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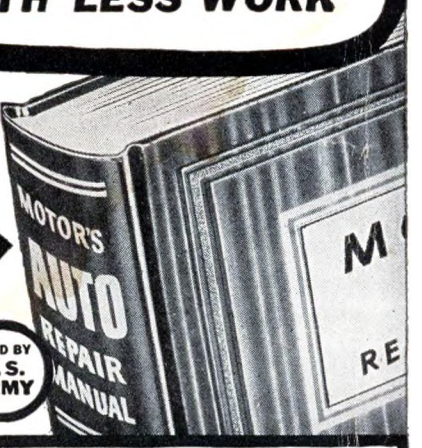

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Detective Book Magazine's $2.50 Booklength Novel

DEADLIER THAN THE MALE

By JAMES GUNN

Mrs. Krantz was no detective. She was, however, a bosom-and-bottle pal of the gay Mrs. Pollicker. For that reason, someone made a ghastly mistake in killing "Laury" Pollicker. It did not matter that the killer evaded the police. It did not matter that he pursued his own abnormal path, driven by his own private fury. It did not matter that he went away, changed his life, moved in gratifying and luxurious circles, met exciting people—such as the too-wise Dr. Forrest Billings, the cold and lovely Helen, the earth-mother Rosane. . . . Gradually he became aware of a dumpy nemesis, a disheveled shadow, a SOMETHING that went wrong with his plans. . . . To his insane mind, it was insane that there should *be* a Mrs. Krantz. He refused to admit that she could bring him low—that he would have to kill the fat, old harridan. . . .

Three Thrilling Mystery Stories

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DEADLIER THAN THE MALE

By JAMES GUNN

HER NAME was Helen Brent and she was thirty-one; her home was in San Francisco; she was in Reno to get a divorce from her husband, Mr. Charles Brent.

She stayed at a boarding house on the edge of town, run by a Mrs. Krantz and her daughter, Miss Rachel Krantz. After six weeks she left the Krantzes' and went to the Hotel Riverside.

She left at five. By four o'clock she was through packing; since it was a ferociously hot day, she lay down and sweated. This annoyed her. She was not exactly athletic, but she was active, and she had a long and elegant body to which she was much attached; she liked showers, and hated baths because they left her feeling sticky. She had taken two bedrooms at the Krantzes', so she would have a place to put her clothes, but there were no showers, and Helen was faced with a fairly unpleasant alternative: she could take a bath and go over to the Riverside feeling sticky, or she could do nothing and go over to the Riverside feeling smelly.

At four o'clock Mrs. Krantz, who owned the place, was downstairs in the back part of the house, where she lived with her daughter, and she was expecting a visit from her great friend and neighbor, Mrs. Pollicker. Rachel Krantz, who had to manage everything, was walking up and down outside Helen's room, trying to think of a way to persuade Mrs. Brent to stay.

For the Krantzes' was certainly not the place for Helen, and certainly not fashionable at all. There were two houses that had been built as boarding houses, in Reno, in the city of boarding houses; they had both seen better days, but not for long.

This was convenient for Mrs. Pollicker, who lived in one of the houses alone, and used only a bedroom and the kitchen. Mrs. Pollicker's flesh was not only weak but eager, and her life was shriekingly immoral. She also had two badly trained poodles, and between the dogs and the Devil she would have had trouble in a respectable district. Her ribald friend Mrs. Krantz was more tolerant.

It was not so convenient for the Krantzes, who still took boarders, though they gave no meals, and just managed to be unsuccessful. The neat and meager upstairs rooms usually had one or two permanent residents, and perhaps one or two women who were trying to get a divorce as cheaply as possible. There was never anyone like Helen Brent.

So here was Miss Krantz walking up and down the hall, a little relutanctly, because of course she did not actually like Mrs. Brent. It seemed to Rachel that Mrs. Brent must be destined for a bad-end, not necessarily because the Devil would have such a lure for Helen, but because Helen, Rachel had to admit, would have quite a lure for the Devil. And suddenly the door opened, and there was Helen herself, looking, as always, perfectly heavenly in a house coat.

She did not look her age; that privilege she regarded as reserved for the very young and the very foolish, and she had given it up at twenty-two. Her hazel eyes were beautiful, and her features were handsome and pure. But, most striking of all things about Helen, there was an elusive aura like white gold, an aura which came partly from her hair and partly from her complexion, and partly from the clothes in which she had the money and taste to dress herself.

"Miss Krantz?"

"Yes?" said Miss Krantz.

"Were you looking for me?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, then," said Helen, and smiled charmingly, "well, then, come in."


Kiemle

HELEN said, "it's your own fault," and was at once rather sorry she had said it. She had handled servants in her own home and in her friends' homes, and she had dealt quite competently with managers and waiters and assorted help in more places than she could remember. And she had always found it best, for reasons of convenience and of good breeding, not to go into post-mortems.

Besides, she was *almost* good-natured, and she did not particularly want to hurt Miss Krantz's feelings. On the contrary, she was rather sorry for her. Rachel was twenty-seven, four years younger than Helen, with black hair and blue eyes and a face that would have been strikingly barbaric if she had known anything about makeup. She had a figure in the Biblical style, the kind that suggests camels and water-jars, which she covered up with the ugliest clothes she could find. Helen had often had the impulse to tell her she was hiding something other women couldn't get out of bottles.

Right now she was standing on the other side of the room, running a very clean finger-nail over the dresser-cloth. Her voice, not at all gentle, was almost inaudible to Helen, who was ten feet away. "My mother and I are very sorry to see you go."

Helen smiled politely and noncommittally into the mirror and kept on brushing her hair. But Rachel was not to be put off: "If there's anything about the service—"

"No, thanks."

"Well, the lady in the front *has* moved now, Mrs. Brent—"

Helen did not lose patience, but she did not care to stay at the Krantzes' any longer than was necessary. She turned around very courteously, in the great tradition of great ladies, who are always intimidating everyone they meet, always completely unaware that they are intimidating anyone at all. Her voice was a mixture of graciousness and briskness, a tone of absolute dismissal. "Miss Krantz," she said. "I think I told you that I've been in Reno a good many times before. And I've never stayed here with you before. This time I had a reason to stay here, a good reason, Miss Krantz, and I told you the reason. Specifically, I told you that if anyone but my sister called, Mrs. Brent was not living here. But someone did call—in fact, my husband called—and your mother, unfortunately, didn't see fit to do as I asked."

She stood up and smiled, and let the graciousness overbalance the briskness in her voice. "Well, I'm very sorry things didn't work out, Miss Krantz." She let the briskness back in: "But I would like my bill as soon as you can make it." She turned back to the mirror.

"Yes, Mrs. Brent."

"And I'd appreciate it if you'd send the maid up to take some of my things down. I'd better be getting along."

"Yes, Mrs. Brent."

By this time it was four-thirty.

Helen left one of her handbags in a dresser drawer, though she had not meant to. When she came out of the room with a couple of hatboxes she heard the jarring click of Mrs. Pollicker's heels in the hall below, and then the skittering of the two poodles as they ran in after her. Helen did not like Mrs. Pollicker. In particular, she did not like women who would not grow old, and Mrs. Pollicker had obviously taken her change of life as a hint that could be acted on later.

Mrs. Pollicker was a small woman, fluttery, with very white skin and very dark teeth, with improbable red eyebrows and impossible red hair. She always wore a multitude of ruffles to conceal the fact that she had no chest. Today there was a mass of fine black lace under her coat. "Looks like a Greek without his shirt on," thought Helen, and started downstairs, while Mrs. Pollicker and dogs disappeared in the back of the house.

But, when Helen was fixing one of the boxes at the foot of the stairs, the dogs suddenly ran out of the back of the house and, true to form, jumped all over her and managed to dirty her very fine white suit before Miss Krantz ran out and interfered.

"I'm so so sorry," she said.

"Forget it," said Helen, and smiled.

"If there's anything I can do," said Miss Krantz; "if there's anything you're forgotten—"

Helen picked up the boxes. "Thanks, I can look after myself." She did not say it unpleasantly. "And good-bye, Miss Krantz." She had forgotten the bag, of

course, but she did not remember it now, and she went down the walk with the long and generous stride that was characteristic of her.

It was five o'clock. Miss Krantz turned toward the back of the house, and as she did so she heard the scratchy high notes of Mrs. Pollicker's laugh.

MRS. KRANTZ was a short woman, with coarse, fatty features and quivering skin. She brought her dark hair up in a greasy roll around her head, and wore gold earrings; when she lowered her head and roared she could look very much like a buffalo.

"Laura!" she roared now. "Bring it back, Laura!" Mrs. Pollicker, perched on the arm of a couch across the room, holding Mrs. Krantz's glass in her hand, jiggled it gently and smiled. "I'm broiling, Laura." Mrs. Krantz was not going to hoist herself out of her chair; sweet womanly reserve kept her from drinking from the bottle beside her.

Suddenly Mrs. Pollicker, still smiling, emptied Mrs. Krantz's glass herself. "Laura!" roared the outraged Mrs. Krantz, and banged the table beside her so hard that the bottle shook. In terror, Mrs. Krantz grabbed up the bottle and walloped the table with her other hand. "Laura! My, ain't that mean of you!"

"They'll hear us upstairs," said Mrs. Pollicker complacently, for she rather thought the boarders would be lucky to be disturbed by a woman of the world.

"You *are* mean," cried Mrs. Krantz, "my, ain't you mean!" She shrunk down in her chair and said piteously, "Make me another, Laura?"

Mrs. Pollicker pursed her lips and looked coyly at the ceiling.

"Then give me back the glass, please, Laura?" Mrs. Pollicker did not answer, and Mrs. Krantz looked longingly at the bottle. She smiled at it winningly for a minute, as if she half expected it to come to her of its own accord.

" 'Fraid?" twittered Mrs. Pollicker. " 'Fraidycat? Go ahead and drink it."

Mrs. Krantz lifted the bottle.

And just then Rachel came in. "Mother, are you drinking again?"

"Do I look like I'm doing a Morris dance?" cried her mother belligerently.

Mrs. Krantz crossed the room without speaking. After a moment she spoke to both of them. "You're been making a great deal of noise."

"So sorry," said Mrs. Pollicker.

"Mrs. Pollicker, your dogs spotted the dress of a woman who was just leaving. I can't have that sort of thing. I put them out in the yard."

"So sorry, my dear," said Mrs. Pollicker.

"And now I find my mother drinking again. I admit it is certainly no surprise to me after—"

"Don't listen to her, Laura," said Mrs. Krantz, waving a regal hand. "Think of the beautiful things in life."

Miss Krantz said harshly, "I don't know why I stand for you, Mother. I've looked after you since I was seventeen. If I hadn't, this place would have been a complete failure—"

"What is it now, my dear?" asked Mrs. Pollicker reasonably.

"Mrs. Pollicker, please keep out of our family affairs. I know you are a—"

"Rachel!" roared Mrs. Krantz in a voice of thunder. There was silence. Mrs. Krantz took a deep breath and leaned forward judicially. "Rachel, you are now twenty-seven. What you need is a good—"

"Don't be too hard on the child," said Mrs. Pollicker.

"But she don't even drink!" cried Mrs. Krantz, and flung herself back in her chair.

Mrs. Pollicker smirked. Mrs. Krantz went on lyrically, "What she is, it's what I was, Rachel, daughter, when I was young. What she is—well, she's passionate, but that's not it. She's *warm,* but that's not it. She's *big,* but that's not it." Mrs. Krantz's eyes sparkeld as an idea came to her. "What she's got, it makes the world go round. It's beautiful. It's—*humanity.*" The sparkle grew, and Mrs. Krantz cried out, crescendo. "Rachel, daughter, ain't she *human?*"

"Oh," said Mrs. Pollicker through the silence. She was awed. "That was beautiful, perfectly beautiful." She came over with Mrs. Krantz's glass, and put it down, and put her arm around Mrs. Krantz's shoulders. "Beautiful. And I'm going to tell you something dear, something I'll never tell another soul."

Mrs. Krantz perked up. "About the new one?" she asked avidly.

MRS. POLLICKER nodded. "He smells," she said. "All the time. Like an animal. I rather think it *is* primitive," she said, pleased. She stood up and went toward the door. "But I'm not going out with him tonight. He gets so jealous, I'm going to chastise him. I'm going out with Danny."

"Don't like him," said Mrs. Krantz positively, "ain't got the figger."

"How would you know, dear?" cried Mrs. Pollicker, and they both shrieked. "Well, my dear," she said on tiptoe, "good-bye!" She leaned forward in the doorway and wiggled her fingers at Rachel. "You too. Good-bye, *anyway.*"

By ten o'clock Mrs. Pollicker had come back to her own house with Danny Jadden, and she lay on the bed, a tangle of ruffles and red fox. She was only a little drunk, but her girdle pinched and she was tired. She pulled the comforter up to her chin. "I'se tired, Mose," she said drowsily, "I'se awful tired."

Danny Jadden did not answer her. He was very tired and more than a little drunk, and he was almost asleep in an armchair across the room. He was broad-shouldered and thick-waisted; he wore a white, fuzzy sweater like a college boy's, but he was over thirty. He had dark, slick hair and dark, dry skin, and unless he stood rather too close to a bright light he was very good-looking. His looks had supported him fairly well for quite a while now. He opened his mouth as if he were going to snore.

"You go home now, Danny," said Mrs. Pollicker from under the comforter. He did not answer her. "You go right home," she said, "I'm going to bed."

"Good night," said Danny sleepily, and started to get up.

On his way out of the room he banged into the door jamb and swore to himself. He had a hard time getting down the stairs, too, because they were dark, as was the whole house. But at the bottom, where there was a little light, he saw a pin of Mrs. Pollicker's, a blue thing with white stones around the edge, and he picked it up and carried it into the kitchen.

He did not have much hope of getting anything from it. He had picked up little things from Mrs. Pollicker now and then, and he had found from experience that her knickknacks ranged anywhere from Paris diamonds to Five-and-Ten rhinestones. As a matter of fact, she was rather a bad investment for his time, being fickle, what you would call a spotty customer; and the only reason he fooled around with her at all was that he was getting older, and business was definitely bad. Stumbling through the dark with the pin in his hand, he thought that if he could get any money for it at all, he could go somewhere else, say Las Vegas. With a little rest to put him back in shape, he could pass for a kid, maybe put a letter on his sweater, and then things would be different. He might even go on the wagon.

There was no light switch in the kitchen, only a string hanging somewhere from the middle of the ceiling. He reached around for it, swinging his arm in a big circle, but he missed; this put him off balance, and he staggered halfway across the dark kitchen and fell down. "Damn," he said. Then the lights went on. This seemed logical to him until he stood up and saw there was another man in the kitchen, holding the light cord.

He was a perfectly enormous man, and Danny closed his eyes, because he did not like to look at big, strong men. When he opened his eyes the man had moved closer. He was even bigger than Danny had thought, six-foot-two or three, with the biggest shoulders Danny had ever seen. He had red hair. He held out his hand and said, "Give me that." He added, almost mildly, "It's mine."

DANNY saw that the red-headed man was looking at the blue pin, which he was still holding; he looked at the man's arms and hands, and decided that the pin would not be worth anything anyway. But when he handed it over, the red-headed man's huge hand was shaking a little, and this gave Danny confidence. He opened the knife which he carried in his pocket, and let it rest there in the palm of his hand. Then he closed his eyes again and waited for the man to go away. He had great patience.

"Get out," said the red-headed man, and Danny opened his eyes. The man had

very long legs and narrow hips, and the suit he was wearing was new and expensive, though not very well kept. His head was small, considering the size of his body, but he was very good-looking; his face was fresh and sunburnt, but there were faint lines across his forehead, as if he occasionally thought very hard. His upper lip was thin, and there were little beads of perspiration above it. "Get out," he said again, and he did not seem to have much control of his voice.

Danny understood the situation easily. The fellow was obviously one of Pollicker's pets, and not a very bright one. "Listen," said Danny carefully, "we're both little boys trying to get along, and you can leave me alone."

The red-headed man closed his hand into a tremendous fist, and Danny felt the edge of his knife with his thumb. It was sharp. "Listen to me, then," said the man. "I'm Sam Wild, and nobody's ever beaten me in a fight, fair or unfair, and I can have anything I want, anything at all, if I put my mind to it. So I've put my hand on this house, and it's my house, and there's no man big enough to cut me out." He raised his arm.

Danny took his knife out of his pocket. He had something to say and he meant to move quickly, but his reactions were slow. The red-headed man struck him full in his open mouth, so hard that he smashed his jaw and teeth, and Danny's mind was full of flashes and darkness. His head hit against the wall, and the red-headed man hit him again. Danny fell forward with his arms around the man's legs, and the red-headed man brought his arm up in almost an incidental gesture to the side of Danny's head. After that Danny did not think any more at all, not just because he was unconscious, but because he was dead.

His weight pushed him against the red-headed man, and he slid to the floor with his arms spread out past the man's feet and his head at a queer angle that was due to his broken neck. It was a little while before the red-headed man discovered that Danny was dead; then he turned out the light and bent over him, and before he dragged the body from the center of the room he picked up the knife.

Mrs. Pollicker did not hear the fight, but she woke up. She had been having a bad dream, a dream that was bothering her more and more as she got older. She had been born in the Middle West, had grown up on a farm, and she found herself dreaming about her farm days through a kind of nostalgic veil. She knew this was the bunk, because she had been a red-headed, homely little brat, and had had a perfectly terrible time as long as she stayed where she was born. Nevertheless, she woke up always feeling uneasy, petulant, and dissatisfied. She decided to go down to the kitchen for a drink.

On the way through the dining room she barked her shin on a chair and yelped like one of her poodles. When she limped into the kitchen she was furious.

The man was standing by the kitchen door, and in the dark she passed only a couple of feet away from him. The man in the dark was holding his breath, and in one of his hands he had Danny's knife. He felt very clever, for he was sure that he was going to get away, and he felt very strong and excited.

Mrs. Pollicker felt in the box where her poodles slept. They were both gone. She looked toward the pantry and saw that both the inside and outside doors were open. She went toward the rectangle of faint light. The man in the dark let his breath out very slowly, perhaps a little disappointed.

But Mrs. Pollicker stopped. She put her hand to her ruffles and sniffed. There was a faint smell in the air, a smell of sweat and human effort, and Mrs. Pollicker turned. She was puzzled, and then she smiled. "Sam?" she said. "Are you here, Sam? What on earth—" She came toward the man in the darkness, and put out her arms. "Sammy, how romantic of you, don't hide from me." Smiling, she stepped between the murderer and the door. "Sam, honey!"

BY TEN-THIRTY Helen was alone in the Hotel Riverside. She was bored. Her husband had come and gone, after a dull interview and a short one, without the nasty quarrel that Helen had been expecting from good old Charlie. She had not, after all, needed to waste six weeks in the awful Krantz place, hiding from him.

Nevertheless, she was marooned in the hotel room, and this discouraged her.

Charlie was sure to start drinking—she had given him the mitten so many times by now that she thought he ought to be used to it, but she knew he would not—and if she appeared anywhere within reason he was sure to pop up and start a scene. Charlie, Helen reflected, doted on scenes. Only last season, when she had been sitting alone in her sister's box at the San Francisco Opera, he had burst in and fallen on his knees before her, right in the middle of *Siegfried,* and asked her to take him back. Not wishing to start a scene in the dark, she had simply thrown her ermine cape over him, and there he had stayed until the intermission, sobbing his heart out against Helen's gold lamé, and getting a knee in the face whenever his sobs became too audible.

That sort of thing, Helen thought, was definitely not going to happen tonight, even in Reno, where anything goes, and goes about as far as you like, too. She was stuck, even though she felt energetic, even though, in a dark red velvet dress that left her shoulders pretty much to their own devices, she was overdressed for an evening at home, and perhaps even a little overdressed for Reno.

She ought, she supposed, to write some letters. It would be very nice of her to write a sweet, gentle, final letter to Charlie, to soften the blow. But her divorce was only a week off now, and she had no sentimental feelings about her marriage. The minute before she married Charlie, she had suddenly had the gruesome and certain idea that he would be a washout, and he was. What she did not know was that his income would be a washout too, so swiftly that they were practically paupers while Charlie was still bearable.

She could, of course, write to Georgia Staples, her sister, or rather her half-sister, who had all the money in the family, and ask for cash. But Georgia was due in Reno in a few days anyway, and Helen's affectations were too breezy to get much satisfaction from letters, sending or receiving.

She could also write to Fred Grover, whom she intended to marry when she had her divorce and he got around to asking her, but the idea of that simply bored her.

Then she thought of going to the Krantzes'. She knew by now, of course, that she had left her bag there, and it occurred to her that a drive would pass the time. This decided her; she phoned the desk and asked them to send her car around.

Both houses were dark when she drove up, both of them looming up like great piles of lumber in the darkness, and it took her a minute or two to find the walk.

Suddenly, as she went toward the house, something ran up and jumped on her, and then ran off and raced around her in wide circles. She guessed that it must be one of Mrs. Pollicker's dogs, and she listened for the second, but there was only one. She moved very quietly toward the house, hoping to evade him, but he ran at her again and jumped up.

She caught him and held him away from her, struggling. Then she dragged him off the path and walked with him back between the two houses, toward Mrs. Pollicker's back door, so that she could put him where he would not bother her.

The swinging door had no lock on it, and she saw that the dog could push it open and get out any time. She shoved him through, and heard him scamper through the open pantry door into the kitchen and then on into the front of the house.

She stepped in herself and looked for the light. Above her was the pale blur of the light bulb, and she waved her arm around in a little circle, looking for the cord. She found it and pulled it.

The inside door of the pantry was wedged open, and wedged by the body of Mrs. Pollicker, which lay face up. A strong hand had grabbed her by the shoulder, and her dress was twisted and rumpled. A strong hand had held her by the mouth, and her bright lipstick was smeared over the faint, distorting bruises. Her throat had been cut, more than once, so savagely that her head was almost severed from her body, and the blood was already drying on the ends of the dyed hair.

II

THE MURDERER had had the thrift to take some money from Mrs. Pollicker's bedroom, and the motive for the two murders was set down as robbery. The man was not caught. There were fingerprints all over the house, some they

could identify, some they could not. But none of the men who were questioned could be held, and the case was promptly dropped.

Meanwhile Mrs. Pollicker was to be buried, and Mrs. Krantz had come into town to put her O. K. on the corpse. She had at first been all for a double funeral in the true Romantic style, giving Rachel a few bad moments. But on the third day after the murders, the Krantzes had a visit from the late Mrs. Pollicker's lawyer, who told them that lady had willed her house and entire estate to Mrs. Theodosia Krantz. Mrs. Krantz put her fat hand to her mouth, asked the lawyer if he wanted a drink, and held off her hysteries until he gave them a financial statement. Fifteen minutes later the undertaking parlor phonel, and asked if Mrs. Krantz, as heir, wanted a double funeral. "Certainly not," she cried, "wouldn't be proper!"

But this was the first time the undertaker had actually seen Mrs. Krantz, and he was considerably startled. When Mrs. Krantz went out she wrapped up her bulk so thickly that the sweat burst out on her face and she had to open her mouth to breathe; she put on a flat hat over her roll of hair, and special earrings; she had bullet-shaped legs and tiny ankles to hold her weight, so she moved with very small steps in a little glide, tottering almost off balance in moments of stress. She was very regal. She looked a little like a greasy Queen Victoria, caught on a jerky escalator.

When the undertaker tried to take her arm, she pulled away from him and streaked into the first room she saw. "My poor Laura," she cried, her handkerchief to her face, "don't she look pale!" Then she opened her eyes and found she was looking at the corpse of a Polish janitor with handlebar mustaches. The undertaker retrieved her and took her to the room where Mrs. Pollicker lay in state.

A black band had been put around Mrs. Pollicker's throat to hide her wounds, and there was rouge on her cheeks. She looked a lot more lifelike than she had before she was killed. Mrs. Krantz looked at the black band with thwarted curiosity. "Beautiful," she said.

"We try to please," said the undertaker.

"Very skillful," said Mrs. Krantz.

Then she was sick.

"We're an old firm," said the undertaker.

Mrs. Krantz made a quick gesture across her throat and said, "Nice job." The undertaker looked startled. "This," said Mrs. Krantz, explaining, and she outlined the black band on her own throat.

"Oh," said the undertaker.

"Does it detach?" said Mrs. Krantz.

"Well—" said the undertaker.

Mrs. Krantz sniffled. Then she whipped up her handkerchief to her face and sat down. "I would like," she said, "to be left alone with my grief," and began to sob. The undertaker moved toward the door, but Rachel did not.

"Could I be alone?" wailed Mrs. Krantz. "Couldn't me and Laura be alone?" She looked up. Rachel did not seem to be convinced of her mother's grief, and Mrs.

Krantz squeezed her handkerchief a little showily over the flowers beside her.

"Please, Rachel," she pleaded, and saw that she had pressed too far, for a look of suspicion came into Rachel's eye. Mrs. Krantz thought fast. She looked at the undertaker. He was a sandy little man of thirty-five whose life was souring on him ,and he looked a little peaked.

"Mr. Sweeks," said Mrs. Krantz, "I don't believe you've met my daughter—Rachel—spinster—so they say," and she moved her eyebrows and leered in a quite unmistakable fashion.

RACHEL, who did not quite catch this, turned and smiled at Mr. Sweeks, as if to say that he understood her mother was a little strange. Mr. Sweeks smiled right back, as if to say that he understood a great deal more.

"There are some vouchers to be signed in the office," he said. "Would you come in, Miss Krantz?"

"Well—" said Rachel.

"I hate to disturb your mother," he said, and piloted Rachel out of the room. Mrs. Krantz waited till they were safely gone, and then she undid some of her wrapping and took out a flask. "To you, Laura," she said, and took a drink. After the third drink she remarked to the corpse that she, Mrs. Krantz, had not had the slightest idea that she, Laura had half so much money; and furthermore, that she, Mrs. Krantz, would do her best to spend it, but that she, Laura, had had a certain technique of spending it which was very beautiful, and which she, Mrs. Krantz, could no longer match because of her age. Then she took another drink. "Don't you worry, Laura, you look perfectly beautiful, perfectly," she called. She hesitated.

"No!" she said to herself, and then she tiptoed out to the door to see if anyone was watching her. "No!" she said again, and took a quick drink. She went up to the coffin. "Very nice job there, Laury," she said, and tried to make a casual little gesture at the black band.

"No peeking," said a voice behind her, and Mrs. Krantz fell on the coffin in terror. She turned around, gibbering.

"I'm Mart Levin," said the dark young man, who was short, and muscular, and something over thirty. "Howdy."

"Howdy," said Mrs. Krantz weakly. She went over and sat down. "Oh, my."

"Gay old jade," said the dark young man, "ain't she?"

Mrs. Krantz perked up. "You know her?"

"No."

"My best friend," said Mrs. Krantz.

"No!"

'Got the business," said Mrs. Krantz, and ran her fingers across her throat. "One of the boys."

The dark young man looked at her. "Oh, yeah?"

"She got around," said Mrs. Krantz.

He said carefully, "I guess you were right in there with her, huh?"

"My best friend," said Mrs. Krantz.

"I guess you know the boys pretty well, huh?"

"So-so," said Mrs. Krantz.

"You got any ideas—"

"Plenty," said Mrs. Krantz.

"—About who did it, maybe?"

"Aha," said Mrs. Krantz.

The dark young man leaned over toward her, and Mrs. Krantz thought he had kind of a cute face, like a monkey's. "Listen," he said, and then he seemed to hear someone coming, "Keep your feet dry," he said. "Stay away from the boys and get your twelve hours' sleep. Who knows but I'll be looking you up."

He went out quickly. Mrs. Krantz stood by the coffin in a rather mellow, melancholy mood. Then she turned and looked at Mrs. Pollicker, and she was chilled. Now Mrs. Pollicker's long nose seemed to point up forlornly toward the ceiling, cold and white; she seemed very desolate and alone.

After a minute Mrs. Krantz spoke, and almost quietly. "Well, Laury," she said. "There it goes. There'll be no more of that. There'll be no more fun." Her bitterness grew. "Why did you leave me, Laury? Why?"

And Mrs. Krantz sat down again and cried. When Rachel appeared in the doorway, indignant and jerking her hat back into place, her mother screamed at her. "Get away! Get out of here, you—iceberg Jezebel! Get out! Get out!" She was so fierce that Rachel went out without a word.

Mrs. Krantz continued to cry, maudlin

and despairing. She fell asleep in the chair, but she woke up from time to time, and she seemed to remember crying out in her sleep: "Don't worry, Laura," she cried, "I'll avenge you. I'll fix him. I'll hang him. You'll see. You'll see!" Once when she woke, she seemed to remember the dark young man standing in the doorway, but she could not be sure. Eventually she dropped off to sleep with an immense snort, and for a while she dreamt no more dreams than did Mrs. Pollicker.

THE RED-HEADED SAM WILD lay with his face toward the wall, and in the harsh light his hair looked even redder than usual. He was so tall that he had to lie diagonally on the bed, and now one of his feet hung idly over the edge.

Mart Levin leaned forward and said again, "Sure you never ran ito this Krantz dame?"

"No."

"How long were you messing around Pollicker?"

"Only about a week."

"Sure Krantz didn't get a look at you?"

"How in hell do I know everybody that looks at me?" said Sam, and rolled over easily onto his back. For all his superficial awkwardness, the size of his big bones and the straight, rectangular lines of his muscles, all of his movements were easy and smooth. He had a perfect, careless balance; he was just the opposite of Mart, whose muscles were dark, fat, and liquid, but whose movements were jerky and who stood with his thick legs spread apart, as if his heavy torso needed support.

"Oh, how do I know about anything," said Sam, despondent. "What do I know at all?" He kept looking at the ceiling. Mart lit two cigarettes, and put one in Sam's mouth and one in his own.

"Don't worry about the old girl," said Mart, "I guess she hasn't got anything. She's just gassing, I guess."

"Why did I do it?" said Sam softly.

"You use too much rough stuff," said Mart, and Sam did not say anything to that.

"If the old girl starts anything," said Mart, "there's just one thing to do." He had very neat, beautiful, middle-sized teeth, and he had a way of smiling which made his dark monkey face quite charming.

"And I'll have to do it." He leaned back. "Don't you worry about the old girl," he said.

"I'm not worrying," said Sam.

They were both quiet for a long time. They had these moments together, when they never made much noise, or spoke loudly. Sam was apt to drift off into dreams, and Mart felt a little as though he were in church.

"Why did I do it?" said Sam. "I spoiled my chances."

"What chances?"

"I could have married her."

Mart remembered Mrs. Pollicker in her coffin, and tried to imagine what she had been like alive. For some reason he thought of her as a little like another Mrs. Krantz, and the hybrid horror that came into his mind startled him. "Wow! Some Mae West to come home to every night."

"To come home to? If I'd married her before the other night, I'd be rich now, you sap."

"You'd be getting dough the hard way," said Mart.

"Hell I would."

"Hell you wouldn't."

"They'd trust me," said Sam. "They always do." And in fact almost everybody had trusted Sam in crucial moments, and the police had never bothered him at all, while Mart, who was more sensible, had been bothered too often for comfort. Part of this, of course, was due to Sam's ability to act like a gentleman when he had to, an ability which he had been acquiring ever since the early age when he had convinced himself that he was a superior being, and which he had perfected under some of Mrs. Pollicker's more elegant predecessors.

"I'd be free as air and rich as Reno," he said. "Next time—"

"What next time?"

"Next time I'm going to get married."

"Not here, you ain't. We're pullin' out."

"All right." Sam rolled over on his side again, facing Mart this time, and pressed the side of his face into the pillow. "But wherever I go, first thing I'm going to do is get married. Somebody really rich."

"And then what? You can't go around killin' for a business, Sam."

"Why not?"

"You're nuts," Mart said. "Why'd you do it, Sam?"

"I had to. She caught me with him."

"But why him?"

"He was cutting in on me."

"On her?" said Mart. "That must have been a big worry. I bet."

"You don't get it," said Sam, and swung his legs off the bed. "He was coming into my house, see? He was taking something that belonged to me. I don't let anybody cut in on me on anything, no matter whether I like it or I don't. I'm strong. I'm the strongest guy I know—"

"You sure are," said Mart.

"—And what I want is mine, and I take it, and then nobody cuts in." He stood up and stretched, and then said tranquilly, "See?"

"Sure." Mart had heard this before, and partly believed it. He put his arm up around Sam's shoulders. "I've been a help, huh?" Sam stretched again, and Mart's arm slid down his back. "And I'm gonna keep on being a help," said Mart, thinking mainly of Mrs. Krantz, just in case. Then he saw that Sam was getting ready to go out. "No dames," he said quickly. "We're gettin' out of this town pretty quick. Lay off till we get someplace else."

"You know me," said Sam, and went out.

BECAUSE Sam was now supposed to leave the women alone, he could not help noticing them. But he had no particular idea of picking up a woman till he drifted down to the railroad station; as he passed by a telephone booth a girl came out of it, and ran into him and fell down. He leaned over to pick her up, and he saw her eyes widen at his strength and good looks. "I'm awfully sorry," he said, and smiled. She smiled back.

"That's quite all right. My fault really, I guess."

"Just for the record," he said, "I'm Sam Wild." His voice just missed being husky with emotion, and the look he gave her was not the casual look of a stranger. She was quite startled.

"Well, I'm Georgia Staples," she said. There was nothing in her voice but a slight catch of breath and a little confusion. She was innocent with men, but she was very rich, and she had never had to be afraid of anything in her life. She was asking herself whether she liked him. When she decided that she did like him, she laughed quite gaily and looked straight at him; and she thought she was rather daring when she said, "And just for the record, I'm *not* here for a divorce."

He laughed very lightly, but she had the warm feeling that he was looking at her as a woman and a wit. She also thought suddenly of her sister Helen.

She was definitely not the type to be picked up, but in five minutes he had picked her up just the same; he collected her bags and drove in the taxi with her to the Riverside, where she was going to stay. She was small, so that she had to look up to him, black-haired, blue-eyed, and very good-looking. Furthermore, she had such an obviously wealthy look that it would have been very foolish to have left her.

And she let herself be picked up, liking what she saw: a man with brown eyes, red hair, and a good body. The bones of his small head were prominent; she could see very clearly the sharp line of his jaw and the ridges of his cheekbones, and his features were straight and clear-cut. He had a sandy, sunburnt, outdoor skin, and a short nose, and she thought these made him look honest. He was obviously attracted to her, and she thought warmly that he was a little naïve. He was wearing what she saw was really a very good suit, and so she knew he was respectable. The suit was unpressed, and she had half a thought that there never had been a man, however big and competent, who did not need a woman to look after him. When this last went through her head, she laughed at herself; but she was startled, and she stopped thinking with a jerk.

The cab stopped at the Riverside, and he asked her to have a drink with him at the bar.

"Well, really," she said, and then she changed it to, "Well, really, I'd love to, but I have to see my sister upstairs—"

"Have the desk call her," he said. "Ask her to join us. I'd like to meet more of this family." She smiled at him warmly.

Five minutes later Helen came downstairs, and Georgia introduced him. "This is my sister, Helen Brent. This is Mr. Wild. I met him at the station."

If Georgia had thought that Helen

would be impressed by Sam, she was dead right. Helen refrained from giving her sister a glance of respect, and then devoted her energy to taking inventory of Mr. Wild. Since she did this without ever letting her eyes dwell on him for more than the polite fraction of a second, she had time to notice that Georgia was chatting very volubly. This did not bother her. She had a good idea that if she asked Georgia what she thought about Sam, Georgia would say he was awfully nice. Helen raked Sam from top to bottom with another side glance, and decided that niceness was not at the head of his assets.

What she saw was an interesting, healthy, and magnificent roughneck. He wore expensive clothes, but she had seen better on riff-raff. He spoke good English, but rather too tightly and precisely. Georgia was not conscious of it, being unsuspicious by nature, and being herself inclined, when she was nervous, to speak a little carefully. But it jarred on Helen's ear at once. She saw through Sam's veneer so quickly that she did not realize that his veneer was successful at all. It never occurred to her that he was a gentleman. It had never occurred to Georgia that he was not.

Sam's thoughts were much simpler. On his part, he had decided that he was going to marry one of the two. He did not know which one. They both must have a great deal of money, and they were both good-looking. Georgia was already taken with him; he thought he could bring Helen around if he tried. Georgia was a little more innocent, perhaps; Helen looked as though she had been around. Which one shall I pick? he thought.

The blonde, he decided.

"That's a gorgeous suit," said Georgia to Helen.

"Wait till you get the bill," said Helen casually.

The dark one, thought Sam; then the blonde gets her money from her sister. She probably won't like me horning in; she'll try to cob the works if anything gets serious.

Helen was thinking, *Is* this serious? She leaned back in her chair and said, "It's nice for you two to run into each other again."

"Oh." Georgia put her head down again, blushing. "We *just* met at the station. Just today." She laughed.

Helen did not stop smiling. She put her fingers around her glass and turned her head from side to side pleasantly, listening to them talk and watching their faces.

"Georgia's fallen in love again," she thought. "Oh, Lord!"

III

IN THE university town of Palo Alto, near Stanford, Sam Wild had a sister who was working as a stenographer. Billie Wild got his telegram on a Sunday.

"Golly!" she said, when she had read it. "Jack! Guess what happened?" She went into the bedroom. Ferrand was lying on the bed, and he propped himself up on his elbows.

"What happened?" he said in the lofty voice he affected.

"*Sam's* got married!"

"Sam who?"

"Naturally, my brother Sam." She read the telegram, impressed. "Look at the words, Jack, this must of cost a mint." She waved it in his face, but he turned over. "She's rich," said Billie, "she's rich as Croesus. And he wants me to come *live* with them."

"*What?*" Jack sat up. He was of medium height, and very thin; he flattered himself that he looked like an Indian, and he would have been handsome without the old pockmarks on his jaw. "You are going to live with your brother?" His voice was incredibly cultured.

"You said it, boy," said Billie. "Well, *he* wants me to. They're going to live in Frisco, and Frisco, here I come."

"And why do you want to live with him?"

"Well, he's my brother, ain't he?"

"And why does he want you?"

"Naturally, he wants to take care of me."

"And why can't he just send you some money?"

"You don't understand Sam," said Billie. "He's a very superior person."

"Indeed?"

"He has very high ideals. Of course he wants me with him. He's going to start a dynasty."

"That ought to be enjoyable for both of you," said Jack.

"Is that a crack?" said Billie, and when he did not answer her she turned venomous. "A *very* superior person," she said. "He can talk just like a gentleman when he wants to—and still sound like a man!"

Jack turned over, ignoring her. "Now that you are leaving me, running out on me," he said, you know what I'm going to do?"

"I'm not holding my breath."

"I'm going to Mexico," he said. "To get experience. After all, if I'm going to be a novelist, I will have to have experience."

'Why don't you just start writing?" she said. "Maybe that'll work."

"Of course," said Jack, "a layman—or, of course, a laywoman—doesn't understand these things. I don't intend to write a word till I've steeped myself thoroughly in the classics. But a vacation can hardly cripple my program definitely. After all, I'll have more classics at Harvard. Did I tell you, my aunt finally agreed to give me the money for Harvard?"

"Pardon my palpitations," said Billie.

"But I must have experience, and for that I shall go to Mexico. After all, I believe I have Indian blood, you know. And I'll *live,* if you understand the term as I mean it. They tell me Mexican girls are very adept at the art of love. That's what one misses here. Do you think American girls are really interested in the art of love?"

"Buddy," said Billie, "you don't want a woman, you want a kootch dancer."

"Please." Jack lay back on the bed. "You will go one way, and I'll go another. I'll look you up if I come back. But meanwhile, let's part beautifully." He closed his eyes, and widened his nostrils slightly; he considered this tremendously romantic.

SAM AND GEORGIA, who were married the third day after they met, took a three-week honeymoon in New York. This left Helen in San Francisco to arrange for their homecoming and to meet Billie, who arrived the Tuesday after she got the telegram.

Helen thought that Billie's opening remark was perhaps a little unfortunate. "Boy," said Billie, looking around her, "Sam didn't tell me you were *that* rich."

Helen smiled. "Well, it's not me. It's my sister who has the money."

"Your sister?"

"*Your* sister now, too," said Helen, smiling and watching Billie rather closely.

"Huh?" said Billie, and Helen decided that Sam's sister did not have to be reckoned with.

Helen did not move out of her old room. The house had plenty of space in it for Sam and for Billie and for anyone else who wanted to come, and it was easy enough to find a room for Sam near Georgia's, since Helen had long ago seen to it that she and Georgia's had rooms as far apart as could be managed.

This had obviously been the safest plan for two women who were active and of age, and both strong-willed in their different ways, though they were both amiable and loved each other very much. Besides, there was a rather weird financial set-up to cause friction. Georgia's father had left her a very profitable department store in the city and enough money to make her one of the richest people in San Francisco. Helen, of course, was his wife's daughter by a former marriage, and he left her what is called a "decent" income. It was Helen's idea, however, that no one called an income decent unless it was the closest possible thing to being indecent, and that she herself could not possibly get along on three hundred a month.

The two girls had gotten along well when they were young; they both had good looks; they set each other off, Georgia being short and dark, Helen tall and blonde; Georgia was generous with her money, and Helen was too old to steal her sister's men. When Helen left her husband four months after the marriage—this was six years before—Georgia had promptly and carelessly taken up her habit of paying Helen's bills.

Helen admitted to herself quite frankly that Georgia's marriage was a blow. It was a relief to know that she was to stay on in the house: Georgia had seemed glad enough to have her, and Sam was actually anxious that she stay. But no one, thought Helen, could predict what might develop out of a situation like that.

What she got from Georgia would depend on whether the marriage was a suc-

cess, and on what kind of a man Sam Wild turned out to be. She had seen him very little in Reno, and could make less of him; in the two weeks she stayed with Billie she came to believe he was an ordinary fortune-hunter. When he came back from the honeymoon with Georgia she had to change her mind.

"I don't know," she said to Fred Grover —who, even in his position of old friend of the family, could hardly be expected to like Sam, since they were such different types—"I just don't know."

It was evident that Sam intended to live on Georgia's money, for the time being at least; and Georgia seemed perfectly satisfied with his attitude. "I just don't get it," said Helen to Fred. "He was doing all right when we met him, and he hasn't any debts to pay, apparently. He seems to have been around, all the right places, not at all like his sister. The other night he was talking to old Mr. Aldrich, and Aldrich offered him a job on the spot. A good one, too, I think. He said he'd think it over, that's all. He's not at all self-conscious about it."

Certainly Georgia was very much in love, and Sam seemed to be in love with her. Georgia was radiant. One night, when they were all at the house, Sam began to talk about destiny.

"It's bound up with a man," he said. "If a man's meant to go up, if he's better than other men, if he's stronger and smarter, then he will go up, and there's nothing in the world can lie big enough across his way to stop him, and there's nothing he can't have."

"I don't believe it," Helen said sharply, for he had challenged her somehow as he was talking, and she was stung. "Life is luck," she said. "There isn't a man that's big enough to buck it, only ride it down hard if the breaks are with him. And the littlest bit of luck there is can change a man's whole life. He can be right on top of the world, and some little thing can happen a thousand miles away to knock the props out from under him."

And Georgia said from her chair, "No. Oh, no." She got up and went over to Sam, and she seemed to Helen more quiet than usual, more like she had been before her marriage. "I couldn't believe anything like that. I don't think I ever could have,

Georgia was most obliging.

and I certainly couldn't now. We have our happiness, and it's all tied up with us, and our lives, and the world too, I imagine. You can't tell me any little piece of luck can have anything to do with changing it."

She was so sincere that they were all a little embarrassed. Helen felt a sudden overwhelming love for her sister, more than she had felt for a long time, and a nostalgia for the innocence that Georgia still had at twenty-seven, that she herself had never had at all.

MRS. KRANTZ and her daughter Rachel sat in their house and considered the question as to whether Mrs. Krantz should go away. "I have," said Mrs. Krantz, "the money to go."

"You have indeed," said Rachel.

"You'll be glad to get rid of me."

"Let's not be bitter," said Rachel.

"I want to get away from my memories," said Mrs. Krantz, and cried a little in tribute to Mrs. Pollicker.

"We certainly can't get rid of *her,*" said Rachel icily, for the Krantzes had come to an open breach. There was a pause.

"New York or Frisco," said Mrs. Krantz loftily.

"You've never seen New York," said Rachel, who wanted her mother as far away as posible.

"There's an old saying," said Mrs. Krantz, "that it's more fun to bounce in an old bed."

"Any way you like," said Rachel.

