

MYSTERY BOOK

No. 11 • **MAGAZINE** • 25¢

The Best in New Crime Fiction



PUZZLE FOR FIENDS

*Debonair Peter Duluth
is Marked for Murder
in a Thrilling
Full-Length Novel*

by **PATRICK QUENTIN**

Also: **THE PERFECTIONIST** *by Margaret St. Clair*
THE GHOST WENT WEST *by Leo Marr*
THE COFFEE POT MYSTERY *by Margaret Petherbridge*



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MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE

Mystery Book Magazine

THE BEST IN NEW CRIME FICTION—NO REPRINTS

Vol. 3, No. 3

MAY, 1946

PRICE 25c

A Full-Length Novel

PUZZLE FOR FIENDS 6

By PATRICK QUENTIN

Peter Duluth picks up a hitch-hiker and recovers consciousness in a plaster cast amid as beguiling a family of killers as ever set out to give their proposed victim—Peter—a high, wide and handsome time before putting his corpse to their profit.

A Short Story

THE PERFECTIONIST 113

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Sweet as Whistler's Mother, Aunt Muriel dreams only of painting realistic pictures—but her urge for artistic verisimilitude leads to an appalling local crime wavel

A True Story

THE GHOST WENT WEST 123

By LEO MARR

Desire comes from under the elms in this strange tale of a man who dies twice.

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I'M ASKING YOU	WILL CUPPY	109

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Death makes a HALLIDAY



BRETT HALLIDAY

by the Editor

CREATING a successful fictional detective character is a good deal like giving birth to a baby. The offspring is sired by the author out of his personal experience, with his agent acting as midwife and his publisher standing by as pediatrician to insure healthy growth once birth has been accomplished.

Like childbirth, the process is usually painful—but there are differences. The period of gestation is usually a matter of years and the pediatrician-publisher, unlike his medical parallel, pays the bills once he has accepted the case.

Take, for instance, that rugged, red-headed, sentimental gentleman of mayhem and murder, Michael Shayne. Shayne, who is featured in **BLOOD**

ON BISLAYNE BAY, the full-length novel which shares the billing with the esteemed Q. Patrick's **THE PLASTER CAT** in our June issue, is a solidly established detective character.

Shayne is widely known to magazine and book readers, to movie goers and to radio listeners. He might be termed, in short, a gold mine to his creator.

Gold mine or no, Michael Shayne was born the hard way. He stems deep from the life experience of Brett Halliday, his sire, and he took a long time getting published. So let us first examine Mr. Halliday as source material.

A genial gentleman of some forty-one summers with a washboard tummy and the poise of a trained athlete, Halliday was born, prosaically enough, in Chicago. Big-city life palled on him early and he fled to Texas to join the U. S. Cavalry just before his fifteenth birthday.

His parents dragged him home by the scruff of the neck in short order and enlisted him in high school—but not for long. Within a year he had run away again, this time to sea. For several seasons he roughed it on banana boats, taking engineering jobs between trips.

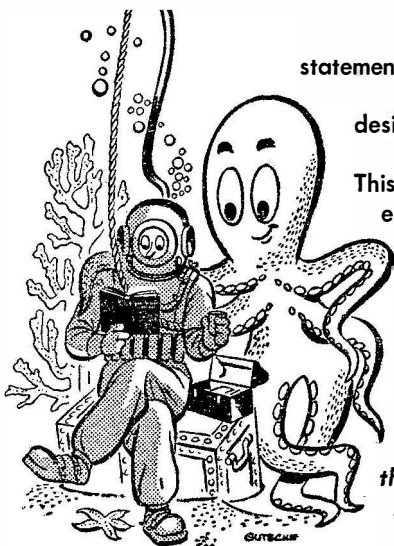
Engineering college came next, to be followed by a job in the Texas Highway Department. After his long period of knocking around, Brett Halliday seemed to have settled down.

"But somewhere along the line," he states wryly, "the writing bug bit me. So I quit to write fiction in Miami. About two million words went into wastebaskets in the next four years."

Then Halliday began to click. In 1934 his first book was published. So enthused was he by this fulfillment that he not only began to turn out six tomes

(Continued on page 130)

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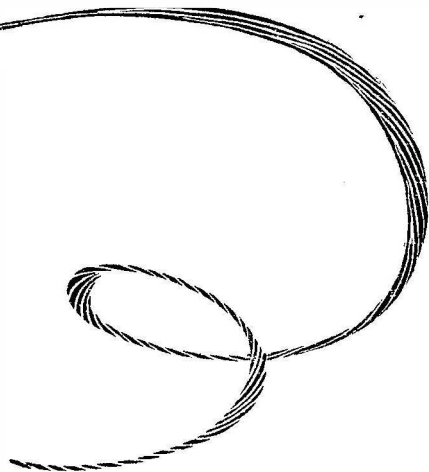
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Debonair Peter Duluth
is marked for murder
in a thrilling
full-length novel

PUZZLE FOR FIENDS



BY PATRICK QUENTIN

PROLOGUE

BEHIND us the bomber's propellers were roaring. The Burbank Airfield stretched endlessly. Iris looked small and rather frightened.

"Take care of yourself, baby," I said. "Give my love to Tokyo."

"Peter, it's crazy. I'd never have signed up if I'd known the Navy would discharge you so soon." My wife's lips were unsteady. "It's such a waste. Me going away—you staying home."

"It's only three months, baby. And think of that Occupation Army panting to see its favorite Hollywood cookie in the flesh."

"I don't want to be seen in the flesh except by you."

The studio had sent photographers to immortalize the occasion. Camera shutters clicked.

Iris asked anxiously: "You're sure you've got to drive straight to San Diego?"

IT IS sound gospel among mystery authors that to limit the action of a protagonist is to beg for trouble. Cut down his freedom of motion and the story at once suffers from a fatal form of creeping paralysis. Which makes Patrick Quentin's achievement in putting Peter Duluth in a wheel chair for practically an entire novel the more amazing because so cleverly has it been done that the story suffers not a whit.

"'Fraid so. Promised the boys I'd show up for a last fling. They want to see me as a civilian."

"You, in your fancy palm beach suit and gent's haberdashery. I still hardly believe it's you." Iris sneaked her hand into mine. "Do be careful driving, Peter. All that champagne we drank at the hotel. You know what champagne does to you."

"Don't forget your rubbers and button up your overcoat," I mocked her, trying to kid myself I didn't feel forlorn. "Baby, you sound the way mother used to sound."

"I wish your mother were still alive so there'd be someone sensible to watch out for you when I'm gone. You're such a goon." Iris clung to me. "Don't have accidents, Peter. Don't drink too much. Don't whistle after sultry brunettes."

"Not even small ones?"

"Not even small ones. Oh, Peter darling, miss me."

"Miss you, baby. Miss you."

The co-pilot came out of the plane. "Sorry, Mrs. Duluth, we're all set to take off."

I slipped my arms around my wife and kissed her. It was a long kiss. It had to last me ninety long days. She twisted away from me and hurried into the plane.

I headed back through the wire fence to the airport building and found my way to my car. As I opened the door, I felt a hand on my arm.

I turned to see one of the boys I'd noticed hanging around the plane, a rather unprepossessing boy with a thin, narrow face, close-set eyes and an untidy mane of black hair.

"Going to San Diego, mister?"

"Yes."

"Gimme a ride?"

The champagne had made me expansive. "Sure. Jump in."

As we drove away, I caught a glimpse of Iris' plane zooming down the runway.

The boy was scrutinizing me out of the corner of his eyes. "Say, ain't you the husband of that movie star who just went off?"

"Yes," I said.

He gave a low wolfish whistle. "Lucky guy."

"Lucky guy is right," I said.

Lucky guy!

That's what I thought. . . .

CHAPTER I



I WAS awake, but something was wrong. That was the first thought I had. This wasn't the proper way to wake up. My ominous dreams had faded. The whirring of propellers was scarcely louder now than the murmur of a sea shell in your ear. But nothing came to take the place of the dreams—nothing but a sense of warmth, a dull ache in my head and the knowledge that I could open my eyes if I wanted to.

A few tenuous memories stirred, a memory of whiteness, of corridors, of the hostile smell of ether, of stretchers and a jogging ambulance. The mental image of the ambulance

started the propellers roaring again. I lay passive, waiting for them to whir themselves out.

I was in a bed. I knew that. I knew, too, that I was uncomfortable. I tried to roll over on my right side. I couldn't. My right elbow seemed huge and unyielding as a boulder. I tried to shift onto my left side. This time it was my left leg that obstructed me. It was twice as big as a cow.

I was annoyed. Distinctly and out loud I said:

"Twice as big as a cow."

A rustling sound came, very close to me. Its closeness, its vague implication of danger, made me open my eyes.

I was staring straight at a woman, and she was staring back placidly. A bowl of pink roses stood on a table next to her. She had a large, beribboned box of chocolate candy on her knee.

"What's twice as big as a cow, dear?" she asked. "Me?"

I studied her gravely. She was big—a large comfortable woman with lovely skin and thick auburn hair piled on top of her head in a slapdash attempt at a fashionable upsweep. She must have been almost fifty. But she was still beautiful in a rich, overblown way—the way the pink roses would look just before their petals started to drop. She was wearing unrelieved, mourning black that didn't belong with her ripe, autumnal sensuality.

Behind her, broad windows, draped in voluptuous cream brocade, opened onto an unknown, sunny garden. All I could see of the room was light and luxurious as meringue.

She stretched out a smooth, white hand and caressed my cheek. "How do you feel? Terrible?"

"Terrible," I said promptly.

"Of course. But there's nothing to worry about. You'll be all right." Her hand groped for a piece of candy and then hesitated. "Does watching me eat **this** turn your stomach? I'll stop if you really want me to. Selena bought it for you. That's so like Selena, **isn't** it—thinking you'd want candy **at** a time like this."

The conversation had become too complicated for me. I hadn't any idea who the woman was. After a long, silent interval I finally decided upon a question that seemed both clever and subtle.

