

The Confession

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Chapter I

I am not a susceptible woman. I am objective rather than subjective, and a fairly full experience of life has taught me that most of my impressions are from within out rather than the other way about. For instance, obsession at one time a few years ago of a shadowy figure on my right, just beyond the field of vision, was later exposed as the result of a defect in my glasses. In the same way Maggie, my old servant, was during one entire summer haunted by church-bells and considered it a personal summons to eternity until it was shown to be in her inner ear.

Yet the Benton house undeniably made me uncomfortable. Perhaps it was because it had remained unchanged for so long. The old horsehair chairs, with their shiny mahogany frames, showed by the slightly worn places in the carpet before them that they had not deviated an inch from their position for many years. The carpets - carpets that reached to the very baseboards and gave under one's feet with the yielding of heavy padding beneath - were bright under beds and wardrobes, while in the centers of the rooms they had faded into the softness of old tapestry.

Maggie, I remember, on our arrival moved a chair from the wall in the library, and immediately put it back again, with a glance to see if I had observed her.

"It's nice and clean, Miss Agnes," she said. "A - I kind of feel that a little dirt would make it more homelike."

"I'm sure I don't see why," I replied, rather sharply, "I've lived in a tolerably clean house most of my life."

Maggie, however, was digging a heel into the padded carpet. She had chosen a sunny place for the experiment, and a small cloud of dust rose like smoke.

"Germs!" she said. "Just what I expected. We'd better bring the vacuum cleaner out from the city, Miss Agnes. Them carpets haven't been lifted for years."

But I paid little attention to her. To Maggie any particle of matter not otherwise classified is a germ, and the prospect of finding dust in that immaculate house was sufficiently thrilling to tide over the strangeness of our first few hours in it.

Once a year I rent a house in the country. When my nephew and niece were children, I did it to take them out of the city during school vacations. Later, when they grew up, it was to be near the country club. But now, with the children married and new families coming along, we were more concerned with dairies than with clubs, and I inquired more carefully about the neighborhood cows than about the neighborhood golf-links. I had really selected the house at Benton Station because there was a most alluring pasture,

with a brook running through it, and violets over the banks. It seemed to me that no cow with a conscience could live in those surroundings and give colicky milk.

Then, the house was cheap. Unbelievably cheap. I suspected sewerage at once, but it seemed to be in the best possible order. Indeed, new plumbing had been put in, and extra bathrooms installed. As old Miss Emily Benton lived there alone, with only an old couple to look after her, it looked odd to see three bathrooms, two of them new, on the second floor. Big tubs and showers, although little old Miss Emily could have bathed in the washbowl and have had room to spare.

I faced the agent downstairs in the parlor, after I had gone over the house. Miss Emily Benton had not appeared and I took it she was away.

"Why all those bathrooms?" I demanded. "Does she use them in rotation?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She wished to rent the house, Miss Blakiston. The old-fashioned plumbing - "

"But she is giving the house away," I exclaimed. "Those bathrooms have cost much more than she will get out of it. You and I know that the price is absurd."

He smiled at that. "If you wish to pay more, you may, of course. She is a fine woman, Miss Blakiston, but you can never measure a Benton with any yard-stick but their own. The truth is that she wants the house off her hands this summer. I don't know why. It's a good house, and she has lived here all her life. But my instructions, I'll tell you frankly, are to rent it, if I have to give it away."

With which absurd sentence we went out the front door, and I saw the pasture, which decided me.

In view of the fact that I had taken the house for my grandnieces and nephews, it was annoying to find, by the end of June, that I should have to live in it by myself. Willie's boy was having his teeth straightened, and must make daily visits to the dentist, and Jack went to California and took Gertrude and the boys with him.

The first curious thing happened then. I wrote to the agent, saying that I would not use the house, but enclosing a check for its rental, as I had signed the lease. To my surprise, I received in reply a note from Miss Emily herself, very carefully written on thin note-paper.

Although it was years since I had seen her, the exquisite neatness of the letter, its careful paragraphing, its margins so accurate as to give the impression that she had drawn a faint margin line with a lead pencil and then erased it - all these were as indicative of Emily Benton as - well, as the letter was not.

