over the long black outline of the Blue Ridge a paling sky prophesied moonrise.

Somebody had been expecting a letter and had been disappointed and was mourning over it.

"I don't understand about letters from Pake," Susie remarked. "Sometimes we don't get any letters for weeks, and then we get two or three, all at once. When we compare dates and post-marks we find that he writes every Wednesday and Saturday and mails the letters the very day they are written. How do you explain that, Billy?"

"I suppose," I said, "that the letters come different ways, perhaps some by Lisbon, some by London, others perhaps other ways. That might explain it. What do you think, Tom?"

"I fancy," said Brundige, "that you are probably right."

"I had a letter from Pake to-day," Susie went on. "I had not heard from him for a month. He says he don't like his business quarters. He has an expensive office and he says it is dark and hot and stuffy and he is going to change just as soon as he can find something to suit him. He says he is looking round. But he says he is most comfortably located otherwise. He is boarding, as he expresses it, 'up on Santa Teresa'; what does that mean, Billy?"

"Big, long hill," I replied. "Four hundred feet high. Splendid view over the city and harbor. Fine air all night. Lots of places to board up there, and all good. How's that now, Tom?"

"All correct," Brundige corroborated me.

"I should think," Rex put in, "that Pake would get into trouble down there."

"What sort of trouble?" Anna demanded. "Pake never gets into trouble anywhere. What sort of trouble do you mean?"

Rex lit another cigarette.

"Oh," he said, "I meant that down there those Dago Portuguese won't stand any nonsense. They're a revengeful lot, by what I hear. Pake might cut somebody out with a girl and get a knife stuck in him."

"You're teasing!" cried Anna, indignantly.

"You're always up to some teasing! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

And Susie rebuked him:

"You oughtn't to suggest such awful things, Rex."

"But I wasn't suggesting anything awful," Rex persisted, "and I wasn't teasing. I only meant Pake would be likely to cause some heartburnings down there. Pake's bound to be the same old Pake. He can't change all of a sudden. He's certain to have half a dozen girls thinking they have him on a string before he was there a week. Before he was there a month he had more than one girl on a string. Somebody's bound to be jealous. Those Dagoes are a hot-blooded lot."

"Pooh!" Buck cut in, "Pake don't know enough Portuguese to flirt with any natives and all the Americans and English down there will understand flirting."

"What's the matter with some Dago being in love with an English girl or an American girl?" Rex persevered; "Pake might cut one out with a girl that speaks English."

I saw that both Susie, who was naturally nervous, and Anna, who had been inseparable from Pake all through their childhood, were wrought up. I tried to intervene.

"Nonsense," I said, "Pake might cut out any number of gallants and never get into any trouble. Rio is as peaceable as Baltimore. To begin with, he can't flirt with any Brazilian girls, for no Brazilian girl is ever permitted to talk to a young man. Anybody going along the streets can see the fashionable Brazilians making love according to their custom. Toward sunset, when the heat is less fierce, the girls, all dressed up, lean out of the windows of the second floor drawing rooms. Their lovers stand on the other side of the street and look at them. A young man will stand that way two hours or more every afternoon for a year before he asks her father for a girl. That's the fashion. How is it now, Tom?"

"Same way now." Brundige corroborated me. "Lots of flirtation among the foreign set, though. But no danger of daggers or revenge. Rio is as peaceable as Washington. I never heard of any case of revenge or of jealousy leading to bloodshed. Never heard of a supposed case, except once."

His tone told us all there was a story coming. He was sitting next to Susie and we all hitched our chairs nearer.

"What was that, Tom?" Buck asked.

The women all looked towards Brundige. Rex lit another cigarette. The rest of us lit fresh cigars.

"It was a fellow named Orodoff Guimaraes," Brundige began. "Guimaraes, in Portuguese, is like Smith in English, only more so. It seems as if half the Fluminenses, as they call the people of Rio, are named Guimaraes. This Orodoff Guimaraes was a cousin and namesake of a wealthy and respected wine-merchant and rather traded on the relationship and identity of the name. He

was one of those dandies who swarm in all South American cities, young men with little or no income, a great sense of their own importance, a taste for expensive pleasures, a love of ease and comfort, ungovernable passions, and an insane devotion to the latest fashion in clothes.

“Most of such idlers have no income and are too proud to have any business. This Orodoff Guimaraes was better off in both respects. He inherited a small property in real estate, and he made some money in life insurance. He had a desk in a third floor office in a building he owned, 49A Rua de Alfandega, one of the principal business streets of the old down-town part of Rio. He rented the first and second floors of the building at good rentals, and he rented desk-room on the third floor; all the back office and all the front office except his own small desk.