"What's the matter **with** me?"

The woman put the box of candy down by the roses.

"Don't worry, dear. It'll all come back soon."

I felt testy, frustrated. "But what . . . ?"

She sighed, a full, chesty sigh. "All right, dear. If **you** really want to know. Feel your head."

I put up my left hand. I felt bandages.

"Bandages," I said.

"Good boy. Now **try** your right arm."

I reached my left hand over and touched my right forearm. It was hard, rough, cold. I **turned** my head to look. There was a **sling** and under the sling a cast.

"A cast," I said.

"Go to the head **of** the class, darling." She leaned across the bed and patted a **hump** that pushed up the gray and gold **spread**. "That's a

cast, too. You've broken your right arm and your left leg. And you've also been hit on that poor old head of yours. An accident."

"An accident?"

"An automobile accident. You were out in the Buick by yourself. You smashed head on into a eucalyptus grove." A smile played around the fresh lips. "Really, darling, you know how dangerous it is to drive when you've been drinking."

I was struggling hard to keep abreast of her. Did I, perhaps, have some recollection, dim as the date on a worn dime, of a car lunging forward out of control? The hospital memory stirred.

"I was in a hospital. I remember that," I told her. "But I'm not in a hospital now."

"No, dear. You were in the hospital for two weeks but you've been out two days now. Dr. Croft has been keeping you under sedatives."

I stared at the woman and beyond her at the rich, unfamiliar cream drapes screening the long, sunny windows.

"Where am I now?"

"Dearest, you know where you are. Look around."

Her face and the mass of hair blocked almost all of my view. But dutifully I looked at what I could see—an area of deeply piled corn-colored carpet, a fantastic vanity all white bows and perfume bottles, and, beyond the woman, another bed like mine, covered with a gleaming gray-and-gold-striped spread.

"Nice," I said. "Never seen it before in my life."

"But, darling, really, you must know. You're home."

"Home?"

"Home, dear. In your own bed in your own room in your own house in Lona Beach, Southern California."

My slight ability to keep a coherent thought track was weakening. I knew she said I was home. I also knew that home was a place you were meant to know and that I didn't know this place. Something was a little unusual about all this.

Anxiety was in her eyes now. "Dearest, please try and remember." She paused and added abruptly: "Who am I?"

With a sinking sensation, I knew I was going to flunk that question.

Craftily—so I thought—I said: "You're not a nurse."

"Of course I'm not a nurse."

"Then who are you?" I blurted, too muddled to try any longer to be subtle.

"This is awfully disturbing, dear. I do hope Dr. Croft will be able to do something about it. After all, it's not much to ask you to recognize your own mother."

"My mother?"

"Of course." She looked slightly pained. "Who else could I be?"

The knowledge that I was legitimately confused in the head cushioned me from the shock. But it was still a shock to hear an unknown woman with auburn hair announce that she was my mother. Mothers were things you were supposed to recognize without having to be told. I began to feel sorry for myself.

"I don't know who my mother is," I said wistfully.

The woman had been looking at the roses. She turned sharply.

"Darling, please try not to be too complicated. I thought it would be nicer having your mother nurse you instead of one of those cold pillars of starch from the hospital. But I'm not very much of a nurse and if you start having weird symptoms, I'll have to get a professional." She smiled and patted my hand. "How much do you remember?"

"I remember the hospital."

"No, dear. Not the hospital. I mean the real things—the things about you." She turned her head, indicating the second bed beyond her. "Who sleeps in that bed?"

"I—I don't know."

"Who's Selena? Who's Marny?"

She must have seen a blank expression on my face because she didn't wait for me to attempt an answer. She added: "What's your name?"

"My name is—" I began, then panic wormed through me. Since my return from consciousness, I had never actually thought about my name. You don't think about your name. I knew I was me; that my personal identity was inviolable. But what was my name?

"You don't remember even that, do you?" she said.

I shook my head. "It's crazy. When I try to think there's nothing."

"Don't worry, my baby." Her voice was rich, soothing. "It's just the hit on the head. You'll soon be well again, Gordy."

"Gordy?"

"Yes, dear. That's your name. Gordon Renton Friend, the Third."

There was a gentle tap on the door. It opened a crack and the head of a uniformed maid peered around it.

"What is it, Netti? I'm busy."

"Dr. Croft, Mrs. Friend. He's just arrived."

"I'll come down." The woman rose and bent over me, kissing me on the forehead.

"Just lie there calmly while I'm away, dear. And say it over and over again. Say 'I'm Gordy Friend.'"

She moved out of the room, large and majestically physical in spite of the drab widow's weeds. After she had gone, I did what she said. I lay in that luxurious bed in that great sunsplashed room, thinking.

I am Gordy Friend. I am Gordy Friend. But the words just remained words.

The propellers started to whirl again. And, although I hated and feared them, somehow they had more reality than everything that had been said in this room.

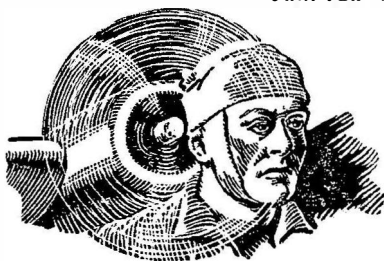
If only I could remember what the propellers meant.

Propellers—a plane—seeing someone off on a plane . . . ?

Was that it?

Had I seen someone off on a plane? Could it mean that?

CHAPTER II



AFTER a while the door opened again. My mother came in. I could feel her without even turning my

head—feel that presence, mellow as ripened wheat, intrude upon the spring freshness of the room.

She was at my bed. Her tranquil hand was on my forehead.

"I've brought Doctor Croft, dear. He says we're not to worry. It's the result of the concussion."

A man moved into my field of vision. He was in his early thirties, very dark. He was dressed in tweeds that were expensive and casual.

"Hi, Gordy," he said. "How d'you feel?"

I looked up into his white smile, feeling faintly hostile.

I said: "Are you someone I'm supposed to know, too?"

He thrust his hands in his pocket. "You don't recognize your mother?"

"No," I said.

"Well, well. What a state of affairs." He turned a professionally brisk look on my mother. "Perhaps I should be left alone with the patient for a while, Mrs. Friend."

"Why, of course." My mother threw me a coaxing smile. "Do try to be good and helpful, Gordy."

As soon as we were alone, the young man brought a chair to the bedside, swung it around and sat on it back to front. I was feeling clearer in the head now and something in me, without conscious identity, was putting me on my guard.

"Okay, Gordy." I got a head-on smile. "In the first place, I'm Nate Croft, a pal of yours and Selena's and Marny's."

He lighted a cigarette from an expensive case, watching me brightly through smoke.

"Tell me, just how much can you remember?"

"I can remember whirring propellers," I said. "I think I can remember an airfield, and a plane, and seeing someone off on a plane."

"Anyone in particular?"

"Not exactly. Except that it seems terribly important."

"The propellers come first?"

"Yes. They always seem to be almost there, if you see what I mean. Even if I can't hear them, I—"

"Yes, yes," he broke in, very much the professional interpreter of amateur information. "I'm afraid that isn't going to be very helpful."

I felt inexplicably depressed. "You mean there wasn't anyone going away on a plane?"

"A common ether reaction," Dr. Nate Croft held his cigarette poised between us. "The loss of consciousness visualizing itself as a whirring propeller. This person you imagine you were seeing off, was it a man or a woman?"

Suddenly I knew and I felt a rush of excitement. "A woman."

Dr. Croft nodded. "The nurse in the operating room. We get that frequently. A patient clings to the nurse's image in exact proportion to his reluctance to lose consciousness."

I couldn't understand why that rather pompous medical explanation brought a strange despair. He went on:

"Forget the propellers, Gordy. Anything else?"

I said listlessly: "There's a hospital."

"Yes. You recovered consciousness several times in the hospital. Is that all?"

I nodded.

"Well, well, we won't let it worry us, will we?" The teeth flashed again. "Your mother told you about the accident?"

"Yes."

"I guess you don't remember, but I run a small private sanitarium up in the mountains. Some people passing in another car found you. They asked for the nearest hospital and brought you up to me."

"I was unconscious?" I asked.

"You came to soon after they brought you in. You were in quite bad shape. They had to operate right away on the arm and the leg."

He went on: "It was always the blow on the head that worried me, Gordy. Your arm and leg are fine. But, after you'd come to a couple of times and still weren't clicking, I knew you had a temporary amnesia. I kept up the sedative treatment for two weeks. Then I thought our best bet might be to bring you home."

He smiled. "Don't you worry yourself about anything. Things will come back gradually. Maybe in a couple of days."

"Or a couple of years?" I asked gloomily.

"Now, don't let's get depressed about it, Gordy. Frankly, I'm optimistic. We've nothing to worry about with the arm and the leg. In fact, tomorrow I think I'll let you play around in a wheel chair."

Although I knew all this was bedside manner, it soothed me. Here was my mother and this friendly doctor. They were both doing all they could for me. I was in a beautiful room. I was Gordy Friend. Soon I would remember just what being Gordy Friend entailed.

I glanced around the sunswept gold-and-gray room. If this was any indication, being Gordy Friend was pretty painless.

I said, pleased: "I own this place?"

"Of course, Gordy. The house has been yours since your father died."

"My father?"

"You don't remember your father?" Dr. Croft looked amused. "It seems impossible that anyone could ever forget Gordon Renton Friend, the Second."

"But he's dead?"

"Yes. He died a month ago."

"So that's why my mother is in mourning."

I tried to stir up a memory picture of my father. Nothing came.

I asked: "Then I suppose I'm rich?"

"Oh, yes," said Dr. Croft.

My mother came in then. She patted Dr. Croft's shoulder as she passed him and sat down by my bed.

"Feel better now?"

"At least I know now who my father was," I said.

"I told him a little," said Dr. Croft.

"Only a little, I hope. Poor Gordy, I'm sure he's not strong enough yet to have to start remembering his father."

