

Hulbert Footner



***Murder Runs
in the Family***

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THE END

CHAPTER I

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LANCE MCCREA set his door open an inch and listened. She was always the first of the lodgers to come home in the afternoon. At this hour there was nobody in the house except the servants at work in the basement, and Professor Sempill, buried in his study in the extension.

When Lance heard her firm light step on the first flight of stairs, a curious breathlessness took possession of him. He had known the girl only a week, but she had done things to him. Most inconvenient to fall in love when you were out of a job. He knew her name—Freda Rollin—and that was all.

He timed his exit from the room so that they came face to face at the top of the stairs. Both started with surprise. Freda's start was genuine; Lance's made to order. The girl's face lighted up at the sight of him, but instantly became grave again. Lance's eyes dwelt on her with a kind of hungry pleasure. Without appearing to, he blocked the way to her room.

"You're earlier than usual," he said, just to be saying something.

"No," she answered. "Just the same as usual."

"Is your work far from here?" he asked.

"Not very."

His face fell. He was always trying to lead her into telling him something about herself, but she always evaded it.

He tried again. "You're lucky to have a job in times like these."

She sighed. "I suppose so."

"Don't you consider yourself lucky?" he asked, in surprise.

"Oh yes," she answered, listlessly. "But you get a kind of yen for freedom. You can't help longing to see the world."

"I know," said Lance, quickly. "What a good time we could have in the world if we had a little money!"

She looked away without answering. Lance's eyes ate her up. She used neither lipstick nor rouge, and her brown hair was drawn straight back and twisted in a bun at the nape of her neck. She seemed determined to make herself look as plain as possible, but it only had the effect of emphasizing her clear beautiful features and her steady eyes, Lance thought. It was the blue eyes that had plunged him in a maze. They were full of sadness. This girl could both think and feel. The silence lasted so long that she became uneasy.

"Were you going out?" she asked.

"No, just looking for ink," he said. "So that I could answer a couple of dozen more ads."

"I have some ink," she said. "No need to go all the way downstairs."

"No hurry," said Lance, blocking her way. However, she quietly pushed past him and went into her room, leaving the door open. She occupied the top floor rear in Mrs. Peale's lodging-house, and Lance had the hall room adjoining. He looked wistfully through the door of her room. It was just an ordinary lodging-house room, but the little things of her own that she had spread around lent it a wonderful grace in his eyes. He was trying to spy out whether there were any photographs of young men displayed.

"Can I come in?" he asked, diffidently.

"No," she said, calmly.

Lance blushed and looked a little foolish. She was always turning him down like this, nevertheless his instinct told him that she liked him. There was that quick blush when she had met him unexpectedly on the stairs.

She brought the bottle of ink to the door, but Lance would not take it right away, for then she would have closed the door. "This house is like a tomb in the day-time," he said. "All day I am waiting for you to come home."

She smiled at his impulsiveness, but there was not much fun in it. "Surely you don't stay in your room all day."

"No," he said. "But I've pretty well canvassed the local situation by now. There's nothing to do but wait for something to turn up."

"Why do you stay in Lounsbery?" she asked. "Wouldn't you have a better chance in Boston or New York?"

He shook his head. "Things are worse in the big cities. It is only in Lounsbery that business is stirring a little."

She extended the ink-bottle and he had to take it. "I wish you the best of luck," she said, making as if to close the door.

It had a horribly final sound, and Lance put his foot against the door. "All day I am waiting for you," he said, and you shut yourself up as soon as you come home."

"I have work to do at home."

"You can't work all the time. You are young like me."

A frankly bitter smile twisted her lips. "I must forget all that," she murmured.

"Why?" he demanded.

"It is not polite to ask questions," she said, gently pressing the door against his foot as a hint.

Lance began to feel desperate. "Won't you come out with me tonight?" he blurted out. "To the pictures. Or anywhere?"