Mrs. Krantz looked at her daughter shrewdly. If she had known Rachel wanted her in New York, she would have chosen San Francisco on the spot; but she was baffled. "I'll flip," she announced suddenly.

She flipped a quarter above the table, and when she caught it the coin bounced out of her fat hand and rolled underneath. Rachel watched rigidly while Mrs. Krantz bent down, wheezing. Finally she straightened up. "Can't see it," she said. "Come here." Rachel came around the table and peered over her mother's shoulder while she bent down again.

She came up a second time. "Can't see it," she said. "You'll have to go down after it."

"Oh, no!" said Rachel. But nevertheless she squatted down beside her mother's chair, because whatever the result of the flip, a quarter was a quarter, and not to be wasted; she went in under the table on her hands and knees.

"Do you see it?" asked Mrs. Krantz after a time, after she had listened for a while to Rachel feeling around in the thick rug.

"Yes," said Rachel's muffled voice at last. "Yes, I have it." And slowly then, like a sharp and angry moon, Rachel's face rose over the other edge of the table. She put the quarter on the table and remained there, kneeling.

"And what was it?" said Mrs. Krantz loftily, for by the look of her daughter's face, she knew that she herself had somehow scored.

Rachel did not have the good sense or the gumption to tell the simplest lie of her life. "Heads," she said, as though she were biting on bullets, "and San Francisco."

* * * * *

"You can't tell me," Georgia repeated, "that any little accident can break up our happiness." She stood before them all, serene and glowing, secure in her own confidence.

MRS KRANTZ went to the railroad station alone to buy her ticket. This gave her a chance to drink unmolested, and she wavered as she went away from the window to find a cab.

"As," said a voice behind her, "the glamour girl!" and Mrs. Krantz whirled around. It was the dark young man whom she had met at the undertaker's. "Remember me?" he said. "Mart Levin, the ladies' friend?"

"Indeed I do," said Mrs. Krantz.

"And how's your friend?" said Mart.

"Still dead," said Mrs. Krantz.

"Going away?"

"'Way away," said Mrs. Krantz, and waved her arm in a big, friendly circle.

"Where?"

Mrs. Krantz pointed due north. "San Francisco," she said, and Mart stiffened.

"Well," he said. He smiled his pleasant monkey smile and moved closer to her. "It's a popular place. Lots of people are going from Reno. I'm leaving myself. I'm going to stay with a friend, a friend that just got married. You know anybody in the town?"

"Enough," said Mrs. Krantz.

"How long you going to stay?"

"Long enough," said Mrs. Krantz.

"Got any particular reasons to go?"

"I got my reasons," said Mrs. Krantz in a dead voice, for she was feeling a little sick; but she sounded almost sinister.

Mart was steely. "What train you taking?"

Mrs. Krantz, glassy-eyed, was also steely, though she was not working at it. "Tuesday, I'm going Tuesday."

"I may be on that train," said Mart, "I may be going with you, glamour girl." He added, angry because he was making no impression on her, "Maybe we'll be going a long way together, glamour girl."

There was a slight belch from Mrs. Krantz. This made her feel better, and she smiled. "Bon Voyage," she said.

They met again on the train, to Mrs. Krantz's surprise, and they were together for the first third of the ride. Mart seemed

to be interested in Mrs. Pollicker, and Mrs. Krantz told him all about that. She told him why she was going to San Francisco, and about Rachel, and he seemed to be interested in that, too.

Finally he said, "You'd like to see the man who killed this Pollicker woman hang. I bet you would. I bet you'd like to be in on the kill. I bet you know something about it, hum?"

"Let Laura rest," said Mrs. Krantz sentimentally, "I don't know. The police don't know. If there's any such things as ghosts, Laury'll come back and give him hell. Leave it to Laury."

And at that, except for a few minor and boring remarks, he left her. She rode the rest of the way to the city in a happy daze, alone.

When she arrived in San Francisco her senses were still blurred, and the sharp air from the bay did not do much to revive her. Nevertheless, she was the first off the ferry on the San Francisco side, knocking aside a blonde girl who was waiting for someone, and dashing for the taxi stand. Then she remembered that she had to pick up her luggage and turned back.

It was perhaps ten minutes before she was ready to get in the taxi again. But just as she was getting in—she had her hand on the driver's arm—she stopped. "Hey!" and her face turned white under the grease.

Suddenly she shook the man's arm and said excitedly, stumbling over her words so that he could barely understand her: "Take me back. Quick, quick, quick, take me back. Run!"

"You lost something, lady?" said the driver; and then, suddenly anxious, "You ain't gonna be sick, are you?"

Frantically, Mrs. Krantz shook his arm again, "Take me back, take me back!"

"Where, lady, where you wanta go?"

"There!" And Mrs. Krantz motioned back toward the ferry slip. Then ran across the front of the building, the driver doing his best to keep her weight from overbalancing her small feet. When they got to the ferry slip it was empty; Mrs. Krantz looked in the telephone booth, though, and tried a couple of doors that were locked, and then ran down and looked through the gate across the entrance to the boats.

The cab driver said, as if something had suddenly been made clear, "You lost a dog, lady?"

"I lost her!" cried Mrs. Krantz, genuinely shaken. "The girl. The blonde. She's gone!" And Mrs. Krantz ran out of the slip alone, to the front of the building, and looked up and down; but she could not see the girl she wanted. "Oh, Laury," cried Mrs. Krantz, "I let her go!"

"Friend 'a yours?" said the cab driver.

"I don't know her," said Mrs. Krantz, a little more quietly, "I don't know her from Eve. But she was wearing it here"—Mrs. Krantz poked a pudgy finger into her breastbone—"right here. She was wearing Laury's pin. Blue and white. I'd know it anywhere. I got a feeling, just a feeling, I've gotta find her." She thumped herself on the chest again, twice, and began to cry. "She wore it right here."

"Jeeze, lady," said the driver, "where was she?" Mrs. Krantz motioned toward the slip. "Must 'a gone long ago."

"Waiting for somebody," said Mrs. Krantz, and stopped crying. She straightened up a little and took her hand off the man's arm. "Then they're in this city. Out there. And I'll find them if I have to stay here till the ocean runs dry. Oh, Laury, I promise I'll find them for you. I promise you that!"

To the driver she said, "We'll go back." And then, as they walked toward the cab stand, "Where are they, damn it, where are they?" Meanwhile, in the cab on the way to Georgia's house, Mart said, "That's a damn nice pin. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Sammy gave it to me. Expensive, I think. Somebody left it to him, a very old friend."

Mart smiled. "How is the old boy?"

"Oh, swell," said Billie. "You should see the dough they throw around, it's like water. You should see the room you're going to stay in. Right across the hall from mine, upstairs."

"Well," said Mart, and laughed, with his arm around her. "Maybe I'll need an old friend in this fancy house, huh?"

IV

A TOW-HEADED BELLBOY carried Mrs. Krantz's luggage upstairs. It was a second-rate hotel, semi-respectable,

and Mrs. Krantz's room was a lot better than her own boarding house. By the time she got to her room she felt much better, and her confidence had returned. "I'm going to be very busy," she said to the tow-headed boy, "looking up some people. I'll need a lot of personal service." She undid her wraps and blew in his face. He helped her to sit down, and she began to arrange as many of her things as she could reach. "I want to find a blonde."

"Don't we all," said the boy.

"And a man," said Mrs. Krantz, diving into her purse after a handkerchief.

"What kind of man?"

"The kind of a man that goes out with old women."

"Any special man?"

"He smells," said Mrs. Kfrantz, "he smells like an animal." She took a wad of bills out of her bag and laid them on the table beside her.

"Hell, lady," said the tow-headed boy, "for that much money I'd smell up a bit myself."

Mrs. Krantz sent him out to buy a quart of Bourbon. After a while she got up and went to the window, glowing with material and spiritual satisfaction, like a well-fed Joan of Arc. Before her were the lights of the city, where presently she would rout out the scoundrel who had done poor Laura in; below her she could hear the preparation of dinner; out in the hall were the returning footsteps of the tow-headed boy. She looked around her happily, and cried out, "Damn it, Laura, this is going to be fun!"

"FOR golly sakes, Sam!" cried Billie. but he slammed the door without answering her. Mart Levin came in from the hall—they were in a sort of study outside Sam's bedroom—and Billie turned on him furiously. "What the hell's the matter with you two?" she said. "All he does is moan about when are you going to get down here, and first thing, first half-hour you're in the house you have an A-1 beef. What the hell?"

"It isn't a beef," said Mart softly. He went up to Sam's door and tried to open it; it was locked. He knocked, "Open up, Sammy, it's me. Come on, boy."

"Don't rile him," said Billie.

"He's riled now."

Sam opened the door. "What is it?" he said. He was dressed to go out, but his hair and clothes were mussed, as though he had thrown himself on his bed, and he looked upset.

Billie spoke quickly. "Sam, you've gotta get ready to go out. He's got a party to go to, Mart."

"Shut up." Sam jerked away impatiently and tried to shut the door, but Mart held it.

"Stick around," said Mart to Billie. "Let me know if his wife comes up here." Then he went inside and shut the door carefully behind him. Sam was on the other side of the room, sitting in a chair with his face in his hands. "Snap out of it, boy," said Mart.

"She's after me," said Sam.

"She doesn't know a thing," said Mart. "She's in Frisco."

"Who ain't?" said Mart. "Hedy Lamarr and Grover Whalen. So she's in Frisco, what the hell?"

Sam stood up, tossing his hair back out of his eyes. He opened his mouth to say something and then hesitated; he went over to the mirror and stood there, swelling his chest and breathing a little hard, looking at his powerful reflection. "They're after me again."

"No doubt," said Mart, "but 'way after. This is no time to worry about the cops."

"I'm not worried about the cops. I'm worried about her."

"I'm sorry I told you about her."

"I'm worried about this sister, this Helen, too."

"Some dish, I hear."

"She found the body. She found Pollicker. She's got her eyes on me. She watches me all the time."

"You're crazy," said Mart. "What has she got to hook you up with that, not a thing. But don't you worry." He went up behind Sam, who was still standing at the mirror, and reached up and gripped his shoulders. "If anything gets funny about this Krantz dame, I'll fix her. I'll watch her and see what she's up to. I may even fix this Helen dame if she worries you." He laughed. "It's going to be a busy season for us, maybe."

"Too damn busy," said Sam, and turned around. "If they close in on me, I'm on a spot. I've got to do things quicker, much quicker."

Suddenly rigid, Mart said, "What things?"

There was a rap on the door, and Billie said, "She's coming down the hall."

"All right," said Mart. He turned Sam around and said, "You'd better fix yourself up if you're going to go out. And stop worrying." He went out, and through the study out to the hall. Georgia was almost at the door, dressed for a cocktail party. She smiled when she saw him.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Levin," she said, and held out her hands. "I'm sorry not to have met you before. I'm Georgia Wild."

"How do you do," said Mart.

"Your name's Mart, isn't it? I hope you're going to stay with us for a long time, and we might as well be good friends as soon as possible."

"Thanks," said Mart.

She held out her arm. "Here, would you put this on for me, I don't seem to be having much luck"—Mart's eyes widened when he saw the bracelet, a double row of square-cut diamonds—"I'm awfully sorry we're going to be out the first night you're here, but I hear you're a good friend of Billie's, so I hope the two of you can amuse yourselves. Thank you, that's an awfully hard catch to fix, isn't it?" She went up to the door. "Sam!"

"He'll be ready in a minute," said Mart, still looking at the bracelet.

"Isn't he ready yet?" said Georgia. "You know, now that you're here, perhaps you should talk him into getting a valet. Really, he's the most erratic man at times."

Mart said seriously, "I'll try to do that"; she looked at him and laughed.

"Oh, I was just joking, Mart," she said. "I wouldn't think of trying to make up Sam's mind for him. I don't quite think he'd like the idea." She opened the door and called again. "Sam, could you hurry, dear? We're late already. Fred and Helen had to go on ahead."

HELEN had a good deal to drink before Sam and Georgia arrived. She felt fine. The cocktail party was very nice, neither too crowded nor empty. It was, she reflected, just about the right consistency, like cornmeal mush.

She met a psychiatrist, who, her hostess told her, was really too magnificent, and who was enough of an oddity on his own, since psychiatrists did not flourish around San Francisco. He was a small, whitish man, a Dr. Forrest Billings, who spread his hands as he talked, as though he were wiping his words off his hands onto the air. "Mine is a very interesting profession," he said. "It happens, of course, that I deal with the better class of people, the more intelligent, the higher I.Q.'s."

"Now, aren't you just saying that to flatter us neurotics?" asked Helen earnestly. He looked at her.

"As it happens," he said, "I make no great difference between the more intelligent and the less intelligent."

"Isn't that rather up to God?" asked Helen. This time the hostess looked at her.

"Ha," said Dr. Forrest Billings wintrily. He waved his hands a little, this time without saying anything—no doubt, thought Helen, swearing under his breath—and said: "But actually there is no difference between high and low I.Q.'s. For instance, I consider myself an average man"—both he and the hostess looked suddenly at Helen, who looked right back—"And I," he finished triumphantly, "have an extraordinarily high I.Q.!" He looked around for applause, and Helen gave him the required beam.

Presently she chased a rather disconcerting young redhead away from Fred Grover, and sat on the arm of his chair. She had no intention of letting him get out of control. He had a rather unusual fortune which he had inherited, and an even more unusual faculty for making more money with what he had. He was good-looking and aristocratic-looking, and he had an artists'-model body, since he taught wrestling to the Boy Scouts. Helen was very grateful to the Boy Scouts, since they provided her with money and attraction in the same man.

"They haven't come yet, have they?" he said softly.

"Who?" and it was a minute before she realized he meant Georgia and Sam. Then she frowned, "Let's not talk about it, Fred."

"My dear Helen, we must talk about it sometime, for Georgia's sake. You ought to watch this husband of hers."

"I do watch him," said Helen truthfully, "but I don't see much of him." She reached out and took another drink. "He

doesn't seem too much attracted to me."

"Well, what was it that happened tonight?"

Helen shook her head. "I don't know. This friend of his came down today, and Sam seemed awfully upset about something, that's all, and he just wasn't ready to go when we left."

"What kind of man is the friend?"

"Oh, I don't know. More like a friend of Billie's than Sam's, you'd say. Something of a thug." There was a pause.

"He was upset tonight?"

"*Yes,* Fred."

"I'm very fond of Georgia, Helen."

"I know that, Fred." Helen waited.

Suddenly Fred said, "Do you think there's another woman?" Helen sat up, startled. "Do you think he's the kind of man that needs more than one woman? Do you think he would be very attractive to women?"

The drinks seemed to hit Helen suddenly. She stood up. She said, "I think I'll go upstairs, Fr—"

"There they are," said Fred. And across the room there were Sam and Georgia. On her way across the room, Helen smiled at Georgia, but she did not look at Sam.

THERE WAS a maid at the bottom of the stairs with a shaker and a tray full of glasses. "I'll take these," said Helen, and went upstairs. She found a small room that was empty, and shut the door behind her.

"I'm getting jittery," she thought. "Either I'd better marry Fred and quick, or I'd better go away for a while and have some fun. I shouldn't be jumpy when people talk about adultery; I'm of age now." She filled all the glasses on the tray from the shaker, and methodically started to drink them, one after another.

After a while the door opened behind her, and someone came in. "Fred?" said Helen. There was no answer, and she turned around. It was Sam.

"Hi, Red!" she cried, feeling hilarious.

"Well." He smiled and came over to her. The room was in semi-darkness, and his hair looked almost brown; his brown eyes shone down at her. "Alone at last. You've been avoiding me."

"Smooth," marveled Helen, "simply smooth."

"You don't believe I'm sincere," he said, and sat down.

"With bells on," said Helen. She picked up a glass. "Have one."

"I don't drink much," he said seriously. "It affects me."

"I love to be affected," said Helen, and leaned toward him confidentially. "And you're such a big strong man. I bet you could stand a lot of affection—affecting. I bet."

"Man is a strange mechanism, and everybody is different from everybody else, in the most subtle way." Sam smiled, somewhat patronizingly. "There is something in my makeup, though I am so much larger than you and stronger than you—"

"I've never been afraid of anything in my life!" she cried suddenly.

"Naturally not," said Sam. "But—as I say—there is something in my makeup that makes me defenseless before something that bothers you—relatively—not at all. And you, too, no doubt, have your weak defenses."

Helen said, "You fancy yourself an intelligent man, don't you?"

He was angry. "Don't you think much of intelligence?"

"Intelligence," said Helen, "is the ability to do stupid things efficiently."

The silence eddied around their feet like a low fog. After a time he stood up and walked across the room; Helen took up the shaker and began to fill the glasses on the tray.

"You've had enough!" he said sharply.

"No, I haven't," said Helen, "not for what I'm going to say." She continued to fill the glasses, and when she was through she drank two or three of them, and then stood up, holding another.

"You've got a secret," she said. She closed her eyes; when she opened them he was standing in front of her, and she did not like the look on his face. "Well, haven't you? Haven't you? Why do you keep your face like a mask? Why do you sneak around the house like a wolf? What goes on with this friend of yours, this plug-ugly you've brought to our house?"

"Any more?" he said.

"Why do you keep away from me?" she cried.

He said softly, "Vanity of vanities, all—"

"Stop that phony intellectual patter, you climbing tramp—"

SHE STOPPED. "I'm sorry. That was a rotten thing to say. I'm not a snob, really. I'm not a perfect louse." She turned away.

"But you're right," he said, "of course. I am a self-made man. I wasn't anything when I was born. I made myself what I am. And I'll make myself more than I am." Neither of them said anything for quite a while.

Helen said finally, "Fred thinks there's another woman."

"And you?"

"I don't doubt it."

"Don't you realize Georgia's a very attractive woman?"

"I know you realize you're a very attractive man."

"That's a hell of a thing to say."

"Don't be a fool!" She turned on him furiously. "Can you remember all the women you've had?"

"Can you remember all your men?"

"Leave me out of this!"

He laughed at her. She went back to the tray and the glasses. "Stop it" he said.

"No." In a minute she turned to him and said: "Georgia's my sister. I love her very much."

"Of course. You'd naturally be grateful for what she's done for you."

She cried desperately, "No, you fool, what kind of a woman do you think I am? I hate her for her money, every time she gives me a dollar, every time she pays a bill, every time I see the world around me, the world I live in, the things I don't own, the things I'm only borrowing, like a poor cousin. I hate her for her money! I could kill her for her money!" She dropped the glass she was holding and put her hands to her face.

"You'd better stop."

"No." Her head was clearing. "In a minute I'll be sober, and I want to say something first." She said, very sincerely, "Because there's so much more to it than that. I hate her for her money, and that's rotten of me, because she's given me so much without even thinking. But the money's made her something that I'll never be, never by any luck in the world. She's perfect in her way. Nothing's ever touched her to hurt her. She's completely innocent. She never has the slightest doubt, if anything comes into her head, that it's perfectly right. She has a perfect faith that if she asks someone a question, they'll give her the right answer. She's never been broken. She makes me maternal. I suppose. She means something to me; I do love her."

He was standing before her when she was finished, and he put his hands on her arms. She finished, looking directly into his eyes, "That's a long speech, but I think you get the idea. If you do anything to hurt Georgia—even *look* like you're going to hurt Georgia—I'm your enemy. And I make a lousy enemy."

"You're so serious."

"No." She pulled away from him and smiled. "I'm the gay type, really."

Downstairs, after a few minutes, she got Fred alone. "Fred, if I have a feeling there's something fishy about Sam, is it —*right* for me to start digging things up?"

"Of course. Of course, my dear, there's nothing else for you to do."

"It isn't"—Helen hesitated—"it isn't just because I've got an eye on the money?"

"But of course you have," said Fred. "You have every right to expect some of Georgia's money eventually, and for her sake and your own you ought to look after it."

She laughed a little, "It sounds so moral the way you put it. "She caught his look. "No, I'm not upset, Fred. I feel wonderful. Oh, I feel fine."

Within a few minutes, in fact, she felt much better. She had another drink. She had four men around her, considerably below her usual par, but she was holding herself in, to keep Fred from getting any wrong ideas. She kept them all in the air at once, gracefully, like a trained seal. Her spirits rose. Sam was in deep conversation with the white face and waving hands of Dr. Forrest Billings. "My," thought Helen, "isn't this chase going to be complicated. Don't be so grim, my girl. This is going to be fun!"

V

IT WAS two weeks before Sam went to see Dr. Billings; he phoned one Tuesday afternoon and asked for an appointment. A woman answered the phone,

a woman with a deep voice that had unexplainable undercurrents and overtones, a mysterious voice.

"We will call you later," she said. Presently she called to say that Mr. Wild could come on Friday afternoon at three. Sam did not seem satisfied.

"You will be here then?" she said, and then before he could answer, in her deep and mysterious voice, "Dr. Billings said to say that he was *most* interested in seeing you."

"I'll be there," said Sam.

Dr. Forrest Billings was a blackmailer and a criminal, but he was no charlatan. On the contrary, he was an excellent psychiatrist, a clever and subtle man. He had already guessed that Sam Wild might be worth a great deal of money to him before long.

The doctor's surroundings were against Sam in the first place, since they were carefully calculated to put prospective clients off their guard. Billings had rented, in place of a downtown office, a private house in the residential district, and he had made its atmosphere his own. It was a beautiful house full of whispers, a house that was shady without being dark, a sophisticated, secretive, knowing house.

Sam was met at the door by the receptionist, who took him upstairs at once, and delivered him to a soft-voiced young man with a paternal, condescending smile. Sam sat in a small room with the soft-voiced young man for perhaps ten minutes, listening to the faint sounds from outside, the footsteps and the dim voices. By this time he was about ripe for Dr. Billings, who promptly appeared.

"Mr. Wild." The little man came into the little room with only a moment's hesitation in the doorway, as if to show that for this very special client he would, as a very special favor, make the first advance. "I have looked forward to meeting you again, as a friend. The other day I was about to call you. I'm very glad you came." He held out his hand.

"How do you do," said Sam carefully.

It was not a long interview, but Sam's careful exterior of intelligence and culture faded away almost at once. In his own bailiwick the little man bloomed, minus the nerves and the pompousness that made him something less than effective in public; he became what he actually was, a shrewd, deceptive, charming man, with only an occasional touch of the spurious showing through.

"You came to me because you were unhappy," he said. He still had a tendency to wave his hands, but he managed to snag them out of the air, and laid them neatly on the desk together, like a pair of squab. He beamed.

Sam waited a while before replying, because he already had a faint idea that he was out of his depth, and he was trying to think. He said, "But I'm not unhappy."

"Napoleon," said the doctor experimentally, "was unhappy when he was at the height of his success, because he knew he had it in him to go much higher. Eh, Mr. Wild?"

He smiled deprecatingly, so that Sam might take this as a joke. But Sam said seriously, "Well, I'm no *Napoleon.*" The doctor looked at him with the well-controlled surprise of the boxer who has knocked out the other fellow with his first punch.

"My dear Mr. Wild," he said, with rising emphasis, "I told you before that I had looked forward to your coming, and I meant it sincerely. When I first met you I saw capabilities and powers in you that so far have not even been touched. My dear Mr. Wild—" The doctor loped around the far turn with a happy, hopeful glow.

PRESENTLY they got into details. By this time Sam had completely dropped his upper-class pretensions. They discussed his life.

"You have been a man of violence, Mr. Wild."

"Well, I don't know."

"You have been violent, not because your great strength is your only asset, but because you have found easier channels in which to use your physical strength than your mental powers, which are also great." He paused, very lightly, for effect. "You have no doubt committed crimes which were below you. Not ethically below you for a man of your type is in a way above ethics"—the doctor chalked up another mental tally when Sam swallowed this whole—"but intellectually below you."

"However." The doctor's hands almost escaped him and took to the air again, but

he caught them. "A man like you does not have a police record, Mr. Wild." He looked directly at Sam and smiled wisely.

"How do you know that?"

"I know," said the doctor—he knew because a detective agency had looked for a police record—"I know because I can see your intelligence, and I can see that whatever you do you would do efficiently and well. You are a very much better man than any policeman I have known, Mr. Wild."

They continued to work through Sam's life, and the doctor continued to make what seemed to Sam very penetrating observations; the detective agency had found that certain aspects of Sam's career, at least, were quite easy to trace. Dr. Billings passed lightly over the Reno phase by saying, "Because you have found nothing on which you can really extend your abilities, you have occasionally done nothing; you have simply taken what you wanted from people who admired you. You have despised these people, as all superior men have despised inferior patrons."

Turning into the home stretch, the doctor found himself on his own, without the agency's information to back him up, but he did not falter, "I know nothing about your marriage. But I have met your wife. A charming, rather helpless sort of woman, I believe."

"Yes," said Sam.

"And overburdened with responsibilities."

Sam said, "I'm going to take some of them off her hands, don't worry. I can handle some of her things better than they're handled now."

"Exactly. You're much the stronger character of the two."

"She's my wife," said Sam. "I can have everything she has if I want it."

"For her own good," said the doctor. Sam did not answer, and the doctor stood up. Dr. Billings knew exactly where to stop; he pushed a button on his desk and said: "I hope you will come to see me very often—as a friend. I hope you will let me advise you, as well as I can, how to make the most of your great gifts."

"Oh, I'll be back," said Sam warmly.

"And by the way," said the doctor, "perhaps it would be better to go slowly with your wife. One person never likes to realize that another is superior. She might resent your trying to control her affairs."

Sam smiled knowingly, but he did not say what was in his mind: that when he was ready he would work very swiftly indeed, and that his wife would be in no position to resent anything.

"Incidentally," said the doctor, "in your early years, did you ever kill a man?"

Sam said simply, "Oh, I've never killed anyone."

Casually, the doctor took this as the truth. He did not see that he had been a little quick in his contempt for Sam. In the field of direct lying, as in the field of force, Sam was quite at home; it was only the subtle variations of the truth that disarmed him.

A door opened behind Sam, no doubt in answer to the doctor's ring. Billings looked past Sam and smiled. "Rosane," he said. Sam turned around.

THE GIRL in the doorway was very dark, very beautiful in an exotic and blank-faced way; she had on a dark housecoat over her very slim figure. "How do you do," she said, in an expressionless voice that did not sound very intelligent.

"My dear Rosane," said the doctor, and went over to her. He turned around to Sam, smiling, "Are you in a hurry? No? Well, come along, then." Sam followed the two of them to another room, a very small room with a flat couch against the wall.

"Mr. Wild," said the doctor, "this is Rosane. She is a great help to me, and to those who come to me, though not precisely in a scientific way. Lie down here, Mr. Wild, for a while. Rest; and let your mind relax, let it drift free. Rosane will stay with you, as the Earth-Mother, the spirit of peace, the spirit of comfort and consolation. Confide in her if you wish, Mr. Wild; she is a rather unearthly soul, and she will not say anything. You are likely to find a very new slant on your problems. I will see you again." And Dr. Billings bowed out, leaving Sam to sit down somewhat gingerly on the couch.

"Lie down," said the girl, in a mechanically vague tone. He did so, and she sat beside him. He saw that she was very beautiful indeed, and then he saw that her

figure was not altogether so slim as it had seemed. She put her hand on his forehead.

"Rest," she said. "Forget. The doctor wants you to forget your worries. Relax." She moved her hand softly back across his red hair.

Sam stared up at the ceiling earnestly; he tried so hard to relax that the sweat broke out on his forehead under her hand. Presently, very slowly, his eyes closed and his body relaxed. "If there is anything you wish to do or say to lighten the burden," said Rosane, "feel free to do it." He did not answer her.

"He really went to sleep," she said to the doctor, when Sam had gone. "Really. Right away."

"Mr. Wild," said the doctor, "is open to suggestion to an almost unmanageable degree. And he said nothing?"

"He didn't say a thing."

"I rather think he will next time, though," said the doctor. Then he called his receptionist, "Who's next?"

Sam went downstairs, and as he passed by the waiting room he heard someone call his name. It was Helen. "You'll have to drive me home, Sam," she said. "I got the chauffeur to bring me down, but he's gone."

"What'd you come down for?" he said.

Helen smiled and put out both hands impulsively. "Shouldn't we be better friends?" she said warmly. "Please, shouldn't we be good friends?"

"Well, of *course*." He took her hands in his; and then he frowned. "How'd you know I was here?"

"I just guessed. I knew you were a friend of Dr. Billings—"

"How'd you know that?"

"I got a little bird to tell me," she said lightly. "Come on, let's go."

VI

THE BOTTLE of Bourbon went back and forth across the table like the shuttle on a loom. Casino is not a game that requires much concentration.

"And after that," said the tow-headed bellboy, "came Virginia."

"A new girl?" said Mrs. Krantz.

"Well," said the tow-headed bellboy, "second-hand."

"Ha," said Mrs. Krantz. She rested her chin in her hand, put out her tongue, and wheezed lustily across the table. The tow-headed boy closed his eyes and turned white. He wiped the sweat off his forehead. Both windows were closed and the heat was on full blast; he could not undo his high-necked uniform without being downright indecent, and he suffered.

"Your deal," said Mrs. Krantz.

"Got to count first," he said wearily.

"Why?"

"Find out who won."

"I won."

"Why?"

"Don't argue!"

"Right!" He pulled the cards together loosely. "Cut," he said. Mrs. Krantz dangled a regal finger in the scattered cards for a minute, as if she were using a finger-bowl. "Thank you," said the tow-headed boy. Then he scraped the cards together and began to shuffle.

"And how," asked the tow-headed boy, "is the search progressing?"

"Lousy."

"Have you found the blonde?"

"I've seen a lot of blondes that looked familiar. I've spoken to them. They don't co-operate."

"Blondes is a peculiar race," said the bellboy. "And what about the man?"

"Ah," said Mrs. Krantz and mellowed. "The first place I went to where I would find that type of man, I found one, all right. I found one. And he taught me the rumba. But my joints aren't what they were, and my grace ain't what it was, and the evening wore on and the drinks wore in, and what I was doing in the end, they tell me"—she sighed fondly—"was the Highland Fling." She picked up the empty bottle and inspected it, already regretting that she had been so harsh with the man at the desk.

She continued, "And then the man I had you go out and get, and bring up here. Well—he got the wrong idea. I had to defend my honor," she said triumphantly, "and believe me, it's been many a day! Ah, well—"

"Let's play," said the boy.

"Serious?" she said.

"Serious," he said firmly.

"Very well." Mrs. Krantz adjusted her posture, composed her face, sharpened her brain, brought out her spare pack of cards, which she kept for cheating purposes, and

Mrs. Krantz brought out her spare pack of cards.

laid them neatly in her lap.

While he was dealing, she said, "And by the by, tell me more about this girl Virginia."

"What?"

"Virginia."

"Nice place," he said, with the fine logic of liquor.

"I thought so!" she said, and struck the table savagely; the pack of cards almost slid off her lap, and she clutched them with one hand. "You've been feeding me with the worst kind of lies, you're a poor little figure of a shrimp that knows no women, you're an impostor, you're no substitute for my Laury, I tell you!"

"What's that?"

"You're a liar, I say!"

"And you're a cheat," he said calmly.

"And why do you say that?"

"Why do you keep a spare hand in your stocking?"

SHE WAVED her hand graciously. "You'll have to forgive an old woman. Let's play!"

"Right!" he said. He scraped together the cards he had just dealt out and began to shuffle again. He dealt out the first hand. There was a two of spades on the table and Mrs. Krantz had no two in her hand. "Two of spades, little Casino, one point if you take her," said the tow-headed boy.

"Two," said Mrs. Krantz, hunting feverishly through the pack on her lap, "two." To look in her secondary pack she had to lay her regular hand on the table, but the tow-headed boy took this with complete composure. Eventually she found a two, and took the card.

Then the ten of diamonds was on the table. "Big Casino," said the tow-headed boy, "two points if you take it." Mrs. Krantz bent over the cards in her lap and searched. She did not find a ten. Two or three of the cards slid onto the floor; when she made a valiant effort to catch them, another batch dropped.

"Want some help?" said the tow-headed boy.

"No, thanks," said Mrs. Krantz, without looking up.

Still she could find no ten; and the cards, one by one and bunch by bunch, drifted down onto the carpet. She pawed more swiftly, frantic, and she tried to bend down, but she was too fat to make much headway. "Need some help?" said the tow-headed boy. She did not answer.

He came around the table and watched her for a minute. Then he tapped her on the shoulder, "What you lookin' for?"

"A ten." Still she did not look up.

He knelt beside her and began to go through the cards. He held one up to her, "Here it is."

She took it. Suddenly she bellowed: "You looked in my hand, you cheater!" and boxed his ear.

The blow was so hard that he rolled over on his back. There was a furious pause before he got up, dusting himself angrily. She sat with her arms folded, staring bitterly away from him.

The telephone rang, and he answered it. After a moment he cupped his hand over the mouthpiece, "You got a daughter?"

"Millions," said Mrs. Krantz offhandedly. "I'm a mormon."

"Tell her to come up," said the tow-headed boy into the phone, and hung up. "You know," he said, "it's damn hot in here."

He wiped his face with his hands, and ran his fingers around his collar. Then he unbuttoned his uniform jacket all the way down the front.

Rachel Krantz—there are some people who have a talent for making unfortunate entrances—came in on this pleasing spectacle. She drew in her breath with a hiss. "Mother!"

Mrs. Krantz told her flatly that she had a dirty mind. "This man is involved in one of my vices, and one only. Our friendship is purely alcoholic."

Rachel advanced into the room, shuddering harshly at the disorder. "This is revolting!"

"You're going to make me mad, Rachel!" said Mrs. Krantz dangerously, and she pounded a cigarette box on the table to emphasize her anger.

"Ugh!" said Rachel with emphasis. Then her eye fell on the empty bottle; she swooped forward and heaved it contemptuously through the window. It made a lovely crash.

"Whee!" cried Mrs. Krantz, and threw the cigarette box through the other window. It made a pretty good crash, too.

"Oh, brother," said the tow-headed boy, abruptly sobered. He ran to the window and looked out; when he drew his head in he was considerably relieved. "All clear," he said.

Rachel said, "I'm going to report you."

"Are you livin' here?" he asked, not at all put out.

"Certainly not."

"Well, your old lady is. And she pays the bills, and she pays the tips. And so long as she does, sister, I'm set. You can put that valentine in your hope chest, you unplucked rose!" And with that he stalked out of the room, buttoning his uniform.

IT TOOK RACHEL quite a while to recover from this sweeping fire, and when she did Mrs. Krantz noticed that her daughter was looking something for the better. She had a new hat and pale lipstick, and when her fury wore off she was almost nonchalant.

Mrs. Krantz moved into the attack first. "I thought when I left you the freedom of Laury's bank account you wouldn't be down here to bother me."

"I came down," said Rachel, "to save you from this."

"I don't get it."

"I got your letters," said Rachel, "with your silly story of a chase, and of a woman with Mrs. Pollicker's pin, and I know you'd been drinking again."

"And I bet that mattered to you."

"Well, it doesn't now," said Rachel surprisingly. Apparently she had even surprised herself. "But now I realize that you don't even exist, in a way. You're just an inhibition of mine, really, and I'll have

to get rid of you."

"I don't exist?"

"In a sense."

"I'm a dream?"

"In a sense."

"It makes no sense at all," said Mrs. Krantz. "If I'm a dream, what does that make you?"

"Please." Rachel opened her purse and took out a card. "I don't intend to stay long. "I've been in town three days already." At this, Mrs. Krantz's eyebrows rose in surprise. "I came down because a woman at the place—business is picking up a little now—was tremendously enthusiastic about a man here. Among other things he's marvelous for curing people of drinking."

"Ah," said Mrs. Krantz, "the Golden Elixir."

"I've already seen him. Three times," said Rachel, and Mrs. Krantz could not tell whether it was her old primness or a new knowledge that made her daughter's face look enigmatic. "He's a very wonderful man. It was he who told me about you and my inhibitions. He says all I have to do is face you, and you'll go away—"

"He hasn't met me," said Mrs. Krantz.

Rachel stood up, and turned the card over in her fingers. "I'm going to leave his name with you, and you're going to see him. I'll be back in a couple of weeks, and I'll know whether you've been or not."

"And who is he?" asked Mrs. Krantz narrowly.

"Dr. Forrest Billings," said Rachel, and dropped the card onto the table.

VII

AS SHE had threatened, Rachel came back to San Francisco in two weeks. But she did not see her mother; she only saw Dr. Billings. In four weeks she came back again, and again she saw the doctor, and not Mrs. Krantz. On the third trip—six weeks—she managed to see them both.

She was so obviously improved that Mrs. Krantz squinted with rage. Rachel was not exactly chic now, but she looked like a brisk and competent suburban housewife. Further, she shrugged off gaily her mother's worst barrage of insults. The upshot of this was that Mrs. Krantz agreed to see Dr. Billings after comparatively little argument. After years of being a bugaboo, it is disconcerting to be demoted to an inhibition.

Mrs. Krantz was not quenched by the submerged atmosphere of the doctor's house, and she gave a first-rate imitation of sobriety. It was not an unpleasant interview, after all. Billings soon found out that he could not get much money from Mrs. Krantz, and she found out that he was not enough of a fool to be made fun of. There was a bunch of violets on his desk in a glass of water, the gift of a grateful matron. Mrs. Krantz cheerfully took the flowers out and laid them on the desk, and filled the glass from a bottle she brought out of her bosom. "To you, doctor!" she said, and drank.

"For you, Madame," said the doctor, with perfect composure, and handed her the dripping violets. Thus they understood each other.

The talk was brisk. The doctor, with his old smile, said that he had really an extraordinarily high I. Q.; and Mrs. Krantz, who had a very good idea of what he meant, shut him up by telling him not to talk dirty. He made a half-hearted effort to find out why she loved her liquor, and she told him gravely that with a cold daughter there was no other warmth on earth for her.

"Perhaps I am helping you after all," he said suavely. She did not try to understand him.

When she left, she blundered into a small room before the doctor could stop her. A magnificent redheaded man in his shirtsleeves had his arms around a dark girl.

The doctor closed the door hurriedly, and a minute later the girl came out.

"Rosane," said the doctor, introducing her, "whom I call my Earth-Mother."

Mrs. Krantz looked at the girl with a practiced eye. She nodded understandingly.

"A home away from home," she said kindly. "And what entertainment do you have for the ladies?"

The doctor smiled bleakly.

* * * * *

The anniversary of Helen's marriage to Charlie Brent came about two months after

she decided to make Sam Wild her friend. She made a little joke about the date when she and Sam were alone. Immediately he took her in his arms and kissed her very hard. "A kiss for the bride," he said softly, "a brotherly kiss."

Georgia had been delighted with the way Sam and Helen suddenly got along. When they went out, now, Helen usually paired off with Sam, and Georgia with Fred Grover. Helen forestalled Fred's jealousy by saying that she was investigating Sam for Georgia's sake; if Fred was not too impressed by this, he kept quiet.

But the investigation as such had slipped into the back of Helen's mind, though now, in a way, the pursuit of Sam seemed the only real thing in an unanchored life. She had the obscure feeling that whatever she did—fascinating Sam, as she knew he was being fascinated, or probing into the darkness of his secrets—she was doing not only to protect Georgia, but to save herself.

She had nothing to do with Sam and Georgia's first quarrel. Sam suddenly told Georgia that sooner or later he would like to take charge of her department store, and she flatly refused. She was backed up strongly by Fred Grover, and later by Helen. Helen did not learn of this development immediately, and she was furious.

She said to Fred Grover, "Fred, why on earth didn't you tell me right away? What a perfectly stupid thing to do!"

"You didn't seem interested."

She appealed to him. "Fred, how long ago was it we agreed to pull together on this, for Georgia's sake? And the first time something actually comes up, you and Georgia are so thick that you don't even see fit to tell me."

"Frankly," said Fred, "you've been a little thick with Mr. Wild yourself, you know."

"Why, Fred," said Helen.

There were more quarrels. Sam continued to press the point, against the advice of Billie and Mart, and with the forced blessings of his great friend, Dr. Billings. The doctor was no fool, and he had done his best to slow Sam down. He had not succeeded. Billings had no control over Sam: he knew nothing about the Pollicker affair, for one thing, for Sam still skipped over the more lurid details of his immediate past. The doctor knew very well that his only appeal to Sam was by direct inflation of his ego. Against his better judgment he was forced to say, "Mr. Wild—you must grasp every problem that you see, like the nettle, and crush it. You must always go forward, at the fullest speed your energy is capable of." And this was the only way he could keep Sam satisfied.

So the fighting continued, Georgia, Helen, and Fred against Sam; Billie and Mart, who privately thought Sam was making a fool of himself, silently disappeared at the first sign of any argument. But Helen and Fred for the first time began to believe that Sam was no ordinary fortune-hunter. He was so obviously naïve, so sincere in his belief that he could do great things for his wife's property that they were a little amused and a little sorry for him.

Only Georgia was bitter. "No, no, no!" she cried, "I've supported you, Sam, when you were perfectly able to get a job, a good job. I've supported your sister, I've supported your friend, and that's enough. That's more than enough. What kind of a fool do you think I am? I've held on to my things because people handle them that know about them. They knew about them before I was born. And if you think I'm going to change, for any reason, you're an insane fool!"

And looking at the door she slammed behind her, Sam realized that his gentle, lyrical, and loving wife had at times a will like granite, or like her sister's.

IN THE HALF-LIGHT of the living room Helen was as beautiful as she would ever be; and she smiled. "Aren't you going to kiss me good night, Fred?" she said.

"Of course, my dear." He kissed her lightly. She put her arms around him, ran across the muscles in his back, and clung to him. He pulled away from her almost at once.

"Is that Georgia?" he said. "I thought I heard the car."

"Oh, they won't be back for a while. They went the long way."

"I thought I heard the car," he said, as though he needed an excuse. "Well, anyway, I'll be going." He picked up his hat.

"Is something wrong, Fred?" she said softly. "I've been feeling that something

was wrong. For quite a while now."

"Of course not. What could be wrong?"

"Nothing, if you say there isn't. Good night, Fred."

Sam and Georgia drove up as he went out the door, and he stopped in the driveway to talk to Georgia. Sam came up the steps. "You're looking very beautiful tonight," he said.

"Thank you."

"Will you be down for a nightcap later?"

"Oh, I might raid the icebox," she said. The sound of Georgia's laughter drifted up from the driveway, and she wondered what Georgia could find to laugh at with Fred, who was so dull. "Yes, I might be down," she repeated.

"I might be there too. Who can tell?"

Upstairs, she undressed slowly, changing to her negligee. She walked softly downstairs, and as she passed Georgia's rooms she heard faint voices: Sam and Georgia must be in Georgia's bedroom, behind two doors, and they must be quarreling very loudly if she could hear them. In the almost-darkness of the living room she mixed herself a drink, and she leaned back on one of the couches, idly wondering about Fred.

She did not hear Sam come in; standing behind the couch, he put his hand on her shoulder. Without turning her head, she said, "I didn't make you a drink. You'd better knock one together for yourself."

While he was mixing it she said, "I didn't know when you'd be down. You sounded busy."

"Georgia's being stubborn."

"About the store?"

"Yes."

"You can't have it, you know," she said, and her voice was harsher than she meant it to be. "It's out of the question, completely."

He was standing against the light from the doorway; and though she could barely see his face, his fists clenched and the silhouette of his chest swelled. "Why are you against me?" he grated. "Why don't you think I can run things better than they're run now? You don't know what I have in me, you don't know what I can do."

"Let's not talk about the store," she said.

His mood changed completely. "No. We aren't interested in the store tonight." He challenged her, suavely, "Are we?" Again, after a pause, "Are we?"

Carefully, she put her drink on the floor, because she could not reach a table without moving. She saw that the line of light cut across her foot; a piece of her negligee and the tip of her slipper were all that emerged from the shadow. She sat up easily. "No," she said, "I don't think we are interested in the store," and she leaned back.

But instead of coming toward her, he turned away. "Once you said you were my enemy."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about that."

"I don't like enemies. They're a problem. I grasp my problems, like nettles, with all my energy. I mean to run that store. I mean to get rid of my enemies, one way or another. People like you and Fred Grover; one way or another. I'm not afraid of you."

She got up then and walked toward him in the darkness, and said softly, "Don't you know you're a fool to say these things to me Sam? I might tell Georgia. I might tell Fred."

His hands were on her arms, lightly at first. "What's Grover to you?"

"I love him," she said.

"How?"

"That's my business," she said; but he would not let her twist away. "All right, then. As I love Georgia, I suppose," she said calmly. "If you must have an answer, that's it. He's peace, and security, and perfection, and no care. It's too bad he's so moral, or—well I wouldn't be here with you." She laughed.