I said: "What was wrong with him? Was he a skeleton in our closet?"

My mother laughed her rich, syrupy laugh. "Good heavens, no. We, darling, were the skeletons." She looked at the doctor.

"Shouldn't we try Selena on him now?"

Dr. Croft shot a swift look down at the hump in the bedspread made by my cast. "I was just going to suggest it."

"Selena," I said. "Who is Selena?"

My mother had my hand in her lap. She squeezed it.

"Darling, you really are sweet. Perhaps I even prefer you without your memory." She pointed at the second bed. "Selena is the person who sleeps in that bed. Selena's your wife."

Dr. Croft was saying: "Is she somewhere around, Mrs. Friend?"

"I think she's in the patio with Jan."

"Then I'll send her up. Have to be running, I'm afraid." Dr. Croft patted my shoulder again. "I'll be in tomorrow and I'll try to put you in a wheel chair."

He left. My mother rose.

"Well, with Selena coming, I think I should beat a retreat."

She moved toward the door and then paused. "Really, all these flowers. This room smells like a funeral parlor."

She picked up two vases. One was full of red roses. The other held a large bunch of white and blue iris.

"I'll take these roses and these iris to Marny's room."

Carrying the flowers, she looked splendid as an Earth Fertility goddess of some ancient cult. A sensation of inconsolable loss swept over me and I called:

"Don't take the iris."

She turned, staring at me through the bright flowers.

"Why not, Gordy, dear? They're depressing flowers."

"I want them," I said sharply.

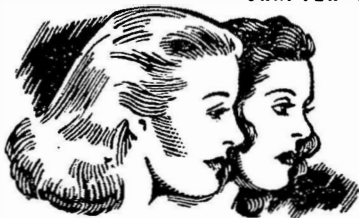
"Very well, dear. Since you're so passionate about them."

She put the vase of iris back on the table and went out.

I lay staring at the slender blue and white flowers. The propellers had started up again in my brain. I told myself that my wife was coming. I had a wife. Her name was Selena. I tried to remember what Selena was going to look like. Nothing came. Always the image of the flowers rose up blotting out the vague image of a wife. I had no control over my thoughts. There were the propellers, and that one word reiterating itself pointlessly.

Iris. . . . Iris. . . . Iris. . . .

CHAPTER III



AFTER a few moments the violence of the inexplicable iris reaction subsided. Selena. I played with the name of my unknown wife. It was one of those tantalizing names. Selena could be tall and slinky with cool green eyes. Selena could be prissy too, bony, spinsterish with a tight mouth. I was caught up in a sudden unease. Things had been too good to be true so far. There had to be a hitch. What if Selena was the hitch? A bony, spinsterish wife with a tight mouth.

To combat that cold, elbowy image, I conjured up a host of vo-

luptuous fancies. Selena had to be a brunette, I told myself. Wasn't there a certain type of brunette I was crazy about? What was the word?

Sultry. That was it. Selena had to be a sultry brunette.

The door was kicked open. A young girl crossed the threshold. In one hand she carried a small cocktail shaker full of drinks. In the other she held a single empty glass. For a moment she stood there, quite still, by the door, staring at me.

I stared back, feeling wonderful. She was about twenty-two. She was wearing a dashing cut black suit with broad shoulders and a skirt that stopped just below the knee showing long, straight legs. She had one of those figures that fit under the arm. Her hair, blue-black as tar, fell glossily around her shoulders.

She crossed to the bed and sat down next to the irises. My mother was an overblown rose. This girl was a cool, red bud. Suddenly she smiled.

"Hello, Gordy, you dreary object."

She put the shaker and the glass down, and she moved over onto the spread close to me and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were soft and fragrant. I brought my one good arm up and slipped it around her, bringing her closer. I went on kissing her. She squirmed away.

"Hey, Gordy. A sister's a sister."

"Sister?"

She shook back her hair and sat watching me broodingly.

"Who do you think I am? Your brother?"

I felt dejected. "The doctor said

he was sending **my wife up.**"

"Oh, Selena." She shrugged. "She's off somewhere with Jan. Nate couldn't find her." She twisted around and poured herself a Manhattan. "Mother said you'd lost your memory. Boy, you certainly have." She laughed, a deep, rich laugh. "If I had your memories, I guess I'd lose them, too."

Her skin was white and soft as my mother's. Against it, the red mouth was fascinating. I knew it wasn't in the book to feel about your sister the way I was feeling. I put it down to the amnesia.

"Okay, sister," I said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Marny." She crossed her legs, the skirt slipping back from her knees. "Really, this is quite intriguing. Let's talk about **me.** What shall I give with?"

I reached out for her drink. "You could give with that cocktail."

She pushed my hand away, shaking her head.

"Why not?"

"My dear Gordy, one of the things you're so conveniently forgetting is that we're making a good boy of you."

"I'm a bad boy then?"

"Terrifically. Didn't you know?"

"I don't know anything. What's wrong with me? Drink too much?"

Marny's impervious young eyes stared. "My dear, you've been potted off and on since you were sixteen. You were stinking the night you had your accident. Now the word's gone forth. No drink for Gordy."

I suppose I should have been discouraged to hear that about myself, but I wasn't. I couldn't remember

any especial interest in liquor and I didn't have any particular desire for her drink.

I said: "Tell me more about myself? What am I except a drunk?"

"I guess the polite word for you is playboy. But to me you're just a lush. A sweet one for those who like luses. Selena likes luses."

"Selena? Oh, yes, my wife." I paused. "Do you like me?"

"I've always thought you were quite a louse."

"Why?"

She grinned a sudden, spontaneous grin. "Wait till your memory comes back, dear. Then you won't have to be told."

Her hand moved to tug her skirt down. It made me conscious of her knees. I said:

"I wish you'd go sit somewhere else. You—you unnerve me."

"Really, Gordy." Marny twisted back onto the chair by the roses. "Nate says I'm to try to refresh your memory. Tell me. What do you remember?"

That question brought back the old sensation of something being hidden behind something, of everything being wrong and faintly menacing.

"I remember iris," I said.

"Iris?" Marny's alert eyes moved to the vase on the table. "What sort of an iris?"

"I don't know." My disquiet was almost fear now. "Just the word. Iris. I know it's important if only I could pin it down."

"Iris." Marny's lashes flickered over the candid eyes and for a moment they did not seem quite so candid. "Probably some hideously

Freudian image. There's nothing else?"

I shook my head. "A plane, maybe. Someone . . . Oh, what's the use?"

"Gordy, don't get depressed, darling." She was back on the bed again, holding my hand. "Think what a snazzy life you've got. All the money in the world. No worries. No work. All of Southern California to play around in. Us—and Selena."

"Selena?" My doubts about Selena started to stir again. "Tell me about Selena. What's she like?"

"If you've forgotten Selena," said Marny, finishing her cocktail and pouring another, "you're in for a shock."

I asked anxiously: "Thin and sharp-nosed with steel-rimmed spectacles?"

"Selena?" Marny wiped a smudge of lipstick off her glass. "My dear, Selena's probably the most gorgeous thing in California."

I was feeling contented again, and smug. "A nice temperament, too?"

"Angelic. She just adores everything and everyone."

"And a fine, sterling character?" I asked enthusiastically.

Marny gave me that straight, uninhibited stare. "That," she said, "is something you might as well find out for yourself."

I hadn't said anything in reply when the door opened. A girl came in, a girl in a brief white cotton dress with no sleeves. The first sight of her dazzled me. She was the blondest girl I had ever seen. Her hair, cut loose to her shoulders like Marny's, was fair as fresh country cream. Her skin, too, was cream, a deeper shade of cream darkened by

the sun. Her body, her bare arms and legs had the molded quality of sculpture. Looking at her, I felt I was touching her. And, although she was full bosomed and thighed, she moved to the bed with a grace that was liquid as milk.

"Gordy, baby."

Her lips were natural dark red; her eyes were blue as summer in the sky. She sat down on the bed.

"Scram, Marny," she said.

Marny stared sardonically.

"Really, Selena," she drawled, "do you have to be in that much of a hurry?"

"Scram." Selena's face relaxed into a swift smile that would have coaxed a platoon of mules.

"Please, darling, be a sweet baby. You can be sweet if you try."

Marny's long black lashes flickered. "All right." She got up, pushed past her sister-in-law and kissed me aggressively on the mouth.

"If things get too hot for you, brother, ring an S. O. S. on the buzzer. I'll be up."

She picked up her cocktail shaker and her glass and strolled out of the room, kicking the door shut behind her.

"That Marny. Such a sordid infant. Sweet, though." Selena's sun-warm fingers curled into mine. "How do you feel?"

I grinned. "Better by the minute."

"I'm your wife, Gordy. You don't remember me, do you?"

Selena leaned over me, pressing her mouth quickly against mine. Her lips were warm and liquid as her walk. They seemed to melt into mine.

Dimly I thought: *Didn't I say*

something about brunettes? Sultry brunettes? I must have been out of my mind.

"I loathe sitting on beds."

Selena tumbled back on the gray-and-gold spread next to me, her hair foaming over the pillow. She turned her head so that her face was almost touching mine on the pillow. "Darling, with those bandages, you look different, kind of tough. Isn't this exciting? It's almost like having a new man."

CHAPTER IV



WITH my good hand I caught up some of the soft, shining hair, letting it slide through my fingers.

"How long have I been married to you?"

"Two years, darling."

"Where in heaven's name did I find you?"

"Those bandages, they do something to me." She arched her head up on her neck, kissing me. "Pittsburgh, dear."

"I bet you were the Pride of Pittsburgh."

"I was. They were crazy about me in Pittsburgh. In the Junior League Poll, I was voted the girl most likely to exceed."

"Honest?"

"Honest." She nestled against me, bringing my hand down from her hair and holding it against her dress.

"Darling, Nate's awfully worried about you. Do try and get your memory back. It would do such things to his professional pride."