For an instant her set face relaxed enchantingly, and the blue eyes sought his in a soft warm glance. But she got her grip immediately. "You can't afford it," she said.

"Yes, I can," he said, eagerly. "I'm not broke yet."

Her face was like marble now. "It is useless for you to ask me," she said, firmly. "I can't come, ever."

"But why? why?" he pleaded. "At least tell me that."

She released the pressure on the door. "All right. It is better to be frank and open. It will save trouble later. I cannot be friends with you."

Lance scowled blackly. He had as good a conceit of himself as most young men. He was perfectly well aware that he was good-looking and well formed. Most girls fell for him. "What's the matter with me?" he demanded, sorely.

"Nothing," she said. "But I am not free. There are circumstances that I don't care to explain. It would be much better for you if you passed me as a stranger when we meet after this. And kinder to me."

"I couldn't do that," he mumbled, wretchedly.

"Then you should find another lodging-house," she said, relentlessly.

He removed his foot from the door, and she closed it. He went back to his room and flung himself down on his bed. He had never met a girl like this before. He felt humiliated. He raged against her in his mind, but that didn't make him feel any better.

Her bed was on the other side of the wall from his. Evidently she had forgotten how thin the walls were. He heard a sound that caused him to spring up with a face of dismay. She was lying on her bed, crying. He distinctly heard the soft catch of her breath on the little strangled sobs.

Lance turned red in the face and ran out of his room. He was beyond all thinking of what he was doing. Conventions and proprieties didn't mean a thing in the world to him then. He threw open the door of her room and ran in.

"Freda! What is the matter?" he cried with all his heart in his voice.

She jumped up, blushing with shame and anger. "How dare you!...How dare you come into my room?" she gasped.

Lance stopped, half abashed. "I couldn't help myself," he said, simply. "I couldn't bear to hear you crying. It was like little knives hacking at my breast."

"Go!" she said, pointing to the door like an offended queen. "You have nothing to do with me."

A healthy anger came to Lance's support, and instead of turning tail he went nearer to her. "I don't know about that," he said, stubbornly. "Something tells me that you were crying because it hurt you to turn me down, and I mean to find out."

She laughed cuttingly. "That's just your vanity. All men are the same."

"Why do you want to fight me?" he asked, wondering at her bitterness. "I'm your best friend. I love you."

"No!" she cried out, as if in pain. "That's ridiculous. You have known me only for a week."

"A week is long enough," said Lance. "A man knows in one moment when he has found the right woman."

"Don't say it! Don't say it!" she cried, covering her ears like a child.

"Why not?" he asked. "I may as well tell you now as any time. I shall never change. No woman has ever got me like you have. We are down to rock-bottom things now. For me it is you or no one."

Freda was all hunched up on the edge of her bed. "This is madness! This is madness!" she was whispering.

He went closer to her. "Don't you feel it, too?" he asked.

She stood up. Her face was working painfully. "No! No! No!" she cried, wringing her hands. "You are hateful to me! You are ridiculous! You make me laugh!"

"I don't believe you," said Lance. "You make too much fuss about it!" He went closer to her.

"Go away! Go away!" she cried, fending him off with her hands.

But he flung his arms around her and drew her close. With a shiver her body relaxed. Her head fell back and he pressed his lips to hers. For an instant she lay quiet and happy in his arms; her lips responded to his. Then recollection seemed to return to her. She stiffened, and thrust him away.

"Go!" she cried. "You are torturing me."

Lance had left the door wide open when he entered the room, and they had forgotten about it. At this moment a new voice made itself heard; a man's voice snarling and hateful: "Who the hell is this fellow?"

Freda clapped a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry, and went staggering back. Lance whirled around. In the doorway he saw a big man, middle-aged, a commanding figure, vaguely familiar; obviously a man of wealth and position. Normally dark and swarthy, his face had now turned almost black with rage.

Lance stiffened. "If it comes to that, who are you?" he asked, coolly.

"I have a right to ask that question, and you have none!" shouted the big man. "Get out of here!"

