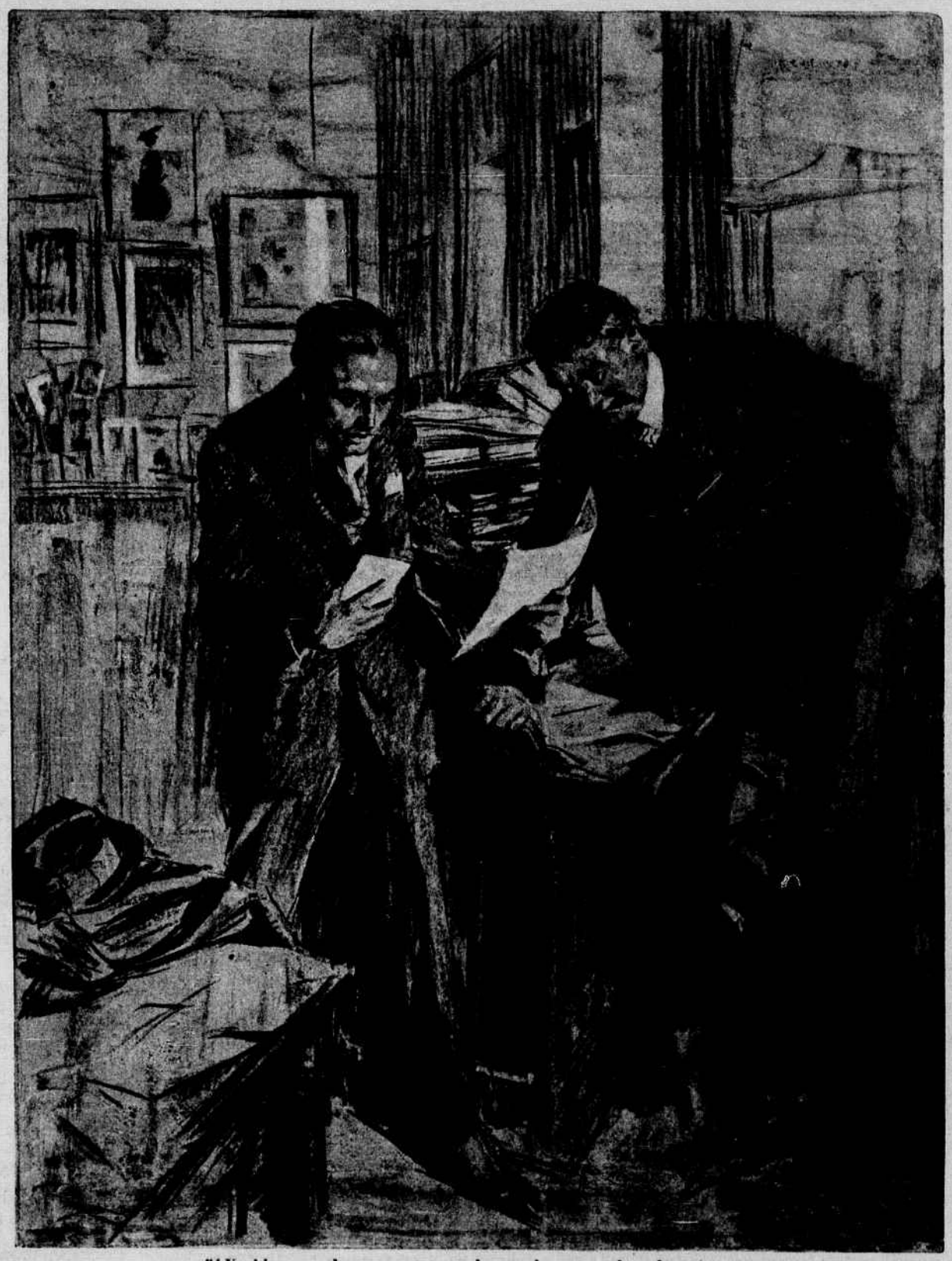
The Mystery at Woodford's

By WADSWORTH CAMP

Illustration by Arthur I. Keller

FORTY years ago, the great actor for whom Woodford's Theater was built died on the stage while playing his favorite rôle in "Coward's Fare." There is a superstition that his ghost, and that of his pet cat, haunt the theater. However, Arthur McHugh determines to revive "Coward's Fare," and chooses Richard Quaile to bring it up to date. Barbara Morgan is given the leading woman's part; and, to lend atmosphere, McHugh engages Dolly Timken, who played in the original cast, and Woodford's property-man, Mike Brady. Woodford's own part is given to Harvey Carlton. McHugh, Quaile, and Brady go to look over the theater. As McHugh is making a skeptical allusion to Woodford's ghost, the lights go out; and in the darkness they faintly hear footsteps crossing the stage, followed by the patter of a cat. The lighting system is found in good order, and McHugh is puzzled. Some days later, at a rehearsal, Carlton tells Quaile he has heard a story that evil will follow any attempt to play Woodford's rôle. He says he has received mysterious warnings; but he promises to see the thing through. As the rehearsal proceeds, the actors show nervousness, and Miss Timken feels the presence of a cat. At the moment in the play at which Woodford died, Carlton, in the middle of a speech, topples to the stage, dead. The coroner's verdict is, heart failure under emotional strain. The manager has a plain talk with his company, giving an opportunity to leave the production; all promise to stick. He engages Tyler Wilkins for the famous rôle. McHugh, who was once head of a detective agency, is convinced that there is a reasonable explanation of the happenings that pursue his revival of "Coward's Fare." He gets Quaile to promise to go alone to the theater the following night for an investigation. The playwright, going from McHugh's office to his rooms, is greeted by a faint tinkle of the telephone and a ghostly message: "Keep away. I prefer to play my part to empty seats." Quaile attempts to trace the call, but the telephone company insists there has been none. In spite of McHugh's offer to release him from his promise, Quaile prepares for his visit to Woodford's, convinced that he will solve the mystery. After rehearsal next night, he returns to the theater, armed with a revolver and an electric flashlight, and enters by the stage door. He takes his place in a chair in the center of the auditorium. Suddenly the building is filled with the sound of wind, and after that has died away, Quaile is conscious of another presence near him. Then comes the sound of limping steps, followed by the patter of a cat. As the steps approach he tries to flash his light—without success. The presence passes him, and he follows it in the darkness to the stage. The curtain is down! He makes his way to the passage behind the boxes. There is a kind of nebulous light in which he distinguishes a figure. Desperately he pulls the trigger of his revolver and is deafened by the explosion. The light is gathering shape for an attack.



"'You'd swear there was no one else on the stage when that picture was taken?' 'Certainly.' 'Look at this,' McHugh said hoarsely."