"To hell with Nate." I studied the gentle line of her nose in profile. "Tell me more about myself. Do I love you?"

The blue, blue eyes went solemn. "I don't know. I really don't know, Gordy. Do you?"

"On a snap judgment, I'd say yes. I kissed her before she kissed me. "How about you? Love me?"

She moved away slightly, stretching contentedly. "You're awfully sweet, Gordy. I simply adore you."

"But I'm an ornery character, aren't I? Drink too much."

"That Marny. What's she been telling you?"

"Just that. That I'm an amiable heel and a lush."

"Really, she makes me sick. What if you do drink too much? How can anyone be nice without drinking too much?"

"Do you drink too much?"

She smiled and then laughed, a frank, husky laugh. "Darling, I do everything too much."

She sat up again suddenly, stubbing her cigarette on an ash tray.

"Baby, this is all gay, but I'm supposed to help make you remember."

"That's what you've been doing, isn't it?"

"I haven't been doing anything. I've just been acting pleased at having my husband conscious again. You can't imagine how dreary it's been, sleeping with a husband as unconscious as a corpse."

"You've been sleeping here?"

Her eyes opened wide. "But, of course. Ever since you came back from the hospital." She pointed at the other bed. "Where did you suppose I'd been sleeping?"

"I'd only just started thinking about it," I said.

"Really, darling, and you all plaster of Paris." Selena grinned and took another cigarette. "But seriously, I mean, let's talk about something you're supposed to remember."

"Okay."

"The Aurora Clean Living League for example."

"What the hell's that?"

"It's terribly important."

"Okay. Give with the Aurora Clean Living League."

Her full mouth drooped in a smile. "It all begins with your father, darling. I suppose you don't remember your father, either?"

I shook my head. "They tell me he was called Gordon Renton Friend, the Second, and that he died a month ago. That's all."

"Your father," Selena brooded. "How to describe your father? He was a lawyer in St. Paul. He was terrifically rich. But the important thing about your father was that he was godly." Absently she had picked my hand up again and was stroking it. "Incredibly godly. Against things, you know. Against tobacco and dancing and liquor and sex."

"Uh-uh. Go on."

"What nice hands you have. So square and firm." She grinned. "Well, your father was dismal to live with. And then, ten years ago, when you all thought things were as lugubrious as they could be, he met

the Aurora Clean Living League and fell in love with it."

"Did he have sex with it?"

"Gordy, don't be frivolous." Selena had tucked my hand into her lap.

"The Aurora Clean Living League is a nationwide organization to make America pure. It publishes dozens of pamphlets called: *Dance, Little Lady—to Hell*, and *Satan Has a Deposit on Every Beer Bottle* and things like that. It runs jolly summer camps where youth can be hearty and clean-living.

"Well, the head of all this gloomy business was a repulsive man called Mr. Heber. Mr. Heber was the Aurora Clean Living League in St. Paul. And Mr. Heber liked your father at first sight and your father liked Mr. Heber at first sight. Your father started deluging the League with money and made St. Paul cleaner and cleaner by the minute. And all the time, he made all of you cleaner, too."

She fell back again onto the pillows, her fair hair shimmering close to my cheek.

"Darling, you can't imagine what life was like. I mean, I suppose you will imagine when you get your memory back. Every morning you were all inspected for seemliness of attire. Your father scrubbed powder off Marny's nose himself in the bathroom. You weren't allowed to attend the theater or the movies. You spent long, crushing evenings at home listening to your father recite pure poems and quote from Mr. Heber's nauseating pamphlets. And as for sex—well, your father was particularly against sex." She

sighed, a deep, reminiscent sigh. "Baby, if you knew how pent-up you all got."

"But how did I, the drunken heel, fit into that picture?"

"You didn't, baby." She had picked up my hand again. It seemed to fascinate her. "That's the whole point. The more clean living your father got, the more dirty living you went in for. Mr. Heber pronounced you permanently unclean. Father would have loved to throw you out for good. But there he was in a cleft stick.

"You see, The Family is one of the things the Clean Living League has a passion for. And one of your father's favorite compositions was a long poem about your son is your son and you forgive him seven times seven, nay seventy times seven. You know—all that."

"I know," I said.

"But after college he tried to keep you away from home as much as possible. He got you a job in Pittsburgh. Somehow you managed not to be fired. But, boy, the things you did to Pittsburgh." She looked dreamy. "That's where you met me. Darling, what a night." She snuggled against me cozily. "Gordy, how long is the cast going to be on?"

"You'll have to ask your buddy, Nate."

She frowned. "Oh, well . . . Where was I? Oh, yes, you met me. We were married. I wasn't at all the sort of person your father relished, of course. But we scrubbed my face and I bought a perfectly hideous brown dress like a missionary in China and you brought me home and I was wonderful and your

father adored me and I wrote a poem against sex myself and drank ginger ale. And then, after we'd gone to bed, we used to get potted on stingers in the bedroom. Darling, don't you remember?"

I shook my head disconsolately. "No, baby. I'm afraid I don't."

Selena lay a moment, quite still, holding my hand against her dress. I could feel the strong, healthy pulse of her heart.

"All this," I asked, "was in St. Paul?"

She nodded.

"And then we moved to California?"

"We didn't, darling. Not you and I. We were in Pittsburgh. But the others did."

"Why?"

"Mr. Moffat," said Selena. "Mr. Moffat is the head of the California branch of the Clean Living League. He was visiting Mr. Heber and your father fell even more in love with him than with Mr. Heber. Mr. Moffat is even cleaner you see. So your father sold everything and trailed out here. Then he developed a bad heart. I guess all that purity preyed on his organs. A couple of months ago he had an attack of some sort addressing the local chapter. He was supposed to be getting better. Then, suddenly, he died."

"And we came out here because of his sickness?"

Selena shook her head. "No, darling, we came a couple of months ago because we had nowhere else to go."

"You mean, Pittsburgh was through with us?"

"With you, dear. You lost your job. We had one hundred and twelve dollars in the bank. Darling, you must remember."

I tried very hard. Nothing came. "I'm afraid I don't," I said.

"Oh, dear." She pushed her hands under her hair to support her head. "Well, baby, I guess that's all about the Aurora Clean Living League—except Jan, of course."

"Jan? Marny talked about him. Who's Jan?"

"Nobody knows, but he's the only gay thing your father ever did. He hired him as a kind of man of all work around the house. Mr. Moffat produced him. He's Dutch, from Sumatra. Somehow he was in the Dutch Army and then somehow he wasn't.

"He's about eight feet tall and built like something on the cover of those health magazines—you know, the ones that are not quite under the counter. He grins all the time and never wears anything but swimming trunks. Father and Mr. Moffat had a passion for him because he doesn't drink or smoke."

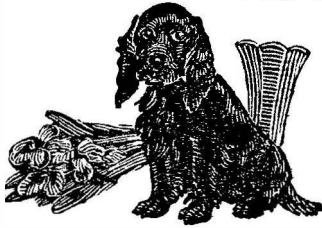
"Or have sex?" I asked.

"That," said Selena thoughtfully, "we don't know. He's kind of simple-minded, and he either can't or won't learn a word of English so there's no point in asking him." A flat, speculative look came into her eyes. "One day I'm going to find out—with gestures." She moved her face closer, kissing me almost abstractedly. "Darling, there's your whole life in a nutshell. Don't you really remember anything?"

"No," I said. "I don't remember a thing—not a solitary thing."

"Never mind, baby." Her voice was low, soothing. "No one really expected you to remember anything yet. Let's relax."

CHAPTER V



WE WERE still relaxing when the door opened. My mother came majestically in, carrying a tray with medicine bottles.

"Selena, dear," she said mildly, "I don't think we should overtire Gordy, do you? Run along now."

Reluctantly Selena rose, smoothing down her skirt. As she did so, there was a scuffling sound from the open door and a small black spaniel dashed into the room, bounded onto the bed and pranced toward my face, waving fat, feathery paws.

"Peter," called my mother sharply. "Peter, get down."

The dog was licking my face and batting at me enthusiastically. Suddenly, as my mother called out, I felt a tingle on the surface of my skin. A sensation, like the one that had come with the word "Iris," stirred in me, only this time it was stronger. It was half excitement, half dread of something ominous just beyond my comprehension.

"Peter?" I asked. "He's called Peter?"

"Why, yes, darling," said Selena. "He's your dog. He remembers you.

Don't you remember him?"

"Yes, I think I do."

The spaniel had rolled over on its back and was kicking flirtatious feet in the air.

Peter.

The crawling of my skin made me shiver. The propellers came, whirling with a deafening roar. I felt dizzy. I hardly knew what I was saying but I blurted:

"The dog's not called Peter. I'm called Peter. I'm not Gordy Friend. I'm Peter."

A change started to spread like a shadow over that lovely, sunny room. It was one of those indefinable nightmare changes where the very blandness and security of a scene seems to cloak some lurking horror.

The change infected the two women. They were both standing by the bed, looking down at me. Both, in their way, were as beautiful as women could be—Selena golden as summer, my mother splendid as autumn. But their faces seemed suddenly marred with an expression that was hostile, ruthless.

A quick glance passed between them. I was sure of that.

Then, slowly, they both moved forward and sat down on the bed. Their soft, feminine nearness was almost suffocating.

My mother took my hand. Selena's smooth fingers rested on my arm. My mother was smiling a smile so serene and gentle that it was almost impossible to believe in the expression I had caught a moment before.

"Darling boy." Her voice was

rich. "Of course you're Gordy Friend. What foolish ideas you have! We say you're Gordy Friend, dear. And who could know better who you are than your mother and your wife?"

She gestured to Selena who rose from the bed. After flashing a warm smile that went right through me, she went out, taking the dog with her. My mother remained close to me. Her thick, hothouse perfume was overpowering, engulfing. She was still holding my hand and smiling that "everything's-going-to-be-all-right" smile.

"My poor baby," she said. "So miserable it must be—not remembering."

My outburst of a moment before was becoming confused in my mind. I couldn't quite remember what I had said.