"Try and put me out!" said Lance.

The girl sank down on the edge of the bed. "Oh, don't fight!" she gasped.

No power on earth could have kept them from fighting. They had reverted to first principles. They glared at each other. They asked no questions; neither had any desire except to get at the other.

The big man rushed at Lance, swinging his arms like flails. He was as strong as a bull, but he had no science. Lance side-stepped, and sent in a right-arm blow to the cheekbone that jarred him badly. He backed off, scowling at his opponent with a new respect.

The immemorial fighting look was fixed in Lance's face. He smiled. "Well, come on!" he said.

With a snarl of rage, the other man lowered his head and charged again. His head collided with Lance's fist, but it didn't stop him. He was extraordinarily quick for his weight. Foreseeing Lance's side-step, he turned and flung his arms around the slenderer man. His hot foul breath was in

Lance's face. All the younger man could do was to jab at him ineffectually with half-arm blows.

The big man lifted Lance from the floor and flung him down. He aimed a brutal kick at him, but Lance, as quick as a cat, rolled out of the way and, gaining his feet, came back and jarred him before he recovered from his own impetus.

He ran at Lance again, and the latter gave ground. The older man was already sobbing for breath, and Lance coolly allowed himself to be chased around the room. As the big man clawed at his shoulders, Lance slung a light chair behind him. The other tripped over it and rolled on the floor. The fall partly knocked the wind out of him, and he was in no hurry to get up.

"Have you had enough?" asked Lance, contemptuously.

The other man got to his feet blind and insane with rage. No one would have thought of calling him a distinguished figure then. His fine clothes were soiled with dust, his face almost dehumanized. With the object of making him angrier still, Lance drawled:

"Your arteries are bad, old man. You drink too much for this sort of work!"

With a hoarse cry the man snatched up the chair and aimed a blow at Lance that would have killed him had it met its mark. Lance evaded it and the chair was smashed to pieces on the floor.

The man kicked the pieces aside and came at Lance with his head down, only to be met by a hard right and left full in the face. Lance continually gave ground, but only enough to escape the embrace of the powerful arms, getting in a blow when he could.

The room was too small and too much obstructed with furniture to permit of free movement. Lance's retreat was blocked by an easy-chair. Instantly the big man sprang, forced Lance back into the chair, knelt on his body, and gripped his throat in his powerful hands. The fight appeared to be over. The girl moaned and covered her face.

But Lance's body, threshing wildly in the chair, contrived to overturn it. As they struck the floor, Lance broke free and, scrambling away on hands and knees, put a table between him and his adversary.

"Not quite good enough," he said, grinning, as he rose. The big man got up slowly, and stood lowering and swaying. He was sobbing hoarsely; his eyes were bloodshot. He felt his strength ebbing, and his eyes darted instinctively this way and that in search of a weapon.

"I'll kill you! I'll kill you!" he muttered.

His eyes fell on a pair of scissors lying on a trunk below the window, and he ran for them. Lance saw them, too, and got there first. Snatching up the scissors, he flung them under the bed. The other man, balked of his intention, stood before him with his guard down. Lance hauled off and struck him with all his force on the point of the jaw. He dropped like a felled ox and lay motionless.

"It was a shame to do it," said Lance working his numbed fingers, "but he asked for it."

Freda paid no attention to what he was saying. "What shall I do?" she murmured to herself, heartbrokenly.

"Come with me!" said Lance warmly. "We must face realities. You and I belong to each other now. Nothing else matters."

She made no reply.

"It's true I haven't got much money," he went on. "But I can work for you. I'm not exactly a fool. We'll get along."

Still she said nothing. Her eyes were fixed in horror on the floor. Following the direction of her glance, Lance saw that the big man had returned to his senses. Raising his bruised and bloated face, he regarded Freda with an ugly grin. "Well, what is your answer?" he said, as if quite sure of himself. "What are you going to do?"