As well as I can explain it, the letter was impulsive, almost urgent. Yet the little old lady I remembered was neither of these things. "My dear Miss Blakiston," she wrote. "But I do hope you will use the house. It was because I wanted to be certain that it would be occupied this summer that I asked so low a rent for it.

"You may call it a whim if you like, but there are reasons why I wish the house to have a summer tenant. It has, for one thing, never been empty since it was built. It was my father's pride, and his father's before him, that the doors were never locked, even at night. Of course I can not ask a tenant to continue this old custom, but I can ask you to reconsider your decision.

"Will you forgive me for saying that you are so exactly the person I should like to see in the house that I feel I can not give you up? So strongly do I feel this that I would, if I dared, enclose your check and beg you to use the house rent free. Faithfully yours, Emily Benton."

Gracefully worded and carefully written as the letter was, I seemed to feel behind it some stress of feeling, an excitement perhaps, totally out of proportion to its contents. Years before I had met Miss Emily, even then a frail little old lady, her small figure stiffly erect, her eyes cold, her whole bearing one of reserve. The Bentons, for all their open doors, were known in that part of the country as "proud." I can remember, too, how when I was a young girl my mother had regarded the rare invitations to have tea and tiny cakes in the Benton parlor as commands, no less, and had taken the long carriage-ride from the city with complacency. And now Miss Emily, last of the family, had begged me to take the house.

In the end, as has been shown, I agreed. The glamor of the past had perhaps something to do with it. But I have come to a time of life when, failing intimate interests of my own, my neighbors' interests are mine by adoption. To be frank, I came because I was curious. Why, aside from a money consideration, was the Benton house to be occupied by an alien household? It was opposed to every tradition of the family as I had heard of it.

I knew something of the family history: the Reverend Thaddeus Benton, rector of Saint Bartholomew, who had forsaken the frame rectory near the church to build himself the substantial home now being offered me; Miss Emily, his daughter, who must now, I computed, be nearly seventy; and a son whom I recalled faintly as hardly bearing out the Benton traditions of solidity and rectitude.

The Reverend Mr. Benton, I recalled, had taken the stand that his house was his own, and having moved his family into it, had thereafter, save on great occasions, received the congregation individually or en masse, in his study at the church. A patriarchal old man, benevolent yet austere, who once, according to a story I had heard in my girlhood, had horsewhipped one of his vestrymen for trifling with the affections of a young married woman in the village!

There was a gap of thirty years in my knowledge of the family. I had, indeed, forgotten its very existence, when by the chance of a newspaper advertisement I found myself involved vitally in its affairs, playing providence, indeed, and both fearing and hating my role. Looking back, there are a number of things that appear rather curious. Why, for instance, did Maggie, my old servant, develop such a dislike for the place? It had nothing to do with the house. She had not seen it when she first refused to go. But her reluctance was evident from the beginning.

"I've just got a feeling about it, Miss Agnes," she said. "I can't explain it, any more than I can explain a cold in the head. But it's there."

At first I was inclined to blame Maggie's "feeling" on her knowledge that the house was cheap. She knew it, as she has, I am sure, read all my letters for years. She has a distrust of a bargain. But later I came to believe that there was something more to Maggie's distrust - as though perhaps a wave of uneasiness, spreading from some unknown source, had engulfed her.

Indeed, looking back over the two months I spent in the Benton house, I am inclined to go even further. If thoughts carry, as I am sure they do, then emotions carry. Fear, hope, courage, despair - if the intention of writing a letter to an absent friend can spread itself half-way across the earth, so that as you write the friend writes also, and your letters cross, how much more should big emotions carry? I have had sweep over me such waves of gladness, such gusts of despair, as have shaken me. Yet with no cause for either. They are gone in a moment. Just for an instant, I have caught and made my own another's joy or grief.

The only inexplicable part of this narrative is that Maggie, neither a psychic nor a sensitive type, caught the terror, as I came to call it, before I did. Perhaps it may be explainable by the fact that her mental processes are comparatively simple, her mind an empty slate that shows every mark made on it.

In a way, this is a study in fear.

Maggie's resentment continued through my decision to use the house, through the packing, through the very moving itself. It took the form of a sort of watchful waiting, although at the time we neither of us realized it, and of dislike of the house and its surroundings. It extended itself to the very garden, where she gathered flowers for the table with a ruthlessness that was almost vicious. And, as July went on, and Miss Emily made her occasional visits, as tiny, as delicate as herself, I had a curious conclusion forced on me. Miss Emily returned her antagonism. I was slow to credit it. What secret and even unacknowledged opposition could there be between my downright Maggie and this little old aristocrat with her frail hands and the soft rustle of silk about her?