She was stroking my head now, letting her cool hand move softly over the bandages.

"Head ache, darling?"

"Yes," I said. "It does ache a bit. What happened just now with the dog? What did I say?"

My mother laughed. "Nothing, dear."

She rose, moving to the tray of medicine bottles on the bedside table.

"Now, it's time for your pill. A nice rest. That's what you need."

She turned, a capsule in one hand, a glass of water in the other.

"Open your mouth, dear."

I felt an impulse to refuse the proffered capsule, but it was a feeble one for I could think of no valid excuse for not taking it. There was something, too, about this woman

that tempted me to invalidism. Her breath, her quietness made me want to forget my problems—what were my problems?—and yield to the voluptuous lure of the pillows.

I let her slip the capsule into my mouth and tilt some of the water against it. I swallowed.

She patted my hand. "That's a good boy, Gordy. Now, before you know it, you'll be off to sleep."

And it happened almost exactly that way. One moment I was watching her idly rearranging pink roses in the bowl. The next moment unconsciousness engulfed me.

When I awakened, the maid who had announced the doctor earlier was entering with a tray. She slid an invalid bed-table from a corner and arranged the tray on it in front of me. She was in uniform and obviously trying to maintain the colorless discretion of a well-trained domestic. She wasn't very successful. She was too plump, and her hair, peroxide blond and tightly waved, suggested hot-dogs and dates in bars with sailors. I remembered my mother had called her Netti.

"Thanks, Netti," I said. "That looks fine."

She giggled. "It's nice having you eating again, Mr. Friend."

Casually I asked: "Well, Netti, has my accident improved my looks?"

She giggled again. "Oh, Mr. Friend, don't ask me. I wouldn't know."

"Wouldn't know?"

"You have lost your memory, haven't you?" Her refinement was slipping by the second. "Cook told me about it in the kitchen."

"What's losing my memory got to do with it?"

"Asking me if the accident improved your looks, Mr. Friend." She was grinning. The grin showed pink gums veined with red. "Why, I'd never even seen you—not before they brought you back from the hospital."

"You're new?"

"Sure, I'm new. They hired me the day after the old—after Mr. Friend died. They fired all the servants then. Except Jan. Mr. Friend fired him the very last day. Then they took him on again."

I stared. "But my father died a month ago. My accident was only two weeks ago. You had a couple of weeks to see me in."

"Not you, Mr. Friend." A suggestive titter had crept into her giggle. "You wasn't around, sir—not ever, after your poor father died."

"Where was I then?"

She hesitated. Then she blurted:

"The old cook told me just before she left. They said you'd gone off on a visit. But you never even showed up for the funeral. The old cook said as it was more likely you'd probably gone off on one of your—"

She broke off. I felt for a moment that she was going to put her hand over her mouth—a servant gesture which had surely gone out with the invention of the vacuum cleaner.

"One of my—what?" I said.

She squirmed. "Oh, sir, I really shouldn't have—"

"One of my—what?" I repeated with irritation.

"Your toots." She grinned again and, as if this admission had forged a bond of intimacy between us, she moved a trifle nearer. "You're quite a one for the—" She bent her elbow significantly.

"So I understand," I said. "So I was off on a blind drunk for two weeks before I had the accident. Why did I pick the day my father died to leave?"

She giggled again. "That old cook. With her imagination, she ought to write stories. The things she hinted at!"

"What things?"

Netti looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Oh, nothing." The discomfort had become genuine anxiety. "Don't ever tell them I said anything about you being away and everything. Promise. I didn't ought to have—"

"Forget it, Netti."

I didn't press the point further. I knew she wasn't going to tell me any more anyway.

She was staring at me uncertainly, as if she was plucking up her courage. Then, with a glance over her shoulder at the door, she whispered: "I suppose you wouldn't have just a little snort? Carrying that heavy tray from the kitchen and—"

"Sorry," I said. "They put me on the wagon."

"That's too bad." She leaned toward me and breathed: "There's times when I get at the liquor closet if it's a sherry dessert or something. Sometimes I sneak a pint of gin. Next time, I'll slip you some. Okay?"

"Okay."

I got the gums again. "I like a drop myself once in a while."

She patted at the cap and left the room with a lot of hip-rolling.

I'd made a buddy. And I was glad. You never know when you need a buddy.

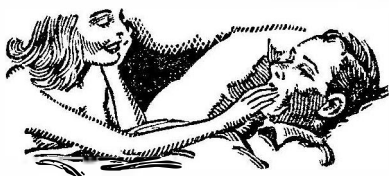
But somehow the chicken breast in wine sauce didn't seem so inviting now. They'd fired all the servants after my father died. And they'd kept it from me that I'd been off on a blind drunk for two weeks before the accident.

Once again suspicion stirred in me, feebly like the flutter of butterfly wings. I tried to remember what was the cause of this unfocused anxiety. Hadn't there been something about a dog? And the irises. Yes, there had been something about the vase of irises on the table in the corner.

I glanced at the table. The vase was still there but it was filled with tall sprays of pink stock. Had I imagined the irises? Or had the flowers been changed while I was sleeping?

And, if they had been changed—why?

CHAPTER VI



WHEN I had finished my dinner, there was a loud knock on the door.

I called: "Come in."

The door opened on a giant. It was a startling experience. Before, when the door opened, I had always

caught a glimpse of the passage beyond. Now there was nothing but man.

He came in, shutting the door behind him. He must have been almost six foot five. He was dressed only in brief navy swimming trunks and a sleeveless blue polo shirt. His hair, shining and fair as Selena's, fell forward over his forehead. His bare legs and arms were solid muscle and burnt by the sun to a light apricot. All I noticed of his face was a broad expanse of teeth bared in a dazzling smile.

It took him about two steps to reach the bed. He looked down at me. His eyes were the blue of denim faded in the sun. His nose was short, almost snub. His mouth, curling at the corners in a friendly smile, seemed amused by everything and by me in particular.

"Jan," he said, stretching the smile even further.

I knew from Selena that old Mr. Friend's "only gay thing" spoke no English. I certainly spoke no Dutch. But I tried:

"Hiyah, Jan. How's tricks?"

He shook his head, making his blond forelock slip down over his eyes. He tossed the hair back again into place and shrugged, indicating that it wasn't worth my time to try to converse. And certainly, simple-minded or not, he seemed to know what to do without being told as he performed all the tasks normally performed by a nurse.

It should have been pleasant to have such efficient valet service. But I disliked it. It made me too conscious of my own helplessness. As Jan bent over me, his fair hair

tickling my chest, I knew that, by slipping one arm around me, he could crush me as easily as a python crushes a deer. With only my left arm to protect myself, I would be completely at his mercy, or anyone else's mercy.

That made me realize how precarious my position would be if I found myself among enemies.

But that was silly of course—because I was among friends.

After Jan left, no one came for a long time. I started feeling sleepy. The little gold traveling clock on the bedside table eventually said eleven o'clock. I thought of leaning over and turning out the light, but I felt too lazy to make the effort.

The pillows were soft. I shut my eyes. I was drifting off into some fanciful half dream when I realized the door was opening. Lifting my lids a fraction of an inch, I looked through my lashes.

Selena had tiptoed in. She moved toward my bed. I don't know why I feigned sleep, but I did. She paused at my side and looked down at me, studying my features with a long, speculative stare.

Satisfied that I was asleep, she stretched voluptuously, her breasts sprouting upward. She half turned away, reached behind her back for buttons and pulled the white dress off over her head. She tossed the dress carelessly onto the chaise longue and kicked off her shoes.

Humming softly, she moved to the french windows, tugged back the drapes. The California moonlight, streaming around her, turned her hair silver and gave her skin

the bluish delicacy of milk. The picture she made was so entrancing that I was supposed to be asleep.

"Hello, Selena," I said.

She turned, the hair swirling around her bare shoulders. She came to my bed, sat down and took my hand, quite unembarrassed. She smiled her vivid smile.

"I thought you were asleep."

She leaned over me, kissing me on the lips. Her nearness brought summer images. Soft, warm sand with the faint murmur of waves.

"Where have you been all evening?" I asked.

Her face was so close that I could feel her lashes fluttering against mine.

"Miss me, baby?"

"Sure I missed you."

"Didn't Mimsy give you a sleeping thing?"

I shook my head.

"Mimsy fancies herself as a nurse. Personally I'd think twice about letting her loose on a sick baboon. Never mind, baby. I'll be here for the rest of the night. If you want anything—shout."

"Anything?" I let my hand stray over her glossy shoulder.

"In time, baby. In time." She grinned and fell back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "Oh, life is such fun. Why do people have complexes and things? Why don't they do what they want when they want to and wallow in life instead of glooming around in Clean Living Leagues? Sleepy, baby?"

"No."

"Want to start remembering things?"

"No."

"What do you want to do?"

"Just this."

"Baby!" She took my head between both her hands, studying me. "Your jaw's right. You smell nice. You've got real arms. Your lips are so—serviceable. You and your plaster of Paris."

She kissed me again, pressing herself against me. The spell of her was like a drug. I had seen her only twice to remember and yet I was already feeling as if I must always have wanted her in my life. It was a strange, rather frightening sensation—not like remembered love, rougher than that, a sort of hunger and a simultaneous desire to resist. Because something in me, something very weak, was still trying to warn me.

Steady, it said.

I didn't pay it much attention. She lighted two cigarettes at once and handed me one.

"Like in the movies." She puffed smoke, enjoying it. "Baby, I've got an idea. A wonderful idea. About your memory."

"To hell with my memory."

"No, baby. Listen. Please. Your father's poems. Whenever you went on a toot, your father made you learn one of his poems against drink. I'll make you learn one again. Don't you see? Association and things. It's bound to be frightfully therapeutical."

"I don't want to learn a poem against drink," I said.

"Darling, don't be dreary." She got up, fumbled in a bureau drawer and brought out a drab gray volume with gilt lettering. Casually, as if it didn't matter one way or the other,

she pulled an oyster white negligee from a closet and slipped into it. She sat down on the green chaise longue.