"You know what I am going to do," Freda whispered. "This scene was not of my making."

"Well, tell him, tell him!" said the man, triumphantly. "Put him wise. Tell him that you are going to marry me as soon as I am free."

Freda, with a white and stony face, repeated the words like a child saying its lesson. "I am going to marry you as soon as you are free."

"Tell him that nobody is forcing you to this. It is your own free choice."

"Nobody is forcing me to this," whispered Freda. "It is my own free choice."

"Tell him that you love me."

"I love him," said Freda.

Lance turned sick at heart. Pride would not allow him to show his feelings. "Well, that lets me out," he said, smiling. He looked at the soiled and battered figure on the floor. "I wish you joy of your husband," he said, grimly.

He turned and walked out of the room, down the stairs, out of the house. He kept his head up and his expression

was much the same as usual, but he was not in the least aware of what he was doing.



CHAPTER II

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LANCE did not return home until the following morning. He had been walking during the greater part of the night, but he was not conscious of fatigue. He met his landlady, Mrs. Peake, in the front entry—an innocent, talkative woman in a homemade flannel wrapper.

"Good Land! Mr. McCrea, where you been?" she exclaimed. "You look as if you was drawn through a knot-hole!"

Lance looked at her in pure hatred. There was no particular harm in Mrs. Peake, but he hated everybody and everything this morning. "I just been out to get some medicine," he muttered. "A touch of neuralgia."

"Do you know what happened in Miss Rollin's room last night?" Mrs. Peake demanded, with sharp curiosity.

"No," he answered, coolly. "I was out."

"There was a chair broke up and I don't know what," said Mrs. Peake. "Of course she paid me for the chair, but she wouldn't tell me what broke it, and I guess I got the right to know what goes on in my own house. And Miss Rollin such a quiet girl and all. It just shows you never ran tell. She's gone now. Moved out last night at ten minutes' notice."

Lance was not surprised to hear this news. "Where did she go?" he asked, dully.

"I don't know. Wouldn't leave no address."

"Well, it's nothing in my life," said Lance, with a shrug of bravado. He moved on towards the stairs.

At the back of the hall the door into Professor Sempill's room was standing open, and a sudden yearning for human companionship overcame him. He went back. Early as it was, the Professor was bending over his books. The long room was cluttered with books and papers and the apparatus of chemistry. Nobody was ever allowed to tidy it.

"Can I come in?" asked Lance, diffidently.

The old man raised his mild, serene face framed in an aureole of floating gray hair. "Surely! Surely!" he said. "The sight of you reminds me I haven't had my breakfast yet. We'll eat together."

Lance made a gesture of distaste. "Nothing for me, thanks!"

"Tut!" said the Professor. "An egg and a cup of cocoa never hurt anybody...I don't know how I'll ever remember to eat, now that Freda has gone away."

A spasm of pain passed over Lance's face, but the old man didn't see it. "Did you see her before she left?" Lance asked, casually.

"No. She wrote me last night to explain why she hadn't been in."

He bustled around the room, making his preparations. In his quaint professor-like way he was quite efficient. He always repudiated the title of Professor, by the way, saying: "I am not connected with any institute of learning; I am only a humble investigator on my own." But "Professor" clung to him, nevertheless.

When food was put before him Lance found that he could eat. In spite of himself the hard, tight strain eased a little. The Professor chattered away, dropping his pearls of

wisdom in an inconsequential way. In a pause Lance said, looking around him:

"This room is like...like a little harbor. Everybody in the house feels it. There are no hard feelings in here, no meanness or crookedness; nobody is trying to get ahead of anybody. It braces a man up. It's like getting a shot of decency."

The Professor laughed in his silent old-man fashion. "Well, if you think all that is here, then it is here," he said. After a while he remarked, quietly: "You seem a bit down this morning. Lance."

Lance felt a great desire to confide his trouble into so wise an ear—not in plain words, but just enough to win sympathy. "Oh, it's the usual thing," he said, with a pretense of lightness.