"And what am I?"

IN THE SHADOW she could only see his eyes as they moved toward her. "I wish I knew." Now she was not quite calm. "I wish I knew everything about you, what your secrets are, everything." It was her voice that changed now, and it was he who laughed a little. "How many women have you loved, Sam, how many women?"

"A great many."

"I've loved a great many men," she said laxly. "Do you think it gets into the blood, Sam? Do you think—"

"I think it does," he said. "I think so."

"Sam—"

"Yes?"

"Is there another woman now?"

"Only one."

"Oh." Her voice was cold, but she was helpless to pull away from his strength. "Do you love her, Sam?"

"No. She's only an earthy type. An Earth-Mother type."

"Sam." She laughed and let her head roll forward onto his chest.

"And what am I to you?" he said suddenly, fiercely, and brought her body against his. "And what am I to you?"

After a pause Helen lifted her head and looked at him. She said clearly, "You're the strength I want, Sam. I love Georgia, and I love Fred, because they're perfect. But they have a kind of innocence, honor I think, that I can't go back to. If I can't have that, I must be strong enough to fight my way through, and I don't know whether I am. Maybe you don't know what I'm talking about, Sam, but you're the strongest man I know." The excitement grew in her voice. "Guts is something, but there's a kind of guts to face down shame and love and decency, and I don't know whether I have that, Sam."

"And you love me."

"Do I?"

"Well, you have guts," said Sam exultantly. "It takes guts to go after me. I know about you. You had guts when you found the two of them in Reno. And you didn't scream."

"Don't talk, Sam."

"Though the old girl wasn't a pretty sight to look at," he said.

Facing into the darkness, Helen said, remembering, "Not with the blood on her hair."

"Her red hair," said Sam.

What a kind of fascination at her own courage, and remembering the horror of the dead woman, she said, "Wedged in the door with the dog jumping over her."

"One hell of a struggle," he said, "and zango! old Pollicker in the doorway."

"How much he wants me" she thought, feeling his body trembling against her. A pinpoint of terror began to grow inside her like an inverted pyramid, a whirlpool in reverse. For a moment she thought it was her memory, but the horror grew.

"Anyway, I didn't scream," she said, and put a final ring into her voice, to banish the darkness. But the blackness was worse than memory, and she could not crush it.

"And you love me!"

Beyond control, she cried, "I do!" She put her arms around him desperately. "Oh, whatever comes after this, whatever I am and you are, this minute I want you, now!" For a moment they were quiet.

Then she jerked away from him with surprising strength, and stumbled swiftly across the room. She caught hold of the couch, unbelieving, chilled.

For the blackness had broken over her like a wave, flooding through her, everything suddenly made clear. "Sam!" she whispered, and sat down. As he came toward her, she stared at him with fascinated dread, with a swelling, disillusioned rage. As he approached her, she rose swiftly to meet him like a Nemesis.

The lights went on. "Well, hello," said Mart Levin in the doorway. Billie behind him, widened her eyes.

IN THE EMBARRASSMENT, Helen recovered quickly. Sam went out into the kitchen to empty the drinks they had not touched. She said coldly, "Sam has been telling me about old Mrs. Pollicker." Neither of them changed expression at all. But it was quite possible, she thought, that neither of them, or one of them at most, knew anything about this.

Mart said, "I think I'll go upstairs. Good night." And Billie followed him. Helen turned around to see that Sam had come back and was standing in the doorway.

"I didn't know you knew her," said Helen.

Sam began to mix her a drink. "I didn't, you know," he said. "Georgia told me about her."

Helen tried to remember whether she had talked to Georgia about old Mrs. Pollicker. No, she knew she had not.

The thought of Georgia filled her with a new fear. If a man would kill an old woman for nothing, for a few dollars, what would he do to a wife who was worth millions?

She could not keep her eyes off Sam. She watched the movement of his arms, and then she was held by his broad, tre-

mendous fingers. Fingerprints: there were fingerprints all over Pollicker's house. She watched Sam's fingers as they curled around the glass, remembering the bruises on the old woman's mouth.

"You're so strong," she said. "You have such strong hands. I think you could break that glass, there, in your hand."

"Do you think so?" He smiled.

She nodded, and involuntarily she closed her eyes. There was a pop and a tinkle, and when she opened them again the pieces of glass were on the floor, and the Scotch-and-soda was soaking the rug.

His palm was red. "You've cut yourself!" she said, startled, and took his hand. She was too close to him now; she felt his power; she was afraid for Georgia. When he went upstairs, a little later, she had to bite her knuckle to keep from stopping him.

"Perhaps I'm being a fool," she thought. But she did not believe it.

She looked around her at the living room. "When this is over, when this is settled either way," she thought, "I must get Fred to marry me and take me away. This house will always mean danger to me now. I must go." She went slowly up the stairs, thinking of Georgia and Sam and what she had better do, and how much she needed Fred Grover, who had not wanted to stay with her.

But her control never left her. When she went up the stairs she was poised, and her face was beautiful and serene.

VIII

FLARING his nostrils and straining himself to be unimpressed, Jack Ferrand appeared on the doorstep a day or two later. He was just about the same as he had been when he was studying at Stanford and visiting Billie Wild in Palo Alto.

It happened that Billie was home alone that afternoon, and she took him up to her room. With his old superiority, he was not at all affected by the house. But he was generous toward her room, done in pastels by a very expensive interior decorator, and slashed with the garish colors of Billie's scattered clothes. "Charming," he said; "has so much *you* in it."

Apparently he was not going to Harvard, after all; he was down on his luck; and Mexico had been most depressing. "No experience at all," he said in his cultured voice. "No real, genuine, sublime experience. Instead of primitive civilization, there was civilized primitivism, a commonplace thing, and dull. You do see the distinction, of course?"

"Oh, sure," said Billie.

He arched his chest and ran his hand back along his hair, looking very Indian indeed. "And so I have come back to you, my dear, for the true experience, the heartbreak, the love."

"Honey, that's horsefeathers," said Billie. But she was getting a little tired of the one-two-three technique of Mart Levin.

Standing behind her, he put his hands on her arms; he looked up soulfully at the molding and intoned, "I know now that you are the one who shall be my true inspiration."

Mart threw him down the stairs.

Billie smiled comfortably. "Maybe I shouldn't let you go on like this, you know, I've kind of got a fiance—"

"I have come back to your perfumed skin," said Ferrand, kissing her left shoulder, "the radiance of your beauty." He kissed her right shoulder, and with his lips still touching her skin he said dreamily, "Could you spare me fifty dollars?"

She murmured ecstatically, "I haven't a dime, Jackie."

"How unfortunate," he said.

"But I think I could work it so you could stay here," she said.

"Ah," said Ferrand.

On the second day of Ferrand's visit, Mart Levin threw him down a flight of stairs.

At the same time Georgia found out that Sam intended Ferrand to stay indefinitely, putting him in the same class with Mart and Billie; and Georgia balked. Billie was vulgar—though Georgia hated to admit it to herself of Sam's sister—but Billie was quiet. Ferrand, on the other hand, was aware that Georgia and Helen were the only people in the house worthy of his snobbery, and he never left them alone. Nor, when he had managed to corner one or the other of them, could he avoid patronizing them. Georgia loathed him, as she did not loathe either Billie or Mart. In fact, she thought she even liked Mart a little, because he was strong and sturdy, and adored Sam. Mart was aware of this; he kept her from being disillusioned by the simple process of speaking to her no more than was absolutely necessary.

Perhaps Georgia was even grateful to Mart for the incident on the stairs. At any rate, her decision was that Ferrand must go.

This ultimatum did not start so many objections as might have been expected. Helen and Fred were pleased; Billie was already tired of being sublime; Jack was perfectly willing to borrow fifty dollars and get out; and Mart stopped shadow-boxing. But Sam flatly refused to let Ferrand out of the house, as a matter of principle. "You can't throw out people I want," he said. "I'll have them here till I decide to get rid of them." The fight was colossal.

"He is going to go," said Georgia.

"He is not," said Sam.

"Say, who the hell do you think you are?" said Helen.

"Helen, we'd better try to keep our tempers," said Fred.

"Well, who the hell *does* he think he is?" said Helen.

Not being able to answer this, Fred retired into the background of the fight. When Georgia burst into tears, he took her upstairs to her room, and talked to her very seriously for more than two hours. Helen had dinner in *her* room, and Sam flung out of the house to see Dr. Billings. This left Mart, Jack, and Billie alone for dinner; the servants had not been so excited in ages.

ROSANE, the Earth-Mother, had been born Flo Spengle, the not-too-bright daughter of a dentist in upstate New York. She had wandered away after a carnival to become the assistant of a hypnotist; when the hypnotist had become a quack psychiatrist, she followed him; and when he died, she went up a step, with his partner, who eventually got to be the excellent Dr. Forrest Billings.

And now she sat in a room in the doctor's house, in San Francisco, dreamily running her hand along the huge muscles of Sam Wild's back, while he slept. He slept heavily, for he had plunged into the doctor's house in a great state of excitement, and he had exhausted himself. She had known for some time that she was in love with him.

He opened his eyes. "They're all against me now," he said. It was the first thing he had ever said to her in the way of confidence, and she knew the signs of more to follow. She was not pleased. She knew very well that she would tell the doctor, for she was not intelligent enough to keep a secret; she could not protect her new loyalty.

Gently she put her hand on his mouth for a moment, then moved it up and brushed the red hair off his forehead. He continued to talk, tensely: "I thought I had her the other night. But now she's asking questions again, she's my enemy again."

Rosane bent over and kissed him on the lips: when he tried to push her away, after a minute, she clung to him. He wrenched her aside and sat up. At last he was, as the doctor had known he would be, feverish,

frantic to talk. Abruptly he said, "What she's after me for, it happened in Reno—" She grasped his shoulders with her hands and lay her head against his back, heartsick.

He went on talking, pouring his words out wildly, one event after another. She tried dumbly to stop him; she kissed him; she rolled her head in agony. But even so she listened carefully, knowing what the doctor would do to her if he did not get an accurate report.

HELEN got nothing more about Mrs. Pollicker out of pumping Sam. She went to see Dr. Billings, on the pretense that her dreams were getting out of hand, but she saw at once that there was no chance of getting information from him. She decided that if there was information to be had at all, she must get it in Reno, and that she must go in person; she had no intention of committing herself to paper.

She intended to go on the day that Jack Ferrand arrived, but she decided to stay, sensing trouble, and so was there for the fight. The next day one of the maids came and said that Mrs. Wild would like to see her. Georgia was in her bedroom, and she was crying.

"Georgia!" said Helen, genuinely shocked; immediately she put her arms around her sister, trying to comfort her. "What is it—Sam?"

"Oh, Helen." Georgia pressed her hands together and sucked in her breath. It was quite a while before she could speak. When she was controlled the resemblance between the two stood out. Georgia said at last, "Helen, should I call it quits? Should I give it up for good?"

"Sam?" asked Helen again, and Georgia nodded. "You mean separate from Sam?"

"I mean divorce him!" said Georgia fiercely, and walked across the room.

Helen sat down slowly, so that her delight would not be too apparent. It was as if she could breathe again. Georgia would be safe, after all; there would be no fight, and no struggle. But she only said, "I thought you loved him so much."

"I thought he was the most wonderful person the world had ever seen. I thought I'd never love anybody the way I loved him. I thought nobody ever would. But now I don't know, I just don't know. Maybe love is just a habit, just something by accident, and it doesn't hang on too well." She was going to cry again.

"I didn't think you'd ever find that out, a person like you," said Helen.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Let it go."

Earnestly, Georgia asked, "Helen, do you think I should let him have his way?"

"Certainly not."

"He's so funny, so domineering—"

"He's being ridiculous."

"That's what Fred says."

"Fred?" said Helen.

"Well, anyway, I can't go on like this, just fighting," said Georgia. "It's wearing me out." After a pause, she said, "That's what Fred says, too."

"Fred?" said Helen again. "When have you and Fred been so thick?"

Georgia came as close to a smile as she had been that afternoon. "Oh, we've had a lot of time together. You know, you and Sam leave us alone a lot. I think perhaps you two get along better naturally. You're both sophisticated, and clever—"

"Sam sophisticated?" said Helen, and smiled.

"Well—not like me, anyway. You both know a lot about life and people, for one thing. You know what I mean."

Helen knew very well, but she was not going to say so. Instead: "What's this about you and Fred?"

"He's so kind to me," said Georgia.

"Of course," said Helen. She did not quite know whether she was talking to Georgia or herself. "He's been a good friend of ours for a long time, Georgia."

"Fred says"—Georgia seemed almost happy now—"that's it's not too late, that I have my whole life ahead of me. He's awfully understanding. I don't know what I'd do without Fred."

HELEN'S WORDS bit into the softness of Georgia's sentiment. "In other words, Fred wants you to divorce Sam?"

"Yes."

Helen said flatly, "Then Fred's talking like a fool."

"Helen!"

"I divorced my husband because he was too weak," said Helen. "You want to di-

vorce your husband because he's too strong, because you're afraid you can't manage him."

"Oh, Helen, please," cried Georgia. "I'm so confused—"

Helen sat down beside her and said softly, "Do you remember when you were married? Do you remember how much in love you were in Reno? Do you remember how the two of you laughed when you came back from New York?"

"Helen, I—"

Helen went on relentlessly, "Have you forgotten everything? Georgia, have you any idea what you're throwing away?"

"Oh, Helen!" Georgia gave way; she threw herself down before her. "I don't know," she said. "What should I do, Helen, what should I do?"

Helen's eyes looked into Georgia's appealing ones. Then she looked away, and said, "Well, it's not my place to decide, Georgia—" She knew her sister, and she knew her sister's will. Georgia was not only asking for help. Beneath her tears, this momentary confusion, she was imperious as always, supremely sure that whatever answer Helen gave her would be the right one. It would take the smallest of pressures to change her mind one way or another, Helen knew, but once she decided, all the will of a girl who had never had a decision turn out badly in her life would stand against a change. "No, really, I can't decide," Helen repeated.

"What should I do, Helen?" asked Georgia steadily.

Helen made herself look at Georgia. She thought: "I must throw away my wild ideas. I must forget about going to Reno. I must close the door on my crazy suspicions." Or was she closing the door on Georgia?

Quickly and sharply she said, "Stay with him. You love each other so."

"Oh, Helen." Georgia put her face in Helen's lap. "You're so good."

"Never mind me being good."

"Oh, you have so much character, so much faith in things. You're so good for me, Helen." Georgia raised her head. "You'll have to help me."

"Yes," Helen said quietly after a while, "yes, I'll help you." She said it sincerely, as though she were making a pledge: "I'll help you, Georgia. Things will be different. I think we'll handle Sam better after this. Yes, I think I can handle him, Georgia. Your life will be secure. Safe. Oh, Georgia, if anything happens—I'll look after you, Georgia. I promise you that. I promise!"

IX

AT THE St. Francis the next week, they met a newspaperman whom Helen had known in New York. He had expressive eyes, and they flickered when he saw Sam Wild. Immediately he turned back to Helen and Georgia. But before he left he took one more look at Sam Wild.

"What a very nice man," said Georgia. "I wish I could meet the people you do, Helen"; and she and Sam went onto the dance floor. Fred and Helen, instead of dancing, went to their table, and when they sat down she asked him if he didn't think Georgia looked happy.

Fred, with obvious mental reservations, said she looked very happy.

"I'm so glad," said Helen. Not knowing quite whether she was trying to convince him or herself, she went on to say she thought it was all in looking on the right side of things. Last week Georgia had been terribly low, and she was seeing everything distorted. Now, with just a little mental switch to give her back her faith in Sam, she was radiant.

Impassively, Fred asked how the hangers-on were doing, meaning Mart and Billie and Jack. Helen replied truthfully that they were keeping quiet.

"Good," said Fred. "You know, you're responsible for this marriage now, Helen."

"I—yes, I suppose I am."

There was quite a pause between them then, until Helen saw the newspaperman get up and go off in the general direction of the bar. She excused herself and followed him, and he bought her a drink.

"You know my brother-in-law, don't you?" she asked pleasantly, not wasting any time.

"The big red?"

"Yes. Does he know you?"

"Oh, I don't think so."

"Where'd you meet him?"

He looked at her over his drink, appraising her. "You know, this isn't going to

have much snob value."

"You ought to remember me better than that," she said.

"Probably I won't ever forget you."

She laughed then, and said that after all he oughtn't to. But she leaned forward and appealed to him, her hand on his, "I really need to know about Sam. Please."

"I met him in Chicago. He was a fighter, I was covering sports. He was using the same name. That's all."

"Oh." She picked up her drink, immensely relieved. "Was he any good?" she said lightly.

"He stunk. Strong as an ox, but no coordination at all. He might have done all right wrestling, with that build and those looks—"

She broke in on him. Suddenly she had to talk to somebody; in her relief she had to let her mind feel free. "You don't know what a load that is off my mind," she said. "You see, Sam isn't—hasn't always been open with us, and somebody had some very silly ideas, suspicions really. Very silly, I can't tell you how silly, so fantastic I can't imagine why I worried about them. You don't know how glad I am to know that's all he's hiding. You don't know—" She drank.

"Well, if you mean did he get into any trouble, I don't know that he did while I was around. Oh, I don't say he wasn't in some pretty rough scrapes—"

"Oh, well." Helen was very happy; she felt careless and gay.

"But he never got pulled in for anything, and it was just the crowd he ran around with, I guess. He was brought up in a pretty rough district, and the boys he worked with before he went in the ring were no lilies."

"Where did he work before?" asked Helen, mildly interested.

"In a slaughterhouse," he said. "Look out, you spilled your drink."

THINGS went too fast: Helen only had time to realize that her sense of relief and security had been the worst kind of mockery. Not more than a day or two later a woman came up and spoke to her in Magnin's. She was dark and good-looking, expensively, rather conservatively dressed, and Helen could not quite place her. "Don't you remember me?" said the woman. "I'm Rachel Krantz."

Helen made the regulation sounds of surprise, and, because they did not sound at all convincing, added, "You look different when you're not working."

"Oh, it's not that," said Rachel without self-consciousness. "I've changed."

They had quite a long talk on the sidewalk in front of the store. Rachel had nothing to hide from Helen; as a matter of fact, she was rather eager to tell Helen everything about herself, for Helen had been one of Rachel's inhibitions. Helen asked if Rachel was well, and Rachel said she was quite well. Helen asked after Rachel's mother, and Rachel said she was as well as could be expected.

Helen could not resist adding, "And has she changed too?"

"Oh, no," said Rachel. "She still drinks."

Mentally, Helen blinked. Even in some of the freer circles she had operated in, this would have passed as very low in self-consciousness, but Rachel continued to look happy and bland. Helen decided that Rachel had done enough changing for the whole family, and probably for several generations to come.

"She's here in San Francisco, you know," said Rachel; and Helen, who was about to say rather sharply that she certainly wouldn't know, was tricked by Rachel's calm expression into murmuring that she just hadn't *heard*. "She's seeing a doctor, a very excellent psychiatrist," said Rachel. "A Dr. Forrest Billings. Do you know him?"

"Yes, I know him."

"Dear Mother," said Rachel, "is giving the doctor a bad time. But he's a very clever man, and a very experienced man, and I've no doubt he'll handle her in the end."

"Oh, I've no doubt," said Helen. "So your mother is seeing Dr. Billings?"

"Um-hum."

And almost against her will, Helen found herself asking Miss Krantz to lunch. Miss Krantz would be delighted. "But please," she said, "call me Rachel."

"I shall," said Helen. "And you must call me Helen." Rachel's triumph as she followed Helen off to lunch was immense. It is not every day that one calls one's inhibition by its first name.

"And," said Rachel, as they went

through the door of the hotel, "I've made another appointment for her. Now the only trouble is to see she keeps it."

During lunch Helen brought up the Pollicker affair. "Oh I'd forgotten," said Rachel. "Of course you'd be interested, wouldn't you? No, they haven't found out who did it yet. I doubt if they ever shall."

"No, I suppose not," said Helen. "Then that's the end of it?"

"For all sensible people. Of course, my mother—"

"Your mother's still interested?" Helen could not quite hide her own curiosity.

"It's really very silly of her," said Rachel.

"Perhaps not. After all, Mrs. Pollicker was an old friend—"

"Mother's believed for a long time that the motive wasn't robbery. And she saw something in San Francisco, apparently, that brought it all back again. I'm afraid she's set herself to find the murderer."

"Do you think she will?"

"Oh, she's being ridiculous," said Rachel with finality.

"What was it," asked Helen, ice cold, "what was it she saw?"

"Oh, a blonde woman."

"A blonde woman. A blonde woman," repeated Helen. "How very strange;"

"It wasn't just that, according to Mother," said Rachel. "Mother thinks she was wearing a pin of Mrs. Pollicker's, a blue and white thing she had for a long time, that we didn't find after she died. She probably imagined she saw it."

"Or mistook another one for it."

"Oh, no, I remember the pin very well. It was very distinctive, very recognizable. You couldn't mistake it."

"I see."

"You must forgive me for running on like this," said Rachel. "It's awfully unimportant. I haven't even told Dr. Bilings, and there's nothing I wouldn't tell Dr. Billings."

"I can believe that," thought Helen. Aloud she said, "And that's all?"

"That's all."

"That's enough," thought Helen.

AS SOON AS she got home, Helen went up to Billie's room. "Billie," she said, smiling, "haven't you got a pin that Sam gave you, a blue and white one? I'd like to borrow it if I could."

"Oh, sure," said Billie, and took the pin out of her drawer. "Is this the one?"

"Yes," said Helen, "that's the one. Thank you so much," and she walked out of the room.

And she was sure that it *was* the one; as soon as she saw it she was positive that it had belonged to Mrs. Pollicker. It was a blue and white cameo, surrounded by pearls; the cameo itself was a picture of a satyr, or at least a creature that had the horns and legs of a satyr, and the breasts of a woman, capering wildly, with a flute in one hand, and throwing a rakish glance over one shoulder. Tiny sapphire chips had been inserted for eyes, and they sparkled maliciously when they caught the light. Nobody but Mrs. Pollicker could have owned the pin. "But I must be sure," thought Helen.

It took her ten minutes to locate Mrs. Krantz's hotel and get her on the phone. Her voice came harshly over the wire, so much clearer than when Helen had heard it through the walls of the Krantz boarding house, and still so much more remote. "Will we ever meet?" thought Helen.

"Well?" said Mrs. Krantz.

Helen said, "This is the office of Dr. Bilings. We weren't quite sure about the time of your next appointment. Could you tell me what day it was?"

"Thursday," growled Mrs. Krantz, "but I'll not be going."

"And what time?"

"Three o'clock. But I'll not be going."

"We're very anxious to have you come then, Mrs. Krantz."

"I'll not be—"

"I think we can give you some information about what you're looking for."

"About Laury?" Mrs. Krantz's voice rose to a sudden shriek.

"About Laury," said Helen.

"What? What are you talking about, you zither-voiced hoity-toity? What are—"

"We will tell you," said Helen, "at three o'clock on Thursday." She hung up.

She wondered again, "Shall we ever really meet?" Getting up from the phone, she found the pin still in her hand, and realized that all day she had been acting like an automaton. She turned the pin in her hand; when the light did not strike the sapphire chips they were black and somber,

and the satyr-nymph gave her a dark look of warning.

X

SAVAGELY they glared at each other across the doctor's desk, neither of them at their best. The doctor was exceedingly distressed, and Mrs. Krantz was very drunk.

"My dear madam—" the doctor began experimentally.

"You'll get nowhere by insulting!" she roared. "I was never a professional in my life."

"Oh, my dear lady—"

"Nor by flattery!"

The doctor's white pigeons of hands fluttered to his face for a moment; when he took them away his worry was still evident, but he was more calm. He smiled a little, benignly, and buttered the air with his hands. "What I still do not understand," he said, "is why you should come to me about this—this"—he made a very pretty show of helplessness—"this business you're talking about."

"I am talking," growled Mrs. Krantz levelly, "about the dirty murder of my best friend, the angel and widow, Laura Pollicker, in Reno."

"Just so," said the doctor. "But why have you come to me?"

"It was you that asked me to come, you little droop! Do you think I'd crawl back again of my own free will into this slicked-up mad house—"

"Just so," said the doctor, and leaned forward earnestly, almost beseechingly, "But why have you come to me?"

"To find out who killed my Laura!"

"Just so," said the doctor mechanically. He recovered: "But, my dear lady, you must understand that I have been perfectly sincere when I told you I know nothing about your Laura—"

"You lying scum!" she burst out suddenly against his blandness.

"You must tell me why you came here, and perhaps I can help you. Why did you come? Is it only because you're drinking that you connect me with some wild story that happened months ago—"

"Oh, I'm drinking," said Mrs. Krantz. "This is the end of the trail, and I celebrate my endings. Oh, I'm drunk, but I wasn't drunk when you called me. And you'll do no wigglin' now—"

"When I called you?"

"Tell me what you promised, you chop of blob!"

"When *did* I call?"

"Tell me who killed her! Tell me who killed my Laura!"

"Oh, shut up!" shrieked the doctor, in the voice of a singed seagull. "You must let me think—" He stood up, but Mrs. Krantz was out of her chair like a volcano, and she was clamped on to one of his hands like a vise.

"Think, will you! Think to lie!"

The doctor's poise was shattered quickly and completely. "Let go of me, you fat old fool!"

"Fat old fool, am I?" She circled around the desk, still holding his hand. When she stood up she was just about his height, and she threw her massive arms around him. "You'll not get away," she hissed into his ear, her face against his, "you'll tell me what I want to know." His struggles were lost in her bulk.

Frantically, the doctor pushed a button on his desk, and Mrs. Krantz only had a chance to squeeze his windpipe with her elbow, before a young man in white came in. He was husky, and he looked sure of his muscles; Mrs. Krantz let go of the doctor immediately.

"Shall I throw her out, boss?" asked the young man.

The doctor panted. "No," he said. "On the whole, I think we have some things to talk over. If you would sit down, Mrs. Krantz—"

UNDER the eye of the muscular young man, Mrs. Krantz resumed her seat. The doctor waved the young man out and sat down himself. "Now," he said, "just why did you come to me about this?"

She watched him narrowly. "What do you want to know?"

"Why did you come here, Mrs. Krantz?"

"You called me."

"Surely that's your imagination."

"I'd not imagine a voice like that, a zither-voiced hoity-toity female—"

"When was this?"

"Two days ago."

"And what did she say?"

"She asked about my appointment, when

it was, what time. And she told me"—she grew fierce—"that you'd tell me what I wanted to know. About my Laury!"

The doctor was relieved. "Ah," he said. "Obviously my office called about your appointment. In your subconscious mind you were thinking about this Laura. The two came together in your thoughts as a perfectly natural connection—"

Under her heavy look he broke off sharply. Then he pressed a button on the little square box on his desk and said, "Just what did you say to Mrs. Krantz when you checked her appointment?"

Mrs. Krantz was a little startled when the box spoke back, "I didn't check any appointment with Mrs. Krantz."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Krantz did not take her eyes off the doctor as he stood behind his desk, musing. Suddenly she allowed a look of recognition to cross her face. "Why, yes!" she said, as though to herself, delighted. "Of course, why, I know who must have called me!"

The doctor was eager. "Well, who was it?"

Prettily, she was covered with confusion. "Oh, I couldn't tell you."

"Why not?" Mrs. Krantz made a coy

The blow spun the little man across the room . . .

little gesture around the room. "Oh, no one can hear us," he said persuasively.

"Not even—?" She jerked her thumb in the general direction of the young man's exit.

"Not even him." The doctor leaned across the desk, as though he were wheedling a difficult child. "Not unless we yell real loud."

"Well—"

"Yes?"

"No." Mrs. Krantz set her lips with finality. "I can't."

"But you must tell me," said the doctor.

"Oh, I'll tell you. But you have to come over here and let me whisper." She crooked her finger and beckoned.

"Go over there?"

"Um-hum." She beckoned again.

"Well—" He went around the desk and came to her. He bent down, and she lifted her face to his. "Who was it that phoned you?"

The blow that she struck him on the chest spun the little man across the room into the angle of the corner and the floor. She hurled herself after him and onto him.

"Oof!" cried the doctor.

"Now you'll tell me," she said savagely, settling herself on him. "Now you'll press no buttons, you'll call for no help. Now you'll tell me who killed my Laura!"

"Let me up!"

"Who killed her?"

The doctor shook his head wildly. "I don't know."

"Oh, you don't!" And she grasped his shoulders and shook him like a rat. "Do you remember?"

"Let me go," cried the little doctor piteously. "Let me go!" With all his might he tried to rise, but all he succeeded in doing was making Mrs. Krantz's ride a little bumpy.

"Tell me!"

"I don't know." He was close to tears.

"Oh, you don't?" She left off shaking and reached for the sparse tufts of white hair. "Does this bring back your memory?" She jerked viciously.

"Help!" The doctor began screaming, with all his lungs and with all the force of his despair. "Help! Hey, *Rube!*"

"Laury," exulted Mrs. Krantz to the heavens, "what a hell of a time we're having now!"

HELEN arrived at the doctor's at five minutes past three. As she went up to the receptionist's desk in the front hall, she wondered if she should ask about Mrs. Krantz, or if that would be too obvious. But luck was with her. As she walked up to the desk the receptionist got a call from the doctor: "Just what did you say to Mrs. Krantz when you checked her appointment?"

"I didn't check any appointment with Mrs. Krantz."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

Helen's expression, when the receptionist turned to her, was one of very mild interest. "Oh," she said, "is it that Mrs. Krantz that's up there now?"

"Yes."

"Will she be long?"

"Well, I don't know, Mrs. Brent, but you—"

"Can I see her come down if I wait in there? Will she come down these stairs?"

"Well, there are some people waiting already, Mrs. Brent."

"I see." Helen sounded as though she were quite disappointed. "Well, I'll wait around for a while anyway, just to take a chance."

The corner of the receptionist's desk that was toward the stairs was blocked from the woman's view. Helen quietly took the blue-and-white pin out of her bag and propped it up against an inkwell, so that nobody coming down the stairs could miss it. Then she went into the reception room and prepared to wait.

She did not pick up a magazine—she was too nervous to read—but she managed to sit very quietly, so that nothing would show on her face. Several people in the waiting room looked impressed by her. Beyond the receptionist's desk she could see the stairway down which Mrs. Krantz would come; she wondered suddenly if she would recognize the old woman when she saw her again.

There was quite a long wait before Helen heard something of a commotion upstairs. Suddenly an empty bottle flew down the stairs and broke on the banister at the bottom. The people in the reception room jumped, and even the receptionist looked startled. After a little more

and louder commotion at the head of the stairs, Mrs. Krantz appeared — Helen recognized her at once, after all — struggling with a muscular young man in white.

She jerked away when they reached the middle of the stairs. "Let me go," she said, heavily melancholy, "I'll go quiet. The fun was over when you pulled me off." She glowered down at the receptionist for a full half minute; Helen thought surely she had seen the pin.

But apparently not. Mrs. Krantz marched sturdily down the rest of the stairs and went up to the woman. She was standing directly in front of the pin. "And when's my next appointment?" she asked regally.

The receptionist blinked. "Wh—when would you like?"

"When I'm dead!" snarled Mrs. Krantz. "But *that's* an appointment you'll have to check. I might repent of my sins before I die, and go someplace unexpected, and then I wouldn't meet any of this crew in all eternity." And she sailed out.

The twittering in the waiting room died down before Helen left. She sat and stared for quite a while, heavy with disappointment. Then she got up with a sigh and went to the desk. "I don't think I'll wait after all."

The receptionist looked pained. "If you're upset about that, Mrs. Brent—" She motioned toward the door.

"Oh, no," said Helen. "That's quite all right. I just think I'll run along." She reached out for the pin, but her hand encountered only emptiness. She looked down with a start, to be sure. There was only the desk, an angle of wood, polished and dark. The pin was gone.

XI

"THANK YOU for coming so soon," said the doctor. Mart Levin sat down without a trace of expression on his dark face.

The doctor was himself again; he had never been more suave or sure in his life. His hands were for once quite still as he leaned back in his chair and said, "I thought the time had come when you and I should meet. And I also thought that the time had come for us to be quite frank with each other. Don't you think so, Mr. Levin?"

Mart said nothing.

"To save you any embarrassment," the doctor went on, "I think you ought to know that I know everything about Mr. Wild. I know that he killed a man called Dan Jadden and a woman called Laura Pollicker in Reno. I know why he killed them. I know that he is worried about his sister-in-law, Mrs. Brent, and about a Mrs. Krantz, whom you seem to have contacted. You do know her, don't you?"

"I've met a Mrs. Krantz," said Mart.

The doctor smiled. "Yes, you needn't hold back, Mr. Levin. I know the state of Mr. Wild's mind, and I probably know it much better than you do, because it's my business. And all this I've got from Mr. Wild himself."

"I didn't know he'd told you," said Mart; and he cleared his throat.

Gently Dr. Billings said, "*He* doesn't know he's told me." He added nothing to this, but simply sat beaming at Mart for a few moments.

"Well," said Mart, "what do you want out of this? Money?"

"Oh, of course." The doctor was deprecating. "But that will come later—aside from my regular fee, which is quite high, by the way, but not unreasonable. The point is that right now there's trouble."— Mart shifted slightly. "Now, Mr. Levin, I don't want you mixing into this any more than you have to, so keep calm. There's trouble, but I'm not sure what kind of trouble. I thought you might help me to find out, and that's the only reason I called you."

"Listen—" said Mart.

"Please, please be calm, Mr. Levin. I know you're a man of action, though not so much so as Mr. Wild, fortunately. Will you be willing to follow my lead?"

"I don't follow anybody's lead."

"Not even Mr. Wild's?"

"He's my friend."

"That's all, he's just your friend? How long have you two worked together?"

"Nine years," said Mart.

"Nine years," said the doctor, and for a moment, strangely, he looked old. "Yes, I know the situation. You follow him around with all the hero-worship of a small boy, hoping only to imitate and help him. Yes, wherever there's a man

like Mr. Wild, there's a man like you. Whereas, wherever there's a man like me—" Very slightly, the doctor pulled himself up.

He went on, "But what I want to know, Mr. Levin, is whether you have any objections to making money out of this affair yourself."

Mart was impassive.

"I don't mean for you to betray Mr. Wild in any sense, Mr. Levin. I mean to work with him. After all, it might help him if you took some money for yourself —I imagine you're rather more careful with it, and you could help him later."

"Oh, I've never minded making money," said Mart.

"Good. We can take that up again later—"

Mart burst out harshly, "Now, what's this trouble?"

"Two kinds. First — Mrs. Brent has been here. But that seems perfectly natural: she called as a client, and she was recommended to me by Mr. Wild. She may have been trying to pump me, but she's an intelligent woman, and she wouldn't overplay her hand. I don't think we have to worry about her. Second—this Mrs. Krantz has been coming to me about her drinking. Yesterday she showed up, screaming that I had promised to give her information about the Pollicker business. She was perfectly sure that I knew something about it." The doctor's white face turned a little whiter as he looked back on the afternoon before. "I don't mind saying that she almost—ah—took me off guard."

Mart stood up and walked over to the window. "Damn!" he said explosively.

"What do you know about her, Mr. Levin?"

TURNING EARNESTLY, Mart said, "I'd have sworn she didn't know anything, and I pumped her dry. She was yelling about revenge for this Pollicker once, but she didn't know a damned thing. No, I know she didn't."

"Thank you, that's all I wanted to know. And Mr. Levin, I will handle this. Of course, you will do nothing about it."

Mart looked at him. "All right."

"Good. And Mr. Levin—"

"Yeah?"

The doctor got up and walked toward the door, still talking, as though this had been only a rather chatty little social visit. "There's going to be a slight change in things. Whether you know it or not, Mr. Wild has been intending to do away with his wife in the future—"

Mart was tense. "You don't say?"

With his hand on the doorknob, the doctor said mildly, "Well, he can't do it, that's all, it just isn't being done. Mr. Wild will have to take a little direction, whether he likes it or not. I think all three of us should make a profit out of Mrs. Wild, but we'll have to take a somewhat longer view. First, Mr. Wild will have to be exceedingly agreeable to his wife. Second, he'll have to get rid of this Ferrand person who's causing so much disturbance—"

"That's all right with me," said Mart.

"Is it? Good. And Mr. Levin, I'd advise you to be careful. You're in rather a dangerous position."

"With the police? What about you?"

The doctor smiled. "I would simply tell them that I thought Mr. Wild's confession was an hallucination. But that isn't what I meant. Mr. Wild is an unstable person, and he's in a position of some stress. His reactions are likely to be surprising and dangerous."

Mart walked over to the doctor. The little beads of sweat glinted on his dark upper lip as he said, stiffly, "Just—how bad is Sam?"

"Frankly," said the doctor, and opened the door, "he's crazy as a coot. Good-bye, Mr. Levin. And you'll let me handle this trouble? You'll do nothing?"

"Oh, of course not," said Mart.

WHEN the desk telephoned her that Mart Levin was on his way up, Mrs. Krantz merely looked at the blue pin again and put it away in a drawer.

"Well," he cried when he saw her, "the glamour girl. The little adventuress." Before she could say anything he sat down beside her, and put his hand on her knee, and winked up at her intimately. "I hear you been drinking again."

"A wee drop," she said, smiling.

"I hear you bust in on a friend of mine yesterday, a doctor I know."

Mrs. Krantz did not stop smiling, but

when she answered him, after a minute, she was a little too expansive. "Sure did. Boy, but I'd been drinking. I didn't even know" — she was all ponderous innocence — "what this big body of mine was doing."

"You didn't?"

"I bet I said some silly things," chortled Mrs. Krantz. "My, my, I bet I did."

"You know what you said? Something about that friend of yours, the good-looker, the one that got—" Mart ran his fingers across his throat.

"You don't say?"

"Yeah."

"My, my."

"And I thought you'd forgot all about it."

"So'd I."

"Must be your subconscious."

"Must be."

"Yeah."

"My, my." Mrs. Krantz stretched comfortably and yawned; Mart moved his head back to dodge her breath. She said, reflecting, "My, my, so you know the doc?"

"Yeah." He smiled his dark monkey smile, and she inspected him carefully.

"You know," she said, "my Laury wouldn't have gone for your type at all."

"No?"

"No." She sniffed. "And anyways, you don't smell."

"Ain't that too bad?"

"It is." She leaned toward him, smiling confidentially. "Say, tell me, you got a nice, big, handsome friend in town."

"I sure have," he said. Then his face changed suddenly, and he stood up and leaned over her. "Listen, glamour girl—"

She cocked a bland ear. "Is that Bert coming back? You know, I sent Bert out after a drink."

"Oh, did you?" He drew back. "Well, I guess I'll be going," and he went over to the door. Mrs. Krantz smiled to herself: somewhat belatedly, she had found out that she was no fool. At the door he said, "And you won't tell the doc I seen you, will you? Might embarrass him."

"Oh, of course not," said Mrs. Krantz.

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK, when Mrs. Krantz crept stealthily into Dr. Billings' house, there was no one on the bottom floor. She walked with great care, since she was a little unsteady on her feet. As a matter of fact, thanks to her liquor, she was hardly so sharp as she had been that afternoon; this visit was purely an impulsive notion, and of what she was looking for she had no idea at all.

The darkness of the first floor frightened her, and she made for the stairs. Slowly she crept up them, listening, but there was nothing to hear but her own gusty breathing in the darkness. She kept on going. At the top of the stairs the hall was lighted and empty, and she went down it fearfully, her black hulk hugging the wall.

Suddenly a door opened in front of her. Mrs. Krantz could not help a sharp gasp; she made a pathetic effort to flatten herself against the wall.

But it was only Rosane, the Earth-Mother. "Ah!" said Mrs. Krantz, jumping forward, at once all energy. She pushed Rosane back into the room and followed her. "Just who I was looking for!" She smiled kindly. "Pet!" and she pinched Rosane's cheek.

The Earth-Mother was blank. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, didn't you know, poor dear?" said Mrs. Krantz. She looked around her, and then whispered loudly, "The doctor sent me, to ask you something. He forgot just who it was that did in my friend Laura Pollicker, and he wants you to tell me, dear."

For a frozen second Rosane stared at the old woman; then she made a frantic dash for the door. Mrs. Krantz caught her arm. "So," she said, speaking swiftly, "you *do* know! Ah, which one of these men who come here was it? Which one did it to my Laura?"

"Oh, please," said Rosane.

Slowly, Mrs. Krantz pulled Rosane to her; she put her arm around the girl's thin body and smiled again. "Sure you know, a nice pretty girl like you. You can tell an old woman like me, I'm *sweet*."

"Oh, no," said Rosane, "I don't know." She began to cry.

Mrs. Krantz squeezed her lovingly. "Now, don't you cry, you just tell me all about it."

"Oh, I love him so," said Rosane, sob-

bing helplessly.

"Laura always could pick 'em," said Mrs. Krantz admiringly. "Now, which one is it?"

"I can't tell you. I can't give him up."

"Fortunes of war," said Mrs. Krantz. "Fun while it lasted. Now you tell me all about it—and, honey, you might as well tell me the details." She leered.

Already she enveloped the girl's body like a cloud, and slowly, beaten, Rosane sagged down to her knees. She looked up and past Mrs. Krantz at the door, and began mechanically: "Oh, I love him so—" Then she gasped.

Mrs. Krantz pushed her away and whirled around. Dr. Forrest Billings was standing in the doorway.

"Well," said Mrs. Krantz, "well." Her gallantry pulled her together like a new corset. "And me just going, too. I dropped an old girdle the other day"—she advanced toward the door, and the doctor stepped quickly out of her way—"and I just stopped by to pick it up." In the doorway she turned defiantly. "Don't wait up for me," she said, "but I'll be back!" But when she had disappeared into the hallway her legs were so weak she thought she would fall, and she had to clutch the banister to get herself downstairs.

The doctor let her go. He looked steadily at Rosane. "I didn't tell her anything," she gasped. "I didn't."

The doctor slapped her across the face; it hurt no more than if it had been a glove filled with water, but she collapsed, quivering. "I'll send you away," he said softly, after a while. "Maybe down south. Old Dolly — remember old Dolly Waterbury? She must want a nice-looking girl like you. I think I'll send you to Dolly."

"Oh, no. Oh, no." She followed him hastily on her knees, beseeching. "I don't want to go down there. I don't want to leave here. I don't want to leave you—"

She shrank back when he turned. "A lot you care about me. It's your Mr. Wild you don't want to leave. So you love him so? Does everybody love him? Doesn't anybody hate his guts?" He was intensely bitter.

She moaned and stretched herself out on the floor. He stood for a long time watching her.

THE DOCTOR told Sam that Rosane had gone off on the early morning train — down south. "Will you miss our Earth-Mother, Mr. Wild?"

"One more gone," said Sam. "They all turn against me." He took a deep breath. "Well, I can stand alone. I can still go forward."

"Only a little more slowly now," said the doctor.

"Faster," said Sam.

"No," said the doctor, softly but firmly, "there are certain things to be done first."

He was prepared for Sam's outburst, but not for its force. "I'm tired of certain things!" All Sam's despair slipped away, now that he was crossed. "I'm tired of waiting around! I'm tired of—"

"We all have things to be tired of, Mr. Wild," said the doctor.

Sam was not to be cooled. "I'm tired of waiting, I'm through with waiting. I'll do what I like!"

"Will you, Mr. Wild?"

"I stand around waiting, and one by one things slip away from me—"

The doctor spread his hands just once, reflectively, as though he were smoothing an invisible tablecloth, before he swung into action. "But things do not get away from you, Mr. Wild. You are an extraordinarily forceful character, and things will not escape your grasp against your will. Rosane did not get away from you, Mr. Wild; you sent her away. Oh, yes, Mr. Wild. Not you yourself, perhaps, but through me. Rosane did not want to go."

The doctor looked at Sam, and went on rather hastily: "Not that I wanted to see her go. On the contrary. I loved that girl like a daughter, Mr. Wild, and certainly she was a great help in my work. But she had come into contact with you—"

"I liked her," said Sam stubbornly.

"Yes, Mr. Wild, you liked her. But that girl did not merely like you, Mr. Wild. She loved you, adored you, worshiped you. And, like all women, she also coveted you; she coveted your freedom, your right to come and go, your right to have a wife. She was insane with jealousy; if I had not sent her away, sooner or later she would have gone raving to your wife, that other woman who is so thoroughly under the influence of your power."

He paused. Sam was sitting with a perfectly blank face; but inside himself he was feeling a genial warmth that extended even as far as Georgia.

