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WHAT HAPPENED AT MONTALBAN

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS
WHAT HAPPENED AT
MOLLY BALSON: A young London nurse, specializing in the care of children.
SIR JOHN MONTALBAN: Head of the Montalban family nearly ninety years of age.
ROBERT MONTALBAN: His son, who has been master of the family seat for twenty years. He has three sons:
ROBERT, Junior, crippled in a road smash (unmarried).
RALPH, (married).
CHARLES, 21 (unmarried).
 and two unmarried daughters **ELSIE** and **CLERONE**.
BARBARA MONTALBAN: Wife of Ralph.
MALLIA DAUNT: Met her death at Montalban in mysterious circumstances.
LAWRENCE SEVERN: Secretary-companion to the veteran Sir John.

CHAPTER VII MOLLY LEARNS MORE

It was a hot day, and still, with the tops of the trees of the Montalban park immobile against a pale, cloudless sky. Two of the Montalban family were disporting themselves in the clear, deep end of the lake, nearest the inlet of the stream. Sand broke the dark soil under this stretch, and even made a narrow strip of beach for bathing along the distant edge of the water; but Charles and Robert Montalban preferred to dive from the balustrade. To Molly, watching from the window of the day nursery, it was startling at first to see the distorted body of Robert plunge clean into the water beside him, silently, without a ripple, and turn, and flash away under water at an otter's easy speed.

There was, in reality, nothing unusual in finding this queer dexterity in another element, revealing itself in one crippled for life upon land. Some sort of automatic remedying of a fate thrown out of balance; one of nature's compensations.

Cleone, dressed for swimming and carrying a scarlet wrap, came in while she was still standing at the window, and instantly came to look over her shoulder.

"I was watching your brother," said Molly. "Isn't it fortunate there's still something he can do so well?"

"Oh, Rob! He's like a fish. Nothing pleases him more than to show off for an audience. He probably knows you're watching and admiring him."

"Probably," said Molly, resisting the temptation to spring away from the window at once. She turned and looked at the intruder. She noted that Cleone was not afraid to wear gay colours, even if her qualities were no longer the qualities of youth. She turned her thin shoulder, and showed a half-detached shoulder-strap.

"Be an angel, will you, and put a stitch in it for me."

Molly entwined the strap into place, and was seated in the process. Cleone was by no means a random talker; she talked constantly and with purpose, but the purpose was her own satisfaction. Molly had learned to venture no protest and no opinion during these enlightening conversations. If she kept silence the flow was stimulated.

"Don't try and work up any sympathy for Robert," said Cleone. "He doesn't need it. I don't think he wants it. He was never a Mbarles, wanting to rush away and climb mountains when things went wrong. No, Rob shuts himself into his little study and gets drunk—on books."

She watched her shoulder. "I can't see your face. Are you looking disapproving? What's the use of my talking this way unless you are?"

Molly regarded the thin, taut figure before her. Severn was right, a woman could do it. The sill of the window was low, and one quick lift would hurl Cleone over the edge.

"You're a long time," said Cleone. "Was I positively coming to pieces?"

"No, I'm nearly done now. Was Robert very handsome before his accident? He has fine shoulders and head now, you know."

"Yes, I suppose he was worth a glance. No Mbarles could ever be beautiful to look at, of course. That was one of the things I had against Mallia. Good-looking was the best one could ever say of me, even by the wildest stretch of imagination. She was quite indecently beautiful. Did you ever see a photograph of her?"

"Yes, I have. She was rather lovely."

"What's a murder trial more or less to a Montalban? In the Middle Ages we did what we like in these parts. No, my dear, our nerves are better than you think. Provided Ralph wasn't actually condemned, father could hold his tongue, and sit tight, and wait the event."

"You should call on Detective-Sergeant Walden and tell him all about it," said Molly. "There might even be a reward for useful information. There you are, the strap's quite safe now."

"Thank you. For the advice, too. Some day I may take it. But I'm afraid I'd need evidence."

"I'm afraid so, too."

"I could tell them he's quite capable of murder. Especially since Robert got crippled; after all, he has nothing but Charles to live for now. Ralph's nothing. Ah, well—no doubt it all works itself out in the end." She laughed, slinging her scarlet wrap about her shoulders. "Don't bother to look through the window any more, nurse. My dive is not worth your notice. I flop badly."

She departed with an insolent swirl of the cotton cloak, and the door slammed behind her.