"All published privately. At terrific expense." She leafed through the book. "Ah, here's my favorite. *The Ode to Aurora*. It's divine. Disinfected Swinburne. Baby, you've learned this one fifty times. It must be needlepointed on your heart. I'll read the first verse. Then you learn it."

In a voice hoarse with mock evangelical fervor, she recited:

Seven sins led our sons to Perdition,
Seven sins that lure youth like a whore
And the worst of them all—(Prohibition
Alas! can repress it no more)—
Is Alcohol, weevil-like borer.
Only one can combat its foul stealth.
That's the sober and saintly Aurora,
Clean Lady of Health.

She looked up. "Isn't it heaven?" Her eyes clouded earnestly. "Don't you remember any of it, baby?"

"No," I said. "Fortunately."

"Oh, baby." She grimaced.

"Really, you're awfully tiresome. Never mind. Learn it. Maybe that'll help."

She reread the first two lines. I repeated them. The rhythm made it easy to learn by heart. But it brought absolutely no recollection.

"No," I said.

She leaned forward coaxingly.

"Gordy, please—just one more."

"Okay."

"This is really my pet verse."

She started to read:

In the taverns where young people
mingle
To sway their lascivious hips,

The youths with sin's wages to jingle
At the maidens with stains on their lips.
Smoke rises like fumes from Baal's altar,
Ragtime drums like a plague in their
blood.

Come down and rend off its lewd halter,
Our Lady of Good.

I learned that verse, too. Selena made me repeat both verses.

"Night, baby."

She leaned toward me, turning out the light between the beds. Her hand came through the moonlight, touching my cheek and caressing it.

CHAPTER VII



As I LAY alone, drowsy but not really tired, the magic Selena cast began to fade and my vague disquiet returned. I didn't remember my father's poems. I didn't really remember Selena. I didn't remember anything. A vision of Nettie's pink, red-veined gums swam in front of me. Somehow that peroxide maid with her weakness for ginning and her giggled hints seemed the only normal, real person in the house. All the servants had been fired on the day my father died. Suddenly that one fact seemed to be the focus of everything that was wrong.

"Selena?" I called.

Her voice, thickened by sleepiness, murmured: "Yes, baby?"

"Why did you fire all the servants when father died?"

"My dear, what weird questions you ask," she replied, her voice alert now.

I had the sensation that she was stalling.

"It's one of those things that stick in your mind." I lied: "Maybe, if you tell, it'll help me remember."

She laughed softly. "Baby, that's frightfully simple. In the old days Father hired all the servants. My dear, you can't imagine how spectral and dismal they were, creaking around in elastic boots and sniffing in drawers for contraband cigarettes. Your father paid them to spy on us. Firing them was our first act of emancipation. Mimsy did it. She was wonderful. She just swept them out like dead leaves."

It was a soothing explanation. It fitted so well with the set-up. I reached for her hand.

"Thanks, Selena."

Now that she had told me there was nothing sinister about the firing of the servants, the lingering fumes of my suspicions dispersed. I felt an unqualified sense of well-being. There was no pain in my leg or my arm. My head didn't ache. Sleep stole deliciously through me.

My last conscious act was to turn my head and look at Selena. She was lying with her back to me, the long line of her hip visible under the humped bedclothes. Her hair gleamed metallic on the pillow.

I dreamed of her hair. It should have been a wonderful dream but it wasn't. The cream hair was tumbling over me, curling around my throat, smothering me.

I was awake suddenly. I knew I was awake because a hand was touching my cheek. My mind was quite clear. Selena, I thought. The touch was very light, just the tips of the fingers moving gently across my skin. There was a faint perfume too. What was it? Lavender.

I didn't open my eyes. Contentedly I raised my arm and imprisoned the hand in mine. The fingers weren't smooth and soft like Selena's. It was an old, old hand, bony, coarse and wrinkled like a lizard's skin.

With a chill of disgust and horror, I dropped it. I opened my eyes wide. I stared up.

A figure was bending over me. The bright moonlight made its reality unquestionable. It was a female figure, short and dumpily shapeless in some black trailing garment.

Its face was less than a foot from mine. Lines spayed over cheeks dry as parchment. Eyes, round and luminous, in puckered sockets stared straight into mine. There was an odor of old age and lavender.

It had happened too quickly. I wasn't ready for it. My skin started to crawl.

"Gordy." The name was whispered in a subdued whine. "My Gordy."

"I'm Gordy," I said.

"You!" The peering eyes looked closer. The voice trembled with ancient, impotent rage. "You're not Gordy Friend. They said my Gordy'd come back. They lied to me. You're not Gordy. You're just another of Selena's . . ."

She broke off with a whimper.

I sat up, quivering. "What do you mean? Who are you? Tell me."

Something white—a handkerchief—fluttered across the face. The smell of lavender flew from it like moths.

"Gordy," she moaned. "Where's my Gordy?"

She turned from the bed.

"Come back," I breathed.

She didn't seem to notice. She started away. I could hear the shamble of her bedroom slippers across the carpet. Then she was gone.

For a moment I lay back against the pillows, my heart racing.

You're not Gordy. They lied to me. You're just one of Selena's . . .

I turned to the other bed. Selena's hair gleamed in the moonlight.

"Selena," I called. "Selena."

She stirred slightly.

"Yes, darling." The words were blurred, reluctant, coming from half sleep.

She started into a sitting position, rubbing her eyes.

"Gordy, what is it?"

"That woman," I said. "That old, old woman. Who is she?"

"Old woman?" She yawned.

"What old woman, dear?"

"The old woman. She just came in here. I woke up. I found her bending over me. Who is she?"

Selena sat for a moment saying nothing. Then she murmured:

"Baby, I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"Who's the old woman who lives in this house?" I persisted.

"Mimsy. Really, I don't think anyone would call her an old woman."

"I don't mean her."

"Then you don't mean anyone."

There's no old woman in this house."

"But there must be. She was wearing bedroom slippers."

Selena burst out laughing. It was a deep, pulsing laugh. "You poor baby, you've been dreaming."

"I wasn't dreaming," I said. "I saw her as plainly as I see you."

"Don't worry your poor head. You're simply stuffed full of drugs, darling."

She pushed back the covers and slipped out of her bed, coming to mine. She sat close to me, warm from sleep. She slid her arms around me and kissed my forehead, drawing my head down to her breast.

"There, baby. Selena will protect you from predatory old women in bedroom-slippers."

Nothing could have been more restful, more to be trusted than those smooth arms and the soft hair brushing my cheek. But the hair seemed like the hair in my dreams, suffocating me.

"Is the old woman over and done with?" she queried finally.

"I guess so," I lied. "Thanks, Selena. Sorry I woke you up."

She patted my hand and slipped off my bed. Before she got into her own, she gave a little laugh, pulled open the drawer of the table by her bedside and took out a revolver. She dangled it for me to see.

"There, darling, your own gun. Next time you see an old hag, scream and I'll shoot."

She threw the gun back in the drawer and slid into bed.

She confused me. After she had left, I lay trying to think. I was sick. I was full of drugs. It was

just possible that the whole scene had been some bizarre illusion. I forced myself to remember every detail of that moment when I had awakened and seen the face looming over mine. I knew just how terrifically important it was to decide once and for all whether there had or hadn't been an old woman.

If there had been an old woman, the old woman had said I was not Gordy. If there had been an old woman, Selena had deliberately lied to me—and the whole situation surrounding me was a monstrous tissue of lies.

The faintest scent of lavender trailed up to me. I glanced down. Something white was gleaming on the spread. I picked it up.

It was a woman's handkerchief. A small, plain, old woman's handkerchief. And it smelt of lavender.

CHAPTER VIII



I PUT the handkerchief in the pocket of my pajama jacket, hiding it under the big one Jan had brought me. I knew I had to keep steady. That was about the only definite thought I had at that moment.

You—whenever you are—keep steady.

The room, washed in moonlight, seemed particularly beautiful. Selena, blond and insidious as the

moonlight, was lying in the next bed, asleep or pretending to be asleep. Part of me was rash and yearned to call her, to have her come over again, to feel the warmth of her bare arms around me. But I fought against it. I didn't even look at the other bed. Because I knew now that Selena was false.

That was how this new, huge anxiety first came to me. The old woman had existed. Selena had tried to make her into a dream. Selena had lied. Selena had lied because if she had admitted the existence of the old woman then I would have demanded to see her and the old woman would say again what she had already said.

You are not Gordy Friend.

I repeated those words in my mind. With the ominous clarity that comes to the wakeful invalid at night, I knew then quite definitely that I was not Gordy Friend. My instincts had always known it. But there had been nothing tangible to support them until the arrival of this flimsy, lavender-scented handkerchief.

I was not Gordy Friend.

Strangely calm, I faced this posterous truth. I was lying in a beautiful room in a luxurious house which I had been told was my own. It was not my own. I was nursed and petted by a woman who said she was my mother. She was not my mother. I was treated to reminiscences from an imaginary childhood by a girl who said she was my sister. She was not my sister. I was lured and made love to by a girl who said she was my wife. She was not my wife. My vague suspicions

had been lulled by the plausible psychiatric pretenses of a doctor who said he was my friend.

Friend. In that calm, moonlit room, the word seemed illimitably sinister. They called themselves Friend. They called me Friend. They were constantly soothing me with the sickly sweet sedative of that sentence: *We're your friends.*

They weren't my friends. They were my enemies. This wasn't a calm, moonlit room. It was a prison.

I was sure of that because there could be no other explanation. At least four people were banded together to persuade me that I was Gordy Friend. Mothers, sisters and wives do not embrace an impostor as a son, brother and husband, doctors do not risk their reputations on a lie—except for some desperately important reason. The Friends had some desperate motive for wanting to produce a make-believe Gordy Friend. And I was their victim.

Victim. The word, falling on my mind, was chilling as the touch of the unknown old woman's hand on my cheek.