"So what shall we do, Mr. Wild?" asked the doctor, who read him almost perfectly. "Shall we take quick action? Or shall we wait and seize the enormous advantages that this character of yours can bring about? It would be so very foolish to hurry now, Mr. Wild; only a few short steps, a few short weeks, will bring the situation to a point where you may have all the action you desire. Temporarily, I say only temporarily, your wife must be placated—"

"I'll think about it," said Sam, and stood up.

"And is that your final decision?" The doctor was rather annoyed.

"I'll think about it."

"As you say, Mr. Wild," said the doctor pleasantly. "There is just one more thing."

"Hum?"

"Rosane has knowledge of certain murders that were committed in Reno. Now, Mr. Wild, there is no need for alarm. But if what you want is to have Rosane back—"

"But that isn't all I want."

"Then you don't want her back?"

"Yes, I want her back!" said Sam, flaring up again.

"Then that *is* what you want?" said the doctor, very reasonable.

"Yes, that's what I want!"

The doctor ducked his head, and managed to suggest that he had been beaten in an argument. "Yes. Well, you can realize that if she were brought back—if you had your way—it would be fatal. In short, Mr. Wild, if you do not follow my suggestions, you are likely to end in the gas chamber, under sentence of death, as a murderer."

For a moment he looked straight at Sam, without pretense. Then he smiled, benign again. "But there is really no reason—"

"I see." Sam stared down at the doctor with a terrible sorrow in his eyes; the doctor, not knowing exactly what to expect, let his hand hover over the button on his desk. But Sam slowly sank into the chair and put his head in his hands. "Still

one more against me," he said. "They're all against me now." The doctor watched him without pity.

XII

THE KRANTZES had spent the twenty-seven years of Rachel's life in mutual blank hostility. Now they looked at each other with measuring eyes. It was the dawn of Mrs. Krantz's consideration of her daughter as a human being; it was the Custer's Last Stand of Rachel's primness.

Mrs. Krantz decided to ignore Rachel's sea-change. "And what have you come to start now?" she asked belligerently.

Rachel said, "I haven't come here to start anything. I've come to finish something."

"Ah."

Rachel crossed her legs and leaned back comfortably. "It seems you've been making a spectacle of yourself down here. It seems you haven't stopped drinking in the slightest. If anything, you've grown worse."

"News travels faster every year," said Mrs. Krantz.

"The doctor," said Rachel, and Mrs. Krantz perked up watchfully, "telegraphed me yesterday to come at once—"

"You're kind of thick with the old poop, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Rachel, without changing expression, "I am. I flew down here today. It appears that you have made a fool of yourself in his house. Naturally, he's upset. That sort of thing is very bad for his business."

Mrs. Krantz mused. "So the old quack's got his wind up? Hum—"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Ridiculous, am I? You'll find out, my fine—"

"Please." Rachel waved a casual hand. "Thank you. Now, the doctor is trying to do his best to help you. And he realizes that it's embarrassing to me to have you making a fool of yourself in San Francisco. At any rate, he advised me that you should either be taken home or put in an institution. It seems that living alone in the city is the worst possible thing—"

Mrs. Krantz was on her feet, roaring. "Institution, is it? An institution for me? I'll institute you, you walking tiger!"

"You might as well sit down," said Rachel calmly, and pushed her mother back into the chair. She stood up and spoke clearly. "The doctor also told me that at any time he would be more than willing to sign papers which would commit you to my care."

"You can't do it!"

"Perhaps not. But at the very least there would be a lawsuit, which would very efficiently keep you from this wild-goose chase after Mrs. Pollicker's murderer."

Mrs. Krantz slumped back. "I see," she said slowly, "you're in cahoots with the doctor now."

"Not quite. I have a proposition to make to you."

"What is it?"

Rachel hesitated for only a minute before she made a little gesture at her new clothes. "I'm building a new life for myself," she said, "after twenty-seven years. After twenty-seven years of being held down by you. I'm making a good business of our place up in Reno now, and I'm going to open Mrs. Pollicker's house, too. I've put some money in on that, and I've spent a lot of money on myself."

"I've let you take out all you wanted," said her mother.

"Yes," said Rachel. "But I can't take the chance that you might get it in your head to throw me out, or make some silly investments. I don't think I can take a chance on what you'll do when you're so far away from me. So here's my proposition." She leaned forward and spoke very slowly and distinctly, "Either you go home with me now, and give up this man-hunt once and for all, or deed over to me both the houses in Reno, and all the money Mrs. Pollicker left you. That's my whole proposition."

Mrs. Krantz was silent for a while, for she was busy masking a feeling of admiration that nibbled inside her. When she got over her surprise at having to do this, she said quietly and without hesitation, "Well, I'll stay."

"Then I'll send you some money every month." Rachel's voice was not unkind. "It'll be hard on you, won't it, taking money from me?"

"You can give me some money now, and

I'll live on it the rest of my life. It won't be long."

"But that's hard, too, for your sort of person. You might lose it. Are you sure you don't want to come home?"

Mrs. Krantz raised her head. "I won't let Laura down."

Slowly, the leopards drooped. "Well," said Rachel, "that's done. That's past and done." She made an effort to be brisk. "I'll send a lawyer around with the papers one day, and you can sign them. I won't be seeing you any more."

"I can look after myself."

"When you're drunk?"

"That's my business."

"Yes," said Rachel, and squared her shoulders defiantly. "Anyway, I have my own life to live. I couldn't help you if I wanted to. You wouldn't let me. Not that I want to."

"You bet I wouldn't let you."

There was a pause. Mrs. Krantz opened her mouth to say something, and shut it again uneasily. Both of them were a little taken aback at the mildness of the exchange. "Well," said Rachel, "good-bye."

"Goodbye."

Rachel went out. Mrs. Krantz felt a little lost, and she did not know why. But she consoled herself with the thought that now she knew definitely that the doctor was in this. She set herself to think of a way to catch the man he was shielding.

"A siege!" she cried at last. "I'll besiege him!"

XIII

TENSELY AND QUICKLY Sam followed the doctor's instructions. First of all he gave Jack Ferrand his fifty dollars and told him to go. Ferrand left the same day, but at the last minute, now that he was going, his emotions got the better of him. He turned to Billie, who was standing at the door, and said, "But you are my inspiration. I can't leave you, not spiritually. I'll be back."

"Oh, well," said Billie nervously, "just drop me a line."

"Yeah," said Mart, who was also standing by, to see that there was no hedging on Ferrand's exit, "you drop her a line or I'll drop you." And on this note of charm Jack Ferrand left Georgia's household.

Georgia had been eager to meet Sam more than halfway ever since her talk with Helen. Now he told her suddenly that he loved her, that he had been stubborn about Ferrand, that she had been right and he had been silly about the store. He did this with an intensity which Georgia took for sincerity, and which offset her surprise.

Georgia told Helen that she was happier now than she had been when she was married. "I think it's finding out how to live together, to make adjustments," she said. "Don't you think that's the most important thing in marriage?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," said Helen. "You don't regret that I told you to stick?"

"You know the answer to that, Helen."

Georgia's eyes were unfathomably grateful; Helen thought, "Well, that should soothe my conscience." She was still somewhat suspicious of Sam's change of mood, and she still wondered about the meaning of the blue pin. But Georgia was happy now, and their life seemed serene. She put off going to see Mrs. Krantz.

She meant to talk to Sam, but she could not catch him; all she got was breezy superficiality. She had the impression that he was tremendously excited, and that he was holding himself in.

A couple of mornings after Ferrand left the house, Mart came into Sam's room and said that Dr. Billings had phoned.

"He says," said Mart, "that if you were coming to see him today, don't. The Krantz dame is sitting across the street from his place in a cab."

"She can't get away with that," said Sam.

"The streets are free," said Mart. "And I can't knock her off in a public cab."

"She's trying to trap me. She thinks when I go there she'll catch me."

"The doctor says not to go."

Sam whirled. "The doctor! Always the doctor now! Can't I think any more?"

Mart was surprised. "I thought you were going to let the doctor handle things for a while."

"Oh, I'll let him tell me what to do," said Sam. "For a while. Then I'll do what I want to do. I'll do what *I* plan to do." He struck one big fist into the other palm. "Then to hell with the doctor!"

Mart took a breath. "Attaboy. I thought you were losing the old grip."

"Now," said Sam, "we think of a way to get to the doctor."

"You don't want to see the doc today, do you?"

"She's trying to keep me away," said Sam with finality.

"You can phone him, can't you?"

"She's trying to keep me away." The idea came to him a little later. "He can write me a note, and somebody can go get it. He can write more in a note than he'll say on the phone."

"But who'll we send? She knows me."

Patronizingly Sam put his hand on Mart's shoulder. He smiled, very wise, and explained as to a backward child. "Then we'll send somebody she doesn't know. We'll send Billie."

MRS. KRANTZ'S first and only excursion into siege warfare began at five o'clock, when, as instructed, the tow-headed boy came into her room to wake her. With him he brought a full quart of Bourbon and a box lunch which the kitchen staff had made up the night before and left in the ice-box.

At six o'clock they issued out onto the street, which was already light but still barren. A taxi drove up a minute later and Mrs. Krantz settled herself comfortably in the cab. This took some minutes, and the driver had to ask her several times where they were going before she bothered to answer him. Then she beamed. "Oh, we're going to park."

He was not impressed. "In the broad daylight?"

"And what's *your* name?" asked Mrs. Krantz.

"McBloomsbury!" he roared sarcastically.

"Hi, ho, McBloomsbury!" cried Mrs. Krantz, and gave him the doctor"s address. As they drove off she uncorked the quart of Bourbon.

At six-thirty they were settled on the opposite side of the street from the doctor's house. At seven the cab driver was already bored to death. At seven-thirty a man went into the house.

"Is that him?" asked the driver.

Mrs. Krantz shook her head. "Not Laury's type," she said. "Too short."

The next visitor was at a quarter to nine. "Not Laury's type," said Mrs. Krantz. "Too thin."

During the course of the morning, the aesthetic standards of the late Mrs. Pollicker took a phenomenal rise. The driver, who got quite a bit of her biography in the interims, gathered that she had spent her time from morning till night being visited by Michelangelical figures. By eleven o'clock Mrs. Krantz had fallen back on her intuition in dismissing the poor specimens that walked up to the doctor's front door.

"Don't feel it *here,*" she said sturdily, when a particularly likely candidate showed up, and slapped her left bosom. She coughed.

"Yeah," said the driver, "not Laury's type." If Sam Wild had walked in to see the doctor at this point, he would have been as safe as air.

By eleven the inside of the cab was a broiling heat, and the Bourbon was two-thirds gone. "Sure you ain't going to be sick, lady?" said the driver, but Mrs. Krantz waved a reassuring hand.

At one o'clock he complained of being hungry, and Mrs. Krantz promptly dug up the box lunch and handed it over. "Sure you don't want some of this?" asked the driver. Mrs. Krantz shook her head.

"You better have some," he said. "Don't you think you'd better have something to eat?"

"In a minute," she said, and he looked relieved. "Got to clear the way," said Mrs. Krantz, and polished off the bottle. She sighed with satisfaction.

"Now," he said, and held out a sandwich.

She looked at him with astonishment. "And nothing to drink with it?" He groaned.

At one-thirty he was asleep. She shook him awake, tremendously excited. "There!" she said. "Look over there!"

He sat up, shaking his head. "Is it him?"

"Look!" said Mrs. Krantz, and he looked. Another taxi was standing across the street in front of the doctor's house, waiting. After a minute the front door opened; a girl with a chunky figure and blatant blonde hair came down the steps and got into the cab. "See?" said Mrs. Krantz.

"Kind of a fairy, ain't he?" said the driver.

"It's the blonde," cried Mrs. Krantz joyously, "it's the blonde! After 'em, McBloomsbury!"

THEY followed the cab easily into the downtown traffic, and Billie did not look back. Mrs. Krantz rumbled eagerly around the back seat, mourning the emptiness of her bottle. When they got behind the other cab by any respectable length she encouraged the driver with some choice pep words and a hard dig in the neck. They actually lost the cab for a moment downtown, and she was beside herself.

She slapped her fat hands together and looked up at the roof of the cab. "Oh, Laury!" she cried, no doubt feeling that her own plea would carry very little weight in Heaven, "Laury, Laury, show me the way!"

From then on Mrs. Krantz never doubted that Mrs. Pollicker had influence with the All Highest. Suddenly, as though it were a miracle, they saw the blonde girl, out of her cab now, standing on a corner. She was with a huge red-headed man, and he was reading a letter which she had apparently brought him.

* * * * *

The letter merely said that the doctor had already seen to it that Mrs. Krantz would be taken either to Reno or to an institution, and not to worry. Sam glared ahead of him, oblivious to the people on the street. "He's seen to it," he muttered, "he's seen to it. Always him!"

"What's the matter, Sammy?" asked Billie, but he did not answer her. "Sammy," she said, worried, "what say we go to a show? It'll take your mind off, Sammy. Come on." After a little argument she managed to drag him after her down the street.

* * * * *

"Is that him?" asked the driver.

"It is if he smells!" said Mrs. Krantz.

"And how do you find that out?"

"Watch me, McBloomsbury!" When she stepped out of the cab her knees gave way, and she sat down with a squash on the sidewalk. The driver closed his eyes, but Mrs. Krantz was not at all disheartened. "Up and at him!" she cried, scrambling to her feet—this required a little help from the running-board, but she made it—"Off and after, McBloomsbury!" She opened her purse, thrust a wad of bills at him, and took off unevenly after the blonde and the red-headed man as fast as her bullet legs would go.

When they reached the box-office she was only a few yards behind them. When they went into the lobby she was almost at their heels. But when they disappeared into the darkness of the lower floor she hung back for a minute, stealthily.

As she stepped inside a little usherette came up. Mrs. Krantz ignored her. "Where would you like to sit, madam?" said the usherette.

"Pish!" said Mrs. Krantz, blasting her out of the way with a mighty sweep of the hand, and set off down the dark aisle alone. The theatre was about half empty; the middle section was almost filled with the dark heads of the audience, and when her eyes were accustomed to the darkness Mrs. Krantz made out the heads of Billie and Sam in the midst of them.

Carefully she picked the second row behind them, and started in. "There are no seats there, madam," said the usherette, hovering.

Mrs. Krantz snarled over her shoulder and kept on. It took her quite a time to drag her bulk across the knees of enough people to reach the middle of the house, but she did it, and then she was directly behind Sam. She stepped on a woman's toe.

"Oh," said the woman.

"Excuse me," murmured Mrs. Krantz delicately. There was a man sitting next to the woman, and Mrs. Krantz carefully sat down in his lap.

"Hey!" said the man.

"Excuse me." Mrs. Krantz lifted her moved back and sat on the woman.

"Oh!" said the woman.

"Excuse me." Mrs. Krantz lifter herself daintily and sat down between the two, on the arm rest of the seats. "Oops!" said Mrs. Krantz. "Excuse *me*."

At that the man got up and made for the aisle. Hastily, with a sigh of thanksgiving, Mrs. Krantz settled herself in his seat. With all the neighborly interest in the world, she turned to the woman beside her. "Hello," said Mrs. Krantz.

BILLIE WILD turned around once while all this was going on, but she saw only an old woman who was a little drunk. Neither Sam nor Mart had told her anything about Mrs. Krantz. She turned back and patted Sam's hand.

The woman beside Mrs. Krantz looked rather pointedly at the screen, and Mrs. Krantz followed suit. The huge shadows were swooning toward each other, a truly Gargantuan kiss. Mrs. Krantz endured this for some time before she nudged the woman and muttered companionably, "Lousy show, ain't it?" Having disposed of the picture, she looked around to get her bearings.

She was directly behind Sam; she could see his head clearly because he was so tall, and because there was only a boy in the row between them, slumped low in his seat. Next to the boy, behind Billie, was a man who was very, very fat.

Mrs. Krantz digested all this for some time. Experimentally, she sniffed a couple of times, to see if her nose was in working order. Then she went into action. Gradually, inch by inch, she hoisted herself up, leaning forward across the sharp ridge of seats.

If the boy in front of her had been sitting low in his seat before, now he shot down like a trout to the bottom of a pool. Above him, slowly, he saw pass the face and body of Mrs. Krantz, a greasy moon followed by an enormous cloud. Her clothing rustled against the wood.

Neither Billie nor Sam turned around; Sam was staring, unseeing, at the screen, and Billie still had her hand comfortably on his. Mrs. Krantz never took her eyes off the dark shape of Sam Wild's head. She was only a foot from it, at the most, when a sharp tug on her skirt pulled her up short. She realized that her elevated beam must be blocking the view of at least three people in the row behind.

She turned her head and looked over at the fat man; he was staring at her with plain and simple horror. Mrs. Krantz made a late gesture toward the social amenities. She whispered "I just wondered if you would take off your hat." Then she noticed that he had no hat, and she sighed gently. With infinite care she let herself back down into her seat, shaking her head at the complications of modern life.

As soon as she was gone from over him the boy made a dash for the aisle, and the fat man looked as if he were considering making it a general rout. Still Sam Wild did not turn his head.

Mrs. Krantz sat for perhaps five minutes. She started forward a little more swiftly this time, making a valiant effort to keep her hindquarters below seat level. In only a minute her nose was about four inches behind Sam Wild's left ear. There, in mid-air, Mrs. Krantz hung while she recovered her nerve. Cautiously she let the air out of her lungs, till they were quite empty. Still Sam Wild did not look around.

She inhaled. And as she did, Sam finally turned his head, so that their noses came together like the revolving sprokets on a gear. For a petrified eternity they stared at each other, nose to nose.

Then the air was shredded with Mrs. Krantz's scream. "Laury!" she screamed. "Laury, it's him!"

The fat man jumped for his life; the audience bounced as if the floor was charged with electricity; pandemonium boiled from the screen to the back of the theatre, and Sam and Billie escaped in the middle of it. But Mrs. Krantz did not try to stop them; she had fainted forward like a jack-knife over the back of the fat man's seat.

XIV

FOR AN HOUR Sam had been sprawled across the bed, the sobs whipping his body with the impact of hammer blows. Now he was standing, talking wildly, incoherently, so fast that they could only understand half what he said, and he would not stand still. "Steady, boy," said Mart again; he had said it so many times that the words sounded like gibberish. The tears had dried on Sam's face.

Together they finally got him to sit down and be quiet, and then they went out to talk for a moment in the little study. Mart closed the door carefully behind him.

"Golly!" whispered Billie. She was frightened and furious, and close to tears on both counts. When Mart put his arm around her and said she was a good girl, she pushed him away.

"Now don't do that," he protested, "Don't get sore."

"Sore!" she whispered viciously. "I'm so sore I'm seein' around corners. Whenever I think of that dame followin' me around—me!—with a murder rap runnin' loose, I get the watering heebies. Why the hell didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me, I could of looked out for her." She was ready to cry openly.

Mart patted her. "Well, it's gonna be okay," he said. "I'll fix things up some way. Now, you go in and calm Sammy down, and I'll head off Georgia and Helen."

"Oh, my God," she wailed, "are they home too?"

"Well, they ain't gonna stay out all night," said Mart. "It's almost four-thirty now." He put his arms around her self-consciously. "And don't you get sore. I'm crazy about you. I'm in *love* with you," he said, as though this were incredible, beyond the limits of belief. He kissed her and went out.

When Billie went back into the bedroom, Sam was sitting in a chair, leaning forward, his eyes closed. She went over and put her arms around him. All the muscles of his back were tense and trembling, and when he spoke the fibers of his voice were shot through with fear. "I'm afraid," he said.

"Sammy," said Billie, "it's going to be okay."

"If there was something I could do!"

"Sammy, honey."

"If there was something to lay my hand to!"

"Sammy."

"Listen." Sam turned to her earnestly. "Look, I never saw the old dame before in my life. I never thought at all that she'd be tracking you. I wouldn't get you into this for all the tea in China. You're my family. You know I wouldn't do anything to butch the family. You believe me, Billie?"

"Sure, Sammy, I believe you."

"All right," he said, and turned away despondently. He had acquitted himself of Billie's troubles; he had only his own to worry about now. Presently he began to talk again, swaying back and forth a little in his chair, and Billie comforted him.

"If there was something to do."

"You just sit quiet, Sammy."

"I'm the strongest man I know—"

"You sure are, Sammy."

"Why can't I do something?" And he clenched his fists in agony.

For more than half an hour she knelt beside him, and the strain told on her. Under the powder her young face was tired; the skin around her eyes was flaccid, and her mouth was harsh. She had no thought of going. Like Mart, she was lost in the ritual of upholding her brother Sam.

"There's one in the light," said Sam, beginning to drone, "and one in the dark. There's one I can see and one I can't. There's one that smiles and one that curses."

BILLIE put her head down for a minute and tried to keep his voice out of her ears. When she looked up again he was saying, scornfully, "I can feel her creeping up in the darkness, and they tell me not to worry, she doesn't know a thing. Not to worry! Only an old woman that drinks, they say, we'll keep tab on her. But they don't keep tab. Don't worry about her, we'll fix her, we'll send her away. And still she comes closer, she breaks water like a fish, she gives a sign she's still there. But I'm the only one that worries, I'm the only one that cares!"

"Sammy," said Billie.

"She's only a face in the dark and a scream to me now, even now, but she's followed me. That's one of them."

"Sammy," said Billie again, and fiercely, unconsciously, he twisted her arm in his hand. She grimaced and kept quiet.

It was a while before Sam began again. "And then there's the other," he said softly. "The other one sits in front of me, the most beautiful smiling thing I ever saw, with a face that smiles. She sits and smiles and swings her legs, above me, above the world, knowing she's better than anybody ever was, sure that she and her kind own the earth we live on. And they do. And she hates me."

Despairingly, painfully, without taking her eyes from his face, Billie began to cry. For a while she managed not to hear what he was saying; and then an anxious look dropped sharply over her face as she realized that his words were coming faster. Excitement was growing in him.

"She's my enemy," he said quickly, "and why, why? It's not her sister, it's me that makes me her enemy. And I don't know why. She puts herself in my arms, and she tries to trap me. She tells me she loves me and somehow she guesses. She feels and digs and looks inside me. But she doesn't show anything. She doesn't say anything. But she gets together with the other one!"

He pushed Billie away sharply when she tried to stop him, and he stood up.

"They're getting together, closer together, and I'm between them. The one comes out of the darkness and screams, the other one goes back away from me. Only I can't see any change, she's still smiling. And they meet and smile about me and talk about me and wonder what to do with me. They close in on me, closer and closer, and here I stand, what I am, what I've always been, the same as ever, and I can't do a thing about them trapping me. They've tied me in, they've blinded me, they're circling me, they're trailing and tracking and hounding me down!"

His voice went up to a shuddering scream: "They're after me now like two bloodhounds, and I can't get away!"

"Sammy!" Billie threw herself at him and held her arm to his mouth. She clung so strongly that he could not force her away. Gradually, with the jerky movements of an animal setting down to rest, he relaxed.

When she took her arm away from his mouth, he began to smile gently, and he put his hand on her shoulder. "Well," he said. "You and me."

"Yes, Sam," said Billie hopelessly, "you and me."

"We've come a long way together, haven't we?" said Sam.

"Yeah," said Billie, "we've come a long way together, Sam." She drooped with a terrible weariness, as if she had made a long journey, and had suddenly realized what road she had taken, and how long it had been. But she lifted her head; she looked old.

"Remember the old place?" said Sam tenderly.

"I remember."

"Remember Ma?"

"Ma died when I was three," said Billie. "I guess you'd forgotten."

Sam's words began to retreat into himself again. "And we'll go a long way ahead from here."

"Wait a minute, Sam," said Billie.

SHE STARTED to back away from him, but he put his hands on her arms. "You're the only one that's still with me, Billie."

"Me and Mart," said Billie.

"You're the only one that's with me," he repeated. He put one arm around her gently, and his other hand to her face. "You aren't Helen," he said. "You aren't even Rosane. You didn't know Rosane, did you?"

"All right, Sam," said Billie, and tried to push away from him. She realized that he was holding her more strongly than she had thought.

"You better let me go!" she said sharply, and tried to move. Both arms were around her now. She heard the outer door of the study open and close, and she knew it must be Mart.

"Somebody has to belong to me," said Sam.

She saw his eyes. "Sam!" She struggled.

Mart was across the room and had pulled Sam away from Billie.

The blow caught Sam's great body off balance; he spun across the room and fell with a crash between the bed and the desk. Fascinated, Billie and Mart stood and stared.

After a moment Sam's huge fingers came over the edge of the desk, and then his big, rectangular wrist. The fingers caught, and the muscles in the hand and wrist tensed as he began to pull himself up. "You better get out of here," said Billie to Mart. "Get out of here!"

He went.

Sam rose very slowly into view. He seemed quite calm; the red hair that fell over his handsome face was all that was disarranged. He started forward. "Sam!" said Billie, and stepped in front of him. It took a lot of nerve. He stopped; he continued to stare over her shoulder at the closed door through which Mart had gone.

Very slowly, never taking her eyes from him, fearful, incredulous, Billie retreated backward to the same door.

With all the power of his squat body he struck.

At dinner that night, Mart and Billie were quiet. Sam was handsome and expansive.

At ten-thirty Mart very slowly opened the door to Sam's bedroom. Sam was sitting almost in the darkness.

"Sam?" said Mart hesitantly.

"Yes." Sam did not turn his head.

"You still mad, Sam?"

"Why, I wasn't mad," said Sam. "No, I'm not mad at you."

Mart came into the room. "I'm not mad, either," he said. "Billie is, a little. Only I guess we all got just a little excited. You were just a little worked up."

"Yes," said Sam.

"You look better tonight," said Mart. "Calmer. You look fine." He put his hand on Sam's shoulder.

Sam smiled to himself and said, "I feel better. This afternoon I didn't have anything to do. Now I've got something to do."

"That's good," said Mart. He said meaningly, "I've got something to do, too. With the glamour gal."

"Who?"

"Krantz."

"Oh."

"I called her up," said Mart. "I made a date for the old fool tomorrow night on

the sand dunes. I told her I'd introduce her to somebody who'd tell her everything. She fell for it without a quiver. The old fool."

"When you do get to the sand dunes," said Sam, "*are* you going to meet somebody?"

Mart laughed. "What do you think?"

"If you did meet somebody—" said Sam.

Mart laughed again. "I'd be up the creek."

Sam said slowly, "If you do meet somebody out there, you won't come out so good." Then he smiled. "But you figure on everything."

Mart beamed.

XV

AT QUARTER TO EIGHT the next night Mart Levin drove Billie downtown to a movie, having borrowed Sam's car for the evening, and left her there. Then he went back to Georgia's and up to his room, going in by the back way so as to avoid meeting anyone. He brought out from its very good hiding-place the knife that Sam had taken from Danny Jadden in Reno. There were still one or two tiny spots of blood on the knife, where the blade and handle met, so dark and crusty that, even if anyone had noticed them, he would hardly have guessed what they were. Mart put the knife in the pocket of his trench coat, and with it a small hard-rubber club, which he had had for a long time and was fond of, in the way that any workman is fond of a tool with which he can do efficient and consistent work.

While these two objects were in his hands Mart almost fondled them. In fact, his face during this whole time was happy, loving, and expectant.

About nine o'clock he went downstairs, again by the back way. He left, as he had come, through the kitchen, for there was little chance that the servants would be moving around, and this was the easiest way to get out with no one seeing him. No one would have seen him, either, if Sam Wild had not been sitting for an hour, with quietness unusual in him, waiting for Mart to carry out his plans. He followed Mart downstairs with his strong, elastic, and silent step.

Thus when Mart stepped into the dark kitchen, Sam stepped in behind him, and Mart was considerably startled when the lights went on. But Sam smiled.

"You drive Billie to the show?" he asked.

Mart said he had.

"You going out to see Krantz now?"

Happily, Mart said he was. When Sam ask him seriously if he thought she would be there, Mart laughed outright. "I know she will," he said, triumphant. "I called her after dinner, and told her just where to meet me, with details. She'll be there. The old fool." He laughed.

They went across the kitchen and out through the servants' quarters. "You aren't going to pick her up at the hotel?" asked Sam.

"No use letting anybody see me if I can help it."

Outside on the stoop, they stood for a while and talked. The night air settled on their faces, cold, damp, and granular; it looked as if there were going to be off-and-on rains of the light, misty type that San Francisco is sometimes afflicted with. "Where'd you say you'd meet her, exactly?" said Sam.

"The sand dunes," said Mart. "The corner of—" and he named a couple of streets.

"They don't mean a damn thing to me," said Sam. "All those streets out there run through is sand. Nobody knows what they are."

"This one," said Mart, "is one of those unfinished places"; and he nodded meaningly. Sam nodded too. There are little spits of asphalt and concrete all over the San Francisco dunes, all of them about ten or twenty feet long, the width of a regular street. As a matter of fact, of course, they are streets, the dead ends where the neat and regular blocks of that part of the city are blanked out by whole acres of dunes which have not yet been divided up for building. They are the natural places for casual and not-so-casual parking; they would be perfect for this, except that it is hard on a car to go over the broken bottles that have been left by earlier parkers.

There are fewer of these spits than there used to be, now that building has spread, but there are plenty still left. There were enough to make Sam, after a minute, look

openly doubtful. "Sure she'll find it?" he said. "I couldn't. Maybe even a cab driver'd have a bad time."

"I scouted it this afternoon," said Mart. "I gave her directions on what streets to take, and what streets it was between. She can't miss it."

"Ah," said Sam, and listened patiently while Mart told him just what those directions were.

Sam brought up another point. "Will you have to keep her quiet out there, or aren't there any houses at all?"

MART EXPLAINED. There were no houses around. Furthermore, you could walk into the middle of the dunes along the direction of the spit they were to meet on; you could walk in the length of what would be two regular city blocks, and then you would be that far from anything but sand.

Sam nodded again, before he smiled kindly at Mart and said, "Well, good luck, boy."

Happily, Mart gripped Sam's shoulder. He pulled the trench coat around him and jumped down off the stoop into the damp night.

Helen opened the door behind Sam only a minute later, before Mart had left. Sam was a little startled. "I heard someone in the kitchen," she explained. "I came out to see who it was."

"Oh." They both stood silent for a minute, till Mart roared out along the driveway in Sam's car. Then Sam turned around.

"Can I still borrow your car tonight?" he said.

"Of course, Sam."

"Keys in it?"

"Yes."

They went in, and because there seemed nothing much for them to say, they crossed the kitchen in silence. But as Sam started to go up the back stairs to get his coat, Helen stopped him.

"Sam."

"Yes?" He waited.

"Sam," she said. "I—I've been wanting to talk to you for a couple of days. But you're a hard man to catch when you don't want to be caught, Sam."

He said politely, "I can only stay a couple of minutes. I have really"—his eyes actually shone with good humor—"a very pressing engagement."

"It won't take more than a minute," she said. "Sam—that blue pin you gave to Billie—that belonged to Mrs. Pollicker, didn't it?"

"Why, yes," he said gravely, with only the fraction of a pause. "I knew her, you know. But I didn't want to tell you. I thought it might worry Georgia. And I didn't know what you'd think of it. I've never been able to figure you out."

"I'm sorry for that," she said. "Sam you didn't—"

"No."

"I'm glad of that." Neither of them had moved, or taken their eyes from the other's. "But you don't seem worried that I know it now."

Still his eyes did not waver. "I don't mind it at all now. I have other things to do."

"I see."

"Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I want to. And anyway, it doesn't matter so long as you're good to Georgia—"

"I will be."

"I think you're going to be. I think you'd better be, Sam."

At that he began to smile. "You must excuse me—" he said softly; but he did not go upstairs. Instead, after a second, he came down all the steps but one, and kissed her, his hands on her shoulders. It was a good kiss, but not passionate, as if he had his mind on other things; and Helen took it the same way, as if she did not know whether it was a brotherly kiss or what.

When Helen turned away — when she had watched the movements of Sam's back as he quickly went upstairs—she was about to go into the front of the house. But she heard a noise in the kitchen. She went out there at once, for she knew she and Sam had turned out the light as they came through, and she had not heard the light switch on again. In the darkness she saw the figure of a man at the other door, fumbling with the knob. Quietly she pressed the switch.

IT WAS Jack Ferrand. "Well?" said Helen imperiously, for she was wondering what he might have heard. But he was so painfully and ridiculously embar-

rassed that she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Well," she said again, "and what are you doing here?" She had a very good idea, of course, but she was not going to relieve his anxiety.

He had made a bad effort to be nonchalant. "Really," he said, and the culture of his voice was positively bell-like, "I just dropped in to see Billie."

"Oh. *Oh.*" Helen could put a world of meaning into her monosyllables. She waved a satirically vague hand to back up her raised eyebrows and her smile. "And the—the front door?"

"Well, I—I didn't want to cause any embarrassment—"

Helen nodded understandingly, relenting. "Mr. Levin is such a strong man."

"Ah—yes," he said. "Well, good night," and he turned to go.

"Aren't you going to see Billie after all?"

"She isn't in. I heard them say she went to a show."

"You heard them? Sam and Mart?"

He nodded, and she looked really surprised. "And where were you?"

He hesitated. He swallowed. Despairingly, he threw a wild gesture in the direction of the pantry, and fled before she could break into laughter. The door banged behind him.

Helen was still giggling helplessly in a kitchen chair, at the thought of the lofty Ferrand hiding behind a kitchen door, when Sam came down again and went out, with his coat over his arm and a purposeful look on his face. "Good night, Sam," she said.

"Good night, Helen."

The rest of the evening passed quietly enough, and most of it Helen spent simply sitting in the front room with Georgia and reading. She did one rather strange thing, however: she kept Georgia from finding out that her husband was not at home. She meant nothing by it; it was only the sort of thing she had done when they were girls, when with a straight face she had fed the most horrendous lies to the serious Georgia.

It happened this way: about ten o'clock Georgia looked up from her magazine and asked Helen if she were going to a cocktail party they had both been invited to for the next night.

"Oh, I don't think so, darling," said magazine. "I suppose I might as well ask Helen. "What about you and Sam?"

"I don't know." Georgia put down the him." She started to get up, but Helen was up sooner.

"You might as well let me ask him," said Helen, stretching. "I've been sitting. "I've been sitting too long anyway." She smiled at her sister with fond amusement, with just a little contempt, and more than a little pity. Georgia did not even know her husband had gone out. It was Helen's idea that if *she* were married—to a man she loved, that is—she would know everything he did that was honorable as soon as he did it, and anything dishonorable beforehand.

So she walked gaily out into the hall and called: "Sam! Georgia wants to know if you want to go to the Wallaces tomorrow." After a minute she came back in.

"Well?" said Georgia, reading again.

"Didn't you hear him?" asked Helen mischievously.

Georgia was intelligent, but the powers of casual suggestion are strong. "Well, I heard him," she said, "but I didn't hear what he said."

"Oh," said Helen carelessly, "he said he didn't care." She stood behind Georgia for a minute, looking down at her, and suddenly she laughed. Playfully, she pushed Georgia's shoulders and went back to her own chair. Georgia looked surprised.

When they went to bed at twelve o'clock, Sam was already home. And at eight-thirty the next morning Helen was awakened by one of the maids, who told her that the police had phoned, and that they were sending a man to the house to investigate a murder.

XVI

MRS. KRANTZ arrived at the meeting place at twenty minutes after nine, ten minutes before the time agreed on, and she was sober, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. Perhaps this last had given her an unusual regard for appearances. At any rate she had had the taxi drop her nine or ten blocks away, on a decently lighted and respectable street, and had suffered the rest of the way on foot. She sat down, as soon as she was sure she had the right corner, and had a blow.

Physically she was way below par. Her feet ached and her legs hurt, though that, after all, was to be expected. What was worse, the damp night air had given her what looked like the beginning of a running cold; she sat on the curb and blew into a tired handkerchief, until the mist and the drippings made the handkerchief damper than the nose she was blowing. In the end she threw the handkerchief away and sniffled in primitive grandeur.

She was wearing her usual flat hat, for this occasion skewered on with three old-fashioned hat-pins; by this time the hat was so soggy that it clung to the shape of her head like a beret. Over her usual collection of wrappings she wore a little item she had picked up from the tow-headed boy, a cheap but flashy imitation of a camel's-hair topcoat. None of this kept her either warm or dry, since the whole mass was already saturated. All over her body Mrs. Krantz could feel water creeping downward, down her bosom and her back, down her legs into her inadequate shoes, down her neck, and down and off the end of her nose.

This was Mrs. Krantz physically. Mentally, all was well. If the darkness of the streets had terrified her; if the sand dunes rising at her back filled her with dread; if it seemed quite impossible to her, now that she was actually here, that anyone would travel to this desolate place simply to hand her some information; still Mrs. Krantz knew only that she was doing this for Laury. For the time being, that was enough. No doubts entered her mind.

Mart drove up in Sam's car on the dot of nine-thirty. "Well, hello, glamour girl!" he called, and got out. "And what fun has the glamour girl been having today?" he cried as he came up to her. The face she turned toward him was sober, alert, and entirely serious. This did not seem to bother him.

Immediately he took her arm. "Well, let's be up," he said. "Let's be up and off, old girl." His white teeth sprang out of the darkness as he smiled.

"Let's be off?" said Mrs. Krantz.

He pointed into the blackness of the dunes. "That way."

"Why?" Her voice was sensible, but not at all wary, and not frightened. "Why don't we meet here?"

"On the street?" he scoffed. And he added, with a great show of mystery, "And it's better we go in by different ways."

Without saying a word, Mrs. Krantz stepped over the curb into the sand. Immediately she lost her balance and fell down. He had quite a time hoisting her to her feet.

Before they reached the top of the first roll, Mrs. Krantz had fallen down seven times, and even Mart was puffing. She sat down and rested. "Who is it we meet?" she said.

"It's a woman," said Mart.

"Why is she telling me?" said Mrs. Krantz. "And why don't you?"

"Come on, glamour girl," he said, and pulled her up.

It was some time till they had gone about two city blocks into the dunes, and they stopped on top of a rise. Mrs. Krantz promptly flopped down on her bottom and looked around. In the distance, blurred and faint in the mist, they could see the lights of houses around. Near them were nothing but dark rolls of sand, and soon even the lights and the further rolls began to disappear as the mist grew heavier. Mrs. Krantz was about to ask how the woman would find them there, but she kept quiet.

Mart asked her why she trusted him.

SHE raised her head. "Trust?" she said. "Why, there's nothing about trust in this. I wouldn't trust my own mother, much less my own daughter. But this is to do with Laury; so I came."

"Are you afraid?" he said softly.

"Afraid?" said Mrs. Krantz.

Mart took Danny Jadden's knife, opened, out of the pocket of his trench coat; he twisted it slowly in his hand so that the blade caught the faint light.

"Gluh!" said Mrs. Krantz, with a retching sound. Spasmodically she was on her feet; and then she stared at the blade, like a breaking spring. Her jaw dropped slowly into the fat jowl. Her eyes widened until the roundness of the eyeballs was apparent; the veins that are usually hidden behind the eyelids appeared, blurring the white of the ball, so that the color of the eyes appeared one with the putty color of the face.

"Glamour girl," said Mart, "where shall I stick you to make you die?"

Toughness of the mind is a strange thing, and it turns up in strange places. It may be there at birth and never used, it may be used in youth and forgotten in age, but it is there. Mrs. Krantz suddenly discovered that she had it. The cords of her neck stretched with unbearable tension; even in the fat they stood out like cables. Strangling, she spoke, as though all the blood in her body was squeezing into her throat. She said, *"Let—us—pray."*

She knelt down on one knee, like a page receiving a favor, or a runner on the starting line. Mart stood in front of her, amused.

"Oh, God," said Mrs. Krantz first, because she knew no more complicated prayer, and that seemed appropriate. The second time it was a sincere plea for help, "Oh, God." The third time it was a pure, pagan, vicious battlecry, *"Oh God!"* She launched herself like a billygoat at Mart.

The surprise of it knocked him off his feet, and the knife dropped out of his hand onto the sand. But her feet had wavered, and at any rate she would have had little effect on the hard muscles of his stomach. He turned over swiftly as she tried to pass him and sent her sprawling.

In a flash he was up and over her with the knife in his hand. But she was ready for him; with all her might she jabbed with her hat pin.

He screamed. She was away again—she crawled for a moment on her hands and knees, but then she was up—and almost free. But the pin had just missed his groin; he caught up with her in a second or two and struck her in the side of the neck, rolling her over on her side.

This time he stood back and let her up unmolested. Mrs. Krantz did what her panic told her was an eminently sensible thing to do: she screamed a long, thin, high wail like a train whistle, and started to run down the side of the rise, sloping forward, like a grotesque, frantic, oversized quail. Before she could lose her balance he had caught up with her. With all the power he had he aimed a vicious kick square at the base of her spine.

She sprawled forward down the hill, her face ploughing into the sand. When she raised her head, turning, her hair was falling and her hat hung crazily askew; the wet sand was plastered in gritty patches on her face. It had begun to rain in earnest now, and as she looked up at Mart the mist swirled around him, heavy and wet. The knife was still in his hand.

"Glamour girl, where shall I stick you. . . ?"

HER BODY rose like an animal's from the sand, and she snarled. She did not try to run away; her eyes had the glare of a primitive and fanatical bloodhate.

"Toreador!" cried Mart, delightedly, as she launched herself at him; and he stepped aside. She sprawled a couple of steps above him. Quickly he climbed; when she tried to get up he planted his foot on her chest and shoved her downward.

He began to retreat a little way through the mist. She realized he was singing, in a loud, flat monotone, "Toreador-ey, don't spit on the floor-ey, use the cuspidor-ey, Toreador-ey!" He continued to bawl at her through the swirling mist. Again her body

rose to the attack.

Again she missed. This time she tried to run away, but he was after her. She fell down before he could catch her; when she came erect he struck her across the face, twice, once with the flat of his left hand, once with the side of the fist that was holding the knife. He had hard, square hands, and they felt on her face like blocks of wood. The force of the blow knocked the wet sand from her skin.

To his hands her damp old face felt like a wet towel.

"Toreador-ey," he sang softly, persuasively, as she rose again, his face only a couple of feet away from hers, his eyes shining. He began to step slowly back down the slope. "Toreador-ey, don't spit on the floor-ey, use the cuspidor-ey—"

Her mind was black and blind with rage. His body, going backward, downward, with each step fainter in the rain, became the focus of her brain and her body.

"Toreador-ey, don't spit on the floor-ey—"

She made herself ready; and though she did not see it, he tightened his hold on the knife.

"—use the cuspidor-ey—"

Above him she rose.

He snapped it out: "Toreador!"

Like an enraged buffalo she hurled herself down. Suddenly he thrust the knife out before him, at arm's length, rigid.

And at the last minute she threw her eyes up and saw the blade and threw herself to one side. She screeched wildly as she rolled over; the flash of the steel missed her face by inches.

Instantly she was up and running, the fight gone out of her. He let her go. When she had gone far enough he caught up with her and drove her back in the direction she had come. Over and over they repeated this; he always headed her off before she could get any closer to the streets and safety. Toward the end he let her go a little farther before he turned her back, because it did not matter now. She was too exhausted to run; she fell at every step; she was only going on her fear and her wild hope. She could always hear his laughter and his singing behind her, and when he turned her she would see the flash of the knife in his hand.

She fell at the end of what seemed the longest run of all, over the largest rise and down into the deepest valley. She knew it would be the last fall. She put her face in the sand. She was through. She was ready to die.

She heard his singing behind her, over the rise. She lifted her head, so she would see her death when it came. And she saw something very different.

Walking up the side of the hill above her, not seeing her, was the red-headed man.

MART'S thick hard body twisted in Sam's strong arms. Sam stood behind him now, and the knife was in Sam's hand. Sam's voice was soothing.

"Why, you can feel it here," he said. Without relaxing the hold of his arms around Mart, he raised his hand and felt Mart's jaw. "Right there I can feel it, where you hit me. Right there, on me, there's a bruise."

"Oh Sam, please," said Mart.

"You ought to know," said Sam, "that nobody can get away with that."

"Sam—"

With a sudden twist of his body, Sam flung both of them onto the sand, Mart lying face upward, Sam on top of him. Mart made a desperate effort to free his arms. Deliberately, Sam imprisoned them both, leaving one of his own hands free. With this hand he brought the knife over Mart's face.

Gently, smiling, Sam balanced the knife, blade down, on Mart's face, just beside the nose, holding it erect with the tip of his forefinger. The edge was not quite sharp enough to cut the skin with only the weight of the knife behind it.