“He used to spend the most of his mornings at that desk, idling. He sometimes had business that took him out, sometimes he pretended he had. But mostly he just sat at his desk, reading papers, smoking cigarettes or doing nothing at all. It was a pleasant place to do nothing in, a big room, nearly thirty feet wide, more than thirty feet long, with a high ceiling and three tall French windows down to the floor, all three always open. They faced south, so that they needed no awnings and they let in no glare and plenty of breeze. The office was light, but not too light, cool and airy, an ideal loafing place.

“When he was not loafing in his office Guimaraes was always making love to some girl or going through the motions of making love. No girl would have him, for no girl’s father would let her marry him; he was not well enough off to marry, though he managed to dress well as a bachelor. So girl after girl whom he made love to married some one else, or got engaged to some one else. Three of them got engaged, but never got married. Their bridegrooms died before the wedding day.

“In each case Guimaraes made friends with his rival, got quite chummy with him, and induced him to rent a desk in his office. In each case the rival was killed by falling out of one of the French windows of the office, forty odd feet to the pavement of the Rue de Alfandega. In each case it was an accident. In each case Orodoff Guimaraes was out of his office when the accident happened. But while no one could say a word against Guimaraes, after the third accident no Fluminense who had been exposed in any way to Orodoff Guimaraes’ real or apparent rivalry for any girl could be induced to rent desk room in his office. The deaths could not be imputed to him, but the coincidence of the rivalry, the friendship, the renting of a desk and the fall from the window, in three different cases, was more than even the slow-thinking fashionable Fluminenses could stand. It got on their nerves. If he hadn’t committed three murders out of revenge, it seemed as if he had. Of course, he couldn’t have hypnotized the victims when he was half a mile away and made them throw themselves out of the window or caused them to walk out of the window, but somehow everybody felt as if that was just about what he had done.

“And each case was spooky, too. In each case the victim’s desk was close to one of the windows; in each case Orodoff Guimaraes was out, but there were two other men, renters of desk-room, at desks further back in the office; in each case the other men, seated at their desks twenty feet and more away, had been talking across the room to the victim; in each case the other men, different men each time, had turned round to look at something on their desks, had heard no sound, no movement, no cry, but when they looked round again found themselves alone in the room, and, going to the window, saw the victim crushed on the pavement below.”

He stopped.

“Why don’t they have a railing or a balustrade across the open window?” Rex inquired.

“Custom,” Brundige rejoined. “Custom rules everything down there; custom rules everything all over South America. In Rio all upstairs offices have French windows down to the floor. It’s a

hot climate and no window has a rail or even a bar across it. To have unobstructed windows is the custom.

“Fool custom!” said Buck.

Just then Leslie came out and joined us. She had been attending to her household duties, or giving orders about breakfast, or entertaining a boarder or something like that.

After she was settled next Rex she said:

“I had a letter from Pake this morning. He says there are some fine girls down there in Rio. Says he has had no end of fun with them. He must have been in a good humor when he wrote that letter. It’s a long letter and very funny. He tells how he pretended to make love to a girl, just to annoy a fool of a dude who was always making eyes at her, how at first the dude was mad, how he saw the joke and behaved real sensibly. Pake says they got to be real good friends. He tells it all very well. I’ll read it to you to-morrow.”

Leslie was bubbling with merriment, as unconscious as possible and very girlish. But about the rest of us the atmosphere seemed to tingle. I could feel, as it were, the spiritual tension. Buck asked, thickly:

“Did he tell you the fellow’s name?”

“No,” said Leslie cheerfully. “He never mentioned his name. But he says they are real good friends.”

Just then the banjo party on the little bridge stood up. We heard cheerful greetings and recognized Mattie’s voice. She had strolled over on foot, her home being a very short distance down the road.

She came up on the porch, a big, solid matronly young woman. I caught a glimpse of her plump face as the lamplight through the open doorway struck on her, her brown eyes smiling merrily.

Buck sat down on the porch floor, his feet on the steps, his back against a pillar. Mattie took his chair. She also took charge and control of the conversation.

“Alf drove to Hagerstown right after supper,” she said. “He ought to be back soon. I told him I was coming over here and he’ll come right here when he comes out.”

This was in answer to my query.

“I had a letter from Pake this morning,” she went on. “He says he’s got a new office that suits him perfectly. He says he didn’t need as much room as he had, so he’s taken desk room only in the office of a friend of his, some kind of Brazilian name, I couldn’t spell and can’t pronounce it. He says it’s a dandy place on the third floor, big, high room, plenty of floor space to move about in and nice fellows at the other desks. It’s bright and cool and airy, three big French windows open down to the floor.”

Then, quite suddenly, as she paused, I felt the Alders enveloped in an atmosphere of tragedy and gloom. The Hibbards excelled in self-control; not one of them uttered a sound. There was a long silence. I could hear the ripple of the brook. The first rays of the late moon, just clearing the top of the Blue Ridge, struck through the maples.

Anna spoke first:

“Have you that letter with you, Mattie?”

“Yes,” Mattie replied cheerfully. “I brought it along.”