Victim—for what sacrifice?

Selena's voice, low and cautious, sounded through the extreme quiet of the room.

"Gordy, are you awake?"

I lay still. I did not answer.

I heard her bedclothes being softly pulled back. I heard the faint scuffle of her feet pushing into slippers, then her tiptoeing footsteps. For a moment she came into the range of my vision, slender, graceful, her hair gleaming. She was bending over my bed, staring down at me. There was something purposeful about her.

It was a bitter sensation, being half in love with an enemy.

After a long moment she turned and moved away from the bed. I heard the door open and close carefully behind her.

I couldn't follow her to find out where she was going. It was that one little fact which brought home to me my extreme helplessness. I was more than a victim, I was an immobilized victim with a broken leg and arm, a victim without a sporting chance to escape.

I was a victim with a broken mind, too. As I took stock of my predicament, that fact loomed above all the others. I knew I was not Gordy Friend, but I had not the faintest idea of who I was. I struggled to make something of the few, feeble hints that drifted in my mind like dead flies in a jar of water. The irises, propellers, Peter, the dog . . . Peter . . . For a second, I seemed on the brink of something. Then it was over. I felt dizzy from the effort of concentration. There was no help from memory. I had nothing to help me except my own wits.

My mind, so recently free from the influence of sedatives, was easily tired. I felt spent, incapable of coping with the situation.

I was asleep before Selena came back.

I awakened with warm sunlight splashing across my face. I opened my eyes. Selena was lying asleep in the next bed. I could just see the curve of her cheek on the pillow behind the shimmering fair hair.

A faint odor of lavender stealing up from my pajama pocket reminded me that life had ominously changed.

I had to be on my guard now. Not only that. Somehow, without arousing their suspicions, I had to discover what lay behind this incredible deception.

The door opened and Marny came in. She was wearing Chinese pajamas and her feet were bare. Her glossy black hair was tousled from sleep. She strolled to my bed and sat down at the foot by my cast.

"Hi, Gordy. How did the night treat you?"

"Roughly." It was a risk but I took it. "An old woman busted in on me. Who is she, by the way? My grandmother?"

Selena was suddenly awake, so suddenly that I wondered if she had really been asleep.

"Hi, Marny. Morning, Gordy. Still fiddling around with that old woman?"

She slid out of her bed and came to me, sitting down on the spread across from Marny. Lazily she kissed me on the cheek.

"Poor Gordy, he had a dream about a hag with a stringy neck and he's sure she's real. Marny, tell him we don't have any old crones locked up in the attic."

"Old crones?" Marny spoke casually but I thought I caught an almost imperceptible flicker of understanding in the glance she exchanged with Selena. "I'm sorry, Gordy. No crones."

I was sure then that Selena had crept out of the room last night to warn the others of what had happened with the old woman.

"What did she say to you?" Marny looked down at her knee,

brushing idly at a piece of lint on the red silk. "The old hag in the dream, I mean?"

I wasn't falling into that trap.

"Nothing," I lied. "She just seemed to be there and then floated away. You know how it is with dreams."

"So you realize she was a dream now?" asked Selena.

"Sure."

She leaned toward me, kissing me again. I was scared she would smell lavender and realize that I had in my pocket definite evidence that the old woman wasn't a dream.

But she didn't seem to notice anything. In fact, she seemed exhilarated as if she had scored a victory.

The door opened then. Mrs. Friend—I didn't call her Mother in my mind any more—came in. She was carrying my breakfast tray.

Gently chiding the girls off my bed, she set the tray down in front of me and kissed me.

"Good morning, dear. You look better. More rested. Any memories yet?"

"No," I said.

"I've been teaching him Father's *Ode to Aurora*, though," put in Selena. "He's learned two verses."

Mrs. Friend smiled and started to straighten the things on the breakfast tray.

"How very clever of him. He can recite the poem to Mr. Moffat tomorrow."

"Mr. Moffat?" I queried.

"A very old friend of your father's."

"You know, darling," said Selena. "The Aurora Clean Living League."

"He's coming tomorrow?" I asked.

Mrs. Friend sat down on the bed, patting at refractory wisps of fugitive hair.

"It's the anniversary of your father's death, Gordy. Just exactly thirty days. Mr. Moffat is making a sort of ceremonial visit of respect. I'm afraid it'll be on the dismal side, but the least we can do for your poor father is to show Mr. Moffat a decent courtesy."

Both the girls were standing at her side. Mrs. Friend surveyed Marny's tousled red pajamas and Selena's white frothy negligee.

"My dears, don't forget. Plain black tomorrow, mourning black. And no lipstick. I don't want you denounced as harlots."

She laughed her deep, amused laugh.

"And Gordy will recite your father's poem. Yes, that would be delightful, most delightful."

CHAPTER IX



SELENA twisted away, picked up the book of poems and opened it at random. She chanted:

Whether weary or woeful, Aurora
With her amber Olympian arms
Will charm and caress

"Listen, isn't that wonderful? He's lusting after Aurora now." She giggled suddenly. "And he can't even spell. He spells

whether w-h-e-t-h instead of w-e-a-t-h. Really—”

“Really, indeed,” broke in Mrs. Friend with a sigh. “Sometimes I am gravely disturbed by your lack of education, Selena.”

Selena’s face fell. “You mean he spells it right?”

“Of course, dear.”

“Oh, God, I never can remember.” Selena moved to me, grinning. “Darling, do you mind having an illiterate wife?”

Mrs. Friend rose from the bed. She could even invest the undignified act of getting up with a stately beauty.

“Now, girls, let’s leave poor Gordy to his breakfast. Ours is being brought up to my room so you needn’t bother to dress.” She turned to me. “Ring for Netti, dear, if you need anything.”

Ritualistically, one after the other, they gave me the Judas kiss, then moved out of the room.

Alone with my orange juice, scrambled eggs and carefully cut squares of toast, I tried to piece together the scraps of information I had so far obtained. I knew the Friends were in league to keep me believing the old woman did not exist. I was beginning to wonder if there wasn’t something behind their veiled eagerness for me to learn the *Ode to Aurora*. Mr. Moffat of the Clean Living League was paying a social visit tomorrow. Mr. Gordon Friend had died a month ago. All the servants had been fired at the day of his death.

Mrs. Friend had told me to ring for Netti if I needed anything. The vision of Netti with her rakish white

cap and her pink veined gums took on a sudden, almost portentous significance. In a situation crazy as mine, the average citizen would have been able to call the police. But, bedridden as I was, I could not even reach a telephone without the assistance of potential enemies. But maybe some sort of salvation lay through Netti.

I couldn’t be sure of her, of course. It was possible that she too was part of the conspiracy. But, remembering her silly giggle and her vaguely hostile hints, I very much doubted it.

If I played my hand right, I might be able at least to find out something from Netti.

After I had finished my breakfast, I rang and, a few minutes later, Netti was there. In spite of the formal, frilly uniform there was a distinctly blowsy air to her plump figure. Over her left hand and forearm hung a napkin as if she were trying to caricature a headwaiter.

“Finished your breakfast?”

She glanced over her shoulder and then moved to the bed. The gums stretched in an intimate, rather leering smile.

Suddenly she whipped the napkin from her left hand, revealing a jigger of liquor clutched between thumb and first finger. She held it out to me.

“Gin,” she said. “Cook sent me to the liquor closet. Had a snort myself. Then you was the first I thought of.”

“Thank you, Netti.”

I took the jigger. She stood watching me with the satisfaction of a mother robin who has just pre-

sented her baby with a juicy worm.

The Friends didn't want me to drink. I was pretty sure of that. I was pretty sure, too, that even they could not be devious enough to have sent Netti up to tempt me to do something against their own interests. I felt I had Netti summed up then. She was a rummy and she thought I was. The bond between two rummies is a very real one—and exploitable.

I swallowed the gin at one gulp and then winked at her appreciatively.

"Goes down good, don't it?" she said, giggling.

"Sure does." I stared down into the glass, stalling, forming the right approach.

"I sneaked out a whole tumblerful," she said suddenly. "I was saving it for my afternoon. But if you could go for another—"

"No, Netti. This'll hold me." I looked up at her then. "Know something? Everyone in this house is trying to get my memory back but you're the only one that helped me so far."

She giggled. "Why me?"

"Remember yesterday you told me about the old cook? The cook that was fired the day you came here?"

Her face fell. "Oh," she said. "That old Emma."

"Emma!" I repeated. "That's just it, Netti. After you'd gone I suddenly remembered the cook's name was Emma. And you didn't tell me. You just talked about the old cook. See?"

She didn't seem interested.

"Yes," I said. "That's very important. That's the first thing I've

remembered." I paused. "Emma was the one who told you about me going off on that toot, wasn't she?"

"Sure."

"Guess she didn't think much of me, did she?"

Netti grimaced. "Oh, her. Church wasn't holy enough for her. She didn't go for you at all." She grinned. "You were sinful."

"And the rest of the family were sinful, too?"

"Your mother? Selena? Marny?" She laughed. "Scarlet women, she called them. No better than street walkers." She winked. "Gee, I was glad she left."

I took her sticky hand and squeezed it. "You're my pal, aren't you?"

She squirmed. "Your pal? Sure I'm your pal, Mr. Friend."

"Then maybe you'd do something for me?"

"You bet your life. Want another slug of gin, after all?"

I shook my head. "Just tell me what she hinted about me. After all, if she made accusations, I've got a right to prove they're wrong."

She looked nervous. "What Emma hinted at?"

"You told me yesterday she'd hinted at something about my going off after Father died."

She laughed. "Oh, that. That wasn't nothing. Nothing real."

"Even so . . ."

"It was nothing. Really." She patted her back hair and giggled. "I was laughing myself silly inside while she was talking. She said with you going off real quick like that and your father dying sudden—maybe you bumped him off. Or if

you didn't, one of the others did."