Frantically, Mart twisted his head, and the knife dropped on the sand. Without haste, Sam picked it up.

"Sam," said Mart, "Sam." He was actually crying now, but his tears were lost on his face, which was already damp from the rain.

Sam brought the knife up again over Mart's face.

"You can't, Sam!"

"Can't I? Who tells me so?"

"Sammy, I love you."

"You shouldn't have hit me, Mart."

"You can't, Sammy, you won't!"

Sam smiled. "No," he said, "maybe I won't. Maybe." Very, very slowly he took the knife away from Mart's face, and brought it down to his side.

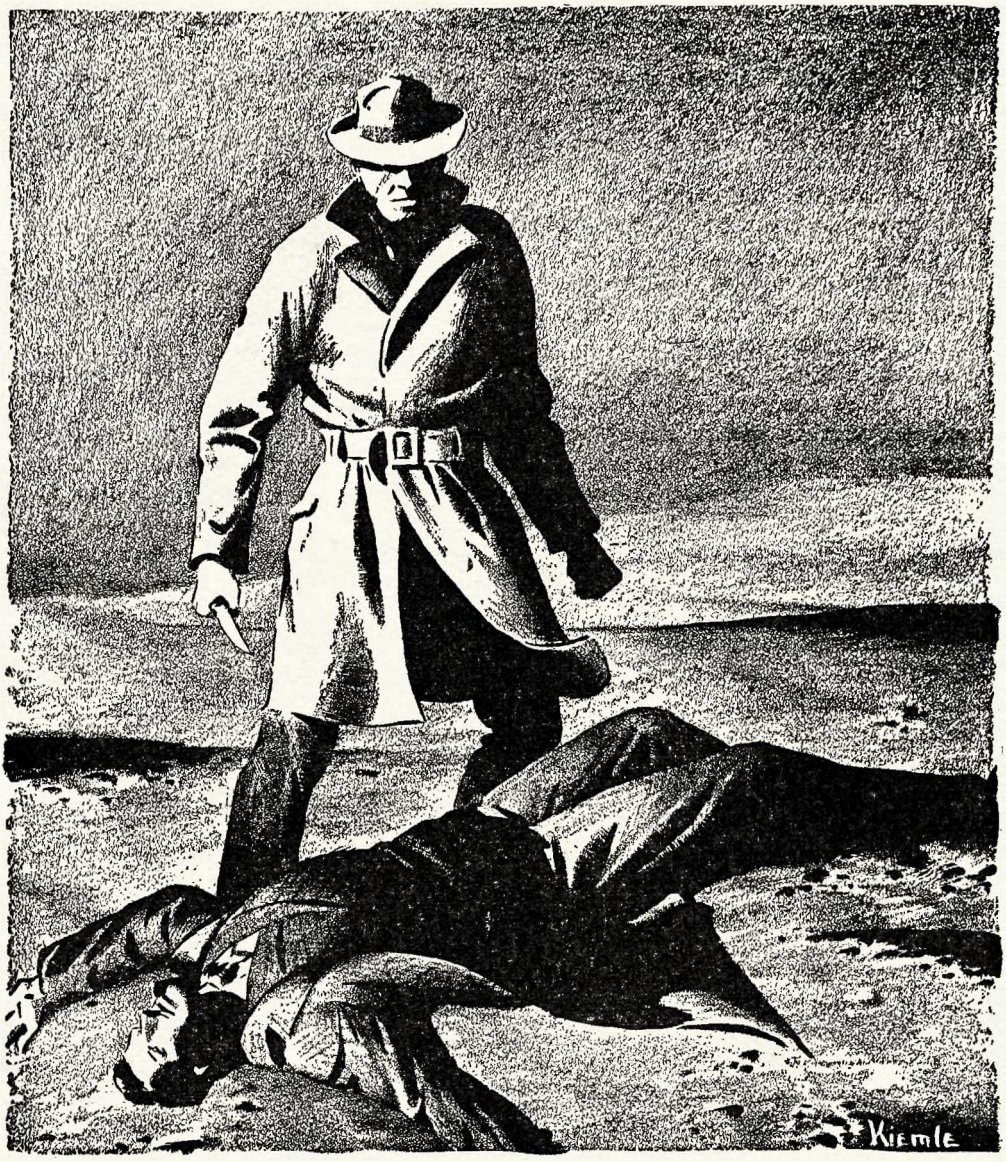
Mart breathed. Suddenly his head went back, his mouth was distorted. Quickly Sam stood up. Mart's trench coat fell open, and the coat under that; against his damp shirt his dark, fat, liquid muscles boiled up convulsively. They relaxed.

He was dead. Sam bent down slowly and pulled the knife out from his side. The wound began to bleed at once, but because the trench coat and the other coat fell away from the body, most of the blood was caught inside them, and not much came out to darken the sand.

* * * * *

When Mrs. Krantz finally came to a street of houses she was so driven, so exhausted physically and mentally, that she passed three or four of them without realizing she was safe. At last she collapsed on one of the doorsteps, her hand clinging tensely to the bell.

At first glance the people thought she was drunk, and very drunk. But there was no liquor on her breath, and they were



Quickly Sam stood up. Mart's trench coat fell open. . . .

immediately sympathetic. "Have you been robbed?" said the man, "Should we get the police?"

"No. No." Mrs. Krantz found it hard to speak. "Get me a cab, please. That's all. And can you get an old woman a drink?"

They straightened up, considerably less pleased. But she was so pitiable that they brought her a small bottle of brandy and a glass. Even in her bedraggled condition, Mrs. Krantz threw the glass away and jerked the bottle from their hands. By the time the taxi came the bottle was empty.

But that was not enough. Mrs. Krantz had the cab driver go to the first liquor store that was open, where she got a quart of Bourbon; luckily, her purse had stayed in the pocket of the tow-headed boy's topcoat. By the time they reached the middle of town Mrs. Krantz was incoherent. By the time they reached the hotel she was almost helpless.

Mrs. Krantz paid the driver and stepped out. The rain was coming down in hard, isolated drops. Plunging toward the hotel entrance, Mrs. Krantz made a frantic grab for one of the boxed trees that stood on either side, but this was not a firm enough support. The hotel was on a very slight hill indeed; to Mrs. Krantz it seemed too steep to stand on, and she was on the up side of the entrance. Before the doorman could stop her she hurtled across, missing the doorway, and threw her arms around the other tree. It went over before her weight, and she and it rolled together on the wet sidewalk.

The tow-headed boy, who was in the lobby, came out with an umbrella, and he and the doorman made vain efforts to get her on her feet. In despair, the tow-headed boy said finally, "Hey, can you hitch yourself along? You know, hitch?" And he demonstrated.

The doorman said, "Well, she can't hitch herself through the lobby."

"No," said the tow-headed boy, "I guess not." He looked at her again. "Hell," he said, "'we can dump her in a cart and take her up by the service lift. She's colder'n a cucumber."

The doorman was bitter. "If these old biddies'd think of somebody else except themselves now and then they wouldn't do these things."

The tow-headed boy looked with disfavor at what had become of his topcoat, and started figuring what he could get out of Mrs. Krantz for it. Thoughtfully, he shifted his umbrella from her face to her rump, thus protecting the coat and letting the rain splash on her dirty and bruised face.

"She won't be thinking of anything tomorrow," said the tow-headed boy. "She won't be wanting to do anything, let alone live."

XVII

MART'S BODY had been found at six-thirty that morning; a policeman had seen Sam's car and had walked into the dunes on the chance that a drunk was sleeping it off. Thanks to the rain and the wind, there were no footprints or car tracks to be deciphered anywhere. From the position of the body, it looked as though there had been a struggle. That was all.

This information was given to Helen and Georgia by Clyde Cunha, the man sent by the police; neither of them ever found out his title, and in any case it never would have occurred to either of them to address him by it. He was middle-aged, intelligent, and polite, anxious to remain on friendly terms with the representatives of such an important family. Even if this had not been the case, he would have been impressed by what he saw when he walked into the house at nine o'clock that morning. Both Helen and Georgia were in the living room, perfectly composed; they were both wearing perfectly plain, expensive, good-looking black dresses, and the only ornaments they wore were identical short pearl necklaces. They had done everything that could be done before he got there: they had gone over everything in their own minds, and they had spoken to the servants.

Cunha, after he had talked with the servants, raised some objection. It seemed the servants were quite unable to say anything sensible, and Cunha was sure that all the help in such a well-run house would not be moronic.

"But surely you don't think this had anything to do with our house?" said Helen.

"Certainly not," he said. "But servants notice a great many things, especially about guests."

Georgia broke in, "But of course they'll

tell you anything you want to know, anything that will help you in any way. We've already spoken to them."

"Yes," said Helen. "I spoke to them myself." Cunha looked at her without speaking; it was obvious that he was thinking that there are ways and ways of ordering servants. "I'll tell them again, of course," said Helen, and he nodded.

"If you would."

Georgia and Helen told him what they could of the night before, which was not much. Mart had gone out around seven-thirty or later to take Billie Wild to a show. Had he come back? Not that they knew of; Georgia was sincere and Helen looked it. And the rest of them, except Billie, had stayed home.

Gently but firmly Georgia refused to let Cunha talk to either Billie or Sam. "My sister-in-law is quite hysterical," she said. "I think they were more or less engaged. I refuse to have her worked up any further now. And my husband is also quite upset; he and Mr. Levin were friends of long standing. If you wish you can speak to Dr. Forrester, who is upstairs now. But I think you can let questions go till this afternoon." If Cunha was not pleased with this, he let it go.

He brought up another point. "From the servants I did pick up one bit of information. I understand you've recently had a house guest, a Mr. Ferrand. A friend of Miss Wild's, I believe. Now—were he and Mr. Levin on good terms?"

After a slight hesitation, Georgia said, "No, they were not."

"I see. Do you have his present address?"

"My sister-in-law might have it."

"May I see her, then?"

"I am sorry." Delicately, Georgia underlined her words. "Mr. Cunha, I think it would be better if I asked her a little later in the morning. I'll phone you the address then. And anything more you wish to ask her or my husband, I think you can ask this afternoon."

HE NODDED, and stood up. Georgia stood up too, and gave him her hand. "Believe me, Mr. Cunha," she said, "we will do everything we can to help you. And we are most anxious that the murderer be caught. Mr. Levin was a stranger in this city, and a guest in our house." Her complete sincerity, her graciousness, her good breeding, all managed to remove the possibility that the murder could have anything to do with her household.

Helen, when she went with Cunha to the door, hammered the point home. "Tell me," she said directly, "have you any idea what's behind this?"

He looked at her and understood at once that she was no fool, and that she knew what was going on. "Frankly," he said, "I've got a damn good idea Levin seems to be a left-over from a pretty tough part of your brother-in-law's life—"

Helen murmured, "Sam has been very adventurous."

"Well, I think this Levin had a police record, but I don't know the details. Obviously he was still playing with a bad crowd, and he was murdered because of something to do with that."

"Good heavens," said Helen, very much the lady of the manor, very much shocked, "*that,* in our house!"

He said courteously, "I'll try to see that your house is brought in no more than I can help. The newspapers apparently haven't caught on yet, but they will soon, and probably you'll have a bad time for the next two or three days. After that, I think it will be over."

"Thank you," she said, and said goodbye. As soon as he was gone she went directly upstairs to Sam's room. He was stretched out on the bed, quiet; but it was obvious that he had been sobbing again.

"You damned fool," she said after a moment. She was shocked that either her voice or her feelings could be so hard.

"I didn't do it," he said, his face turned down and away, the bedclothes wadded in his hands.

"What kind of a fool do you think I am?"

"I didn't do it."

She said coldly, "I went to the garage this morning before Cunha got here, to sweep out the car. I see you had sense enough to get rid of the sand yourself."

He sat up then, and glared at her. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"The police would if I told them you were out last night."

"You wouldn't."

"No, I wouldn't, but that's not the point. Now, why was Mart out there last night?"

"I don't know."

"Who else knows he was going out there?"

"I don't know, I don't know. I tell you I didn't do it!"

Helen stopped; she could tell blank stubbornness when she saw it. She said, "I can't help you if you won't tell me anything."

But he was sobbing again, his face twisted in the bedclothes. For a while she stood watching his body shake, filled with pity for this mixture of the strong and the terribly weak. Then her lip curled, "You'd better stop that. If it's an act, it's overdone. If it's remorse—"

"He was my only friend."

"Evidently you didn't think so when you killed him."

"I didn't!"

"You were all right when you came home last night. Why cry today?"

He put his head on one side, speaking stiffly, as if he had trouble in moving the muscles of his face: "Have you ever stared at nothing but night? Have you ever faced nothing but emptiness?"

"By the good gods above," said Helen slowly, "I certainly have. And I will again!" Slowly the core of her strength was bared, to him and to herself, as if a sculptor was chiping away rock to reveal a statue underneath. "And I worried about myself" —she was contemptuous—"and I thought you were strong. Well, I know now that I can face anything. Shame or death or eternity or conscience or emptiness. I'll face anything that comes. And that will be my pride, because I'll know that there's nothing the world can hang on my shoulders that I didn't put there myself."

At the door, her voice was pure steel, but quiet, "Don't think I won't stare down some nights for saving you now. I *will* save you, whether you help me or not, even if I have to do it alone. I don't know why. Partly because of you, partly because of Georgia, partly because of me. But I'll save you." She went out.

Helen left the house after only a minute's talk with Billie. Five minutes later the first reporters arrived.

JACK FERRAND was living in a second-rate boarding house on Pacific Avenue, and he answered the door in his bathrobe. Helen noted with cold amusement that his chest was thin, his breastbone showing like a washboard through the pale skin.

His manners were still up to their old affected best. "What is it you want?" he said when she came in and closed the door behind her; he was conceited enough to think he knew.

"You don't know?" asked Helen sharply.

"No, I don't."

She said, "Mart Levin was murdered last night. Out in the sand dunes." Carefully she watched how he took it.

As a matter of fact, he took it rather well. His eyes flickered slightly, and narrowed; and he looked a trifle happier. But no more than that. Helen said, "The police will be here, sometime this afternoon, I imagine, to question you about it."

At that he was really startled, and she said quickly, "You're in no danger. It's only routine questioning, the same as we're getting. It may be a little longer with you, because you weren't his best friend. But the police already realize that Mart must have been mixed up in a bad crowd, and that one of them must have done it."

"Oh, is that so!" He was on his feet, frightened and venomous. "I don't think so. I don't think I want to take a chance on that. I know who killed him well enough—"

"If you do," said Helen calmly, "then you ought to tell the police."

"It's that crazy Sam."

"Sam was home with us last night. It's a physical impossibility, even if your guess made any sort of sense."

"The hell he was home! I was still out in the driveway when he left, and I saw him go."

"Oh, did you?" said Helen calmly.

"He knew where Mart was going. They were talking together—"

Helen broke in. "Where *was* Mart going?"

"I don't know where. But to meet a woman named Kantz or Mantz or something. I heard them talking together."

"Oh, did you?" said Helen again.

"*You* know I heard them," he said anxiously.

She let him wait. Then she let her mask of polite interest dissolve, and she leaned forward, "Indeed I do, Mr. Ferrand. Indeed I do. The police, I think, will be very

interested to hear about that part of the evening."

"What are you talking about?" His voice cracked stupidly under the strain.

"Let me tell you, Mr. Ferrand." She said, swiftly and intensely, "You killed Mart Levin, Mr. Ferrand. You came to that house to see Billie last night, or so you said. What your motive for coming really was I don't know. But you hid behind a kitchen door, after sneaking in by the back way, and listened to the man of whom you were insanely jealous and who had beaten you once before physically. When I saw you, you were nervous, excited, angry, beside yourself—"

"That's a lie!" he said.

"That's the way I remember it," said Helen. "Perhaps I'm wrong. At any rate, you disappeared out into the driveway where Mart was starting his car. All that makes very interesting material for the police."

"His car was gone before you saw me," he cried frantically. "You saw it go yourself."

"Did I?" said Helen. "Well, I seem to forget."

He pushed his hands together, and then brought them up and pressed them against his temples. "Why are you doing this to me? I don't understand." He threw himself on his bed. "Why are you doing this?"

Helen said, "I have no wish to tell the police this. I have every reason to keep it quiet, to protect appearances—"

He turned on her suddenly, rolling over on the bed, his eyes gleaming. "I know why you're doing this!" he cried wildly. "You're in love with me. You're insanely jealous of me—"

Helen had had about enough of men sobbing on beds. She slapped his face, hard. He cringed as she leaned over him.

"I am simply trying to say, Mr. Ferrand," she said coolly, "that it would be better for all of us to keep quiet. You know and I know that some one of Mart's crowd killed him. But it can be very embarrassing for any of us if we don't stick together."

"Yes," he said brokenly.

"I don't think it would be wise for you to tell the police anything about going to the house or what happened."

"No," he said. "Oh, no."

XVIII

"COME IN. I said come in." Mrs. Krantz's voice rang through the door, harsh, defiant, bitter, gross. Helen stepped in and closed the door behind her. Instantly, she was appalled.

Facing the door, Mrs. Krantz was enthroned in her armchair. The bed was unmade, for she had just risen. The room was half dark, for only one of the shades had been pulled up. All the debris of her gaiety—the cards, the bottles, the glasses, the clothes—was scattered with a lavish hideousness on the floor. And the floor itself was grimy, as if the maid had contemptuously given up the cleaning of it. In a corner were the wet and sandy clothes that Mrs. Krantz had worn the night before; Helen realized at once that the old woman had been out on the dunes.

In the center of it all sat Mrs. Krantz, staring sullenly at Helen, a newspaper at her feet. Helen could see a fraction of the headline; the news of the murder was already out.

As for Mrs. Krantz herself, she looked as though she had been blasted by the night. Her face had not been washed; the flesh sagged, weary and dirty, the cheeks puffed and bruised, the skin raw where the sand had scraped it. For once the gold earrings were gone and the hair hung straight down around her face, pushed back angrily from her forehead. She was not dressed. She wore an old wrapper, slung open in the front, and Helen could see the broad, dead-white, veiny plateau of skin above the bosom where it disappeared into the crumpled nightgown. Underneath the wrapper the feet stuck out, still dirty with sand.

Worst of all were the eyes, red-rimmed and malignant. The mouth was bitter and the fat hands trembled as they clutched the chair, but the eyes were the worst.

Mrs. Krantz breathed heavily, several times, as if she could not catch any air. She coughed.

"You're ill!" exclaimed Helen, her resolution gone before this pitiful and horrible apparition. "You need a doctor."

The eyes rolled up in their red circles—it was a bruised, purple-tulip red—and Mrs. Krantz said with lead-heavy irony: "You must excuse an old woman. I didn't sleep so good last night."

Helen stepped closer, chin up. "You said when the desk called you that you remembered me. I'm Helen Brent."

"Yes." Each word came out of Mrs. Krantz heavy and solid, like a boulder, because of the effort it cost her.

"Probably you remember me from Reno."

"I do. And you're a friend of the red-headed man."

Helen measured her slowly, her own face a mask. The fat, bruised cheeks fluttered slightly, as if Mrs. Krantz was trying to bring an expression to her face and could not quite make it. Slowly her fat hand reached down to the paper at her feet, and tossed it across to Helen.

Just as slowly, Helen picked it up. There was a picture of the body; a picture of the car; a picture of Sam, Georgia, and herself, taken some weeks ago, at the opening of the opera. They were all quite recognizable. Helen's face did not change when she looked up.

"You know the red-headed man?" she asked.

Mrs. Krantz bowed her head once, slightly. None of her sentences had more expression than the others. "I know his name. Mr. Sam Wild. I know he killed that man. I know he killed Laura Pollicker, and Danny. I never did like Danny." This last was a sort of afterthought.

"You saw him last night?"

"Yes."

This was Helen's final proof; and it meant no more, it surprised her no more, than if it had been the written invitation to a party she had known all along she could not be left out of.

"Where did you see him?" Her voice was as expressionless as Mrs. Krantz's own.

"I had found the red-headed man, and I knew he killed Laura. I didn't know his name. I went with Levin to find out. Levin was going to do me in with a knife. I was frightened, and I ran. When I was too tired to run any more, I stopped. Then I saw the red-headed man. When Levin didn't come to kill me, I got up and ran some more. This morning I read the paper."

"Are you going to the police?"

"Yes."

"The red-headed man saved your life, after all."

"He killed Laury."

"You can't do her any good now."

"Maybe not." She was as immovable as a mountain.

Staring at her for a long time, Helen realized what she had to do. She must break this woman, who seemed to be so broken that nothing mattered any longer. She must put aside all pity; she must crush every thought or shred of spirit that was left in this old wreck.

"If you tell the police," said Helen clearly, "you will die."

Mrs. Krantz glared in amazement. But too much had happened to her in the last twenty-four hours to leave her skeptical of anything. Finally she said, "Well, let that be."

"There will be no more life for you."

"There's little life left in me."

"You will be killed with a knife, or possibly a gun. It will be painful. It will be a piece of metal biting into your skin, your fat, and your bones, searching for some beating organ that you cannot live without. Or you may bleed to death, slowly." Helen spoke carefully, rolling the words over her tongue, giving them weight and substance and horror.

"Let that be." The arms that were on the chair shook violently now, though the hands were white from clutching. Terror ran high and black through Mrs. Krantz, along the lines of all her veins. There was none of the calm of the night before. It is one thing to speculate about death in the abstract, another thing to face it when you have just by a hair's-breadth escaped it. She was afraid as she had never been afraid in her life before. But she only said, though she had to work her lips before pronouncing the words: "Let that be." She was completely heroic.

Helen did not give up. She continued to talk, coldly and devastatingly, in the voice of a trained orator. She made all of her points as clear and dramatic as they could be made. She explained just why an enormous number of people would make it their lifetime work to see that the betrayer of Sam Wild would die. She made it perfectly plausible that Mrs. Krantz would not live ten minutes after Sam Wild was captured. And still Mrs. Krantz only stared at the floor and said

doggedly, "Let that be."

Finally Helen stared at Mrs. Krantz in silence. Well, I've failed, she thought. But she made her last try. She said, "Your daughter will die too."

IT WAS a shot in the dark. She had not remotely guessed what would happen; Mrs. Krantz herself was amazed. "No!" cried Mrs. Krantz in a tortured voice, before she realized what she was saying. She found that her throat was constricted, that she was shuddering, that actual physical chills were running through her back.

Helen, sensing her opening, moved closer to Mrs. Krantz and knelt down in front of her. "Your daughter Rachel will die."

"She has nothing to do with this!" Mrs. Krantz's vehemence was a revelation to both of them; for the first time her voice came to life.

"That does not matter," said Helen.

"Damn it," roared Mrs. Krantz, and banged viciously on the table beside her, "I fight my own battles." She made an effort to get out of her chair to strike at Helen.

"What good will it do to hit me?" said Helen, moving back quickly. "You *and your daughter* will die."

"She can't die!" cried Mrs. Krantz, the belligerence wearing out; she looked as if she were going to cry.

"Why not?" said Helen.

MRS. KRANTZ could not say, for she herself did not know. She searched in her mind, and all she could find was the illogical memory of the leopard hat that Rachel had worn the last time she had seen her. Waving her hands helplessly, she stammered, "She—she has a leopard hat, you see." Even to herself this sounded silly. "Oh," she cried in agony, "have you no pity?"

Helen's heart was aching with pity, but she did not say so. She said, "It's too late. I couldn't let you tell now, even if I wanted to." That much, she knew, was true enough: she was in this thing for good or bad, and she could not back out. She added, not unkindly, "Does it matter so much if this man is not caught?"

Mrs. Krantz disregarded this last. "Oh," she said in a voice of judgment, "I'd not trade places with you, not if I died by fire. For you're the coldest piece of rock I ever saw that walked; you're no human, that I know. Why, when my daughter Rachel was at her coldest, compared to you she was a South Sea belle, playing in the balmy breezes naked, and pagan, and overflowing with love. You're a cold green iceberg of a woman if you can say these things, whatever you may do that looks like warmth, however you may fool the world and yourself. You're something out of Hell, with Hell inside you, nasty and crawling, and whoever you touch you'll freeze in your hand."

Helen was feeling a pain inside her like a wild cry. "Oh, Lord," she thought, "will anybody ever know I am not like this? That I seem to be because I must, because I am the only one who is strong enough to do these things? That I will be kind and friendly as I seem on the outside if only I have a chance?"

But she steeled herself, relentless. Mrs. Krantz was on the brink of giving in, and she must be given the final push. Helen said coldly, "So you choose to die, knowing your daughter will die after you."

For a long moment there was no movement in the room at all. Then Helen saw a terrible thing: the breaking up of a human being. Gradually, the trembling that Mrs. Krantz had been suppressing took possession of her whole body, her head, her arms, her lips. The tears ran down her face helplessly. She shrank forward and down in her chair, so that her face came to rest eventually on her hand. "Oh, Laury," she sobbed, finality in her voice, "I've failed you. I've failed you." Then there was silence.

It was all over, and Helen straightened up. She must get out of this dark room into the light, she must breathe again. She only said, to make the thing certain, "You understand that when Sam Wild is captured by the police for any reason, your lives are over?"

"Yes. Yes," murmured Mrs. Krantz despairingly.

"Well, then, goodbye." Helen turned to the door. But as she had her hand on the knob, Mrs. Krantz's voice cracked behind her, "Wait!"

Helen turned. Mrs. Krantz's hands were on the arms of her chair, and with a tremendous effort she was lifting herself out of it. "I would be a bad hostess," she said, in a voice like far-away thunder, "if I let you open my door."

She was erect. As she started forward, she stumbled, and Helen put out her hand with a gasp of sympathy; she checked herself. Mrs. Krantz had caught hold of a table. She lifted her head and intercepted Helen's look. "No fear," she said. "I'll get over this. I'm tougher than you think. I'm tougher than *I* think. I've lived through hard nights before." She started forward, shaking, planting her bare feet carefully in the dirt, a bitter smile on her face, a sinister parody of courtesy.

When she reached the door, she flung it open. "Goodbye, my fine lady!" she sneered. Contemptuously, as Helen stepped in front of her to go out, the old woman spat.

Neither of them moved. At last Helen brought up her purse and took out a handkerchief; she wiped the lapel clean, folding the handkerchief so that the spittle was on the inside, and put the handkerchief away; she closed the purse with a click. Still staring at Mrs. Krantz, she raised her chin, and one eyebrow, and asked, not quite mockingly, "Bad cess to me?"

"No need," said Mrs. Krantz. "You carry your own curse in you."

Helen went quickly down the hall.

XIX

WHEN HER BODY was well of the ravages of the night on the sand dunes, Mrs. Krantz went back to Reno. She went heavily and without joy, without even a drink. When she went up to her old house, she did not even notice that it was repainted, and that there were cars in front. A maid told her that Miss Krantz was living next door.

Mrs. Krantz walked across to the house that had once been Mrs. Pollicker's, not noticing that it too was looking much the better. Another maid took her upstairs. Mrs. Krantz walked into her daughter's new bedroom without raising her eyes.

Rachel's greeting was rather singular. "Mother!" she exclaimed in surprise. "You're sober!"

Mrs. Krantz looked up. "Rachel!" she exclaimed in even greater surprise. "You're drunk!"

It was a bad guess, but Rachel was looking as Mrs. Krantz had thought her daughter never would, unless she were very drunk indeed. She was sitting up in bed, showing fine, creamy shoulders in a frothing blue-gray negligee. Her hair was hanging down around her with a gay abandon, and worst of all, there was a look of exhilaration on Rachel's face which, unless Mrs. Krantz's memory was all wrong, had nothing to do with Rachel at all. The whole room was bright, feminine, and expensive: Mrs. Pollicker's money had been put to good use.

Even in her depression, Mrs. Krantz was determined to go right to the heart of this staggering situation. But she did not know where to begin. She compromised on a helpless snort, which got across her mood, if nothing else.

"But you're not looking well, Mother," said Rachel by way of reply, and with real concern in her voice.

"I've looked worse," said Mrs. Krantz, dazed but indomitable. She had just barely kept herself from adding, "should've seen me, Laury;" shocked, she pulled herself together and did her best to get a grip on the conversation. "*You're* looking well, Rachel," she said brightly.

"Thank you," said Rachel. "But I'm tired, terribly tired. And I have the most horrible blue circles." She waved a vague hand, presumably at the circles.

"And I've been so terribly busy," Rachel went on, when it was obvious that Mrs. Krantz was too much at sea to keep up her end. "All this decoration, and there's been so much of it. And business—did we ever know how much business there is in running a *real* boarding house? And everything, everything put together. I'm exhausted, really." She shrugged her shoulders into her pillows, wearily, very much the woman of business home to relax.

Mrs. Krantz spent a minute catching up; and then she asked wistfully, "Then it's a busy life you're leading now?"

"Busy!" Rachel flashed a devastating smile. "And *gay*."

Mrs. Krantz felt as if the smile and the word "gay" were the last blows she

could take. Her spirit was broken; she closed her eyes. "Gay," she said in a sick voice. "Well, goodbye."

"But aren't you staying?" Rachel sat up with considerably less languor.

"Why," said Mrs. Krantz, and she swallowed bravely, "if you wouldn't mind, I'm not coming home. I just stopped in, I just dropped by. I won't be spoiling your good times." She turned to go.

"Wait a minute," said Rachel, distressed, and Mrs. Krantz turned back. "Listen," began Rachel; she was embarrassed, trying to find the right words. "Oh, darn!" she said at last, throwing back the covers, and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Mother," said Rachel, "welcome home."

Mrs. Krantz's mind had never been built for tragedy or confusion; she waggled her head vigorously, and her woes fell away from her like loose hairpins.

"And you'll be wanting to go on with your fun?" said Mrs. Krantz.

"Oh, yes," said Rachel.

"You'll be needing somebody to look after the house."

"Oh, yes," said Rachel.

"You'll be needing—"

But nobody could ever accuse Mrs. Krantz of breaking up a happy scene with her tears. In only a little while she managed to blink and so say waggishly, "I bet it will be some—" but Rachel never knew what her mother would have said, because the telephone rang, and Rachel started to answer it, but Mrs. Krantz stopped her. "Let me," said Mrs. Krantz; and she got up and went out as if she were going to her coronation.

For a moment she had to let the phone ring, as she sat beside it, overcoming something in her throat. At the back of Mrs. Krantz's mind a little red-haired figure skittered up through the gates of Heaven, no doubt giving Saint Peter the eye as she passed. "Goodbye, Laury," said Mrs. Krantz quietly. "You must excuse me. I have my own to take care of now." A tear marched slowly down and hung like a spangle on the broad veranda of her nose, and Mrs. Krantz held a moment of silence, in tribute to Laury, till it dropped with a splash on her bosom.

Then she straightened, and picked up the phone. Her great voice rang out, buoyant, triumphant, magnificent: "The establishment of Rachel Krantz! Her mother speaking! And whom might you be, sir?"

MART LEVIN was buried quietly about a week and a half after his death. The services were short, dignified, and fairly well-attended since a number of San Francisco's old guard turned up as a gesture to Helen and Georgia. At the back of the crowd Helen saw a woman whom she remembered vaguely. Presently she placed her as the receptionist in Dr. Forrest Billings' office. Next to her was another woman, heavily veiled; when the second woman turned her head and her blonde hair flashed under the veil, Helen recognized Billie Wild.

Neither Sam nor Georgia had seen her, and Helen said nothing. When they went out into the hall after the services, they almost bumped into the two women, but Billie went out quickly without looking at Sam. He had cried quietly all through the services, but now he was quiet, and clinging tightly to Georgia's arm for comfort.

Helen stood beside Fred Grover at the grave. It was a sunny day and a calm one, and as the body was lowered Helen had suddenly a feeling of peace and finality. She looked up, across the grave, and let her thoughts build happily. "This is the end, then," she thought. "I've managed to come through this and keep things together, and there will never be anything worse to throw me. I'll get along. I'll manage everything, and I'll be serene about it. I'll keep my love for Fred, and for Georgia, and for Sam, and I'll keep them separate. I'll marry Fred, and I'll be secure. I'll stick by Georgia, and she'll never know enough to be unhappy. And as for Sam—"

She noticed that Fred was looking at her rather sharply.

At the end of three peaceful weeks the police had apparently not much hope of solving the case. They found nobody in the city's criminal class who could be connected with Mart, and they made only faint efforts to find out about his life in Georgia's house. They had no intention of offending her or her sister.

It was less than a week before the reporters stopped coming around, but even after that none of them went out much. When Fred came to see them, he usually

spent the evening with Helen in the upstairs sitting-room; or they talked all together downstairs. Sam alternated rapidly between periods of elation and despair; when he was with Helen he gave way violently to his fears and his conscience, and then he would throw himself into Georgia's arms with a controlled intensity and a wild desire to find peace. Georgia, greatly touched, was more infatuated than she had ever been. Helen was rather annoyed.

The only times when Sam left the house were at night. Three or four times he disappeared for several hours, and came in very late. Each time he came back he was more excited than usual, and his clothes were sandy, and Helen guessed that he had been going out to the dunes.

At the end of the third week he went out once again; Helen came out of her room and stopped him at the head of the stairs. It was eight-thirty.

"Wait a minute, Sam," she said. She was wearing a creamy, light dressing-gown trimmed with fur; it touched the ground and pulled open a little, showing one of her legs as she walked. She came up to him as he stood on the second step from the top.

"Where are you going?" she asked softly.

"Out," he said.

"Just out again?"

"Just out," he said. He wet his lips and stood silently, waiting for her to speak.

"Fred's coming later," she said. "I've got to dress."

"Yes," he said.

She breathed a little deeply again, and put her hands on his shoulders, moving them down along his arms. Her hands moved over his square muscles as a sculptor's might move over clay, sensitive and loving. She was thinking: "I have saved him. It is almost as if I had created him. All this strength and weakness depends on me, belongs to me."

SHE had to clear a little thickness out of her throat. "You were with Georgia all day today," she said, "and all day yesterday, as far as talking to you goes."

"Was I?" Under her hands his body moved restlessly.

"Do you love Georgia after all?" He did not answer her. "Do you, Sam?"

She came up to him . . .

Still no answer. "Where's Georgia now, Sam?"

"In her room."

Helen was reassured. She drew her hands together slowly across his shoulders. "We've waited so long, Sam," she said.

As he moved up toward her, the weight of his body pushed her hands apart, and her arms slid around his neck. "Come back to me."

"I will."

"I'll be waiting for you." He kissed her. She threw back her head. "Let me go," she said softly, persuasively.

"Yes." He went down the stairs and out the front door. She stayed for a moment till she had heard his car drive away, breathing a little fast. She brought the white fur together about her throat, and

almost unconsciously she pressed her arm against her body as she did so. Then she turned quickly and went to her room.

Fred came at nine and stayed till eleven, sitting with Helen in the upstairs sitting-room and talking. When he left she made a little joke about the quietness of the evening. As she stood up she said, "It's almost as if we were married, isn't it?"

Something passed over Fred's face. "Maybe we'd better talk about that, Helen."

"Oh, I didn't mean anything, Fred." She laughed, lightly and insincerely, and turned away from him toward the door. But he said nothing more. She waited, almost imperceptibly, keeping her head straight, holding her breath. After a moment she put her hand on the knob.

"I think maybe we'd better talk about it anyway, Helen," he said behind her, seriously.

She let out her breath, relieved. Then she turned, smiling charmingly. "Why, of course, Fred," she said, and crossed the room to sit down.

He did not sit down with her. For a moment he did not even look at her, and Helen had to turn her head down to keep from smiling. It was certainly not her first proposal, but it was the first one for which she had bothered to be demure. "What a gala night this us!" she thought. "Freddy and Sammy come home to roost. What a thing to tell my grandchildren—if they're that kind of children."

He stopped in front of her. "This isn't going to be easy to say, Helen." It was apparently difficult enough for him to speak. "You and I have been friends for a long time. We've been more than friends for quite a while. We know each other very well. I can't tell you how much I admire you—"

He was so distressed that Helen put out her hand impulsively. "Maybe I can help you, Fred," she said. The hazel eyes smiled up at him, expectant.

He looked straight at her. "You could help me a great deal," he said, "but I don't think you're going to." He took a breath. "I'm not going to marry you, Helen."

THE HAZEL EYES changed color as suddenly as if drops of hot metal had been poured into them. After a pause, Helen said mechanically, as though her lips had no strength in them and she was working them from somewhere inside her, "You—you aren't going to marry me."

"No, I'm not," he said sharply. "I'm not going to marry you, Helen, and that's final."

She was clutching the wooden arm of the chair, so tightly that she felt one of her long nails crack. Carefully she widened her hands and made them lie still. "Oh, you don't have to be so brusque, Fred," she said. She stood up and walked tightly across the room. "If you don't want to marry me, that's your business. You've never encouraged me, not really. I've lost you, that's all. I'll get over it. I'll have to get over it. I'm a good sport, Fred. I've always"—her voice was intensely bitter; for a moment it looked as if she would give way, but she recovered—"I've always prided myself on being a good sport."

"I'm glad of that," he said.

Since she had gotten up she had stood with her back to him. Even now she did not turn around. She managed to hold her head very high, and to keep her voice clear. "It's Georgia, I suppose," she said.

"Georgia?"

"You've been in love with Georgia for a long time, haven't you, Fred?"

"I've always admired Georgia a great deal."

"You've been in love with her, too."

"I'd be proud to marry Georgia. I'd be proud to have her as my wife."

"That's why you wanted her to divorce Sam, isn't it?"

Still she had not turned. It was a long time before she heard him say, "So that's it."

She whirled, a little less anxious to be a good sport. "So what's what?"

He looked at her steadily. "So that's why you told her to stick with Sam."

She saw that she had made a mistake, but not an irreparable one. She said gently, forgivingly, "I wanted them to stay together because I knew how much they loved each other. I didn't"—it was easy enough for her look downcast—"I didn't want Georgia to make the mistakes I did."

Even to her own ears, her voice sounded noble. She could see that Fred was impressed too, as if it was almost against his

will. Suddenly she realized how much she was losing, the money and the security she had counted on so much; and she knew she would never let him go without a fight.

"At any rate," she said, "you don't love me."

Carefully, Fred let himself down into a chair. He seemed to be showing more emotion than Helen had ever thought he had in him. After a long while he said, "I think I love you more than I'll ever love any other woman."

"Fred. Oh, Fred." She was sincerely touched. Then quickly, so as not let the moment go, Helen was across the room and down beside his chair. "Oh, then, Fred," she said, "if you love me and I love you, why should we let anything keep us apart? Fred—"

"Please don't do that," he said flatly. Helen stopped abruptly, and they looked into each other's eyes. "I don't want to have your anger turned at me," said Fred, "when you find you've lowered yourself without getting what you wanted."

COLD-EYED, she was on her feet, and it was all she could do to keep her voice from being stony. "What is it, then?" she almost spat at him. "My past?"

"No," said Fred tiredly, "your future."

"Don't be witty, Fred!"

"I'm not being witty," he said. "Helen, I've known you for a long time. I've seen you grow, and I've seen what you've grown into. You're a very beautiful woman. You're extraordinarily intelligent. And you have more courage than any other woman I've ever known, or almost any man."

"I'm rather proud of that," she said.

"I thought you would be. Too proud, I daresay. That's what you've wanted, more than anything else, and that's what you've chosen to live by—strength. But you've never seen, Helen, that strength comes before everything else in the people who live by it—"

She jerked her body impatiently. "I don't know that I want psycho-analysis from you, Fred."

"Well, you're going to get it, Helen!" he said sharply, and stood up. His face was hard and determined, and for the first time Helen understood how it was he had become a success in business. "You think I'm a fool, Helen, and you think I'm stuffy. Well, maybe I am. But I'm not stupid, and I've seen enough of you to know you pretty well. And I'm going to tell you!"

"Get on with it, then," she said, and her voice was ugly.

"All right. You're a good sport on the surface, Helen, and you're fun to be with. You laugh a great deal; you're amusing and beautiful. But that isn't the core of you. Your core is your strength, Helen. I'd like to have you my friend if I were in trouble. What you'd think of that is another matter. You might help someone who was down simply out of pride."

"Don't stop," said Helen, "I'm not asking you to stop."

"But strength isn't something you can live with, Helen. You'd be a little tiring. You'd always have your way or there'd be a fight. The truth is, Helen, you're uncivilized still. You're out of the jungle, or to be more exact, you've gone back to it. You have enough intelligence and enough courage to realize you don't need other people. You've decided to live alone with your strength. And that's where you fall down. Georgia is a beautiful woman, but not as beautiful as you. She's intelligent, but not as much as you. She hasn't been around at all. You have, Helen; you've seen everything and you've been disillusioned of everything. But Georgia has a heart, and you've found out you don't need one."

For the first time his words were visibly taking effect. "In other words," said Helen with difficulty, "you think I have a cold heart?"

"I think you're cold all the way through. I think you're an iceberg."

Her face went dead white. "You'll be glad to know," she said, "that you're not the first person to tell me that."

"I am glad. I'm glad that someone can see under your surface. I wish *you* could, Helen, before it's too late."

"The person who told me that," said Helen, "also told me I was something out of Hell. How do you stand on the question, Mr. Grover?"

FRED DID NOT WAVER. "Heaven only knows what you'd do if you were crossed at the wrong time."

"Damn you!" she burst out. "How can

you stand there and say these things to me?"

"For your own good, Helen," said Fred. "By a miracle from heaven, you might change, and I'd be glad to see it. You have fine things in you—"

"And aren't you the smug one!"

"Someone should have told you these things before," said Fred. "Perhaps I'm not the one. That's been the thing that's ruined you, Helen: you've never met a fighter your own size. It would have saved you if you'd met a man strong enough to knock you down. And I've always regretted that you didn't go to work for your money. At least you'd have something big to fight then, like the world. I think you'd get along. And I think you'd have a little tolerance left over for the people you live with—"

"Shut up!" she screamed.

"But you didn't choose to work for your money, Helen. You haven't fooled me, and I don't think you've fooled anyone, really, by pretending it doesn't matter to you. You might have some real respect for your money if you worked and fought for it honorably, instead of prying it out of people like Georgia and me—"

With all her force she struck out at his face. He dodged it easily. "I suppose that's unethical," he said. "A gentleman's apparently always supposed to stand still and let a lady strike him. Or doesn't that apply here?"

"You filthy—oh!" She could not even speak in her rage.

"Goodbye, Helen," said Fred. "I'm sorry it came to a fight. I'd been hoping it wouldn't."

As he turned toward the door, even in her fury, she began to sob. "Goodbye, Fred," she said, and put her hand to her temple. "Maybe I'll improve some day." In spite of herself she was half sincere.

He turned back, and put his hands on her shoulders. "Just relax, Helen," he said. "Don't be so eager to have things, and to knock people down to get them. Oh, you'd like to be nice to people, I think, and you are, whenever it doesn't interfere with anything. Nothing should be important enough to interfere, Helen."

"Oh, Fred, I'm so sorry," she said. In the midst of her misery she made a last effort to keep him. "Oh, Fred, is that the only reason you're leaving me?"

"No, it isn't," he said gently. "You don't love me, Helen. You don't love me any more than you do Sam, certainly, and probably—"

She threw her head back, looking at him. She had stopped crying, and the eyes were hard. "So you're jealous of Sam," she said slowly. A lightning expression contracted her face, as though, a flash-bulb had gone off in her soul. *"I hate Sam!"* she said.

He dropped his arm and stepped back. The moment of sympathy was gone. "Right now," he said calmly, "I don't doubt you hate everybody. But I'm not jealous of Sam. I don't think you love him. I just don't think you love anybody."

"That's a lie," said Helen with some dignity, for she was bitterly contemptuous of this. "If I don't love you—and I don't—at least I love my sister. At least I love Georgia."

Fred went out, quietly closing the door behind him. Helen turned fiercely and swept a lamp from the table, and it crashed on the floor.

Five minutes later she was standing in the middle of the room, very straight and rigidly controlled. She stared ahead, her eyes golden and metallic.

She picked up the phone and dialed for the operator. "Give me the police station."

She asked for Clyde Cunha. When she found he had gone home she asked the man at the desk to get in touch with Cunha at once, and tell him to call Mrs. Helen Brent right away.

Cunha called her ten minutes later. Her thoughts had been marshalling themselves coldly, and she knew exactly what she had to say. "Mr. Cunha," she said, "I have something very important to tell you. I called you because I thought you would understand faster than anyone at the station. My brother-in-law killed Mart Levin. He's killed people before; in Reno he killed a woman named Laura Pollicker and another man. You can look up the records. I've known about this for some time, but he made me protect him."