"You mean a girl?" said the Professor, smiling. "Well I have been through that in my day."

"None of them are any good!" said Lance, harshly.

"Oh, I wouldn't go so far as that," returned the Professor, quaintly. "Very often when they make us rage it is all our own fault."

"Not in this case," said Lance, bitterly. "I meant well by this girl. I went all out for her."

"What happened?" asked the Professor.

"She has engaged herself to a middle-aged man. A man already married, it seems, who is divorcing his wife. He is more than twice her age, you understand, and a foul brute! Fat, dissipated, overbearing. How could she do it?"

"Well, I don't know," murmured the Professor. "Sometimes good women have a genius for crucifying

themselves. If something has persuaded her that it is her duty to marry this man, nothing can stop her."

Lance looked up sharply. This put a new aspect on the matter. "You mean he may have obtained some hold over her?" he asked, eagerly.

"How can I tell?"

A new light came into the young man's eyes. "Well, I'll find out about that," he said, setting his jaw. "I feel better now."

"Take another piece of toast," said the Professor.

When Lance got up to go, the old man handed him a stamped and addressed letter. "Would you mind posting this for me?" he asked. "I don't want to go out."

Lance looked down idly at the envelope and read:

Miss Freda Rollin, 237 Franklin Street, City.

His face flushed. This seemed like a little miracle. He glanced sharply at the Professor to see if he was on to anything. But the old man's face was all innocence. He was busy gathering up the breakfast dishes.

"Sure," said Lance. "See you later." He hastened out of the house.

He posted the letter in the first box, and kept on walking. Franklin Street was on the north side of town, something less than a mile away. If I get a move on I'll be there before she starts for work, Lance told himself. He had no clear idea of what he was going to do. As soon as he learned where Freda was, some power outside himself drew him there.

No. 237 was a boarding-house, a more modern establishment with a neat yard, distinctly better style than Mrs. Peake's. By the time he had reached it, Lance's

courage had failed. If Freda had refused to give him any information yesterday, there was not much chance that she would do so today. Better use indirect means to get at what he wanted. He walked up and down in front of the house, gazing at the windows and wondering which one might light Freda's room.

The door of the house opened and the man Lance had beaten the day before came down the steps. Lance's face turned bitter with jealousy. He noted that the man's black eye had been painted out by an expert. His clothes expressed the perfection of elegance. There was a handsome limousine waiting at the curb, which was no doubt his. Lance would not give ground, but waited grimly for him on the sidewalk.

Under ordinary circumstances and when things were going well, this was a handsome and distinguished-looking man in his dark style, but when he saw Lance his face turned as mean and ugly as Satan's. His right hand went to his pocket with a significant gesture. "What the hell are you doing here?" he growled.

"Just taking a morning walk," said Lance, with a hardy smile.

The man took his hand out of his pocket and exhibited a black automatic lying on the palm. He held it in such a way that the chauffeur could not see it. "I'm ready for you now, you thug! Keep your hands off me, or I'll shoot you down like a dog!"

Lance laughed. "You started it last night!"

"Don't speak to me!" barked the man as one who was accustomed to authority. "Keep away from me, do you hear?"

Keep out of my affairs, or I'll step on you as I would a worm!"

"Thanks for the warning," drawled Lance. "I'll think it over."

The man dropped his gun in his pocket, entered his limousine, and was driven away. "That man will kill me, if I don't get him first," Lance thought, involuntarily. At that moment a taxi came through the street, and, yielding to a sudden impulse, he hailed it. If it was war between him and this man, it was necessary to learn what he could about him. "Follow that car," he told his driver, "and stop when he stops."

The limousine skirted around the north side of the city, and turning east on the Hartford road, drew up before the buildings of the Beardmore Linen Mills, the largest works in Lounsbery and the mainstay of the town. The dark man alighted and went into the offices of the firm without a backward glance. The limousine drove away.