"This," thought Molly, "is certainly a rum household. Do they really care so little for each other, or is it a pose?" She began to wonder, in an idle way, about Robert's accident. Seven years ago, so they said, and in terms of newspaper files seven years was no so great a time. She might, some day, go to the trouble to look up the reports of that motor smash; not for any possible light it could shed upon recent events, but because she began to be greedy for information about these baffling Montalbanians.

She went back to the window. Robert was standing upon the balustrade, his feet curved into a firm grip, his twisted body leaned slightly forward for the dive. She found herself resenting his accident.

It was not likely, however, that she would have thought about it again if it had not been for Mrs. Forester. The housekeeper was standing at the window of her sitting-room when Molly went down the stairs. The room was in a small wing built out from the end of the house, and from this window the edge of the terrace and the rim of the lake could just be seen. Mrs. Forester also, it seemed, felt fascinated interest in the sight of Robert poised for his dive.

Robert raised his arms and plunged. "He has a wonderful dive, hasn't he?" said Molly. "I've just been watching him from the nursery window."

"It's a blessing there's something he can still do," said Mrs. Forester with sudden warmth. "When I think how fine he used to be! He was never so tall as Mr. Charles, of course, but he was as likely a young man as you could wish to see. And I have heard that he was looking forward to a promising career in the diplomatic service, but when it happened—seemed to give up all hope of ever doing anything. I suppose it was no use going on. They talk about another operation on his back, but nobody seems in any hurry to fix it up, and it's my belief they know it's too dangerous."

"It must have been a ghastly smash to break him up like that," said Molly. "How did it happen? Was he driving the car?"

"No, his father was driving," said Mrs. Forester. "It was no fault of his, though. The other man was drunk—or so they said at the inquest."

"Oh, he was killed, then, was he? As a rule, the boot's on the other foot; and the one to get killed is the innocent party. Did it happen round here?"

"No, somewhere in Sussex, I believe. Mr. Montalban and Mr. Robert were coming back together from a business visit to some bigwig at his country house, and this man drove out on them at a crossroads. They hadn't a chance. Both the cars were smashed to pieces, and it's a miracle of all things the two women weren't killed as well."

"The two women?"

"The man's wife and daughter—or step-daughter, or something. I forget the exact relationship. It was as a bad business all round. I did read something about the women being put in a home, or some such thing. There was something badly wrong about them, at any rate—no normal people."

"Still, if she had an alibi, I'm afraid that's that."

"They walked to the far end of the orchard to a rustic seat partly overgrown with moss."

"There's another thing I've been wondering about," said Molly, spacing herself. "Robert's accident. Were you here when it happened?"

"No, it was before my time by two or three years. But what can it conceivably have to do with Mallia and her death?"

"Nothing I suppose. This was quite a different wonder. I was watching him in the water to-day, and it brings it home rather how helpless he is on land. Mrs. Forester tells me he was destined for the diplomatic service until—that happened."

"She'll know. If she says it, it must be so. There isn't much that woman doesn't know about the Montalbans."

"So I gathered. Nor much she wouldn't do for them. That was what gave me the idea she might have killed for them. No, I wasn't trying to connect up the car smash with the murder. Robert just interests me, that's all. Do you know anything about the case?"

"A little. It was caused by a drunk-and-driver, who turned out—when they'd identified him—to be a fellow called Sacchetti. He was killed, and Robert got a year of lying on his back, two major operations—and—the results you see. It was a ghastly blow for his father. Robert was the only one with any considerable brains, you know."

"There were two women in the other car, too, weren't there? Mrs. Forester said so."

"Fellow's wife, and a young girl—her daughter, but not his, as far as I remember. She'd been married twice; the girl was English. That was what me her name, because I don't know it. No one here knows it, except probably the two Roberts. Owing to the subject's youth her name was suppressed."

"Why? She wasn't driving the car; and she hadn't a shady business. I don't see how her stepfather's sins need ever have affected her."

"She had other qualities not usually advertised. Like her mother before her. They were both of them rotten with cocaine."

"Oh!" said Molly slowly, and not without horror. "So that was the sort of home they were put into!"

Severn lit a cigarette. "Someone seems to have been telling this tale before me."

"Not so well. Go on. What was it, a court order that they should be committed to undergo treatment? I don't know how these things are done."

"I know how this one was done. Montalban had it done, and he paid for their treatment."

"And were they grateful?"

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INKLING OF TRUTH

North Bay Nugget—Modern speech... In a Main stem coffee shop this a.m. we overheard a fellow telling another chap about his new home. "It's ideally located," he said. "Out in the suburbs, you know!"

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Wednesday of last week members of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Canadian Legion met at the regular weekly comfort fund tea, knitting articles to be packed into the parcels which are being shipped by the fund.