She talked down Cunha's protests: "Please come tonight, with some men. He won't be easy to take, he's somewhat unhinged. But leave me a little time; I'll need a little time to prepare my sister.

He'll be back at midnight. Come a little after midnight. I promise you we'll all be up. I'll give you proof. Come a little after midnight." Ignoring his excited voice, she hung up.

XX

HELEN ROUSED HERSELF as though she had been asleep. She stood beside the phone, her hand raised, regretting. Then she said, "Well, that's that," and let the hand drop.

Now there was Georgia to be taken care of. It was twenty minutes to twelve. Sam would be here at midnight, the police not long after. Helen would have to tell Georgia now, and when the police came she would have to see that Georgia was not hurt. There was more to be done.

Still she stood for a while in the center of the room, laying her thoughts neatly in place. She would be without Fred now, without any hope of Fred. Georgia and she would be all alone again, and Georgia would be broken-hearted. "I'll take her away," thought Helen. "I'll get her out of here as soon as I can. We'll go away together, and stay away, and travel, and see new things. Oh, Lord, what a lousy break for the kid."

Georgia was not in her room when Helen went to find her. She was downstairs in the living room, reading. Obviously she was killing time, waiting for Sam, and Helen's resolution wavered.

Suddenly she went in and put her arms around her sister. "Oh, Georgia," she said, and found that the tears had gone to her voice.

"Helen." Georgia looked up almost as if she had been expecting her. She laid down the magazine and turned to Helen. "Don't mind," she said softly.

A little of the tenderness seeped out of Helen. "Don't mind what?"

"Fred."

"What about Fred?"

Georgia said, "Look, I know things didn't come out the way you wanted, and it's a rotten break. I don't know why—well, anyway, it isn't so terrible." She smiled. "How would you like to go away, dear? Just the three of us, you and me and Sam? We'll forget all about this, hum?"

"Sam." Almost in panic, Helen snapped out the words. "It's Sam I wanted to talk to you about."

Georgia smiled. "What about Sam?"

"I told you to stay with him."

"Did you?"

"Oh, Georgia, I was all wrong, I shouldn't have, I shouldn't have."

"I thought I did my deciding."

"Don't get angry, Georgia."

"I'm not angry. After all, Helen—"

"We were both wrong about Sam."

"Don't be a damn fool, dear," said Georgia, at the same time pleasant and sharp. She leaned back with her hands on the arms of the chair and laughed, but Helen could see she was beginning to be annoyed. "I might have been wrong when I first married Sam," said Georgia at last. "Once I thought I was. But these last weeks I've known him more closely than I've ever known anyone else in my life, and I know how much I love him. Helen, Sam and I are the happiest people alive. I'd die without him."

Helen said, very slowly and carefully, "Sam's going to be arrested, Georgia. He killed Mart. He killed those people I found in Reno. The police will be here a little after twelve."

"Helen!" Georgia was on her feet, incredibly shocked. "Oh, Helen, you'd better go to bed. Really, darling—" She laughed uneasily. "Oh, really, Sam killed Mart, Sam killed some people in Reno—"

Helen stood up too, and broke in on her. Quickly and carefully she told her everything that had happened, leaving out only her own part in things. She was very convincing. When she was halfway through, Georgia picked up a cigarette and lit it with shaking fingers. She did not get more than two short puffs out of it.

WHEN Helen was through Georgia put the cigarette very carefully on the edge of the table. Her calm was shaken; she spoke almost in the high voice of a society editor on the radio. "For one thing, Helen dear, you seem to have forgotten that you and I were with Sam when Mart died. We happened to be right here in this house."

"I lied about that. You talked yourself into it. People saw Sam outside, Georgia."

After a minute Georgia swayed forward, and Helen helped her into a chair. "Oh, my God." She put her hands in front of her face and began to cry. Helen went over and got her a drink, and by the time she was back Georgia seemed to have stopped crying.

"We'll go away," said Helen. She expanded this diplomatically. "We'll get the best lawyer in town for him—we ought to do that at least—and then, no matter how it comes out, the two of us will get away from here. We'll face it, Georgia." Suddenly Georgia was on her feet, pushing aside the drink in Helen's hands. "Georgia, where are you going?"

Georgia started for the door. "I'm going to put some of his things together. If he gets back before the police, he's got to get out of here."

"Georgia!" Helen seized her wrists. "Georgia, you aren't going to help him!"

"Oh, I have to," said Georgia.

"You can't."

"I'm going to, Helen. Please let me go."

In a panic, Helen said, "Georgia, the police have probably put men around the house already. It would make it worse for him if he tried to get away." She reflected to herself that this was probably true enough.

Georgia stopped struggling. "Yes, yes, Helen, you're probably right." Another thought came to her for the first time. "Helen—you called the police?"

"I did," said Helen carefully. "I thought it was right, Georgia."

"Oh, of course you did." Georgia walked across the room with her hands pressed together in front of her, and turned. Her eyes stared blankly at Helen. "But it was so wrong, Helen. No matter what Sam's done, I can't—Oh, Helen, I still can't believe he did anything—" She put her hands over her eyes. "Helen, we'll have to do something. Helen—you'll have to tell them that you were lying. That you were mistaken. You'll have to tell them—"

"Georgia, there's proof. There are other people besides me. There are fingerprints in Reno."

The threads of hysteria began to weave through Georgia's voice. "But we've got to think of something, Helen. When Sam comes—"

Helen was across the room in an instant. "Listen, Georgia," she said earnestly, "you mustn't say anything to Sam. He's half insane, you don't know what he'll do—"

"Oh, for God's sake," said Georgia angrily. "First Sam's a murderer, now he's insane. Let me by, Helen!"

Helen held Georgia strongly. "Georgia, when Sam comes in, you must go upstairs to your room. You're too upset, he'll see that something's wrong. You must leave me downstairs to handle him."

"Do you think I'll let my own husband walk into a trap?" Now Georgia was furious.

Helen took a breath. "Georgia, you've got to make up your mind. You've got to give Sam up. You've got to forget him."

"Never!"

"Georgia, he's a murderer and a maniac. You're the gentlest person alive, how can you stand the thought of touching a man like that?"

GEORGIA made a last attempt to be calm. "I don't know how," she said, "but I know I can. He's my husband, Helen."

"And does that mean everything?"

"It does to me."

"You were willing to leave him once."

"And I decided to stay with him. I've never regretted it, Helen. I made up my mind to stick, and I'm going to stick!"

"Listen, Georgia." Helen was hard and direct. "In the first place, you didn't make up your mind, I made it up for you. No matter how hard that is on your pride, you've got to realize it. In the second place, you've got to go back on a decision sometimes. You've never done that in your life, Georgia. Your money has protected you, none of your decisions have turned out badly—"

"What's my money got to do with this?" Georgia's thin voice was like a razor; she stared at Helen with growing, disbelieving horror. Freightened by the new coldness on her sister's face, Helen relaxed her grip, and Georgia stepped back. "I see," said Georgia at last. "My money has everything to do with this."

"Georgia—"

"You've always been conscious of money, haven't you, Helen, when there wasn't any reason for it? You're hipped on the stuff, Helen—"

Helen said, "Georgia, this is no time—"

Georgia said coldly, "This is no time for anything. This is the middle of the night, Helen. Why did you call the police in the middle of the night?"

"Don't you turn against me, too!" Helen cried in terror. "Georgia, I couldn't stand it if you—"

"You can stand anything," said Georgia. "You brag about it often enough." After a pause she began again, and the hysteria began again with her voice. "Fred was through with you tonight, wasn't he, Helen? Fred and Fred's money? You were willing to let my money go when you had Fred's. But not now. You wanted Sam out of the way! You wanted him dead!"

"Georgia!" Helen gasped with pain. "Georgia, listen, whatever I've seemed to be, I've loved you—"

"You wanted Sam dead. You wanted him away from me. All you've ever wanted is money," cried Georgia shrilly. "That's all you ever hung around me for. That's all you've ever thought of as long as you've lived!"

Helen put her hands on Georgia's arms and pleaded, beseechingly, "Georgia, if I've seemed hard to you—I seem to have looked hard to so many people—still there's another side to me, and I swear that I love you, Georgia, I swear it."

"Everybody has a good side, Helen, but you're too smart to let yours get along." Georgia's sneer changed to a laugh. It was almost a racking laugh, and it came to a choking and shaken end. She gasped. "You know what I'm going to do, Helen? I'm going to change my will. My will!"

"Your will." Helen froze.

"I only made one will," Georgia said hoarsely. "I don't like to think about those things. But when I was twenty-one old Mr. Aldrich made me make one out. And everything's left to you, Helen. We always admired your financial ability."

Helen's voice was somewhat too controlled, "You'd better stop, Georgia."

"I'm going to cut you out of that, Helen. And then you're going to get out of my house. You're going to be through, washed up, as far as I'm concerned." Georgia's face was contorted with rage. "You've worked me, and you've tricked me, and now I'm saying goodbye to you, Helen. Get out of here! Get out! Get out!"

WITH ALL her power Helen struck Georgia across the face, and pulled her sister to her with a strong grip. Georgia, silenced and sobered, stared into Helen's glaring eyes. "I wouldn't do that, Georgia," said Helen dangerously. "Georgia, I love you, but—"

Georgia stared back without fear. "Get out of here," she said.

Helen let her go and stepped back, contemptuous. "You're hysterical," she said. "You'll forget this in the morning."

"Oh, I won't forget it."

"You're insane."

"If I am, I'm insane with love for a man. You're insane about money, Helen, and that's worse."

"You damn fool," said Helen levelly. "He doesn't even love you."

Georgia started to laugh again. She was still laughing when they heard the front door open and close. Instantly Georgia stopped and made for the door; Helen caught her as she went by. "You idiot," said Helen, with a voice of granite, "I'll show you!" She thrust Georgia back across the room, so hard that Georgia spun against a chair and almost fell down.

Helen went swiftly into the front hall. Sam was standing there, rigid, with a frozen look on his face. Helen put her arms around him, and saw that he was trembling. She thought, "This is the end of a hell of a lot of things, Sammy boy." When she heard Georgia come into the hall she said softly, "Kiss me."

He kissed her so hard the breath was crushed out of her. He breathed very heavily, and she could see beads of sweat that had been on his face. "Sam," she said clearly, "do you love me, do you want to go away with me?" He kissed her again, as fiercely.

From behind her, Georgia screamed, "Get away from her!" Helen had never been so shocked in her life. Mechanically, she put her arms around him under his coat.

He had a gun under his armpit, and a huge artery in his arm began throbbing against the back of her hand. He had begun wearing the gun after Mart had died.

"Do you want to go away?" she said softly, and wondered if she meant it. "Just the two of us go away somewhere and rest? Do you want to go with me?"

"Yes," he said.

Behind Helen, Georgia began to cry with a harsh, tearing sound; Helen had never heard her cry like that before. "Oh my Lord," thought Helen, with a suddenly empty despair, "what a damn fool I am!" All at once it was clear to her that this was one thing that Georgia could not forgive. This was the end: she would stand alone, without Fred's money or Georgia's between her and obscurity.

And as she saw this, the rage and the blood rose together in her, blotting out everything she felt toward Georgia, till her head was filled with nothing but a black madness. Suddenly she thought, with a flash of insight, "Fred *knew!*"

Fiercely she lifted her head and whispered, "She hates us. She doesn't want us to go away. She'll never let us be together, Sammy." The sweat stood out more strongly on his face, and the trembling grew. "Oh, Sam, my dear," said Helen, over the sound of Georgia's sobbing. "Do you hear me, Sam, she doesn't want us to go away." Under her hands she felt the tenseness creep up through his muscles, as though he was making himself ready to spring.

"Get out!" screamed Georgia suddenly.

"Do you hear me, Sam? She'll never let us be happy while she's alive, never while she's alive!"

AND he pushed her aside. At the last minute she wavered and clung to him. She wanted to tell him to stop, but her lips could not move with terror; the force of his arm swept her away so that she fell on the floor and could not see.

"Sam!" screamed Georgia over the sound of the shots, and then there was only another sound in the silence, a slithering thud.

Helen did not look up. She only wanted to lie there and be sick, to be unconscious, to die. She only wanted to forget that she ever stood in this hallway in Sam's arms. She only wanted her heart to be free again.

But she stood up. She stood up and turned to Georgia's body and looked at it until she was sure she had herself under control. All her life long, she knew, nothing would ever be harder than this; and she had done it. There would never be anything now that she could not face.

The first bullet had struck Georgia as she was half turned to run, and spun her back. The second had broken her jaw and ploughed through her cheek.

Helen turned to Sam. She was more afraid than she had ever been in her life. He was looking at her with eyes that were entirely mad. He was still holding the gun, pointing it somewhere around her legs. If he raised it a little, only a little, there would be another bullet in another woman's face. Even in her defiance, Helen for a moment wished that she was a coward, so that she could faint and be out of this.

There was a sound beside them. Both of them turned their eyes. One of the maids was standing in the entrance to the back of the house, her eyes round with terror. "Will she bring the police?" thought Helen. "But the police are already on their way. Will they get here in time?" Slowly, as she watched her, the maid lowered her eyes to see Georgia. Abruptly, her eyes closed and her body sagged. She slumped to the floor in a faint.

Helen's face no longer looked alive and human: it was as if skin was stretched over a complicated system of wires. But her jaw was set. She was alone again. Through all eternity, now, she would be alone. She would have to see this through by herself.

Presently she found that she could be bored even when she was frozen with fear. Her leg was getting stiff, and she shifted very slightly, so that he would not hear her. She said, "Sam?" He did not move.

She began to walk toward him, and yet on an angle, so that she could pass him and get to the stairs. As she walked he turned with her, and her heart froze again. It seemed to her that he was standing very still, that he had stopped trembling. She said, "Sam, don't you know me?" and saw that this upset him, so she kept quiet.

After a minute she said, "Don't you really think the pictures are hung beautifully, Sam?" He looked puzzled, and she took a step toward him. She said, and hoped he would not think of the old joke, "What about the price of eggs in Russia, Sam?" He was completely bewildered. She continued to move toward him, step by step, reciting gibberish. As she was close to him, her lips began to quiver. She managed to say, "Don't you think we'd better get a new maid? Our halls are so frightfully messy." It sprang out of her lips before

she thought, and when she realized what she had said she nearly vomited.

He had not moved, and she was standing almost beside him, when the doorbell rang. She took the gun out of his hand with no effort at all. "It's the police," she said quietly, "they've come for us." Suddenly she threw the gun across the flooor and screamed, "Shoot 'em down, Sammy!" She flashed up the stairs when he dove for the gun.

HE HAD FIRED three shots by the time she reached the top, and as she looked back he spun around and looked up at her. She found the doorknob behind her and slipped in; his last bullet struck the wall outside her head. She heard him running up the stairs. She locked the door and crossed the room. The door into the next room had no lock on it, but the door on the other side of the second room did. She went through this and locked it, and found that there was nowhere for her to go.

The outside door crashed with a huge splintering, and she knew Sam had broken through. There was a woman's scream from downstairs, and a commotion: the police must have gotten in, and either the maid had revived, or another one had come up. She went swiftly to the window and looked down; it was too far a drop. Sam had come through the unlocked second door and was hurling himself against the door of the room she was in. "Good Lord!" she thought swiftly, "this eye-for-an-eye stuff works out pretty fast." She picked up a nailfile from the dresser and stood facing the door.

When he broke through the police were only a few steps behind him. His weight was so much that he knocked her into the angle of the bed and the floor, and she was nearly crushed when he fell on her. But he was dragged off almost at once, and her nailfile had only scratched his face.

They helped her up. For the first time in her life she fainted.

She revived almost at once: they had not even had time to lay her down. Cunha was there, and another man, a younger man, who was holding her. She could hear the rest of the men fighting with Sam on the stairs.

She said, "I'd like to go to my room."

"Certainly." Cunha nodded to the younger man, who took her along the hall. She did not look back toward the stairs.

When they came to her door one of the maids came up, white-faced, but Helen waved her away and said, "Mr. Grover. Phone Mr. Grover. Tell him—" The maid nodded and went away. Helen said to the man, "Would you stay, please? I'm afraid that I'm—afraid." She began to laugh uneasily.

"Steady," he said.

"I'm—I'm going to get out of these things," she said: "I'm still a little shaky. I—I can't blame myself. Would you mix me a drink while I change? And one for yourself. The things are there."

In her dressing room she changed into the fur-trimmed robe.

When she came out she looked at him carefully. He was fresh-faced and tanned, and his hair was clipped short, with sharp neatness. His eyes were completely frank, devoid of evil. She had a horrible nostalgia for all the things she had never been. She wondered briefly how it would feel to know innocence.

And she looked at her room. It was really her room now, and this whole house was her house. She could do whatever she wanted, choose whatever man she wanted. Georgia had chosen Sam, poor Georgia. But she would not choose another Sam.

"I know it's silly and cowardly of me," she said, "but I'd like to have someone stay in the house for a few days. Do you think they could fix that?"

"Sure."

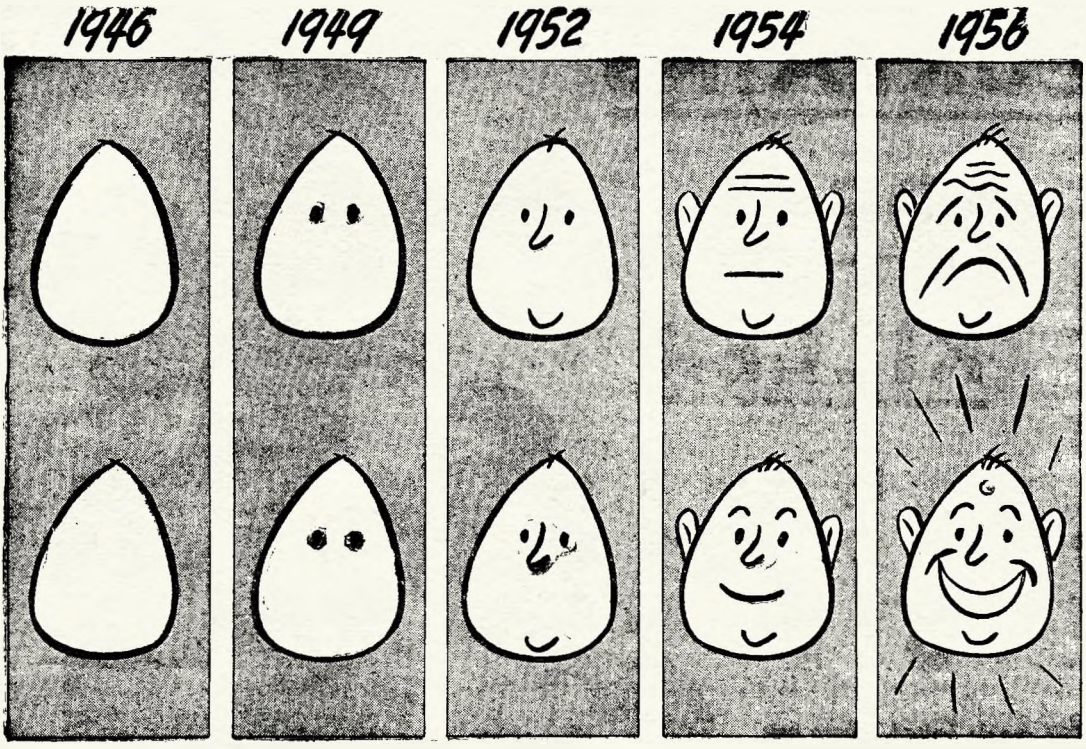
"It's a hard job you have, isn't it?" she said. "I imagine your wife spends a good many anxious nights."

He said he was not married.

"Salute," she said, and her voice shook slightly.

"Steady," he said.

They drank together.



Two ways your face can grow in the next few years

USUALLY, our faces show what's happening to us.

For instance, suppose financial matters are constantly on your mind.

Suppose you know that there's practically no cash reserve between you and trouble.

It would be surprising if your face didn't show it.

But suppose that, on the contrary, you've managed to get yourself on a pretty sound financial basis.

Suppose that you're putting aside part of everything you earn . . . that those dollars you save are busy earning *extra* dollars for you . . . that you have a nest egg and an emergency fund.

Naturally, your face will show *that*, too.

There's a simple and pretty accurate way to tell which way your face is going to go in the next few years:

If you are buying, regularly, and holding as many U. S. Savings Bonds as you can, you needn't worry.

Your face will be among the ones that wear a smile.

Buy all the Bonds you can... keep all the Bonds you buy!

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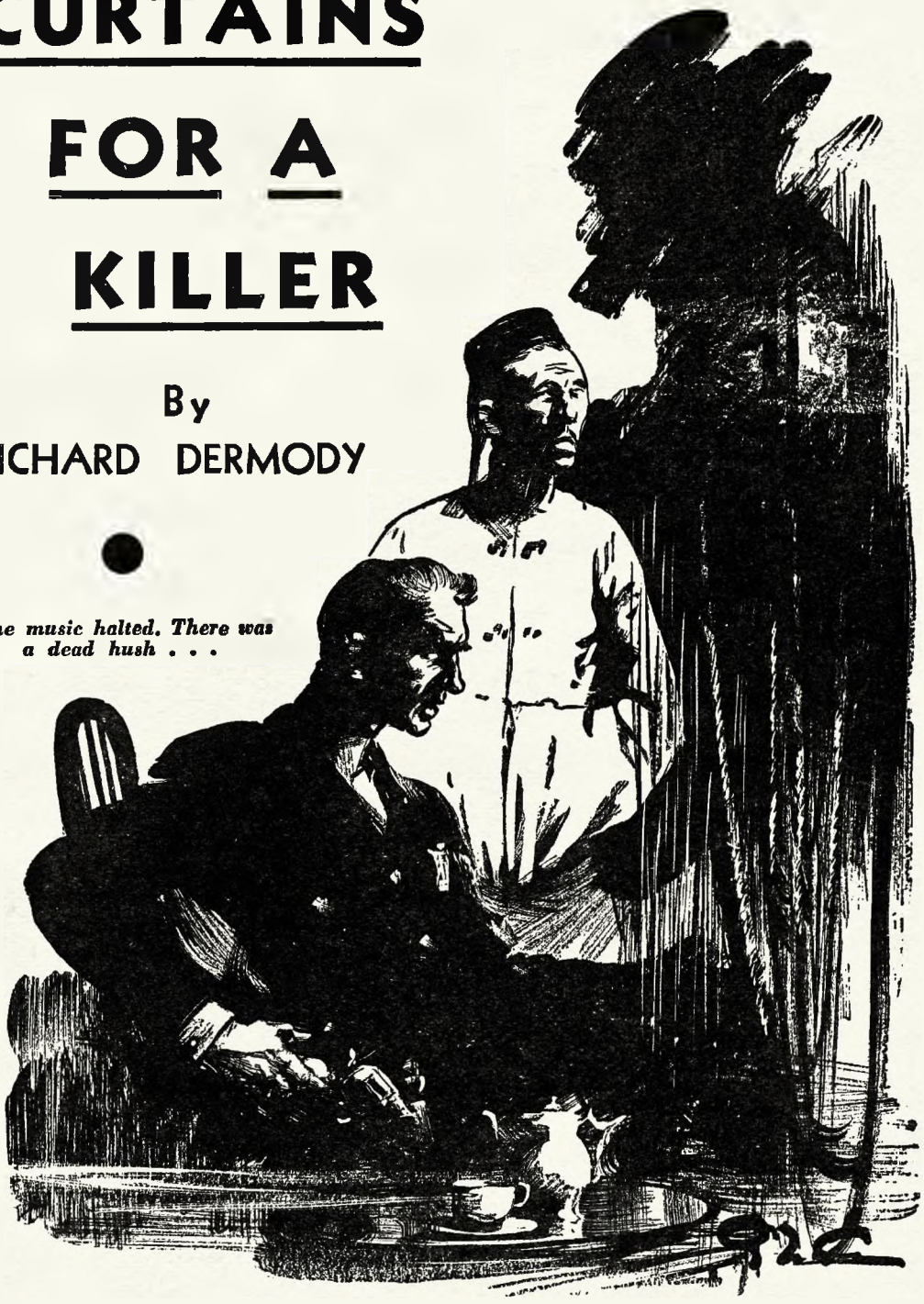
CURTAINS FOR A KILLER

By
RICHARD DERMODY



The music halted. There was a dead hush . . .

"It is a custom among our people," explained Chin Jok softly. Tom Lenehan grinned to himself. Among his people, too, there was a custom!

THE LITTLE MAN in the plum-colored, quilted silk coat and neat skull-cap sat quietly gazing at his long, curved fingernails. Finally he looked up at the broad-shouldered, broad-faced man across the desk.

"I come to tell you of a crime, Mr. Lenehan," he said in his slow, deliberate En-

glish. "To ask your help, if you please."

Detective-Sergeant Thomas Lenehan, Chinatown Squad, San Francisco Police, leaned back in his chair, his gray eyes wary. He had a healthy respect for the *Yang Mon Jing Moo Soo,* the Society of Interpreters. And this soft-spoken little man was the smartest of the lot.

"The police will help you, Chin Jok," he said quietly. "What is the crime?"

The interpreter hesitated, arranging his words. "Last night the actor, Leong Chew, came to his death in the *sing pinge.* Many people saw Leong Chew die, but not many know that he died."

Tom Lenehan digested this statement in silence. "I see," he said at last. "Leong Chew was knocked off on the stage of the theater during a performance. Who killed him?"

Chin Jok's dark eyes widened. "That is why I am here. I do not know the name of this wicked person."

The detective leaned forward. "Listen, Chin Jok," he said slowly. "I was assigned to Chinatown twelve years ago, during the war between the Kwong Docks and the Suey Sings. Nine men died in that war and a hundred have been killed since then in other tong wars but no Chinese ever came to the police. Why do you come now?"

The interpreter's hands moved in a slight, delicate gesture. "The Elder Uncle of my family is owner of the *sing pinge.* Elder Uncle has great respect for you, Mr. Lenehan. We have failed to find the hand that struck Leong Chew. Elder Uncle has ordered me to ask your help."

Tom regarded the little man thoughtfully. "Was this actor an important man?"

Chin Jok's lip curled. "The Children of the Pear Garden are persons of low class. But it is important that the killer of Leong Chew be found. The name of the person who gave money for his death must be known to the people."

"The person who gave money for his death," Tom repeated softly. It was beginning to make sense, to add up. He got to his feet, spoke crisply. "I don't know what you've got up your sleeve, but the police aren't pulling your chestnuts out of the fire. You know damn well this murder should have been reported last night. I'll go down and take a look at this actor's body. If you can point out a suspect I'll throw him in jail. But that's all. I'm not putting the police on your side in some dirty tong war."

"There is no war," Chin Jok said quietly. "The tongs are at peace."

Tom snorted. "Don't hand me that stuff. Only four days ago we found a lad named Loke Ying with his skull split."

Chin Jok inclined his head. "Loke Ying is dead, but he did not die at the hands of the *boo how doy.* Loke Ying was struck from behind. The hatchet was not found."

The detective stared, dropped into his chair again. "I should have noticed that myself," he said slowly. "The tong killer always faces his victim, and always leaves the weapon beside the body." He frowned. "Then who killed Loke Ying?"

"A white man. A *low fon* who tried to slay in the manner of the *boo how doy* so the police would blame the tongs." Chin Jok hesitated, then went on. "I have no evidence, but I am sure a member of his own clan opened his purse to the killer of Loke Ying."

Tom nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense. You think it was a white man because no Chinese would kill a kinsman of the man who hired him."

"That is true. The most wicked *boo how doy* would be afraid. He would lose much face. As the person who killed Leong Chew will lose much face when he is known."

Tom Lenehan stared. "Are you trying to tell me there's a hook-up between the murders of Loke Ying and Leong Chew?"

"You are very quick." The interpreter smiled faintly. "I think different hands were raised against Loke Ying and Leong Chew, but the same purse was opened."

THE DETECTIVE took a blackened pipe from his pocket, stuffed the bowl with coarse shag and lit an evil-smelling sulphur match. He sent a cloud of blue smoke toward the ceiling and pointed the stem of his pipe at the little man across the desk.

"All right, Chin Jok. I'll take a whirl in your squirrel-cage. Give me the whole story, from the beginning." He grinned suddenly. "And take it easy. Remember, I'm just a dumb Irish cop."

The interpreter smiled again. "I will remember." His face sobered, he spoke slowly. "A certain *mah jeen* opened his purse to the killer of Loke Ying. I have no evidence, but many of the people know this to be true. If we can find evidence, this *mah jeen* will lose much face and go away from San Francisco."

Tom nodded. "A *mah jeen* is a storekeeper, a merchant. Is that right?"

"That is true," Chin Jok hesitated, then continued. "Loke Ying was a scholar, a young man of good character. He arranged to marry a certain girl. The *mah jeen* also desired this girl. He has much money and he tried to destroy the plan of Loke Ying to marry this girl."

Tom snorted. "Stop beating around the bush. You know damn well the girl was a slave. Loke Ying scraped up enough money to buy her and the merchant raised the ante. Isn't that right?"

"That is true." There was glint of amusement in Chin Jok's dark eyes. "Loke Ying appealed to the elders of his clan. The elders called the *mah jeen* into the council and told him the arrangements of Loke Ying must be honored."

Tom nodded. "So the merchant hired a white thug to knock off Loke Ying. But where does this actor, Leong Chew, fit into the picture?"

The interpreter hesitated. "It is hard to tell this so you will understand. It is an old custom among the Children of the Pear Garden. When a person does a wicked thing and is not brought to justice, the actors make a play about that person so he will be known to the people and will lose much face."

"I get it." The detective grinned. "I know a few parties around City Hall who would look pretty cheap if some of their stunts were acted out on the stage. Why are actors called Children of the Pear Garden?"

"It is a custom," Chin Jok said. "A thousand years ago the great king T'ang Ming Huang made plays that were acted in a pear garden. T'ang Ming Huang is a god of the actors."

Tom leaned forward, spoke slowly. "Call me if I'm wrong, but I think I can put the rest of this picture together. It goes like this: Leong Chew was assigned the part of the merchant in a play the actors made up about the murder of Loke Ying. The merchant figured he had to stop this play, and also show the boys that they couldn't push him around. So he hired someone in the theater, probably another actor, to knock off Leong Chew. Is that right?"

"That is all true," Chin Jok said. "I was in the *sing pinge,* looking at the play. Elder Uncle was behind the curtain. Every person could be seen by Elder Uncle or myself. But Leong Chew was killed and we do not know who drove a nail into his head."

Tom Lenehan's eyes widened. "A nail?"

"Yes. A very large nail. That is why we are sure it was an actor who killed Leong Chew. There is a very old play called *Shang Ting Chi.* Two men are killed with a nail in the head in that play." The interpreter paused, then went on: "Elder Uncle has ordered another actor to take the place of Leong Chew. The play will be shown to the people again tonight. Elder Uncle thinks if you see the play you will find the person who killed Leong Chew." His smooth voice hardened. "Then that person will be made to tell the name of the *mah jeen.* And the *mah jeen* will be made to tell the name of the white man who killed Loke Ying."

Tom nodded thoughtfully. For twelve years he had tried to find an opening in the smooth, elastic barrier that surrounded the people of Chinatown. A barrier that was higher than mere language and custom. A barrier that had blocked him at every turn for all those twelve years. Perhaps this was the opening, the gateway. Perhaps at last he was to get inside.

"I'll do my best, Chin Jok," he said slowly. "But you've got to agree to turn these men over to the law, to trial and punishments in our courts, if we catch them."

"So it will be," the interpreter said gravely. He rose to his feet, a small, exotic figure against the harsh brick walls of the office. "Now I will take you to the house of Leong Chew, so you may look at his dead body."

THE POLICE DOCTOR parted the thick braid, whistled softly, and glanced up at the intent face of Tom Lenehan. "Damnedest thing I ever saw. Spike was

driven into his fellow's head with one blow. Base of the brain upward. Head of the spike's here under his pigtail. Fellow must have been drunk or drugged."

Tom looked a question at the small man beside him. Chin Jok shook his head. "Leong Chew was not drunk. He had not used the smoking-pistol, the opium pipe."

The detective glanced around the tiny, windowless room, lighted by the dim flicker of a nut-oil lamp. The smell of death was strong, and other smells. "Let's get over to the theater. I want to take a look at that play."

The lobby was crowded, odorous. From the doorway ahead, leading into the theater, came a staccato chatter of high-pitched voices, the crash of drum and gong, the shrill wail of strings. Tom stared around at the gaudy posters, wrinkled and sagging in the steam that arose from a battery of wash-tubs ranged along the walls of the lobby, each manned by a sweating Chinese. He grinned at the interpreter.

"Business is good tonight. The customers are using lots of hot towels."

Chin Jok smiled briefly. "The people come often to the *sing pinge*. It is warm, and there is light and friends to laugh with."

The detectve nodded. He knew the lives of these hard-working, cheerful people; fifty thousand of them crammed into a half-dozen blocks of dismal, rat-infested buildings. He followed the interpreter through the doorway, into sudden islands of silence that descended at the approach of his tall figure. Silence that exploded in rapid syllables as he passed.

Chin Jok led the way to seats behind a railing at the left. A section of comfortable chairs flanked by dainty lacquered tables. A waiter in a blue gown poured tea. Chin Jok passed a cup to the detective, holding the tiny bowl in both hands in the gesture of friendship. Tom sipped the hot, fragrant liquid and looked around.

The backless benches that filled the main section of the theater were crowded with men, all wearing their hats. Rough planks set on posts in front of the benches were laden with teapots and smoking plates of food. It was a noisy, good-natured crowd; eating, drinking, mopping their faces with the steaming towels the waiters tossed in bundles from hand to hand. The light, twittering voices of the women rustled in the gallery above. Flaring gas-jets along the walls etched every detail in harsh light and wavering shadow.

On the stage, two men in glittering robes, tall head-dresses set off with pheasant feathers six feet long, whirled and stamped, thrusting and parrying with long, tasseled spears, slashing the air with featured whips slung from their wrists.

"These are *wu sheng,* the men who fight," Chin Jok said. "They fight now from the backs of horses." He smiled at the detective's puzzled look. "It is a custom. A person with a whip in his hand is on the back of a horse."

Three musicians sat on the left, facing the audience, the nasal whine of the moon-fiddle threading weirdly through the crash of drum and gong. At the rear, two men in blue gowns—stage-hands, Tom decided—were placing a pair of gilded chairs and a table set with wooden cups and a silver pitcher, in evident preparation for the next scene.

A backdrop of yellow silk, inscribed with black-brushed characters, slotted by curtained doorways at right and left, hung behind the warriors. Tom glanced at the interpreter.

"What is the writing on the curtain?"

"The words say that the *wu sheng* are fighting in the mountains. In China a board is placed behind the actors with words telling of the place. Here we have a different curtain for each place." Chin Jok's voice held a trace of pride. He glanced at the stage. One of the warriors had fallen, landing lightly on his palms. "Now it is finished. That *wu sheng* is dead."

Tom grinned as the fallen gladiator leaped to his feet and strode briskly through the doorway on the right. "That's the liveliest corpse I ever saw."

CHIN JOK'S faint smile appeared again. "It is a custom. The actor who is dead, or finished with his part, goes out the right-hand door in the curtain. If an actor goes out by the left-hand door he is still in the place and will come back. All the actors come in by the left-hand door."

The victorious warrior pranced around the stage, lifting his knees, stamping, flour-

ishing his spear. He sang a few lines in the high-pitched falsetto of the Chinese actor, turned and followed his defeated opponent. So far as Tom could tell the audience displayed no interest in his victory. There was no applause, no halt in the chattering and laughing.

"What's the matter? Don't they like it?"

Chin Jok looked surprised. "Oh, yes. The people like the *wu sheng* very much. Every night there is a play with the *wu sheng.*" The interpreter's voice lowered, held excitement. "Now comes the play about the *mah jeen* and the death of Loke Ying. The people know how Leong Chew came to his death. They will show much interest in this play."

The platform was empty except for the musicians, playing softly now, the drum muted, the gong tapping lightly. The pair of stagehands leaned against the wall at the left, grinning and waving to friends in the audience.

The drum thundered. Swift silence fell over the packed benches. Two black-robed men filed through the entrance. As they advanced, the gong crashed, the moon-fiddle screamed. A crimson curtain descended slowly behind them.

Tom Lenehan sat bolt upright in his chair, every muscles in his big body suddenly taut; a curious chill that was almost fear sent a tingle through his veins. There was evil, menace, in those dark figures. He shrugged his broad shoulders, relaxed. He was getting jumpy; probably that damned tiresome music. He leaned back, watched the actors with narrowed eyes.

The taller man was speaking, his harsh, high-pitched lines punctuated by the incessant crash of drum and gong. He was an imposing figure, robe crusted with jewels, a long black chin-beard reaching to his knees. His queue was coiled in a thick, shining knot at the base of his neck.

The other man faced him, listening. A short man in a plain robe, his face painted chalk-white, his queue hanging down his back, a sign that he was in the presence of a superior, Tom knew. A long, curved knife glittered at his waist.

Chin Jok spoke softly. "The tall man takes the part of the *mah jeen.* The part that brought death to Leong Chew. He has a beard with no upper part, no mustache. So the people know he is wicked. The other man is also wicked. He is a *ta ching,* a criminal. In the old days the *ta ching* wore a white face but now it is the custom to paint the *ta ching's* face black. The people know why *this ta ching* has a white face."

Tom nodded. "I get it. This lad's a white man. What is the merchant talking about?"

"The *mah jeen* says that he is a person of importance. A young scholar has robbed him of a girl. He will pay money to the *ta ching* if he removes this scholar from his path."

The merchant held out a jeweled purse. The white-faced man took the purse, drew his knife, bowed and disappeared through the curtain. The merchant's voice rose again. A burst of laughter swept along the benches. Chin Jok smiled briefly.

"The *mah jeen* says his wife has a sharp tongue. She will make much trouble if he takes the girl to his house. He will keep the girl in another house and hide her from his wife."

Tom grinned. "I always thought you boys were the absolute boss at home."

Chin Jok shook his head. "That is not true. The wife is of great importance. There is always trouble when the green-skirt, the second wife, comes into the house."

The black-robed, bearded man on the stage finished his speech and departed. There was a pause, a let-down. Low talk rippled along the benches, the drum tapped lightly in quiet rhythm.

THE GONG BOOMED. The benches stilled. Slowly the crimson curtain rose and another of deep orange was lowered. A dainty feminine figure in short, close-fitted robe and trousers of pale blue, black hair piled into a formal jeweled structure, a scarlet handkerchief floating from slender, red-tipped fingers, her narrow, delicate face bright with rouge, came through the entrance on the left. She moved slowly to the front of the stage, slim body swaying on stilted shoes of wood. A stocky man in the loose blouse and cotton trousers of a workman, his nose painted bright red, followed.

"This is the house of the *hua tan,* the girl," Chin Jok said. "The man is the

cho'u, one who makes the people laugh. I do not know the English word."

Tom nodded. "We call him a clown." The girl was singing, her light voice rising above the squeal of the moon-fiddle.

"She is very sad," Chin Jok said softly. "Her lover, the young scholar was killed by the wicked *ta ching.* Now she must go to the house of the *mah jeen.* She speaks to the *cho'u* because he was a friend of the dead scholar."

The girl's voice paused. The clown faced the audience. The heads along the benches were tilted forward, the teapots and plates of food forgotten. Tom realized suddenly that he was on the edge of his chair, straining to catch the words, even though he could not understand them; gripped in the tension that held the silent hundreds in the theater. The clown was speaking, Chin Jok translated slowly.

"The *cho'u* says the girl must give the *mah jeen* much wine. Then they will take the *mah jeen* to his house. The *cho'u* has a plan to make the *mah jeen* lose much face." The interpreter's voice sharpened. "Now the *mah jeen* comes."

The bearded man came through the doorway on the left, advanced to the girl and spoke, his voice harsh with authority. The girl bowed in submission, sank slowly to the floor. A stagehand stepped forward, placed a cushion under her knees as they touched the floor.

Tom grinned. "That's what I call real service."

"The gowns are old and of great value," Chin Jok said. He listened to the voice of the girl. "She says the *mah jeen* is her master and she is glad to go to his house. She asks him to drink wine."

The bearded man was smiling. He motioned the girl to her feet and walked to the table at the rear of the stage. The clown filled two wooden wine cups. The girl lifted a cup, touched it to her lips and set it down. The bearded man drained his cup, held it out to the clown.

Five wine-cups later the clown held up the silver goblet, turned it to show it was empty, and stepped back. The bearded man was on his feet, swaying. The clown and the girl moved to his side, slid supporting arms around his waist and started a slow circuit of the stage.

Chin Jok's voice trembled with excitement. "Now they go to the house of the *mah jeen.*"

The stage-hands were working swiftly, moving the table and chairs, setting up a huge bed, hung with curtains of soft green. A backdrop of the same color lowered silently behind them. As the stage-hands stepped aside the three actors halted a few feet from the bed.

"Now they are in the sleeping room of the *mah jeen,*" the interpreter said. "The wife of the *mah jeen* does not know of this. The girl and the *cho'u* will hide the *mah jeen* from his wife."

The clown lowered the bearded man onto the soft quilts of the bed. The girl drew the curtains, hiding the prostrate form. Tom Lenehan spoke quietly. "Tell me, Chin Jok. Was Leong Chew killed while he was in that bed?"

The interpreter nodded, his breath rasping in his throat. "That is true. Now the wife comes. Now you will see."

A gaunt, elderly woman in a robe of red silk, her face plain, unrouged, crossed the stage and broke into shrill speech.

"The wife is angry," Chin Jok said. "She says she will make her husband send the girl away."

Tom nodded, his eyes intent on every movement of the posturing, doll-like figures on the stage. The girl's voice broke into the old woman's shrill scolding. She threw her head back, laughed, her light words defiant.

"The *hua tan* says she will be the number-one-wife. The *mah jeen* has promised that she will not be the green-skirt. The old wife will be her slave." The interpreter was leaning forward, his slender, long-nailed hands gripping his chair. "Now the wife asks for her husband. The girl says that he is in another room, bringing jewels and money to her."

The old woman stamped her foot, turned and moved across the stage to the doorway. "Now the wife goes to find the *mah jeen.*"

The girl faced the audience, her voice rising in a long-drawn speech. "The *hua tan* says that when the wife returns they will open the bed and the wife will see the *mah jeen* is a fool. Then all the people will call the *mah jeen* a fool and he will lose much face."

The old woman was coming back, moving slowly across the stage. As she ap-

proached, the clown moved to the bed, reached under the curtains for a moment and then drew them back, pointing to the still figure of the bearded man and holding his sides with laughter.

THE MUSIC HALTED. There was a dead hush as the bearded man sat up slowly. A hush that was broken by a howl of mirth from the audience. Tom Lenehan stared. A square cloth hung around the man's neck, almost covering the beard. A cloth on which was painted the picture of a turtle. The bearded man covered his face with his hands and got to his feet slowly. The wife, the girl and the clown stood in a half-circle, pointing at him and laughing. He moved slowly across the stage to the doorway and disappeared, followed by the other actors. The detective turned to the small man beside him.

"What's the joke? What does it all mean?"

"The play is over," Chin Jok said soberly. "The turtle is a great insult. It is a custom. The people know the meaning of this play. They know the scholar who was killed was Loke Ying. They know the actors make a fool of the *mah jeen* when they place a turtle on his beard."

Tom shook his head. "It doesn't make much sense to me but I'll take your word for it." He leaned back in the chair, thought for a moment. The noise around was deafening, every man on the packed benches talking, waving his arms. "Let's go backstage," he said slowly. "I want to check a few points with Elder Uncle."

Chin Jok rose to his feet and led the way up a set of steps to the stage and through the left-hand doorway in the green curtain. As they passed, Tom noted that the yellow curtain still hung behind the green one.

Backstage was a single huge room, a row of tables littered with jars, bottles, wigs and all the paraphernalia of the actor, a group of great chests piled with gowns and weapons. The dainty blue-gowned girl, the *hua tan* of the play, was removing her make-up. The detective stared as she took off the high-piled headdress and revealed a plaited queue. The *hua tan* was a man! He touched the interpreter's shoulder. "Are all these actors men?"

Chin Jok's dark eyes were surprised. "There are no women among the Children of the Pear Garden. It is a custom." He turned and halted before a small table set with fragile bowls and a steaming teapot. "Here is Elder Uncle."

The man at the table rose and bowed, a lean, wiry man of perhaps seventy years, with the stamp of authority in his steady eyes and calm, wrinkled face. He smiled at the detective and indicated a chair beside him.

