

# The COLLAPSIBLE HUSBAND

## and other MEDDLERS in THE CAXTON CASE

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**O**N THE VERANDAH where I sat, I turned. Down the orange and lily hedged avenue a motor had come. At the door of the hotel it stopped. A fat woman alighted, a man followed. The woman, veiled from the glare of the California sun, ascended the steps. The hall engulfed her. Before I could speak, it engulfed the man.

"Mores!" I mentally exclaimed. At sight of him my thoughts shot back. As reporter, I was assisting again at the trial of Judith Caxton whom he had defended.

Judith Caxton was accused of murdering her husband. Both were known, by repute at least, in New York where Caxton, who was a scientist, had caused rather a ripple in the press. It had been announced that he was engaged on a work similar to Delormel's.

To the public generally that was so much Greek. To students it was refreshment. Delormel's work is unobtainable anywhere, at any price, and what is worse—or better, according to the point of view—Delormel was killed for writing it. That is history.

The announcement, therefore, that Caxton was engaged on something similar caused a ripple; first, because no one could imagine where he had obtained the data, yet chiefly because the original obviously belonged to the forbidden class; that is, it was supposed to have been based either on the *Kájur* which none but the Thibetian hierarchy may approach, or else on the esoteric sections of the *Upanishads* which the priests of Brahma guard.

These works are not for everybody. If rumors concerning them are true, they contain the lost arcana, the sciences that plutonian cataclysms engulfed, the secrets of the cosmos. Such things are not for nobodies who talk about nothing. Moreover, they are doubly inaccessible. Written in tinted word forms of which the words mean one thing and the tints another, a Champollion might perhaps decipher the

text, but, unless he were initiate, he could not construe the colors. Then, also, apart from their difficulties, these works have their dangers. To get at them is one, to publish them is another. Delormel must have incurred both. His life was the penalty. So apparently was Caxton's.

But not to the district attorney. The latter, a ferocious person named Sherwood, contended that Caxton died of viper venom administered by his wife and he had experts to testify at least to the administering.

"Do you really regard these people as experts?" Mores, in a casual, condescending way asked of him; whereupon he proceeded to eat them up and, that done, he produced experts of his own who testified to just the contrary.

During the trial I got to know Mores rather well. Afterward I heard—yet what does one not hear?—that in a panic which supervened he had dropped a lot of money, that the loss had affected him, and that he had vacated the courts and the city.

Now, here he was at this California resort, where, but an hour before, after a stretch of work in San Francisco, I had come for an outing. November had come with me. But not as yet the usual tourist. Practically, the hotel was empty and I was glad that I had at least an acquaintance in the land.

At sight of him also, the trial, as I have said, returned. The vocation of reporter is not considered enviable, but there were not a few that envied it then. It took me, where they could not go, into the General Sessions where there is more drama than in all of Homer.

In this drama, as the curtain went up, a call resounded:

"Judith Caxton to the Bar!"

**I**NTO the court, the defendant came and shrank rather than sat on a chair beside Mores.

Never have I seen a face so spectral. It was not innocence that it expressed, nor yet guilt; it was horror. Her skin was white as white paper and that whiteness was accentuated by her weeds and by her eyes which were black and yet burning. Normally she must have been beautiful. Her features displayed the sensitiveness of a human mimosa and it was that sensitiveness combined with the tragedy of her position that made her look like a phantom, not from Homer, but Dante.

But one gets accustomed to all things. The soul makes itself at home with what it must. As the trial proceeded the horror of it must have waned, for once she smiled. During the summing up, Sherwood described her as hysterical and passionate, a woman insatiable of pleasure and, in pursuit of it, hesitating at nothing, even at crime. It was then that she smiled, but her smile was as weary and as flickering as a fire about to go out.

"May it please the Court: Mr. Foreman and gentlemen of the jury."

With three bows and these rituals, Sherwood opened for the State. According to him the defendant had grievances against the deceased whom he described as a recluse occupied with the recondite, a man who never went anywhere, never saw anybody and who refused to have guests at his house. Many a woman has hated her husband to the death for less, and that fact Sherwood put before the jury. It constituted, he said, the motive for the murder of this man from whom the defendant had been planning to obtain a divorce. But to obtain it meant, Sherwood declared, a sojourn in Nevada, in Idaho, exile from the smartness of upper Fifth avenue life. There was a shorter way and that way she took. Among her effects was a vial containing venom from the *tic-potonga*, or bora viper, and this venom, which she had given to her husband, was the cause of his death.

**B**EFORE he had finished, Mores was at him. "I object to the District Attorney prejudicing the jury against this gentlewoman, my client."

The objection was not sustained.

"And I except to your honor's ruling," Mores, with a bulldog look, threw up at the Bench.

Sherwood proceeded. "There, gentlemen is the crime; there, too, is the motive. To finish the picture evidence will be produced."

As I sat on the verandah, the Pacific before me, I could see the picture, the frame as well—the amber panoply of the bench, the fabulous beasts that climbed the fluted columns on the walls and the courtroom, high ceiled, close packed, filled with spectators who had begged and badgered their way there. For it is always great fun to see a woman tried for her life. Yet when you have known her, or known of her, when she has happened to be one of the super-select whose names are recorded as "Among those present," what more could any one decently ask? But public sentiment is a wave that thinks, thinks again, changes its mind. At the opening everybody knew that the prisoner was guilty. As the trial proceeded no one was quite so sure.

There was a reason for that. On the stand, servants and experts succeeded each other. Among the experts, some testified that the venom of the bora viper leaves no traces and that reagents employed in the autopsy had determined only slight discolorations superinducible as well by natural causes as the reverse. Of the servants, one told of finding the body and of going to the defendant who was in her room, the door barred and bolted. That was at eight in the morning. Already it had been shown that Caxton had died at midnight.

**W**HERE was the defendant at that time? It was Mores who asked the question. It was the prisoner who answered it. Bending to her, Mores had asked her to take the stand.

The move, wholly unexpected, unusual, almost exceptional in murder cases, created an impression that was excellent, one that increased when, hesitant and abashed at first, but presently with lifted eyes and in a clear, level voice, she testified in her own behalf.

In the direct, she denied of course that she had killed her husband, denied that she had ever contemplated such a thing, adding that though she had wanted to leave him, it was not for the reasons advanced but because she was afraid of him and that, at the hour when it was shown he had (Continued on Page 14)



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A woman vulgar and obese, a face that time had coarsened and temper had marred