THROUGH interminable moments Quaile remained crouched in the passage, his eyes hidden by his arm, unwilling to look again at the growing splotch of unnatural radiance which he had fancied assuming the outlines of a human form. He was alone in the theater with this livid thing.

He had reached the point of surrender. Further effort on his part was futile. The ghostly ambush had been too carefully arranged. The failure of his light, the mysterious lowering of the curtain, had driven him too certainly into this choking passage, where the limping footsteps still strayed, where the contented purring of the cat persisted. It was useless to retreat to the auditorium. It would be simpler to await the attack here, to resist it here if he could. He wondered if he would be more successful than Carlton, who had died. He knew it would come now, for the limping thing was closer.

Without warning, a violent pounding reverberated in the meager space, shattering the silence that hitherto had been disturbed only by the stealthy manifestations of the theater. It grew in volume. It animated Quaile's frozen senses. For there was nothing immaterial about its urgency. A living person stood in the alley, demanding admittance at the stage door, offering him rescue from this shapeless, unseen antagonist. Only a few feet of darkness and the iron door separated him from safety. Somehow he must conquer that journey. He would do it in spite of the pallid thing that blocked his way.

He lowered his arm and opened his eyes. As if it had reacted subtly to the material noise, the luminous mass ahead was dimmer, less concrete in shape.

Quaile's muscles tightened. With outstretched hands, he stumbled forward against the fading thing, which did not fall back. He had a sensation of walking through a medium scarcely perceptible—less troublesome than the water that opposes a swimmer. As he pushed the passage door open, another sound keened in his ears—as nearly as he could define it, the groan of a man abandoned to an unbearable anguish.

He dashed across the wings, thrust the key in the lock, and threw his weight against the stage door, which swung back, precipitating him into the alley.

He drank in the cold, clean air. He responded to such a sense of freedom as a man must experience who is reprieved at the edge of the scaffold.

HE leaned against the wall of the loft building, staring back at the open door, which made a sable scar in the dim glow of the alley. From the street lively and familiar sounds reached him.

With the rapidity of a miracle the strain had been broken. The reaction threatened his restraint. For a moment he had an absurd feeling that it must falter into a sob of relief. To save that, since his emotion demanded some expression, he laughed The sound, uncontrolled, neurasthenic, was restorative. It ceased abruptly, and, although he was still shaken as if by abnormal cold, he began to take stock of his position and to reason.

First of all, he was interested in the whereabouts of his rescuer. Surely, in the moment it had taken him to unlock the door and stumble into the alley there had been no time for any one to reach the street unseen. After all, McHugh was the only likely person, for who else had known certainly of his intention to remain in the theater?

"McHugh!" he called, in the strained voice with which one addresses a possible emptiness.

No answer came, and it occurred to