In Miss Emily, it took the form of - how strange a word to use in connection with her! - of furtive watchfulness. I felt that Maggie's entrance, with nothing more momentous than the tea-tray, set her upright in her chair, put an edge to her soft voice, and absorbed her.

She was still attentive to what I said. She agreed or dissented. But back of it all, with her eyes on me, she was watching Maggie.

With Maggie the antagonism took no such subtle form. It showed itself in the second best instead of the best china, and a tendency to weak tea, when Miss Emily took hers very strong. And such was the effect of their mutual watchfulness and suspicion, such perhaps was the influence of the staid old house on me, after a time even that fact, of the strong tea, began to strike me as incongruous. Miss Emily was so consistent, so consistently frail and dainty and so - well, unspotted seems to be the word - and so gentle, yet as time went on I began to feel that she hated Maggie with a real hatred. And there was the strong tea!

Indeed, it was not quite normal, nor was I. For by that time - the middle of July it was before I figured out as much as I have set down in five minutes - by that time I was not certain about the house. It was difficult to say just what I felt about the house. Willie, who came down over a Sunday early in the summer, possibly voiced it when he came down to his breakfast there.

"How did you sleep?" I asked.

"Not very well." He picked up his coffee-cup, and smiled over it rather sheepishly. "To tell the truth, I got to thinking about things - the furniture and all that," he said vaguely. "How many people have sat in the chairs and seen themselves in the mirror and died in the bed, and so on."

Maggie, who was bringing in the toast, gave a sort of low moan, which she turned into a cough.

"There have been twenty-three deaths in it in the last forty years, Mr. Willie," she volunteered. "That's according to the gardener. And more than half died in that room of yours."

"Put down that toast before you drop it, Maggie," I said. "You're shaking all over. And go out and shut the door."

"Very well," she said, with a meekness behind which she was both indignant and frightened. "But there is one word I might mention before I go, and that is - cats!"

"Cats!" said Willie, as she slammed the door.

"I think it is only one cat," I observed mildly. "It belongs to Miss Emily, I fancy. It manages to be in a lot of places nearly simultaneously, and Maggie swears it is a dozen."

Willie is not subtle. He is a practical young man with a growing family, and a tendency the last year or two to flesh. But he ate his breakfast thoughtfully.

"Don't you think it's rather isolated?" he asked finally. "Just you three women here?" I had taken Delia, the cook, along.

"We have a telephone," I said, rather loftily. "Although - " I checked myself. Maggie, I felt sure, was listening in the pantry, and I intended to give her wild fancies no encouragement. To utter a thing is, to Maggie, to give it life. By the mere use of the spoken word it ceases to be supposition and becomes fact.

As a matter of fact, my uneasiness about the house resolved itself into an uneasiness about the telephone. It seems less absurd now than it did then. But I remember what Willie said about it that morning on our way to the church.

"It rings at night, Willie," I said. "And when I go there is no one there."

"So do all telephones," he replied briskly. "It's their greatest weakness."

"Once or twice we have found the thing on the floor in the morning. It couldn't blow over or knock itself down."

"Probably the cat," he said, with the patient air of a man arguing with an unreasonable woman. "Of course," he added - we were passing the churchyard then, dominated by what the village called the Benton "mosolem" - "there's a chance that those dead-and-gone Bentons resent anything as modern as a telephone. It might be interesting to see what they would do to a victrola.

"I'm going to tell you something, Willie," I said. "I am afraid of the telephone."

He was completely incredulous. I felt rather ridiculous, standing there in the sunlight of that summer Sabbath and making my confession. But I did it.

"I am afraid of it," I repeated. "I'm desperately sure you will never understand. Because I don't. I can hardly force myself to go to it. I hate the very back corner of the hall where it stands, I - "

I saw his expression then, and I stopped, furious with myself. Why had I said it? But more important still, why did I feel it? I had not put it into words before, I had not expected to say it then. But the moment I said it I knew it was true. I had developed an *idée fixe*.

"I have to go downstairs at night and answer it," I added, rather feebly. "It's on my nerves, I think."