Tom returned the smile, glanced at the interpreter as he took his seat. "Tell Chin Fat Low that I am honored. That I have great respect for his age and wisdom."

Chin Jok spoke rapidly in cadenced Cantonese, listened to the old man's slow reply. "Elder Uncle say that he is ready to listen to your wisdom." There was a trace of anxiety in the small man's voice. "Do you know the person who brought death to Leong Chew?"

"I've got a couple of ideas " Tom said quietly. "Tell me exactly what happened on the stage last night."

Chin Jok nodded, spoke slowly, pausing to translate his words to the intently listening old man across the table.

"It was as you saw tonight. Until the *cho'u* opened the bed after placing the turtle on the beard of the *mah jeen.* The *cho'u* opened the curtains and was frightened. A red cloth was over the face of Leong Chew."

"Why was he frightened? What does the red cloth mean?"

"It is a custom," the interpreter said. "In the *sing pinge* a yellow cloth over the face means that a person is sick. A red cloth means the person is dead."

Tom nodded. "I see. An artistic touch by the murderer."

Chin Jok went on: "The *cho'u* closed the curtains and came here to tell Elder Uncle. Elder Uncle ordered the actors to carry the bed here. He also sent the *wu sheng* back to the stage to amuse the people."

"That was quick thinking." The detective reached into his pocket and laid notebook and pencil on the table. "Listen carefully, Chin Jok. I have some questions for Chin Fat Low and yourself. It is important that you make no mistakes when you answer them."

Thirty minutes later Tom Lenehan closed his notebook, a grim, triumphant smile on his broad face. "I think I've got it," he said quietly. "But I'll go over it again:

"Chin Fat Low sat here last night. He could see every person in the company except the nine people on the stage. Three musicians, two stage-hands, Leong Chew in the bed, the girl, the clown and the wife. Is that right?"

"That is true." Chin Jok's eyes were alert. "Elder Uncle saw each person behind the curtain. I saw each person in front of the curtain except Leong Chew in the bed. No person behind the curtain or in front of the curtain could kill Leong Chew."

Tom grinned briefly. "You're absolutely right. The lad who knocked off Leong Chew was *between the curtains. Leong Chew was killed by a custom.*"

A puzzled look spread over the wrinkled face of Chin Fat Low as the interpreter translated the detective's words. His slow voice formed a question.

"Elder Uncle asks you to explain," Chin Jok said.

"All right." Tom riffled the pages of his notebook. "The killer walked across the stage, passed through the left-hand doorway, turned and walked between the curtains to the rear of the bed, took a nail and hammer from his robe and drove the nail into Leong Chew's head." He paused. "What was that stuff the man with the beard, the merchant, was drinking at the table?"

"It was not wine," Chin Jok said. "It was cold tea." His dark eyes were puzzled. "But no person left the stage."

"The tea was drugged," Tom said. "And one person did leave the stage, although you didn't realize it because of your customs. In your theater, a dead man gets up and walks off; in our theater a dead man takes a curtain call with the rest of the cast. One custom is not more absurd than the other. But you accept many things in your theater that we do not accept. If a man carries a whip, he is riding a horse. If an actor goes out by the right-hand door, he is finished and will not be back. But if an actor leaves by the *left-hand* opening in the curtain, he is still part of the play, of the scene. In other words, to you and the rest of the audience *he is still present.*"

Chin Jok's eyes were wide. He turned to the old man and translated rapidly. Tom Lenehan watched comprehension dawn on the wrinkled features of Chin Fat Low. He spoke softly.

"What was the name of the actor who took the part of the wife; who left to look for her husband in another room?"

The interpreter's narrow shoulders sagged. "I am a fool, Mr. Lenehan. The name of the actor is Wang Mei."

Tom got to his feet. "I think you boys had better have a little talk with Wang Mei before I arrest him. Tell Chin Fat Low that I expect to see Wang Mei and any other wicked persons he can round up at my office tomorrow. Tell him that I trust him to play fair with me."

Chin Jok's lips parted in a smile. "Elder Uncle will be very glad to speak with Wang Mei."

THE LITTLE MAN in plum-colored, quilted silk coat and neat skull-cap sat quietly gazing at his long, curved fiingernails. Finally he looked up at the broad-shouldered, broad-faced man across the desk.

"Elder Uncle has kept his bargain with you, Mr. Lenehan," he said in his careful English. "Three wicked persons are now behind the bars of your jail: The *mah jeen,* Loke Yam, who opened his purse to the men who brought death to Leong Chew and Loke Ying. The actor, Wang Mei, who drove the nail into the head of Leong Chew in the *sing pinge.* The *low fon,* the white man from the Barbary Coast, Jerry Dowd, who struck Loke Ying with a hatchet. Elder Uncle has ordered me to ask what will be the fate of these wicked men."

Tom Lenehan smiled, a grim smile. "Tell Chin Fat Low that these men will hang by the neck until they are dead. It is a custom."

DOUBLE DEADLINE

By BRUNO FISCHER

The Merrick snatch was hot copy, but ace legman Jerry Rocke wouldn't touch it . . . until they brought the deadly business home to him—in a very real way!

JERRY ROCKE entered the bar with a valise in one hand and a portable typewriter in the other. He had twenty-seven minutes to train time and a thirst that had followed him all the way from India.

The bar was crowded. Jerry walked along it until he found an empty space. He dumped the bag and typewriter case at his feet, slipped onto a stool, called: "Hey, Perc."

A bartender sidled eagerly toward him. "Hello, Mr. Rocke. Long time no see."

"Long time no be around," Jerry said.

"Yeah, I know. You been one of these here war correspondents." The bartender oozed admiration. "But I see they put you right to work on our home-grown rats, like kidnappers." The bartender slapped a copy of the New York *Courier-Express* on the bar.

Jerry hardly glanced at the page one story which crowded the war news. It consisted of the latest failure of the parents of six-year-old Amy Merrick to contact her kidnappers. The story was under Jerry Rocke's byline.

"Right back to work," Jerry echoed grimly. "Two Old-Fashioneds."

"Both at the same time," Perc asked incredulously.

"I'm thirsty," Jerry said. "And in a hurry."

Jerry was on his second Old-Fashioned when he felt hot breath on the back of his neck. A thin, irritable voice said: "I figured I'd find you in a ginmill near the station if your train hadn't left yet."

Jerry turned slowly and looked into the ferret face of Howard Florin. He knew what Florin wanted and he should have been flattered. The managing editor of a great New York daily generally does not go chasing around in person after his menials.

Jerry wasn't flattered. He growled: "Let me alone."

"All right, all right," Florin said. "Can't you at least drink with me?"

The stools on either side of Jerry were taken. Florin swept an arm, and Jerry picked up his glass and tagged after the managing editor to a couple of empty stools farther up the bar.

Florin didn't order anything. He said dreamily: "There's not only the Merrick snatch. Last night Eddie Meer's head was torn off in Greenwich Village. Then there are a couple of other stories right up your alley, kid."

"You bore me," Jerry said.

Florin appealed to him with melting eyes. "Jerry, boy, every decent man the *Courier-Express* had is in the armed forces or working for the government or a war correspondent. We need you."

"Nuts!" Jerry said. "For eighteen months I was in India for your sheet. I thought it would be glamorous to be a foreign correspondent. What did I get out of it? Dysentery!" He shuddered and drank deeply. "Eve has gone ahead to Mount Fall to open the cottage while I settle affairs in the city. I'll be in Mount Fall in three hours and spend the days looking at the way the sun shines in my wife's hair and maybe write a book."

"All I ask is for a couple of more days, kid."

Jerry snorted. "That's what you said when I came off the ship. Just a couple of days, till the Merrick story played out. So I succumbed to your wiles. So what happened? The case dragged. It's still dragging. Two days ago I quit. You told me Mr. Merrick had contacted the kidnapper. The police were laying a trap for him. I was to be in on the kill. So last night I was at the rendezvous Mr. Merrick had arranged with the kidnap-

Jerry was in motion with the sound of the shot . . .

pers. So was every cop within a hundred miles. It's a wonder they didn't sell tickets to the spectators. And how surprised everybody was when the kidnapper didn't show up. You'll find the details in today's *Courier-Express* under my byline—the last story you'll get from me."

"Something new broke this morning," Florin said. "If you'll come back to the office, kid—"

"And another thing," Jerry cut in glumly. "How will my as yet unborn children feel when they learn that their old man was the only foreign correspondent in the war who didn't write a book?" He glanced at his wrist watch. "Holy cats, I'll miss my train!"

"Now listen, kid!" Florin said.

Jerry was already off the bar stool. He dropped his money on the bar and reached down for his bag and typewriter. They weren't there, and he remembered that he had moved his seat and had forgotten to take them along. He went to the first stool on which he had sat. The bar was less crowded now and several stools on either side were empty. His valise was there, but his typewriter wasn't.

"Did anybody see a typewriter?" he inquired loudly.

Puzzled glances greeted his question.

"A portable," Jerry explained. "I left it right here."

"We aren't responsible, Mr. Rocke, if you don't check personal belongings," Perc said from behind the bar.

Jerry felt bad. The Corona was pretty well battered, but it had accompanied him all the way to India and back and he had become sentimentally attached to it.

Somebody said, "Here it is," and there was the portable sitting against the bar several stools away.

"Thanks," Jerry said and picked up the typewriter and then stood there frowning. "Now how did it get all the way over here?"

Howard Florin tugged his sleeve. "Kid, if you'll only listen to me for one minute—"

The clock above the mirror told Jerry that he had two minutes to make his train, and he was at least a block from Grand Central. "Write me a letter," he threw over his shoulder and ran.

The train gate was closed when Jerry reached it. As he turned away, he cursed whoever had moved his typewriter. That minute of delay had caused him to miss his train, and the next one didn't leave for two hours.

He went into the waiting room and bought a couple of magazines and spread himself out on a bench to wait.

Rain was pouring down on the sleepy village of Mount Fall when Jerry got off the train. He raced through the shack which served as a waiting room and peered out to the road. Three hacks were lined up. The gnarled face of Will Ames was in the middle one, and Jerry sprinted for it.

"So you're back, Mr. Rocke?" Will said. "Staying long this time?"

"Till I'm drafted or something," Jerry said, wiping his face with his handkerchief.

Will Ames swung out on the road. "What'd you do, Mr. Rocke—miss the two-twelve from New York?"

"By a hair," Jerry said. He sat up. "How do you know?"

"Well, this guy expected you on that train. I mean, he thought you'd already come in on it. He came around an hour after it got in and asked did I drive you out to your house."

"What guy?" Jerry said.

"Never seen him before. A fat guy. Head bald as an egg. I said I didn't know on account I wasn't around when the train came in. Then I asked Steve Jones and Mort Willow, the other two drivers, but they don't know you, Mr. Rocke. They're both new. They said, though, they didn't drive nobody to your house, and then I said likely your missus called for you in her car."

"My wife sold the car when I went abroad."

"That so?" Will said. "I didn't know."

"Was the fat man in a car?'

"Yeah, guess your missus sent him to pick you up."

Jerry supposed so. He didn't know any fat bald man in Mount Fall, but maybe he was a new neighbor who had come to pick him up at the station as a favor to Eve. But why show up an hour after the train on which he'd been expected, got in?

Jerry dismissed him from his mind and concentrated on looking out of the window. Even in the storm the placid hills and valleys were like a cool drink after the lushness and heat and loneliness of India. This was home, and he and Eve would be together day and night, and the hell with Howard Florin and the *Courier-Express.*

The green-shingled cottage nestled fifty feet back from the road. Will Ames swung the taxi up the driveway and stopped in front of the door. Jerry was reaching for his wallet when he noticed that the front door of the cottage was wide open.

THERE was no porch and the rain drove directly into the foyer. Eve wouldn't have gone out. She was expecting him; she'd be waiting for him. And if she had left the house, she would be sure to close the door.

Alarmed, Jerry thrust a bill into Will's hand and leaped out of the cab. As he reached the door, a strange woman was closing it from the inside. He thrust past her. A strange man was down on his knees in the living room, bending over Eve.

Eve lay flat on her back, her eyes closed, her face chalky, and a hideous spiral of blood ran down her temple and cheek.

'What happened to her?" Jerry cried.

The man's head snapped up. He looked scared. The woman demanded shrilly: "Who are you?"

"Jerry Rocke." He dropped down on the other side of Eve.

"Oh, her husband." The woman sounded relieved.

And Jerry felt relief too—a little. Eve was breathing all right. His fingers probed through her mass of brown hair and felt a nasty cut in her skull.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

The man stood up. He was very tall on his feet and very narrow. He said: "Gert and I live next door. Gert heard a scream and we both rushed here through the rain. We found the door open and your wife on the floor. A moment later you arrived. By the way, my name is Carl Garden. My wife, Gertrude."

Jerry was too upset to acknowledge the introduction. He knew what would bring Eve out of it. There was a bottle of rye in his bag. Straightening up, he looked around and then remembered that he had left it and his typewriter in Will Ames' hack. Will had driven away.

In the kitchen pantry Jerry found a finger or two of rye. He returned with it in a glass and poured it down Eve's throat. She sputtered and opened her eyes.

"Darling!" she moaned. "I'm dreaming. You're in India."

"You've been with me for seven solid days in New York,' he reminded her.

"So I was." She sat up with his help and winced. "It's worse than a hangover."

Gertrude Garden helped Jerry get Eve to her feet. For the first time Jerry really looked at the woman who was his neighbor. She was a washed-out blonde, short and round; and when she stood next to her husband, the contrast between her and his tall gauntness was funny.

Eve leaned heavily against Jerry. "Where'd he go?" she asked thickly.

"Who?" Jerry said.

"There was a fat man," Eve said. 'He—" Gingerly she touched her wound. "I must be pretty groggy. There wasn't anybody. I tripped and fell against the edge of that table."

Mr. and Mrs. Garden looked at each other and then at Eve.

"You screamed," Mrs. Garden told her. "We heard you and rushed over."

"Did I scream?" Eve sank weakly down on the couch. "I guess it was when I felt myself falling."

Carl Garden cleared his throat. "Now that Mrs. Rocke's husband is here, we're not needed. Come on, Gert."

Jerry accompanied them to the door and thanked them. When he returned to the living room, Eve had her head in her hands.

She was wearing shorts and a shirt open at the throat, and she was as lovely as his vision of her during all those months away from her. Every day had started with a fresh hope that he would be with her soon, and now that he was he had almost lost her forever.

"Who are Mr. and Mrs. Garden?" he asked.

She spoke against her wrist. "New people. They rented the Tracy house. Gert Garden is very nice."

"Why didn't you want them to hear what happened?"

Her head lifted sluggishly. Her dark eyes were hurt and frightened. "Because I don't understand what it's all about. Why should a man I'd never seen before come here and try to kill me?"

"Kill you?" Jerry echoed.

"Murder me, darling," she said.

NEAR the foot of the long maple table lay one of the two iron bookends. It was in the shape of a horse's head; it and its mate, which was on the table, had been in the cottage for a long time.

Jerry picked up the bookend, hefted it. and turned back to Eve on the couch. "Is this what fatty socked you with?"

"Not that lad," Eve said without looking up. "He carried a gun. An ugly black automatic."

He placed the bookend on the table alongside the other one and went into the bathroom. He returned with a basin of water, cotton and bandage. Eve hadn't moved. He sat down beside her and sponged blood from her face and head. There was a nasty furrow in her skull, but it wasn't as bad as it looked and felt. All the same, if it had ripped her

face or bitten into the bone—Jerry's fingers contracted as if a fat man's neck were between them.

"Gun-whipped you," he said savagely.

"Is that what they call it?" Eve said, trying to sound light. "I wouldn't recommend it."

Jerry kept quiet until he had the wound bandaged. Then he gave her the rest of the rye and lit cigarets for both of them.

"Now let's have it," he said.

SHE SAT on her legs; in the shorts and shirt she looked like a little girl. "The bell rang, darling, and I thought it was you. When I opened the door, there stood a fat man. He wasn't short, but he gave that impression because he was so wide and thick. A brown raincoat the size of a tent was draped over him. He wore no hat and rain glistened on his absolutely bald dome."

Jerry nodded. "That checks. He asked Will Ames if I'd come in on the New York two-twelve. Will thought we still had the car, so he told fatty you'd probably picked me up at the station."

"So that's why he was positive you were at home," Eve said. "Before I could ask him what he wanted, he said, 'I want Jerry Rocke,' and he brushed right by me and came into this room. I told him he had a nerve. He just looked at me and said: 'Where is he?' Naturally I wouldn't answer him. I told him to get out." She gripped Jerry's arm. "Darling, he had the scariest eyes. Who is he?"

"I've no idea. I hoped you'd enlighten me."

Eve brooded into her empty glass. "Darling, he was mad."

"You mean angry or insane."

"The stark, raving kind of madness, except he's not the raving type. What did you think he was after? He wanted your typewriter."

"Huh?" Jerry said, glancing suspiciously at her.

"That's what he claimed," Eve insisted. "When I told him you weren't home, he didn't believe me. He started to look for you through the rooms. I said I'd go out and fetch the police if he didn't beat it. That's when he took out that big black gun of his. And he forced me to go through the house with him. At first I wasn't very much scared, but then he looked for you in closets and under the bed and places like that."

"He what?"

Eve gave him a tenuous smile. "Of course he was looking for the typewriter. I didn't know that then. He didn't tell me till we were back in the living room. Then he said: 'All right, so your husband came home and then went out again. But he'd leave his typewriter here. He wouldn't lug it around with him,' he said. I asked him what typewriter he was talking about, and he pushed that horrible gun into my face and wanted to know how I'd like to die."

"Nice guy," Jerry said tightly.

Eve shivered. "I decided that he was mad and had a typewriter mania or something, and that if I gave him a typewriter he'd go away. I told him there was an old typewriter of yours somewhere around. He asked me what kind it was, and when I told him it was an Underwood, he shook his head. It seems he had his heart set on a Corona. Yours is a Corona, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh."

"By the way, where is your typewriter? I mean the one you had when you came off the ship."

"I left it and my bag in Will Ames' hack," he told her. "Any more to the story?"

"The worst part," she said. "The fat man was getting angrier by the second. And he was frightened, too. That was queer because he had the gun, but he kept patting his bald dome nervously and his eyes were awful. Then he said that if I didn't produce your typewriter in thirty seconds he would shoot me."

"So you," Jerry said dryly, "bopped him with a bookend."

"I tried to." Eve sounded more cheerful now; her freckled smile was coming back. "He was going to kill me anyway, so I wasn't taking much chance one way or the other. Either way I'd die. I was standing against the table. I swept up one of the bookends He was much faster than I expected a man that fat to be. He stepped in and I saw his gun swing and I guess I screamed. The next thing I saw was your face, darling." She scowled at a bare knee. "He'd said he'd shoot me. Why didn't he?"

"BLUFF," Jerry said. "By then he'd decided that I really hadn't come home yet, so he beat it." He rose and nervously rattled the change in his pocket. "Why would he want my typewriter so badly?"

"You know how scarce typewriters are these days," Eve cracked.

"Very funny." Jerry stared glumly down at the bandage on her head. "Doesn't it strike you that fatty is probably watching this house and that he saw me arrive and will pay another visit?"

Her dark eyes widened. "Of course he will. Darling, let's get out of here."

"And in a hurry," he said. "Scoot out through the back door and over to the Gardens and stay there."

Swiftly she went to him. "You're coming with me."

"No."

"He has a gun," she said. "He's a killer."

Jerry's jaw ridged. His eyes were bleak. No man was going to gun-whip his wife and get away with it, even if he carried an arsenal with him.

She read his mind. "Don't be so damn heroic, darling. I much prefer you less vengeful and more alive. We'll both of us go."

"No," he said doggedly. "You beat it I'll—"

The doorbell rang.

Eve said, "Oh!" and then there was silence in the room except for the pounding of the rain on the roof. Jerry wished desperately that he had a gun. There was a shotgun in the attic, but it was dismantled. Anyway, he didn't think there were any shells for it.

"Slip out through the back," he whispered.

Clinging to his arm, she shook her head. "There might be more than one. They'd surround the house, wouldn't they?"

The doorbell rang again, and suddenly Eve laughed.

"What's so funny?" Jerry demanded.

"Us. Would the fat man ring the bell if he returned? He'd come right in, through the unlocked back door or an open window. It's probably the Gardens wanting to see how I am."

She crossed to one of the two front windows. Jerry felt silly. From that window you could see whoever stood at the door. He should have done that at once instead of going into a panic.

At the window Eve's profile frowned. "It's not the fat man. Somebody I don't know. He's got—" She wheeled toward Jerry. "He's coming in!"

Jerry heard the door open. He hadn't locked it when he had let the Gardens out, and now somebody was crossing the foyer. Jerry's eyes swept the room for a weapon and fell on the bookends. He was halfway to the table when the man stepped into the room.

"Mr. Rocke?" the man inquired politely.

The stranger didn't look menacing. In a baggy, dun-colored raincoat and a rain-soaked felt hat, he looked like somebody who couldn't be picked out of a crowd of three. He carried a portable Corona typewriter case.

"Yes?" Jerry said cautiously.

The man put down the typewriter and removed his dripping hat. "My name is Smith," he said. "Monty Smith. Earlier this afternoon I was in a beer joint in New York. I had a portable typewriter with me—a Corona. A short while after I left, I realized that the typewriter I had was not mine. I returned to Lou's and learned from the bartender that another man who had been there the same time also had had a portable. Evidently we got our typewriters mixed up. The bartender told me your name and said you worked for the *Courier-Express.* I phoned the paper and got your address."

He sounded glib, convincing. Jerry would have believed him if it had not been for the prior visit of the fat man. They'd acted stupidly, Jerry reflected; they should have tried this line first instead of the fat man barging in with a gun.

Jerry said: "I still have my own typewriter."

"Are you sure? Have you looked at it?"

"Just a minute," Eve said. She came forward from the window. Monty Smith's eyes licked over her skimpily clad form. Though Jerry couldn't really blame any man for looking at her slim loveliness, he felt enraged. It was not only because of the expression in Smith's eyes. He was fatty's accomplice, and fatty had socked Eve.

"Do you mean to say," she said to Smith, "that you dropped everything to rush all the way up here to Mount Fall to return a typewriter?"

Smith laughed mildly. "And to get my own back. Anyway, it wasn't out of my way. I'm a salesman. I'm driving home to Utica where I live, and this is on the highway. Can I have my typewriter back?"

Eve pinched Jerry. He scowled at her. Did she take him for an utter fool? He knew as well as she did that this was a trick to get possession of his typewriter. And he knew something else: the man who called himself Monty Smith was probably armed.

"How do I know that's my portable?" Jerry said.

"I'll show you." Smith went to the table and put his hat on it and then the typewriter and pushed the catch. Then, without raising the lid, he turned to Jerry and Eve and shook his head. "This goes two ways. Show me if you have my typewriter."

"Sure," Jerry said. "I'll go up and get it."

"Up?" Smith echoed. "This house has only one floor."

"There's an attic. I dumped the typewriter there when I came home." He took Eve's hand. "Come on, baby, we'll go up and get it."

It was pretty clumsy, pretty obvious. Smith smiled and unbuttoned his raincoat and put his right hand up to his necktie. Jerry had no doubt then that the man had a gun under his shoulder, and Eve's slight gasp told him that she knew also.

"Why doesn't the little lady keep me company while you get it?" Smith suggested amiably.

Very polite. What Smith meant was that Eve was to stay here with him as a hostage, otherwise that gun of his would come out.

Jerry hesitated. Eve pinched his hand and said: "Go on, bring it down, darling. We'll wait."

Slowly Jerry nodded. Smith wouldn't do anything until he returned. He was after the typewriter and nothing more. And Jerry thought of the shotgun in the attic.

THE gun was there in its case where he had left it a couple of years ago. Swiftly he put it together and then looked around for shells, though he remembered having used the last box two summers ago and not having bought more because he was leaving for the city.

"I'm in a hurry, Mr. Rocke," Smith's voice came up through the floor.

"Just a minute," Jerry called back.

No shells. But Smith wouldn't know that. The sight of the shotgun might be sufficient to neutralize him.

Jerry went with the gun as far as the attic door and stopped. He couldn't risk it. If he entered with the shotgun, Smith might go for his own gun and start shooting and Eve would be there.

"Mr. Rocke," Smith called. He sounded testy, nervous.

Jerry put aside the gun and found the ancient Underwood portable behind some packing boxes. He wiped the dust off the case and went downstairs.

In the living room, Smith was standing behind Eve. Her eyes watching Jerry enter were sick, and Jerry was glad he hadn't tried to pull a bluff with the shotgun. Even loaded it would have been useless with Eve as a shield before Smith. Plainly Smith was no fool.

Smith's head bobbed forward. "That it?"

"That's the one I brought home," Jerry said. "See if it's yours." He reached it to Smith.

"Put it on the table," Smith ordered. A very careful man. He hadn't taken his gun out, but his right hand remained close to his shoulder.

Jerry put the case on the table, beside the one Smith had brought.

"Open it," Smith ordered.

Jerry pushed back the lid and then nonchalantly put the back of his thighs against the edge of the table. His hand reached behind him. Eve gnawed her lower lip. It was obvious that Smith wouldn't be fooled by this substitute.

Smith moved forward. He peered down and said angrily: "This is a piece of junk. And it's not—" Quickly he raised his head and the tail of his eye saw Jerry's arm move. Smith clawed for his gun.

The bookend swooped and struck. Eve screamed. Smith's legs started to fold and

Jerry hit him again. Smith made a motionless dun-colored splotch on the fiber rug.

"That," Jerry told Eve, "is how to hit a guy with a bookend."

Her scream had rippled off into wild laughter. "I was jittery for a moment, darling. Though I should have known you'd—" Then she yelped.

The front door crashed open. Feet raced across the foyer.

Jerry dropped down beside the unconscious man and yanked out the stubby revolver which was loose in a clip under the shoulder. He had the muzzle focused on the doorway when two people burst into the living room.

"It's only the Gardens," Eve sighed. "We thought you were—that is, might be—" Her voice faded in confusion at the horror in the faces of the gaunt man and the round blond woman.

Jerry stood up. He looked at the gun in his hand. It embarrassed him. He dropped it into a pocket.

"I didn't shoot him," he explained. "I only knocked him out with a bookend."

"Oh," Gertrude Garden said weakly. "Is that all?" She moved closer to her husband as if for protection.

Carl Garden wet his lips. "We were coming over to see if Mrs. Rocke had recovered from her—ah—experience. We heard her scream and so rushed in." He thought that over and then added: "Scream a second time."

"I'm the hysterical type," Eve said. "I'm always screaming."

Mrs. Garden looked down at Smith and shivered. "Let's go home, Carl," she said.

"I think we'd better," Garden agreed.

They eased back into the foyer, looking as if they wanted to run.

Jerry recovered when they were out of sight. He went after them and caught them on the terrace. They stopped short when he called to them. The woman huddled closer to her husband; he threw an arm about her shoulders. Their eyes were fixed nervously on the sagging pocket where Jerry had put the gun.

"Look, folks," Jerry said. "A couple of guys want something and seem ready to kill us to get it. You saw me take that gun from his pocket."

"Want something?" Garden said.

"It seems to be my typewriter. Lord knows why it should be of any value to anybody. It's taken an awful beating these last couple of years. One of the keys sticks, and the margin release—"

They were drawing away from him without moving. It seemed obvious to them that he was either insane or lying. He couldn't blame them.

"Yes, your typewriter," Garden muttered. "Of course." He pulled at his wife. "Well, we'll be running along."

Jerry opened his mouth and gave it up. Time to explain to them later, when he had an explanation. He stood there watching them move in a kind of restrained frenzy along the path to their house a hundred feet away. Then he realized that he was getting soaked to the skin and turned back into the cottage.

All was not well.

Monty Smith was no longer in the living room. Neither was the portable typewriter he had brought or his hat. But Jerry hardly noticed that. With a strangled cry, he leaped toward the motionless figure of Eve lying in a crumpled heap near the front window.

RUEFULLY Eve Rocke rubbed her jaw. "This," she said disgustedly, "is getting monotonous. Still, I prefer a fist to a gun. It leaves less after-effect."

She was lying on the couch where Jerry had carried her. He put down the cold cloth with which he had been massaging her face. "I left you alone with him," he brooded. "I ought to be kicked."

"You and me both, darling," Eve said. "I suppose I should have kept an eye on him, but he looked as if he'd stay out cold all night. I heard you speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Garden on the terrace, so I went to the window to listen. Monty Smith—that's a phoney name, of course—was very quiet about rising and coming up behind me. I never saw him. Wham! A clean knockout. He's no gentleman, striking a woman with his fist."

Jerry took Smith's compact automatic out of his pocket and looked in the magazine. The guy had come for business; the gun was fully loaded.

"Lucky I lifted his gun," Jerry said, pushing out his jaw. "Now let him and his fat pal come back."

Eve sat up. "They'll be back, all right. They're frantic for that typewriter. What do you think is in the portable case, darling?"

"My typewriter," he said.

"Of course. But I mean that other thing."

"What other thing?"

"What they're after." Eve hugged one bare knee and dreamily regarded the ceiling. "The priceless ruby or the secret plans or whatever it is."

He studied her narrowly. "Did those smacks damage your brain?"

"Darling, don't you see it?" she said. "Your typewriter is hardly worth anything, even these days when they don't make any more, so it has to be something in the case. Say somebody wanted to smuggle something out of India to this country. It was slipped into the case of your portable just before you left India, and now that you've brought it to this country they want to relieve you of it. What better way to get it here than to use a war correspondent as an unwitting dupe?"

"Offhand," Jerry said, "I can think of at least a million better ways, and no worse way. I had that typewriter out a dozen times while I was on the ship, and I used it at the hotel after I reached New York."

"Oh," Eve said disappointedly.

"I'm sorry, baby," Jerry told her. "Rubies would have been exciting. Secret plans would have been even better. All we've got—in fact, what have we got?"

"I," Eve said, "have a headache and a swollen jaw. When are you going to call the police, darling?"

"And tell them what? That I knocked a guy out cold because he said he thought I'd exchanged my typewriter for his? It's true fatty attacked you, but when you tell the cops the reason, they'll do worse than not believe you. They'll think you have something up your sleeve and start making things miserable for you."

"So what do we do?"

"That—" Jerry said and got no further. A car was pulling up to the house.

Jerry tightened his grip on the automatic and twisted on the couch to peer out of the window. The sun had set; through the gloom headlights momentarily blinded him. Then the car turned broadside to the house and stopped, and he saw that it was a taxi badly in need of paint.

"Here comes my typewriter," Jerry said and went to let Will Ames in.

The hack driver was carrying Jerry's bag and typewriter. He asked: "You got a baby now, Mr. Rocke?"

"Will, you anticipate us," Jerry said. "And I resent the implication. I was abroad for eighteen months."

Will blinked at him as if he were trying to make sense out of the verbiage. Then he said: "I guess you left these behind, Mr. Rocke. Soon as I seen the typewriter, I figured it was yours on account of you write for the newspapers."

Jerry said, "Thanks, Will," and relieved him of the stuff and locked the door after him. Eve came out to the foyer, and her eyes glowed with excitement.

"I hope it's a big ruby," he said dryly. "The kind that Indians are always sticking into the eyes of Buddhas according to traditional adventure fiction. I wouldn't know because I really was in India, but—"

With an impatient growl, Eve pulled the portable from his hand. She switched on the living room lights and placed he

case next to the ancient Underwood on the table. She raised the lid. The Corona sat there placidly.

"Not even secret military plans," Jerry sighed.

Eve said confidently, "You'll see," and removed the portable from its case. She ran her fingers over every inch of the case; then she took up the portable in both hands and shook it.

Jerry said: "I'm not the kind of husband who tells you I told you so."

"There has to be something," she insisted.

"Something, but not—" Jerry whistled. He shouldered her aside to get a better look at the machine. "Hey, that's not my typewriter. It's a Corona, the same model, but mine has seen a lot more use."

"Are you sure, darling?"

"Of course I'm sure. I've been the slave of that damn machine day and night for two years. I ought to know it by now. And the 7 on my machine stuck. Watch this."

He struck the 7 key. The bar hit the platen with the proper snap and returned.

"You see?" he cried. "My typewriter wasn't at the place where I'd left it in Lou's bar, but my bag was. Somebody who was there at the same time must have had a portable just like it. He picked up mine by mistake and left his."

"Then Smith was right," Eve muttered. "You took his typewriter and he took yours. All he wanted was to get his back and you knocked him out cold." She started to giggle.

"Stop that!" Jerry snapped. "It isn't funny."

HER shoulder shook. "Not to Smith and me it wasn't. We both got damaged. When he recovered consciousness, he knocked me out and grabbed the typewriter and fled for his life. He must have thought he had walked into a den of homicidal maniacs."

"What does that make your fat friend?" Jerry asked quietly.

Abruptly she sobered. "For a minute I forgot." Her puzzled eyes tilted up to his face. "The fact is, that was really your typewriter Smith came with. All he wanted was to get his own back."

"That was all," Jerry said grimly. "But he wanted it badly. Fatty must have been near Mount Fall, and Smith phoned him to get it. He had learned I was making the two-twelve, but he couldn't know I'd missed it. So the fat man barged in here, assuming I'd arrived."

Eve nodded. "Then when the fat man failed to get it, Smith tried soft-soap. But why didn't Smith do that right off? If he had simply come here without sending the fat man and had said there'd been a mistake, we wouldn't have suspected anything wrong. We'd have given him back his typewriter without trouble."

"They were desperate and in a hurry," Jerry said. "They couldn't wait."

"But why?" Her eyes widened on the portable. "Then it must contain something very valuable."

"Rubies?" Jerry mocked her.

She tossed her head. "Be funny. I was almost killed twice because of it." She held the portable to the light and peered through the maze of bars and springs. "It would be something very small. Maybe inside the lining of the case."

"It's a thin paper lining and glued," he pointed out.

She didn't bother to argue. She went into the kitchen and returned with a sharp vegetable knife and a small screwdriver. Glumly he watched her slash the case.

"If Smith had been in the beer joint, you would have seen him," she observed as she worked.

Jerry shrugged. "You see too many faces in New York to remember any in particular. Lou's was crowded. I have a vague memory of somebody like Smith sitting near me at the bar, but it wasn't raining in New York and he hadn't that raincoat on, so there's no clear picture."

Eve had finished making a shambles of the case. She compressed her lips tighter and picked up the screwdriver and removed the carriage. She examined the platen under the light.

"Code written on tissue paper and stuck into a tiny hole bored into the rubber platen," he suggested.

"It could be," she pondered. "But I don't see any sign—" Her head lifted sharply. "Oh, you're still trying to be funny, darling. It has to be something. What are you doing?"

"Thinking," he said. "I don't like it."

"I suppose I like having my scalp laid open and then—"

"That's not what I mean." He lit a cigaret.

Determinedly Eve continued with the screwdriver. Presently she straightened up from the chaos she had produced and said wearily: "I'd give a lot for a drink."

"Now you're talking," he said.

He got a bottle of rye out of the bag and poured two stiff ones. With his glass in his hand, Jerry went through the house, locking both doors and all the windows. Then he returned to the living room and sat down on the couch with Smith's gun at his side.

"It's stifling in here," Eve complained.

"Better than being dead."

"I will be soon if you don't open a window. What do we do now?"

He put the empty glass down on the floor. "To begin with, get you as far away from here as possible."

"Wild horse couldn't drag me away."

"I would," he assured her. "But there are complications. We have no car and the telephone company isn't replacing our phone because of the war, so there's no way to call a hack. It would be too dangerous to walk to the station in the darkness even though I have a gun."

"You think they're still outside?"

"They're not far. They've gone to too much trouble to give up easily. They'll be back. I'd like that, if you weren't here."

"Well, I am here, darling," she said comfortably, snuggling her bare legs under her. "You had all the fun in India. Now I'm going to share this with you."

"That's what I'm afraid of." He looked longingly at the bottle of rye and decided that he ought to keep stone sober. "I've got an idea. I'll call the Gardens from a window. They'll phone a taxi for us."

"They think you're a madman," she reminded him. "If they hear your voice, they'll lock themselves in their cellar."

"Maybe they'll send for the police to protect themselves from me," Jerry said hopefully.

The bedroom window faced the Gardens' cottage. He was raising it when he heard a car approach the house. Gun in hand, he rushed back to the living room. Eve was on her feet, looking out of the window.

"Here are your police," she said. "I suppose the Gardens called them. That's Sheriff Press."

Over her shoulder he saw the broad-hipped form of the sheriff getting out of a sedan. Jerry had known him fairly well in other days, a close-mouthed, shrewd poker opponent, and Eve had been vaguely friendly with his wife.

By the time Jerry reached the front door, a fist was hammering on it. He switched on the foyer light and unlocked the door. Outside pressure slammed the door open. Sheriff Press took one step over the threshold, halted, clawed for his gun.

"Drop it!" he barked.

"Drop what?" Then Jerry realized that Smith's automatic was still in his hand. He grinned sheepishly. "You mean this?"

THE sheriff's florid face was tense, cautious, his big revolver lined on Jerry's midriff. A boyish deputy stood behind him, his gun also out.

Eve giggled. She had followed Jerry out to the foyer. "Why, Sheriff, you don't think that Jerry—" She stopped, not sure how to finish the sentence.

"Think what, Mrs. Rocke?" the sheriff asked softly.

"Why, that my husband would—that gun—it isn't his."

"It's in his hand." The sheriff's face hardened. "I said drop it."

Jerry placed the automatic on the floor. "I forgot it was in my hand."

"Pick it up, Gib," Sheriff Press said briskly. The deputy scooped up the automatic. The sheriff waved his gun. "Into that room, both of you."

Eve reached for Jerry's hand. She looked scared. He whispered, "We can explain easily enough," and led her into the living room.

"Ah!" the sheriff said. He strode to the table and looked down at the dismembered typewriter. "It seems I got here just in time. You were taking it apart so you could get rid of it more easily."

"Good Lord!" Jerry breathed. "Is everybody losing his mind?"

"Bluff won't help, Rocke," the sheriff said. "You watch 'em, Gib. I'll have a look around."

They heard the sheriff stamp heavily through the cottage. They heard him go up to the attic and then down to the cellar and then out through the back door.

Eve said: "What's going on, Gibby?"

"My name ain't Gibby. It's Gib."

"Don't the girls call you Gibby?" Eve said.

The deputy flushed and tightened his mouth.

"He won't talk," Jerry told her. "That's the way the police are when they've apprehended desperate criminals."

"Who are desperate criminals?"

"We are. Aren't we, son?"

Gib's lips twisted. "People like you should be boiled in oil, that's what."

"You see, baby," Jerry said. "We're very criminal criminals."

Eve shook her head as if to clear it. "What did we do?"

"I'm not absolutely sure," Jerry said slowly. He didn't feel nearly as flippant as he tried to sound. He didn't feel flippant at all. "I think I understand why a typewriter would be so important. Not rubies, baby, or secret plans, but something to make certain people kill."

She stared at him, open-mouthed, and was about to put a question when Sheriff Press returned. He came a little way into the room, looking at Jerry and Eve with cold rage.

"Couldn't have got here a minute later," he said. "You managed to get rid of her, but you didn't have time to get rid of the rest, especially the typewriter and the guy outside."

"The guy?" Jerry muttered dazedly. "What guy?"

"Come and see for yourself."

Eve's fingers were tight about Jerry's hand as they tagged after the sheriff through the kitchen and out the back door. Gib and his gun brought up the rear.

"Guess you were dragging him away when I pulled up in my car," the sheriff said.

A shaft of light streaked out from a flashlight in the sheriff's left hand. There, in the midst of the petunias, lay the man who had called himself Monty Smith. His face was raising to the drizzling rain, but not enough came down to wash away the blood. His head was smashed to a nasty pulp.

Eve moaned and sagged against Jerry. "Darling, you didn't hit him hard enough to—" She gulped, realizing what she had said.

"So you admit you struck him?" the sheriff leaped.

"I—I—" Jerry let out his breath. "Oh, hell!" he said.

SHERIFF PRESS had permitted Eve to get into a dress. She had said that she was starting to be embarrassed in only shorts while an endless procession of men paraded through the house; but the real reason was that she was cold. She shouldn't have been because the night was sticky, but Jerry knew that the coldness she felt had nothing to do with weather. Now she huddled against him on the couch while the sheriff sat facing them with his gun on his knee. Gib had gone next door to make official phone calls.

"You knew we were getting suspicious, so you got rid of the girl," the sheriff told him. "Then you decided to dispose of the typewriter. As for the guy outside whom you murdered—"

"Wait a minute," Eve said. "Let's start from the beginning. What girl are you talking about?"

"You know. Where's Amy Merrick?"

"Amy who?" Eve said in bewilderment.

Jerry sighed. It was utterly crazy, but here it was beyond doubt. He said: "Amy Merrick is the little girl who was kidnapped in New York several days ago. Don't you read my stuff in the *Courier-Express?*"

"I would, darling, if you'd get some Broadway gossip into what you write."

"The fact is," Jerry said, "the sheriff has a notion we're Amy's abductors."

"Oh, no!" Eve said. "Why would we—"

"Why would anybody?" The sheriff waved his gun. "Fifty grand is a lot of money. You came up here yesterday, didn't you, Mrs. Rocke?"

"So what? I came up to get the cottage in order."

"I bet!" The sheriff sounded pleased

with himself. "While Mr. Rocke stayed in the city and wrote ransom notes on his typewriter and last night tried to collect the dough. It was neat, being on the inside the way he was, writing up the case for his paper. He'd know everything that was going on. That's how he knew enough not to try to collect the money last night and walk into the trap. Then he figured New York was getting too hot a place to hide the girl, so he drove up to Mount Fall with her, with either you, Mrs. Rocke, or another woman."

Jerry growled: "What's this nonsense about driving up here?"

"Don't act dumb," the sheriff said placidly. "About three o'clock last night—or call it this morning—a state trooper came across a sedan with a flat tire about half a mile down the road. A man was changing the tire and a woman was watching him. When the trooper stopped, the man bent low over his work, and the woman dropped a veil over her face from her hat. The trooper didn't think their actions particularly suspicious till later. He saw that the man could manage all right and he was getting back on his motorcycle when he happened to glance into the car. His headlight was shining that way and showed him something white on the car floor. Then he looked sharp and saw it was a little girl tied and gagged. That was when the man socked him with a lug wrench or something."

"When did you decide that that girl might be Amy Merrick?" Jerry asked.

"Might be? Stands to reason she is. New York City is far from here and we didn't put two and two together right away. We had to send out inquiries. The New York police figured the set-up soon as they heard. Amy Merrick had been wearing a white dress. It would take just that long to drive up here to Mount Fall after the kidnappers found out a trap was waiting for them instead of the dough."

"So that's what Florin was trying to tell me in Lou's," Jerry mused. "That there was a new angle to the case." He looked up. "How does that prove the kidnappers remained in the neighborhood?"

"They had to. The trooper didn't go out cold. He saw the car bouncing away on three tires and a rim. In their hurry, they'd left the spare and the flat tire on the side of the road. The trooper was groggy; it took him maybe a minute to start chasing them and send out an alarm. The car was never caught up with or found. We had the road blocked in no time. They couldn't have gone far on only three tires and we know they didn't abandon the car. In other words, they were practically where they'd set out to go when they had the flat. They rolled the car into their garage and put on another tire and sat tight."

"We have no car," Jerry pointed out.

"Not in your garage now," the sheriff conceded. "We didn't look in your garage right off because we figured nobody lived here. This morning, likely, it was driven away. The trooper didn't get the license number because the tail-light was out."

"And so all he knows of the man and woman is that they were male and female," Jerry said.

"You made sure of that—a woman in a veil and a man squatting in the dark beside the car."

Eve chuckled with relief. "I'm sure Jerry can prove that he was in New York all that night. Can't you, darling?"

Jerry could, but he knew it didn't mean anything. And so did the sheriff.

"I DIDN'T say Mr. Rocke was in that car," the sheriff said. "He stayed behind in New York to write the ransom notes on that typewriter of his and mail them from there and hang around to collect. There are more than you two in this—or were. That dead man outside, he was one of the gang. He was the one drove up here with you, Mrs. Rocke, and the girl, and he drove the car away later. Maybe there is a fourth, the one who took the girl away a little while ago when Will Ames talked too much. Everybody in the neighborhod has been warned to watch out for the sight or sound of a strange child or for queer doings."

"Queer doings," Jerry muttered. "That means that the Gardens got in touch with you."

"That's right," the sheriff said. "They phoned me and said that funny business was going on here. A minute later Will Ames came into my office and said he heard a child cry in this house."