Lance paid off his taxi and went slowly along the sidewalk, looking over the ground. Beardmore's was a magnificent modern establishment with handsome buildings set amidst an extensive park, brilliant with flower-beds. The offices were in a small separate building like a little Greek temple facing a stone-bordered pool set about with Italian cypresses.

There was a gardener transplanting flowers in a bed beside the public sidewalk—a little man with a face like a withered apple and a wise bright eye. Lance stopped before him.

"Who is that guy that just went into the office?" he asked, casually.

"Him?" said the gardener. "That's the big boss. That's Jim Beardmore."

Lance whistled softly, and a slightly gone look came into his face. "Gee!" he murmured. "The biggest man in town!"

"In town?" said the gardener, scornfully. "Jim Beardmore could buy up half a dozen towns like Lounsbery and never feel it! Say one of the biggest men in the U.S.A. and you'll be nearer to it."

"Reckon you're right," said Lance, heavily. He looked on the ground. "It would be funny, wouldn't it, if a young unknown fellow who didn't even have a job set out to beat Jim Beardmore."

"Funny!" said the gardener, dryly. "It would be a scream."

"How is it," asked Lance, "when the whole country is in the dumps, that the Beardmore Linen Mills are working full time and said to be making money hand over fist?"

"Read the slogan over the door of the office. It's all in that."

Lance, following the pointing finger, read, "Linen for the price of cotton."

"That's the plain truth," said the gardener. "Beardmore's can sell linen for less than cotton and make a handsome profit. It's all owing to a new process invented by Peter Beardmore, Jim's father. Peter discovered a way of getting the fiber out of flax with a saving of months of time and labor. They got more mills in the South and the West and all over Europe. Their output is only limited by the amount of

flax they can buy. They say that the change from cotton to flax is going to alter the whole face of the earth."

"What sort of man is Jim Beardmore personally?" asked Lance.

The gardener looked at him shrewdly. He evidently made up his mind that the young man was to be trusted, He spat sideways and said: "He's a swine, that's what he is, with all his money. You can take it from me, fellow. I get a worm's-eye view of the man!"

Lance's hand shot out involuntarily. "Put it there!" he said.

They shook hands heartily.

"What's your name?" asked Lance.

"Bob Fassett."

"I'm Lance McCrea. I'll be seeing you, Bob." Lance turned back towards town.

Twenty minutes later he was climbing the stairs at Mrs. Peake's. He was weary enough then, in all conscience, because the heart had gone out of him. One of the richest men in the United States! How could you blame the girl for marrying him? Perhaps she had a family dependent on her.

At the top of the last flight the door of Freda's former room stood open. All the grace had departed from it. The rug had been taken up, and the mattress was lying doubled up on the naked springs. Lance's face twitched and he quickly turned his head.

When he opened the door of his room he instantly saw the note lying on his bureau, and a remarkable change took place in his face. It was addressed in a hand that he had already seen that morning. It must have been lying there

since the night before. This was the first time Lance had been in his room. Snatching it up and tearing it open, he read:

DEAR LANCE:

It is wrong of me to write to you, but I can't help myself. I just can't bear to have you think of me as a kind of gold-digger who is bent on making a rich marriage whatever may come. There is more in it than that, Lance. I care nothing about money. I am just in a jam. I can't help myself. It is through no fault of mine. I didn't have any luck, that's all.

Please, please, do not try to find me. It would only make it harder for both of us. You cannot help me. Nobody can. There is no way of getting out of it. I just have to keep a stiff upper lip and make the best I can of my life. After all, happiness isn't everything. Think as kindly of me as you can.

FREDA.

When he had read these pitiful broken sentences, Lance fell into a study, and a deep line etched itself between his brows. In his mind's ear he could hear the sound of Freda's soft, strangled sobs. Slowly his face hardened into the lines of a grim resolve. So intense was his absorption that he murmured aloud:

"There is one way she can be saved..." And a moment afterwards, "It doesn't matter what happens to me."