"I should think it is," he said, with a note of wonder in his voice. "It doesn't sound like you. A telephone!" But just at the church door he stopped me, a hand on my arm.

"Look here," he said, "don't you suppose it's because you're so dependent on the telephone? You know that if anything goes wrong with it, you're cut off, in a way. And there's another point - you get all your news over it, good and bad." He had difficulty, I think, in finding the words he wanted. "It's - it's vital," he said. "So you attach too much importance to it, and it gets to be an obsession."

"Very likely," I assented. "The whole thing is idiotic, anyhow."

But - was it idiotic?

I am endeavoring to set things down as they seemed to me at the time, not in the light of subsequent events. For, if this narrative has any interest at all, it is a psychological one. I have said that it is a study in fear, but perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is a study of the mental reaction of crime, of its effects on different minds, more or less remotely connected with it.

That my analysis of my impression; in the church that morning are not colored by subsequent events is proved by the fact that under cover of that date, July 16th, I made the following entry:

"Why do Maggie and Miss Benton distrust each other?"

I realized it even then, although I did not consider it serious, as is evidenced by the fact that I follow it with a recipe for fruit gelatin, copied from the newspaper.

It was a calm and sunny Sunday morning. The church windows were wide open, and a butterfly came in and set the choir boys to giggling. At the end of my pew a stained-glass window to Carlo Benton - the name came like an echo from the forgotten past - sent a shower of colored light over Willie, turned my blue silk to most unspinsterly hues, and threw a sort of summer radiance over Miss Emily herself, in the seat ahead.

She sat quite alone, impeccably neat, even to her profile. She was so orderly, so well balanced, one stitch of her hand-sewed organdy collar was so clearly identical with every other, her very seams, if you can understand it, ran so exactly where they should, that she set me to pulling myself straight. I am rather casual as to seams.

After a time I began to have a curious feeling about her. Her head was toward the rector, standing in a sort of white nimbus of sunlight, but I felt that Miss Emily's entire attention was on our pew, immediately behind her. I find I can not put it into words, unless it was that her back settled into more rigid lines. I glanced along the pew. Willie's face wore a calm and slightly somnolent expression. But Maggie, in her far end - she is very high church and always attends - Maggie's eyes were glued almost fiercely to Miss Emily's back. And just then Miss Emily herself stirred, glanced up at the window, and turning slightly, returned Maggie's glance with one almost as malevolent. I have hesitated over that word. It seems strong now, but at the time it was the one that came into my mind.

When it was over, it was hard to believe that it had happened. And even now, with everything else clear, I do not pretend to explain Maggie's attitude. She knew, in some strange way. But she did not know that she knew - which sounds like nonsense and is as near as I can come to getting it down in words.

Willie left that night, the 16th, and we settled down to quiet days, and, for a time, to undisturbed nights. But on the following Wednesday, by my journal, the telephone commenced to bother me again. Generally speaking, it rang rather early, between eleven o'clock and midnight. But on the following Saturday night I find I have recorded the hour as 2 a. m.

In every instance the experience was identical. The telephone never rang the second time. When I went downstairs to answer it - I did not always go - there was the buzzing of the wire, and there was nothing else. It was on the twenty-fourth that I had the telephone inspected and reported in normal condition, and it is possibly significant that for three days afterward my record shows not a single disturbance.

But I do not regard the strange calls over the telephone as so important as my attitude to them. The plain truth is that my fear of the calls extended itself in a few days to cover the instrument, and more than that, to the part of the house it stood in. Maggie never had this, nor did she recognize it in me. Her fear was a perfectly simple although uncomfortable one, centering around the bedrooms where, in each bed, she nightly saw dead and gone Bentons laid out in all the decorum of the best linen.

On more than one evening she came to the library door, with an expression of mentally looking over her shoulder, and some such dialogue would follow:

"D'you mind if I turn the bed down now, Miss Agnes?"

"It's very early."

"S'almost eight." When she is nervous she cuts verbal corners.

"You know perfectly well that I dislike having the beds disturbed until nine o'clock, Maggie."

"I'm going out."

"You said that last night, but you didn't go:

Silence.

"Now, see here, Maggie, I want you to overcome this feeling of - " I hesitated - "of fear. When you have really seen or heard something, it will be time enough to be nervous."

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