"That's absurd," Eve protested.

"Will Ames warned you," the sheriff went on, ignoring her. "He told you he heard the kid cry. You got scared and sent her away with one of your accomplices and were getting rid of the typewriter when I barged in." The sheriff settled back with a smug expression. "But you know all that and a lot more. You know more about this than anybody. Haven't you got anything to say for yourself?"

"Plenty!"

And Jerry started to tell him all that had happened since he had entered Lou's bar shortly before two o'clock that afternoon. As he was speaking, men started trickling into the cottage—the coroner, more deputies, state troopers. When he finished, there was silence, as if each man present was considering flaws in his story. And there were flaws. Sheriff Press picked out one.

"The fact is, Rocke, there's a murdered man outside. You admit you hit him."

"Just a tap," Jerry said. "He was able to get up and leave after that. The fat man was waiting for him outside and killed him."

"That's possible," the sheriff agreed surprisingly. "The fat man—your accomplice. So was the dead man. Crooks fighting among themselves."

"What's that?" Eve bristled. "Are you calling us crooks?"

"Not crooks," the sheriff said. "Kidnappers. Murderers."

A deputy came forward with Will Ames. The hack driver told about the fat man who had inquired after Jerry at the station, but that didn't prove that the fat man wasn't an accomplice who had gone to pick Jerry up. And Will said that when he had returned with the typewriter and valise he had heard a child cry in the house.

Eve said severely: "Will Ames, you heard no such thing. You know you're lying."

"I wish I was, Mrs. Rocke, but I heard what I heard." Will twisted his cap in his hands. "I heard it when I was pulling up, and when I was leaving I stopped to listen again, and it was still crying."

Carl and Gertrude Garden were led in and regarded Jerry and Eve with fascinated horror. Mrs. Garden said she had known Mrs. Rocke since yesterday afternoon, and she'd thought her a nice, respectable woman. Then tonight—

Her husband took up from there. He told how he had heard Mrs. Rocke scream and had found her unconscious. When she'd recovered, she'd handed them an absurd story about having tripped and hurt herself. She and Mr. Rocke had been very anxious to get them out of the house. Then a little later, after Mrs. Rocke had screamed again, they had found Mr. Rocke crouching over the body of a man, and he had pointed a gun at them. That man on the floor might have been dead at the time. They couldn't tell, but he had been so very still. That was why they had phoned the sheriff as soon as they had returned to their house.

After that nothing happened for a long time. Jerry and Eve remained on the couch while the sheriff and the deputies and the troopers proceeded to take the cottage apart. After an hour they gave up and simply hung around. Jerry and Eve remained on the couch.

"Is this a psychological trick?" she whispered. "I mean, are they letting our guilty consciences work on us until we break down and confess?"

"Nothing as subtle as that," Jerry told her. "They're waiting for New York cops to get here, no doubt with a typewriter expert."

"It's fantastic, darling. They can't prove anything."

"In the long run, probably not," he said. "But they've enough to hold us in jail."

Eve didn't seem disturbed. "That should be an experience. Will they let us share the same cell, darling?"

"Sure," Jerry grunted. "With a double bed and maid service."

AROUND midnight the New York City police arrived in a high-powered car. A small gray-haired man opened a bag of tools and put together the portable typewriter which Eve had dismembered. Everybody in the room watched him silently. When the typewriter was again in working order, he spread out three sheets of manila paper and copied them. Those, Jerry knew,

were the ransom notes. Then, with the aid of a magnifying glass, the man compared the copies he had just completed with the original messages.

"No doubt about it," he announced. "The ransom notes were written on this typewriter."

An undercurrent of savage voices ran through the room. Nobody loves a kidnapper.

Jerry leaped to his feet. "Of course that's the typewriter. That's the point to everything that's happened to my wife and myself. That's why the fat man and Smith were so anxious to get it back. Smith was staying behind in New York to write and mail the ransom notes and collect the money while the fat man kept Amy Merrick in Mount Fall."

THE SHERIFF shook his head. "It doesn't wash. Only an expert who had an idea that the machine had written the ransom notes would compare the type. In anybody else's hands it would just be another typewriter."

"But I wasn't just anybody," Jerry argued. "I was the newspaperman who knew as much about the kidnapping as the police. You can imagine how Smith felt when he learned he had switched typewriters. I had photostats of the original ransom notes. We'd printed them in the paper. He thought it likely I'd continue to write the kidnapping stories on the portable; I'd compare the type peculiarities with the ransom notes. And he'd be sunk because he'd given himself away by inquiring at the bar after his typewriter, and the bartender would remember him. He thought he got a break when he learned I was bound for Mount Fall where his fat accomplice was hiding Amy Merrick. He phoned him to get the typewriter. But the fat man was a fool. He was crude and made us suspicious."

Sheriff Press waved toward the table. "All very nice, but why were you trying to destroy that machine?"

"Opals," Eve blurted, trying to be helpful.

There was a bewildered silence. Fervently Jerry wished that she would keep her mouth shut.

Eve flushed and added hastily: "I mean, I wanted to discover why the typewriter was so valuable to those two men. I thought—well, maybe something was hidden in it—like something valuable."

Somebody in the room snickered.

Jerry said: "Anyway, it's easy to prove that's not my typewriter. I've dispatches on file and notes and letters written on my own portable."

"I expect you not to be so dumb as to use your own machine," the sheriff said. He rubbed his heavy jaw reflectively. "Another thing. According to your story, the man you call Smith was here with your machine. Where is it?"

"He took it with him after he recovered consciousness and knocked out my wife. He—" Jerry stopped. "Isn't it outside near the body?"

"It is not."

"Then the person who murdered Smith took it."

"Why?" The sheriff smiled. "What use is it? This machine on the table is the one that counts."

"Maybe the murderer thought Smith had got his own portable back."

"And murdered Smith in order to get it—and Smith was also one of the kidnappers?" the sheriff said. "The reason you don't make sense, Rocke, is that you can't. Smith was one of your gang. You had a falling out among yourselves and you murdered him. Mr. and Mrs. Garden walked in on you right after. You had to get rid of the body then in a hurry—also the child and the typewriter. You were dragging the body out when I arrived."

Jerry snorted. "You think you can prove any of that?"

"There's a lot more wrong with the story you told me. I never care for coincidences, Rocke, especially not whoppers like Smith being in that beer joint just when you were and switching typewriters by mistake."

"That's no coincidence," Jerry protested. "Don't forget that I was working on the case. As you say yourself, I knew as much about it as anybody. Reporters drink and sometimes blabber. It wouldn't hurt Smith any to get some inside dope, some angle on how the police were working and what they knew. And he was lugging the typewriter around with him because he didn't dare leave it out of his

sight, or maybe because he was on the way to Mount Fall to join the fat man."

His reasoning bounced off the sheriff without effect. "Then there's an even more far-fetched coincidence," the sheriff said. "The kidnappers bring Amy Merrick up to Mount Fall, and of all the places within one hundred and fifty miles of New York, you happen to have a cottage here. Put that together with everything else, and you're guilty as hell." He dry-washed his hands. "Let's go, Rocke. We've got new beds in the county jail."

Jerry knew that there was nothing he could do to keep himself from at least spending the night in jail. He took Eve's arm. "Here we go, baby."

"Not Mrs. Rocke," the sheriff said. "Just you."

"But if I'm suspected of kidnapping, then so is my wife."

"Who said anything about kidnapping. We're not ready to make that stick yet. The charge at present is murder. There's a murdered man in your back yard. You admit you struck him and he's dead."

"But you can't do that," Jerry protested. "If you take me, you have to arrest my wife also."

The men in the room gawked at him. Even Eve looked as if she weren't sure of his sanity.

"Don't you see?" Jerry said. "She's able to identify the fat man, so he can't let her live. In jail with me she'll be safe."

"What's the gag?" the sheriff asked suspiciously.

"It's no gag. She's in danger."

"From the fat man? He's her pal, isn't he? One of the gang." Impatiently the sheriff grabbed Jerry's arm. "Come on."

Jerry held back and a couple of deputies closed in on him. Eve said: "I'll be all right. I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" Jerry muttered bleakly and went with the sheriff.

Outside it was still raining. He paused on the terrace, looking at the line of cars in his long driveway. "I'm entitled to at least one phone call."

The sheriff nodded. "Sure. I guess you want a lawyer."

"No," Jerry said. "I don't need a lawyer. I want to call the managing editor of the *Courier-Express.*"

HOWARD FLORIN showed up an hour before dawn. He must have driven all the way from New York at high speed to have made it in that time. His eyes were strained, his ferret face haggard. He huddled his long form deep in his damp topcoat as the aged turnkey fumbled at the lock of Jerry Rocke's dingy cell.

The county jail had no reception rooms, no visiting routine. Visitors were locked in the cell with the prisoner until their time was up or they yelled to be let out.

"I used up my last gas ration coupons to dash up here," Florin greeted Jerry as the door clanged shut behind him. "So you wanted to have no more of the Merrick snatch?" He regarded Jerry with a happy grin. "Kid, don't tell me you dragged me here so you could make an exclusive confession to the *Courier-Express?*"

Jerry said: "How much do you know about this mess?"

"I had a talk with the sheriff just now. I told him he was crazy. You and Eve aren't kidnappers. It'll probably be cleared up when Smith is identified as the guy who was in Lou's and exchanged typewriters with you. But there's also a little matter about a murder—"

Jerry walked across the cell and looked out the barred window. The rain was still coming down. Eve was about a mile away, in the cottage.

"Murder or kidnapping," Jerry said, "why doesn't the sheriff arrest Eve also? If there's enough to jail me, there's enough to make her an accomplice."

"These hick sheriffs are gallant. They're in awe of pretty women."

"Gallant, hell!" Jerry said. "Press is trying to be clever. He hopes that Eve will take the first chance she gets to scoot to wherever we're supposed to be holding Amy Merrick. He's having her watched. If she leads her shadow to where the girl is, the sheriff solves a sensational kidnapping and becomes a national hero."

"If you and Eve are both clean, why should the sheriff's stunts bother you?"

Jerry turned from the window, and his face was gray. "Because of that fat man. She knows him. She can identify him. I won't be surprised if his photo is on file with the police."

"Why worry, kid? The tails the sheriff has put on Eve will protect her."

"Will they?" Jerry said hollowly. "Their job is not to keep anybody from her, but to watch where she goes, if anywhere. It's a dark, stormy night. The fat man will slip through to her because he has to. I've got to get out."

"A lawyer might—" Florin started.

"I can't wait." Jerry moved closer to Florin. He said, musingly: "You're about my height and build and the turnkey is near-sighted."

"Huh?" Florin said. He backed away until the wall stopped him. "Now wait a minute, kid. I'm not going to—"

Jerry snapped up his right fist. He knew from past experience that he had a knock-out punch, and he learned now that the managing editor had a glass jaw. He caught Florin as he fell and dragged him to the cot.

"Sorry," Jerry told the unconscious man contritely. "I couldn't do it any other way. I'll try to make up for it by giving you an exclusive on the case."

When the turnkey returned to let out the visitor, he barely glanced at the still shape on the cot. Jerry was wearing Florin's topcoat and hat. He had the coat collar raised about his chin and the hat pulled low over his eyes. Not facing the turnkey, he mumbled: "The kid's asleep. He's had a hard day."

"Sure, hard day, murdering and kidnapping," the turnkey grumbled. His eyes hardly touched Jerry; yawning, he led the way to the head of the corridor. Then he unlocked a second door and negligently waved a hand. "Out that way."

"Thanks," Jerry said. He descended a flight of stairs to a broad hallway. All the glazed doors leading out to the hall showed darkness except the one marked "Sheriff." Jerry started to hurry past it and then stopped.

"What?" Sheriff Press' voice barked. "Will Ames murdered? Right in his own bed?"

There was a silence which told Jerry that he was listening to one end of a telephone conversation. Then the sheriff's voice came again.

"A knife, eh? Yeah, I figure it was that fat man, Rocke's accomplice. Poor Will saw him when he asked after Rocke at the station. Now that we have Rocke, the fat man thought he had to protect himself. I'll be right over. You stay there till—"

Jerry didn't listen to the rest. He ran into the night, into the rain.

Minutes later, as he trotted in the downpour along the highway, it struck him that Florin's car was probably parked in front of the jail. It was too late to go back; he'd wasted precious time by using his legs.

How precious? Will Ames had been the one other person besides Eve who would have been able to identify the fat man. And if the fat man had risked murdering Will to silence him, how much more reason would he have to silence Eve!

THE sky turned a blurred pink as Jerry neared his cottage. Ahead there was a dark hump of a car parked a short distance before his driveway. One of the sheriff's shadows watching for Eve to leave by way of the road. There would be at least one other shadow at the back of the house.

Hunched against the rain, Jerry stepped off the road into waist-high wild wet grass and approached the cottage from the side. There was light in the living room. Uttering a silent prayer, he crawled in through a bedroom window.

Eve was not there. She was not anywhere in the cottage. Twice Jerry went through the rooms and the attic and the cellar, and then he stood in the living room so weary that his legs could hardly bear him erect. His dripping clothes made a pool on the floor. Why had Eve left?

Dawn was breaking. From where he stood, he could see out of a window to the highway. The parked car of the shadow was carefully out of sight. The deputy in it evidently didn't suspect that Eve wasn't still here. He continued to wait behind a clump of trees at a point between this house and the Garden house next door, where the driveway angled in.

All at once Jerry was certain of what must have been at the back of his house for some time. He spun with the thought and raced to the back door. A hundred feet away, across a stretch of thick underbrush, the Garden house sat in darkness. Half-

way there, Jerry almost tripped over the man who lay half-hidden in the growth.

Murky light penetrated the rain. Jerry dropped to his knees and turned the motionless man over on his back. It was Gib, the deputy. Like Monty Smith, he had been clubbed down from behind, but he was not dead.

Jerry fumbled in Gib's clothes and found the revolver in his belt. The deputy had not drawn it; he had had no warning of danger. Had he been following Eve, who had left the cottage through the back door, when somebody had come up behind him?

Dropping the revolver into a soggy pocket of Florin's topcoat, Jerry moved on. There were no lights at all in the Garden house; it looked like the place of people properly asleep at that hour. Jerry hesitated. Was he all wrong?

And then he knew that he was right because Carl Garden showed him that he was. The tall, gaunt man stepped around a corner of the house. His hands held a rifle leveled at Jerry's chest.

Jerry dropped a hand to the revolver in his pocket, and he realized that he hadn't a chance and shrugged. "So it was you," he stated flatly.

Garden glanced anxiously at the spreading dawn. "Get into the house. Once I killed a female snake. The male came looking for her. I figured that might happen in this case, even though you were supposed to be in jail."

"There are snakes all right, but we aren't the snakes." Jerry's head jerked up. "Killed her? By God, if you—"

"Get in the house," Garden repeated.

Jerry obeyed. He was armed. Inside he might get the chance to use his revolver. He wanted to get inside with the rest of them and do as much damage as possible. If Eve was dead, he didn't care what happened to him.

Garden said, "Wait!" and closed in behind him and lifted the revolver out of his topcoat pocket. He must have seen the bulge it made against the material.

Unarmed now, helpless under that rifle, Jerry went down some stairs. And Eve was in the cellar—alive.

She stood against the hard stone wall, her wet dress clinging to her body, her wet hair thin and straggling. "Darling!" she said and struggled for a smile.

And little Amy Merrick was there. She was tied and gagged to keep her silent—a limp white bundle lying in a corner of the cellar. That sight enraged Jerry more than anything that had happened that day.

He lifted bitter eyes to the fat man whom he had heard so much about, but had not seen before. He was as Eve had described him, a wide mass of flesh in a brown raincoat and the overhead light glistening on his uncovered hairless pate.

"Carl!" Gertrude Garden whispered. "Why isn't he in jail? What's happened?" She seemed suddenly old and faded.

JERRY gave her nerves an additional twist. "I caught onto the set-up and told the sheriff. He's on his way here." Mrs. Garden gulped in noisy terror. Fiercely her husband gripped her plump arm, keeping his rifle on Jerry.

"He's lying," Garden said tightly. "Would he come here without the sheriff?"

"How did I know to come here?" Jerry said. "My wife, I'm sure, figured it out also. Didn't you, baby?"

Eve nodded. "Will Ames swore he heard a child cry. After they took you away I realized that Will had driven between our house and this. It was raining and sound traveled wrong and he got the impression that the crying came from our place. As I knew it hadn't, I reasoned that it must have come from here." But I had to be sure, so I started toward this house and I heard a grunt and—" She shuddered. "This fat man killed that cute deputy."

"Gib will probably live," Jerry told her dully. "That's one murder he hasn't got on his conscience, but he murdered Will Ames tonight and he was out to get you. Then he saw you coming out of the cottage and the deputy shadowing you, and he knocked out the deputy and forced you to come here. But they're finished all the same. They haven't a chance."

The fat man spoke for the first time. "All we have to do is get rid of you two."

Jerry turned to Carl Garden with a crooked grin. "Your mistake was in going into this job with a muscle man. He doesn't understand anything but force and gun-play. He botched it by getting tough about that typewriter and rousing our suspicion."

"That's right," Mrs. Garden said shrilly. "I've always warned you against him, Carl."

"Hell!" the fat man grunted savagely. He unbuttoned his raincoat and pulled it back to reveal the heavy automatic under his shoulder. "It was the rest of you that messed it up. You let the trooper see the kid in your car. Then Monty lugged the typewriter around with him and left it in the beer joint. He called me up here to get it back in a hurry or this newspaper guy would get wise. So what am I to do? Hurry means hurry to me. I don't beat about the bush."

"Did you have to kill Monty?" Mrs. Garden demanded.

"I NEVER did trust that mug," the fat man said. "He was a dope, getting that typewriter mixed up. And we hadn't any more use for him. Kill him and pin the killing on Rocke, I figured, and we'd be rid of Monty and Rocke, too. Let them disappear. The cops will be sure they knocked out that deputy and then took a powder with the kid. We wait till the fuss dies down and then contact the Merricks again without the cops knowing, and we collect the dough."

Jerry said cockily: "Except that the police are looking for a fat man. They have his description. He endangers you, Garden, and your wife every minute he's with you. He's too crude."

"Yes," Mrs. Garden agreed stridently. She was working herself up. "We don't need him. We never did. We have the child and—"

She broke off. The cellar was suddenly very quiet. Carl Garden let his rifle hover between Jerry and the fat man. The bones of his gaunt face stood out with strain, and the skin was like parchment.

The fat man drew his coat farther away from his holster. "Are you getting ideas, Carl?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," Garden muttered. "You're a danger to us—your presence and your methods. You murdered Monty. How do we know you won't murder Gert and me for no more reason?"

"Who took the gag out of the kid's mouth so her crying could be heard?" the fat man sneered.

"She had to be fed," Mrs. Garden said. "And I just couldn't leave her tied up."

Jerry gave the knife another twist. "It's already day and the police are all over. You can't get rid of the child or of us, living or dead, until tonight, and then it will be too late. Your fat friend will murder anybody to protect himself, to play safe. If he thinks he has to, he'll kill both of you."

"Carl, we can't trust him," Mrs. Garden whined. "You have the gun now."

Carefully the fat man moved his right hand nearer to his holster.

"Look out!" Jerry shrieked. "He's going to shoot!"

It worked. Their nerves, already raw, had been laid open, and the tension had to break. Automatically Garden shifted his rifle more directly toward the fat man.

But at the motion of the rifle, the fat man instinctively went all the way for his gun.

It was the rifle that thundered. The fat man, with his right hand crossed on his chest, opened his mouth, sluggishly folded to the floor and lay still.

Jerry was in motion with the sound of the shot. Garden tried to swing his rifle back, but it was too late. The barrel struck Jerry's arm; the muzzle was past his body. Jerry hit Garden twice, once with each fist. Garden slammed against the staircase. His eyes glazed as he fell.

Shrieks filled the cellar. Jerry spun with the rifle to see Eve kneeling on Gertrude Garden and pummeling her with her small fists.

"Okay, baby," he said wearily. "Everything's under control."

He lifted the revolver from Garden's pocket and turned to see Eve rise to her feet. She brushed wet hair from her face. "I bet India was never like this."

Gertrude crawled to her husband and sat on the floor in sullen defeat, waiting for him to revive. And then there was thin weeping as Eve removed the girl's gag.

Eve removed the ropes and gathered the child in her arms. Jerry looked down at the two. He felt something choke him.

"You look very good with a child in your arms," he said.

Eve raised shining eyes. "That's one reason I wanted you home from India, darling."

There was something different about her that Wes couldn't put his finger on.

MURDER COMES FIRST

by

JACK ELLIOTT

"Where's Al?" the mob yelled. "He don't show with the dough! Put Wes Morton, the shamus, on it!" But there was no moola in this job . . . only death—for the guy who found where Al was . . .

PERSPIRATION OOZED on the man's forehead. He tried to keep his face dry with a soggy handkerchief. It stayed wet and greasy. He was a small man, and fat. He wheezed.

Sitting directly across the desk from Wes Morton, he rested his pudgy hands on the arms of the larger chair. "I want you to find him," he said, "and quick!" His voice was shrill.

Wes leaned back in his chair. He rubbed

his large nose between a knuckle and thumb. His tan face was covered with small lined wrinkles. "What's this McAvoy done to you?"

The fat man leaned forward and wiped his face with the wet handkerchief. "He owes me some money."

"Enough to make it worth while hiring a private dick?" His sun-bleached eyebrows were arched slightly, but the rest of his bony face remained emotionless. Crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes gave the impression that he was smiling, though his mouth was a thin line.

"Enough," the fat man answered. "To pay your price, Morton."

"Why don't you have one of your boys find him?" Wes asked quietly. "They must know Al McAvoy better than I do. All I know is that he's a card sharp. And you just told me that."

"My boys know their business and you're supposed to know yours."

"You loaned him the money?"

"Yeah," the small man piped. "I've been backing his game." He hesitated as Wes' eyebrows lifted. "O.K., Morton, I owned the game and Al and this pal of his were running things."

"He took a powder with the proceeds?" Wes asked.

"I was waiting for him out at the bar in the Pines on the edge of town. He didn't show up."

"Who's his pal?"

"Another cheat by the name of Stock." He wiped his forehead once more. "They've been pals a long time. McAvoy has a scar on his cheek from some affair he pulled Stock out of."

"All right, Ferrin," Wes said. "I'll see if I can get your money."

"Leave the money to me." The small man snapped. "You find Al and leave the rest to me."

"Any suggestions on where to start?"

"Better see his girl. She may not give you anything, but the word is that she's been two-timing Al." Ferrin smiled. "It may not mean anything, but I wouldn't let on that you know."

THE DOOR was opened by a blonde in a light blue dress. Wes noticed that she had a thin face, long tapering fingers which looked as if she had just taken them out of dish water, and a nice pair of legs. She looked cool.

"Miss Eavers?" Wes asked. "I'd like to ask you some questions."

She stood quietly for a moment studying him and then stepped back. She shut the door and nodded toward the living room. Wes sat down in a slip covered chair while she drew her legs up under her on the sofa. A dark bruise showed through the powder on her right cheek.

She smiled. "Andy sent you?" It was almost a statement of fact. Her voice was smooth and liquid.

"Who's Andy?"

She laughed. "Andy Ferrin." She took a cigarette out of a lucite box and lighted it herself. "He wants to find Al." She let the smoke drift out of her parted lips slowly. It rose toward the ceiling very slowly in the hot air.

Wes did not say anything immediately. She watched him through the smoke. She was laughing at him. He took a card out of his pocket and handed it to her. She glanced at it and put it on the cushion beside her.

"I didn't think you looked like one of Andy's boys," she said.

"Thanks," Wes laughed. "But I thought you might be able to give me a line on McAvoy."

"Remember, I'm his girl friend."

"Sure, but there is also a rumor that everything isn't just so between you two." Wes said quietly.

She butted her cigarette in a little Mexican dish on the coffee table. "That's what you hear?" She wasn't smiling now.

"They say that you've been two-timing Al," Wes stated calmly. "They also say that you and Al had a fight last night."

One of the girl's hands went to her cheek and rubbed the bruised place thoughtfully. "No one told you that. You just have good eyes." Her face softened and she smiled again. "All right. What do you want to know?" She laced her fingers together in her lap.

"When did you see Al last?"

"Last night." She frowned. "He was in a devil of a mood. I figured that something had gone wrong in the game until he started in on me. He got pretty nasty and I slapped him as hard as I could. Then he slugged me. That's where I got the

knob," she said, touching her cheek. "I folded up and sat down on the floor and bawled. Not because he had hurt me, but because I was so mad."

"He just walked out and left you sitting on the floor?" Wes asked. The girl nodded. "Is it on the level about your two-timing him?"

The girl's eyes flashed. "I think that's none of your business, Mr. Morton," she said in a low voice. She smoothed her dress over her knee.

"O.K.," Wes acquiesced. "What about Stock? Think he'd know where Al is?"

"I doubt it," she answered, "but you can try."

"I thought they were pals."

"Sure," she replied, "but things can always change."

"What happened?"

"Al thought Stock was cutting the pot."

"They were both working for Andy, weren't they?" Wes asked. "If Stock kept taking money off the table, that would be just that much more for Andy. It just meant that no matter who might have the biggest pile of money in front of him at the end of the game, Stock had more than his share at the end of the game tucked away in a pocket."

The girl took another cigarette out of the clear box and tapped it against a long fingernail. "Yes, but Fred didn't turn it over to Al like he was supposed to, so that Al could turn it over to Andy."

"Al's probably done the same thing himself," Wes insisted.

"Sure, but you can't get away with too much on Andy." The girl alleged. "Andy has ways of checking up on what he's supposed to get. Al was going to be the guy that got the kick in the pants if Andy found out. Fred was just supposed to be his helper. Al was responsible for the game."

"O.K.," Wes said getting to his feet. "Know where I can find Stock?"

"I think he's at the Summit House." She said smiling, "I hope you find Al. I wouldn't mind taking a turn at him myself for that smash in the face he gave me."

WES' SHOES made a rustling sound in the deep carpet of the hotel corridor. Stock's room was around the corner from the elevator. There was no floor clerk at the small desk in front of the bank of elevators. A thin, dapper individual with a dead-pan face, curly hair, big ears and a mole on his nose was leaning on the desk. He didn't pay any attention to Wes.

Stock was wearing a blue pin-stripe suit, an ox-blood shirt and a dark foulard tie when he opened the door. He listened quietly while Wes explained what he wanted and then waved him inside.

There was a rocking chair and the bed. A few toilet articles were scattered across the top of the bureau. Stock dropped onto the edge of the bed and Wes took the chair.

"So Andy is getting hot about McAvoy," Stock remarked. His mouth opened in a smile without showing any of his teeth. He was a big man, partially bald, with a red, close-shaved face and large, powerful hands that were continually in motion. His voice was loud and harsh. "It's about time."

"Yeah?" Wes shook a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and lighted it. His voice did not show any interest. "Why is it about time?"

The big man frowned. He studied Wes for a moment before he answered, making up his mind. "You mean Ferrin didn't tell you?"

"No," Wes answered slowly. "What's he holding out?"

"You know Al and I have been running the game for Andy Ferrin?" Wes nodded his head and the big man went on "Well, Al has been holding out on the boss. That's all right with me. Andy expects a certain amount of that."

"So what is Andy kicking about?" Wes demanded coolly.

The red faced man thought a moment before answering. "Al has been holding out sizable chunks of dough."

"And Ferrin wants his money back," Wes frowned. "Why did you and Al split?"

"Because he claimed that I was the one that was pulling the hold-out."

"How long have you and Al been working for Andy?" Wes asked. He wondered who was really holding the money that Andy was looking for.

"About two years," Stock answered. "Before that we were working in Cleveland."

"That where Al picked up his scar?"

"Yeah," the big man mumbled. "Some characters tried to rig him for the hot seat. We had quite a tussle."

"You don't have any idea where Al might be?" Wes wondered.

The man smiled and shook his head. "If I knew I'd tell you." He shrugged his shoulders. "He doesn't exactly confide in me since he started pulling the double cross."

Wes started to get out of the chair and then settled back. "I almost forgot," he said casually. His voice was flat and emotionless, but his eyes watched the big man carefully. "There's a mug hanging around the elevators. I had the idea he might be interested in you."

"You did?" The big man laughed. "Could be. What's he look like?"

"Thin, curly hair, big ears and a mole on his nose," Wes reported. "Know him?"

"Yeah." The big man grunted. "He's a friend of Al's."

"Know what he might have on his mind?" Wes inquired.

Stock shook his head. A speculative glint came into his eyes, but he didn't say anything.

"Want me to go out and see if he's still there?" Wes asked.

"No," Stock replied. "I can take care of myself."

"O.K."

Wes got up and left the room. The troubled look was still on the big man's face when he left. Wes wondered who he was supposed to believe. There was no way of his deciding and he dismissed it from his mind.

The thin man with the mole wasn't in sight when he went down the hall. He had hoped that he would get a chance to talk to him. If he was another of Al's friends, he might know something. In any case the fact that he was hanging around Stock indicated something. Wes wished that he knew what it was.

THE GIRL at the desk in his outer office looked up from the typewriter as Wes came in the door. She nodded toward his private office. She smiled.

"Ferrin," she said gently. "He's in a dither. Said he'd wait for you."

Wes nodded and went through the door into his office. Andy was sitting in the big chair facing the desk nervously smoking a big cigar. He jerked around and came out of the chair as the door opened.

"Where've you been?" he demanded shrilly.

Wes smiled and motioned him back into his chair. Wes sat down behind the desk. "What's the matter?" he asked calmly.

"They found him!" the fat man shouted. "They found him sitting in a little shack out on the other side of the Pines. He was dead."

Wes studied the little man carefully as he lighted a cigarette. The gambler seemed more excited than he would have expected him to be. "When did it happen?"

Ferrin shrugged his flabby shoulders. "I don't know. I just got the tip that he's been found. I don't know anything else." He puffed viciously at his cigar.

Wes knew that the gambler could have known everything there was to know if he had wanted to. The fat man was frightened. It was either because he was involved or because he was worried that he'd get canned for something he didn't have a hand in. Wes couldn't decide which it was.

"O.K., it's a murder," Wes said. "What next?"

The little man scowled and jerked the cigar from between his teeth. "Nothing. You're going to drop the whole thing and forget that I ever hired you."

"Sure," Wes agreed. "And what are his girl friend and Stock going to say?"

"What do you mean?" the little man demanded shrilly.

"I mean that you're going to have to keep me on the payroll to find the killer," Wes said flatly. "That's the only thing you can do under the circumstances."

Ferrin jammed the butt back into his mouth violently. He pushed himself out of the chair and started pacing the floor on his short legs. At the window, he halted and stood looking down at the traffic below. Wes watched him, but said nothing.

Finally, the short man turned away from the window. He was still mad, but his face was not as red as it had been. "O.K." he said testily. "You've got me over a barrel."

"I'm only telling you how things are going to look," Wes insisted. "Go out and

get yourself another private dick for all I care. I don't give a damn."

"I said, O.K.," Ferrin snapped. "You're still on the payroll."

"You still don't know anything more?" Wes asked.

"I told you—"

"I just wondered." Wes interrupted. "I can get the rest easily enough."

The little man continued to chew on the end of the cigar. He had a different handkerchief which he used on his face. It was even soggier than the other.

"You know a friend of Al's with a mole on his nose?" Wes asked the gambler. The fat man nodded. "He work for you?"

"No," Ferrin said. "His name's Joe something. Why?"

"I was just wondering," Wes replied. "Know where I can find him?"

The gambler shook his head. "Anything else you want to know?"

"No." Wes answered. "I'll call you if I find anything."

Wes had just finished calling headquarters when his secretary put her head in the door. "A Miss Eavers called while you were talking to Ferrin," she said. "She said that she wanted you to come out as soon as you can."

Smiling, Wes got up and put on his hat. "That all she had to say?" he said.

"She said that she had something about McAvoy," the secretary said. She smiled. "Think you'll need a chaperon?"

Wes hesitated in the doorway. "Probably," he said seriously. "But not the kind that you mean."

THE BLONDE still looked cool when she opened the door. There was something different about her, however, that Wes couldn't put his finger on. She shut the door behind him and waved him into the living room.

As he stepped out of the hall into the hot room, he realized what the difference was. Sally Eavers was frightened. He didn't blame her for being frightened. The man standing in the middle of the room facing him looked like he meant business. The gun in his hand merely emphasized the fact.

Wes stiffened as someone stepped up in back of him and checked him for a gun. The man in back of him had a thin voice. He said, "He's clean. What do we do with him?"

"Don't get anxious," the man in front of him said. "We'll figure that when we come to it."

The blonde stood in front of the sofa rubbing one hand against the back of the other. "I told them you didn't know anything," she said.

"That's all right," Wes said quietly. He went over and sat down in the chair the guy with the gun indicated.

He could see both men now. They were both thin. They both wore light grey top coats and dead pan faces. The one that had frisked him had big ears and a mole on his nose. Wes smiled.

"Why did you leave the hotel so suddenly, Joe?" Wes asked.

Joe's mouth started to open and then he shut it again. He didn't answer. He looked at the other man.

"You find out that Al was dead, Joe?" Wes grinned. "That why you decided that there wasn't any use waiting for him to go and see Stock?"

Joe frowned. "Paul," he said. "I don't like the way this guy talks. I didn't like the idea in the first place. I told—"

"Shut up," Paul snapped. "And let me do the talking."

Paul sat down in a chair facing Wes. He looked at the gun for a moment and then put it in the pocket of his coat. Joe stayed on his feet and continued to shake his head worriedly.

"I've heard about you, Morton," Paul said levelly. "And I know you can mean plenty of trouble. I also know that you are a sensible guy." He jabbed his finger toward Joe. "Joe, he doesn't know that—so he's got ants in his pants."

Wes smiled. "You friends of Al's?" he asked. Paul nodded his head. "Then why were you hanging around trying to put the finger on him?" Wes demanded.

"We had a deal on," Paul said. "Al was supposed to meet us last night and he didn't show. I kept an eye on this place and Joe kept his eye on Stock. When I found out that Al was dead, I called Joe off."

"What kind of dea'?"

"I don't know," Paul replied. "He just tells us to meet him out at the Pines." He frowned and then went on. "We were there but he never showed up."

"Was Ferrin there?" Wes asked quietly.

"Yes."

"All the time that you were?"

"I'm not sure," Paul answered after thinking a moment. He turned to the other man. "You remember, Joe?"

Joe shook his head. He went over and sat down on the sofa on the opposite end from the girl.

"You sure didn't meet him outside the Pines and take him up the road and pump some slugs into him?" Wes insisted. "Just because you say you didn't know anything about the deal he was working on doesn't mean you're telling the truth."

"No," Paul mused. "But I am. And I didn't kill him. You take it or leave it. I'm just trying to put you straight."

The girl jerked out of the sofa as the bell rang. She started toward the hall, and then stopped. She looked around at Wes.

Paul nodded toward the door. "O.K.," he said quietly. "See who it is." He took the gun out of his pocket.

The girl was frowning as she followed Ferrin into the room. The little fat man stopped short as he saw the gun in Paul's hand. He looked over at Wes questioningly.

"Come on in and sit down, Ferrin," Wes said. "Don't mind Paul, he's just suspicious. He's trying to put me straight on a few things."

"Yeah?" Ferrin piped. He frowned. "Such as?"

"He tells me that Al had a deal on just before he was killed," Wes explained. "You have any idea of what it might be?"

THE FAT MAN shook his head. He took out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "No. All I know is that he was supposed to meet me and didn't show up."

Paul put the gun away in his pocket again. He watched Ferrin intently. Joe slouched in the corner of the sofa, glowered. He kept putting his hand into the pocket of his top coat and then nervously pulling it out again. The weight of the gun held it open. Ferrin dropped into a straight chair against the wall.

"What about the money he had been holding out on you?" Wes snapped. "You sure you didn't kill him when he wouldn't pay up?"

"No," the little man cried. "I didn't kill him. I was in the Pines the whole time."

"You could have slipped out long enough to kill him though," Paul interrupted. "No one would have noticed."

"No!" The fat man's voice was shrill. "He said that he'd bring the money. He said that he'd get it and bring it out with him. But he didn't show up."

"He tell you that Stock had been holding out on you?" Wes asked.

"Yeah," the little man replied.

"You believe him?"

Ferrin shook his head. "No," he said. "But that might have been the way it was."

"He promised that he'd bring it with him?" Wes took out a cigarette and lighted it. He tossed the match at the little Mexican dish and missed. The girl didn't pay any attention. She was watching Ferrin.

"Yes."

"There wasn't any money on him when the police found him," Wes said quietly. "You think someone killed him for the money?"

"Maybe." Ferrin answered. His eyes shifted to Paul and then to the girl. "And maybe Sally decided she wanted to get rid of him."

The girl leaped at him. The fat man held his chubby arms up in front of his face, but there were two long scratches on the side of his face before Wes could grab her. She struggled as he lifted her off her feet and dumped her back on the sofa. She started to cry.

"I didn't," she sobbed. "I didn't kill him. I hated him, but I didn't kill him."

Wes went back to his chair and picked up the cigarette he had dropped. "You're sure you didn't kill him. You're the only one so far that hasn't provided an alibi."

The girl continued to sob without indication that she had heard his question. Wes smiled. "Maybe you can tell us who the guy is that you have been running around with."

The girl's head jerked around with fright in her eyes. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out.

Wes looked around as the buzzer rang once more. He frowned. He noticed that Paul had his gun out. Joe got up and went to the door. They could hear him talking to someone at the door and then two sets of feet treading the hall carpet.

"Why did you happen to turn up, Stock?" Wes demanded as the big man entered the room. "Or did you get an invitation?"

The big man hesitated a moment as he looked around the room. He glanced at Paul and the gun for a moment and then went on to Sally. He frowned as he realized that she was crying.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"You haven't answered my question," Wes insisted.

"I thought I'd come over and see if I could do anything for Sally," he growled. "I guess it was a pretty good idea."

"Was it, Stock?" Wes asked blandly.

"What do you mean by that crack?" the big man asked.

"Nothing," Wes replied. "I've just got through trying to find out where the rest of this nice little group was last night. Mind telling us where you were?"

"I was home."

"You didn't take a ride with Al?" Wes asked quietly.

"No," Stock snapped.

"That's funny," Wes remarked. "I was pretty sure you took a ride out toward the Pines after Al went up to see you."

"What do you mean?" the big man yelled.

"I mean that he came up to see you and got you to go along with him out to the Pines. He thought you wouldn't wise-up to what was going on. That's why he didn't have his pals here come along. He figured that he might need them out there, however, so he had them planted." Wes sighed. He butted his cigarette in the Mexican dish and went on slowly. "That's where he made his mistake. You knew he was taking you out to the Pines for a showdown."

Paul was caught flat footed. The gun seemed to leap into Stock's hand. "You're a damn liar, Morton," he growled. "You're not going to frame me for the job. Pick on someone else that had a good reason for killing him, like Ferrin."

Wes smiled. "Sure Ferrin had a good reason, but not as good as yours, Stock," Wes insisted. "You had three times the motive of anyone else." He hesitated, and then went on quickly. "First, you had to keep Al from proving to Andy that you were the one that was pulling the double-cross. That would have left you washed up high and dry after Andy got finished with you. Second, there was a little matter of the affair in Cleveland. You said that some guys were trying to rig good old Al for the hot seat.

"From what Sally and Ferrin have said I wouldn't be very far wrong in saying that *you* were the guy that was in danger of getting strapped into the chair. You have always been afraid of what Al might do with that bit of information. Finally, you're the guy that has been running around with Sally. You were afraid because Al was getting wise. You knew that he was all set to blow things wide open last night and you beat him to the punch. You forced him to drive past the Pines to the shack and then—"

WES NEVER got to finish the sentence. Stock jerked out of his chair with his finger tightening on the trigger of the gun. It was impossible for Wes to duck. The big chair hemmed him on three sides. There was just one direction in which he could move.

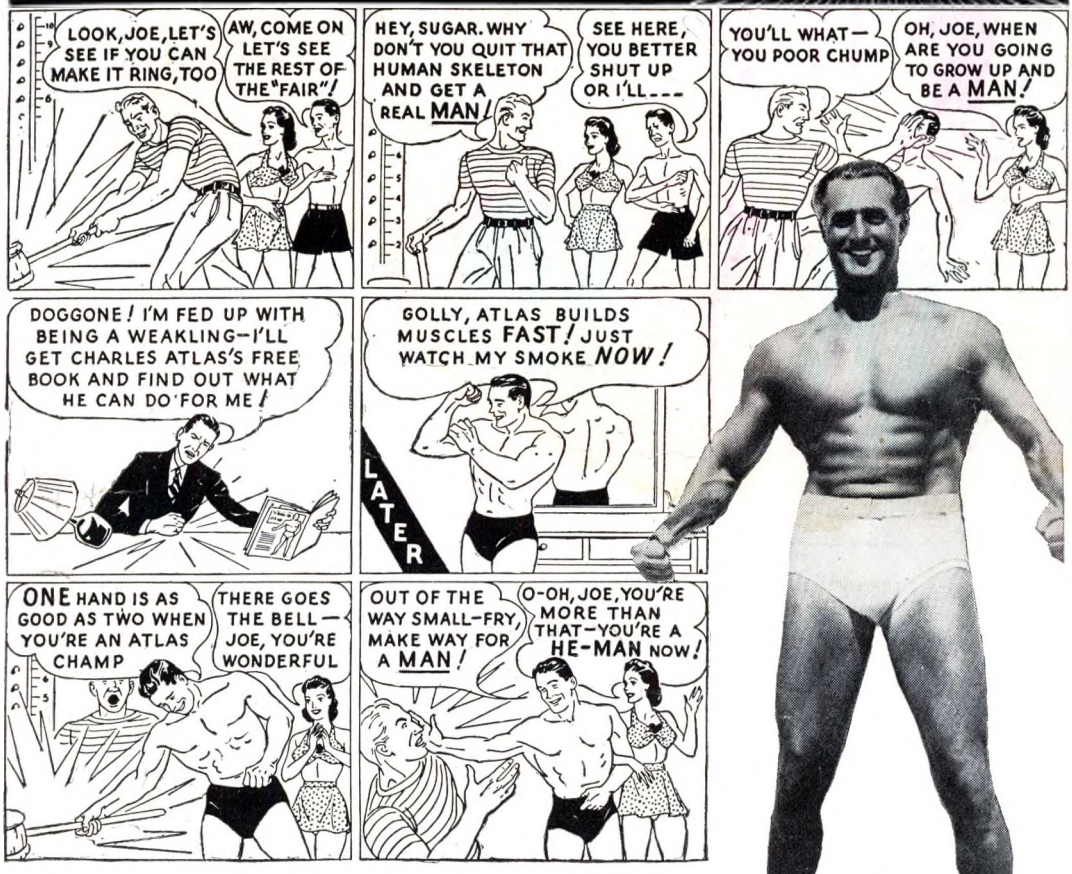
Just as he launched himself at the big man's knees, the girl let out a shriek. Stock's eyes jerked toward her as the gun went off.

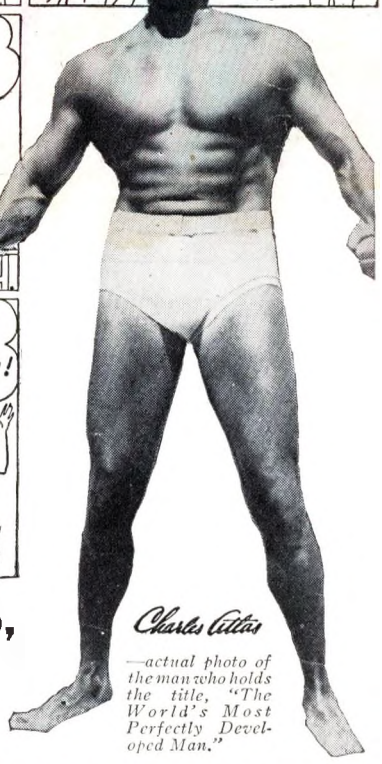
Wes' arms found the big man's legs and they went down in a heap. Joe stood beside Stock as Wes pulled himself from under the red-faced man. He held his gun like a club, but he did not need to use it. Stock was already out. Glass was still falling from the shattered mirror which the bullet had smashed.

Wes turned to the girl. "Was I right?" he asked quietly. She nodded dully. He turned to Ferrin.

"O.K., Ferrin," he said. "We still have to find your money. I don't think it should be hard, now that we have the little matter of a murder out of the way."

The Insult That Turned a "CHUMP" Into a CHAMP





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