He put the letter in the drawer of his bureau, and locked it. He counted the money he had on him. He started downstairs with his head bent, still studying.

On the ground floor he looked back, and seeing that the door at the rear of the hall stood open, he turned that way, irresistibly drawn by the thought of the old man's serene wisdom.

Professor Sempill was conducting an intricate chemical experiment with his books, his notes, his test-tubes. Wholly absorbed as he was, he could still smile at Lance.

"Sit down," he said. "Smoke up. I can put this down directly."

Lance obeyed, and gave himself up to the peaceful, studious atmosphere of the laboratory. His face smoothed out, but the look of resolution in his eyes did not weaken.

After a while Professor Sempill put the tubes in their stands and wiped his hands on a towel. "Well, how goes it?" he asked. "You don't look quite so broken up as you did this morning."

"No," said Lance, seriously. "I have learned more about that case I told you about. The girl is all right. She is not just shallow and mercenary as I thought. That was what knocked me flat. I banked on her."

"I understand," said the Professor. "A man can stand anything better than being let down by one he trusts."

"What are you doing?" asked Lance.

The old man described the experiment he was making, which had something to do with the last unknown element of nature. It must be confessed that Lance understood very little about it. From chemistry they got to talking about human conduct, and Lance led up by degrees to the question he wanted to ask. It came out very off-handedly.

"Professor, do you think that a man is ever justified in killing another?"

"Why, certainly," came the prompt answer. "I can think of many cases in which murder would be a positive benefit to the community."

"Right!" murmured Lance, in deep satisfaction.

The old man glanced at him shrewdly. It must have occurred to him that this was not very prudent advice to offer hot-blooded youth. "Of course I am only speaking in the abstract," he went on. "I am a scientist. I live and have my being in the laboratory. As you know, I almost never go out-of-doors, and I am completely cut off from the practical affairs of life. Considered in the abstract, there are circumstances in which murder might be entirely justifiable, but practically considered, the laws and the state of public opinion being what they are, I should say that it would be very, very foolish."

"Oh, sure!" said Lance, "but if a man was satisfied he was doing right, what else would matter?"

"What are the circumstances you have in mind?" asked the Professor, with a smile that invited confidence.

"Oh, I didn't have any particular circumstances in mind," said Lance, carelessly. "It was just a supposititious case." He led the conversation back to the safe ground of chemistry.

Lance presently left him to his work. Issuing from the house, the young man made his way in the direction of South Chatham Street, which ran from the Civic Center down to the station. He had noticed several pawnshops along here. He turned into one which displayed an assortment of firearms in the window.

Lance was keyed up to concert pitch, though nobody could have guessed it from his wooden face. The look of that pawnshop was bitten into his brain for life: its curious blend of furtiveness with luxury; the fur coats, the jewelry, the field-glasses, the musical instruments and the weapons; the sharp glance of the young man who was prepared to be arrogant if Lance came to borrow or obsequious if he came to buy. He had greasy black curls plastered on his forehead and his eyeglasses were crooked.

"I want a gun," said Lance.

The clerk accepted this life-and-death request coolly. "What sort of gun?"

"An automatic. About thirty-two caliber. Large enough to do the trick without weighing me down."

The clerk turned towards the window where they were displayed. Lance, who did not know what the law of Connecticut was in respect to firearms, thought it better to add: "I've got a job as watchman, and I have to protect myself."

The clerk betrayed no interest in Lance's circumstances. He spread a felt cloth on top of the showcase, and laid the guns upon it.

Lance with a steady hand tested the mechanism of each, and soon made his choice. He paid the asked price, somewhat to the surprise of the clerk, and added a box of ammunition to his purchase. The clerk produced a blank book.

"Name and address," he said.

"John Williams," said Lance. "The Antlers Hotel."

It was written down in the book, together with the serial number of the gun.

Lance went home, flung himself on his bed, and slept throughout the middle part of the day.