“Give it to me,” Anna said; “Billy and I will try to make out that name.”

“Billy can do it, I’ll bet,” spoke Mattie brightly.

Anna, the letter in her hand, stood up.

“Come on, Billy,” she said.

I went.

I was surprised at her asking me instead of Brundige. I had never been intimate with Anna. Susie I had known well and Mattie better, but Leslie, in the old days, had merely smiled and seldom spoken, so that I could not tell whether she liked me or not, while Anna had seemed to avoid me.

I should have expected her to call Brundige, for Tom had been in Rio longer than I, and much more recently.

She stood by the refrigerator in the back hall by the side door and leaned against it, her brown hair almost golden against the lamp that stood on the refrigerator.

"I daren't look at the letter," she said. "You read it, Billy."

I found the name and it was Orodoff Guimaraes. Also, at the end of the letter he told Mattie to write to him at his office address, Rua de Alfandega, 49A.

"Come!" said Anna, in a fierce whisper.

I followed her through the side door and out into the tepid windless moonlight.

She made for the barn.

The atmosphere of gloom and tragedy deepened about us. The moonlight seemed weird and ghastly, the shadows of the trees grim and menacing, the silence like that of a graveyard.

Anna leaned against the barnyard gate.

"Could I send a cablegram to Rio de Janeiro for thirty dollars?" she queried.

"A long one for less," I said. "When I was down there the rates were sixty-five cents a word. That's many years ago. The rates can't be over half that now. You could cable a letter for thirty dollars."

"I have three ten-dollar bills," she said. "Barton gave them to me for emergencies just before I left Washington."

"I have more than that in my pocket," I said. "Between us we are sure to have more than enough."

"Do you suppose," she asked, "that I could send a cable from Jonesville this late Saturday night?"

"We might try," I said.

"If we can't," she pressed me, "will you drive into Hagerstown with me

"Yes," I promised.

"Oh," she said, "I can't bear it. I can see him lying dead on those cruel paving stones. I can't bear it."

I remembered that, just as Rex and Leslie had been inseparable all through their childhood, so Anna and Pake had been comrades from the cradle on. I said nothing.

"Can you hitch up without the lantern?" she demanded.

"Has the stable been altered?" I asked.

"Not a bit," she said.

In fact my hand in the dark found in the same places what might have been the same hickory harness-pegs and on them what seemed like the same old sets of harness.

"Which stall?" I asked.

"Laddie's old stall," she directed me; "call her Nell."

I harnessed the mare and led her out to the carriage shed. Anna climbed into the buggy. I opened the gate into the grove and closed it after she had driven through. At the far end of the grove I got out of the buggy again and let down the bars. After I had put them up and was at last in the buggy she handed the reins to me.

“Nell can trot,” she said.

Nell trotted, the snaky black shadows lay inky dark across the road. We tore past Grotto station. We neared Jonesville. I had no sense of ineptitude or futility in what we were trying to do. I did not feel I was on a wild goose chase. I did not feel absurd. I took our errand most seriously. We were on our way to warn Fake against the devilish machinations of a fiend who had contrived and compassed three ingenious murders. We were racing against time to warn him before it was too late. I was wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement over the gravity and urgency of our mission.

We found the telegraph operator still awake. We persuaded him to do as we asked. Anna wrote and I amended till we agreed on:

“Change your office immediately. Do not enter it again on any account. Get another office at once. Act instantly; this is a matter of life and death. Explanations by letter.

“ANNA.”

When the cablegram was sent off we drove homeward, at Nell’s natural pace, which was not slow.

We felt only partly relieved.

A dozen times Anna sighed:

“I hope we were in time; oh, I hope we were in time!”

The atmosphere of gloom and tragedy pursued us as we returned, enveloped the Alders when again we were seated on the porch.

Hardly were we seated when Mattie’s husband came. I had heard he had been consumptive, but had recovered completely. He looked to me like a dying man; haggard, gray-checked, sunken-eyed, trembling. He greeted people like a sleep-walker.

As soon as greetings were over he said:

“Buck, I want to talk business to you a moment.”

Buck stood up. He had the Hibbard faculty of intuition and unexpectedness. I was used to both, of old. But I was very much astonished when he pinched me as he passed and indicated that I was to come, too.

In the back hall by the refrigerator Alf looked up at Buck like a hunted animal at bay.

“My God, Buck,” he said. “How’ll we ever break it to the girls?”

“Break what?” Buck queried, his voice dry and thin.

“There was a cablegram for you at Hagerstown,” Alf replied. “Beesore had sense enough not to telephone it out here. He saw me and gave it to me. Pake’s dead.”

“Let’s look at the cablegram,” Buck said thickly.

He looked, holding it closely to the kerosene lamp on the refrigerator.

Then he handed it to me.

I read:

“E. P. Hibbard instantly killed by a fall from a window.

“G. Swanwick.”