She yawned. "That Emma, she couldn't think of nothing but your father. Thought he was Jesus Christ himself, she did. If you ask me, she was stuck on him."

I suppose it was my invalid weakness, but I felt as if my pajamas were wet and clammy, clinging to my skin.

Could that conceivably be the explanation? Had they killed Mr. Friend and were they somehow grooming me to take the rap?

I started to speak but Nettie got in ahead of me. Her eyes gleaming with a sudden, knowing light, she leaned a little closer.

"Quite a night you had last night, Mr. Friend."

"Me?" I tried to be casual.

She leaned nearer. There was spite in her eyes too now—spite that was not directed at me. Maybe she didn't like the Friend women any more than Emma had. "I heard all about it. You being woke like that and all scared. Mrs. Friend made me promise, but you and me being pals . . ."

She broke off. I could tell she had been able to see how her words affected me. She was on the verge of telling me about the old woman and she wanted me to coax her so that she could extract every ounce of satisfaction from this indiscreet confidence.

"You mean the visitor I had last night?" I said, playing up to her.

"Visitor," Nettie grimaced. "I don't call that no visitor. Waking up, seeing her bending over you with them big, shivery eyes. Ugh. It's a shame. That's what it is. Say-

ing you wasn't to be told about her just because you're sick and all."

"I'm not meant to know about her?"

"No." Nettie stared anxiously as if she was afraid her thunder had been stolen. "You mean you *do* know?"

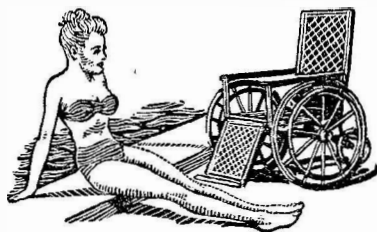
This was the moment.

"Matter of fact," I said. "I don't."

"What don't you know, dear?"

That sentence, mild as a gentle spring breeze, wafted from the door.

CHAPTER X



MRS. FRIEND WAS MOVING into the room, large, comfortable, smiling her mellow smile.

Nettie grabbed the empty jigger from my hand and hid it clumsily under the napkin. Embarrassment blotted her cheeks with red. Mrs. Friend progressed to the bed, took my hand and smiled at both of us.

"Nettie, you'd better be running along. I'm sure cook will be wanting you."

With a flustered, "Yes, Mrs. Friend," Nettie made a dive for the tray and scurried out.

It seemed almost impossible that Mrs. Friend had failed to notice Nettie's awkward juggling with the empty glass. But she made no comment. She was carrying a small brown paper sack. As she sat down on my bed, she took a flat disk of

chocolate-covered peppermint from the sack and popped it in her mouth. She produced another piece for me.

"There, darling, I don't think candy will hurt you today."

Suspecting the Friends as I did, her affectionate sweetness was almost more than I could bear. I had been on the very brink of success with Netti, too. Now everything was gone and Mrs. Friend was feeding me peppermint candy.

Sitting there in her square-necked widow dress, she was terrifically plausible in her role of mother. I tried to think of her as a husband-murderer and the leader of a conspiracy somehow to use me as a victim. The effort was almost impossible. But only almost.

She lost interest in the roses and, leaning forward, started unnecessarily to plump the pillows behind my head.

"I'm not being a very good nurse, am I, dear? I'm always that way about everything, I'm afraid. I'm thrilled to begin with and then I get bored. Too bad you were unconscious when you first came home. I was such an impressive nurse then. I took your temperature and your pulse and sat with you and gave you all the right medicine at the right times. By the way, aren't you supposed to be having something now?"

On principle I was on my guard against any of Mrs. Friend's medicines. "I feel fine," I said.

"I am glad, darling. But we'll ask Nate when he comes. He should be here with the wheel chair soon." She glanced up at me. "You trust Nate, don't you, dear?"

"Sure," I said. "After all, he took care of Father. I'd be a dope not to trust the old family physician."

I said that largely to discover what, if anything, Nate Croft had had to do with Mr. Friend's final illness. I got a rise out of her.

Gravely selecting a candy from the box, she murmured: "Nate wasn't your father's doctor, dear. Dr. Leland was. A most reputable old duck. But a little stuffy."

So Mr. Friend's death-bed had been attended by old reputable Dr. Leland. Presumably, too, Dr. Leland had signed the death certificate. I felt a lot easier in my mind. They might have Nate Croft sewed up in their conspiracy. But surely they couldn't have made a conspirator out of Dr. Leland, too.

At last, Mrs. Friend glanced at her watch and gave a little sigh.

"Well, dear, it looks like Nate's going to be late—if he's coming at all. Last night I'm sure he told me you should have a sedative so that you can rest all morning and be fresh for the wheel chair this afternoon. I'll bring you one."

She moved to her medicinal tray, shook a capsule out of a bottle and brought it to me with a glass of water.

I had to decide whether to refuse it and run the risk of her realizing my suspicions or to take it and pretend to be the completely trusting son. I had taken her sedative the day before and nothing damaging had happened. Until I knew more, it was wiser, I felt, to play along with her. I took the capsule and the glass of water. I swallowed the capsule.

Mrs. Friend moved out of the room and, soon, I felt thick drowsiness blurring me. The drowsiness made me more conscious than usual of my amnesia. With all the detail fading from my thoughts, there was a great blank left where my name and my memories should be. Gradually a vision of Netti, dim as the image on a myopic's retina, rose to fill the empty space.

They had tried to take everything from me but they hadn't taken Netti. Netti's red-veined gums . . . Netti's white cap . . . Netti's sour gin breath . . . Netti who knew about the old woman . . .

I awoke, feeling alert and rested. The traveling clock on the bedside table pointed to one. There was sunlight everywhere. A warm, vigorous breeze blew through the open windows, stirring the heavy drapes. For a moment I had a pang of longing for Selena. Selena who was summer, who was all a man could want. Selena with the liquid hair and the warm, generous lips.

But the clock said one. One meant lunch. And lunch meant Netti.

Exactly at one-fifteen the door opened. Selena came in. She was wearing a scrap of a white swimming suit.

She was carrying a tray.

"Your lunch, baby."

She brought the tray to me and arranged it on the invalid bed-table. She sat down by my side, her blue eyes laughing.

"Sweet, darling, Gordy. He just sleeps and eats and sleeps and eats without a care in the world."

"Where's Netti?" I said.

"Netti? Darling, that dreary

Netti. What would you want with her?"

"Nothing," I said. "I just wondered where she was."

"Then, darling, I'm afraid you'll never know." Selena's smile was sweet as syringa. "No one will ever know, except maybe a couple of sailors who keep telephone numbers."

I knew then what she was going to say and I felt the door of the trap swing firmly shut.

"Really, she was a frightful girl. Always stealing our liquor. And then, bringing you a jigger of gin. Gordy, darling, with Mr. Moffat coming you don't imagine we'd put up with that, do you?"

Selena patted my hand. She rose from the bed and strolled to the window, leaning on the sill and gazing out.

"Mimsy was awfully nice to her. Nicer than she deserved. She gave Netti a whole month's salary when she fired her."

After lunch Jan brought in the wheel chair. Like everything else produced by the Friends, it was the most luxurious of its kind, self-propelling with deep rubber tires and overstuffed upholstery.

Jan was both proud and proprietary about it. He seemed to think it was his toy and that I was just another prop to make the game more amusing. Tenderly, like a little girl putting her favorite doll in a perambulator, he lifted me from the bed and installed me in the chair. He brought a green silk robe and tucked it around my knees. Then he pushed the chair a few feet around the room and burst into laughter.

I had been entertaining in bed. Now I was deliriously funny in the wheel chair.

He stopped wheeling me around. With my good arm, I experimented propelling the chair myself. It was easy, but almost immediately Jan called:

"Nein."

He grabbed the rail at the back with a huge fist and stopped me. His face was dark and sulky.

I had a wheel chair but, apparently, Jan was not going to allow me the potential liberty it offered.

Still smoldering, he pushed me out of the room into a broad sunny corridor. This was my first glimpse of the house that was supposed to be mine. He rolled me into a living room. It was one of the most spectacular rooms I had ever seen. One entire wall was plate glass, revealing a vast panorama of lonely mountains and a precipitous canyon between. I had not realized the house was so high up. I had not realized, either, exactly how remote from civilization it was.

CHAPTER XI



WE MOVED through the living room to a spacious, book-lined library. There was a telephone, I noticed, on a desk in the corner, standing next to a typewriter. The realiza-

tion of it as a link, however slender, with the outside world was comforting.

French windows opened from the library onto a riotous prospect of flowers. Jan was pushing me toward them when Mrs. Friend emerged from an inner door.

"Darling boy, how nice to see you up. And how do you like your house? Sweet, isn't it?"

"Kind of cut off from everywhere. isn't it? Any neighbors?"

Mrs. Friend gave her throaty laugh.

"Good heavens no, dear. No one for miles. There used to be an old farmer who had an avocado farm way back in a little canyon behind the house, but your father bought him off. Your father hated neighbors. It was the Napoleon in him, I think. He used to like to get up on high, craggy places and be the monarch of all he surveyed." She patted my hand. "The others are at the pool. Is Jan going to wheel you down to join the fun?"

"I guess so," I said.

Mrs. Friend sighed. "Lucky you. Your poor mother never seems to have a moment's rest. Back to the kitchen I go to order dinner."

She drifted away. Jan pushed me through the french windows onto a tiled terrace and off it onto a grass path between blossoming hibiscus, oleander and mimosa. There was no view here, no sense of loneliness, only the bright, almost stifling cozi-ness of the shrubs and flowers.

A turn in the path under a wire arch smothering in blue plumbago brought us suddenly and unexpectedly to the edge of a long, wide-

rimmed, elaborate swimming pool.

It was the swimming pool of dreams. Screened on all four sides by fluttering eucalyptus trees, it was also bounded by a lower hedge of orange trees. The perfume from the creamy white blossoms was almost oppressive and the ripe oranges glowed like fire among the glossy dark leaves. The water of the pool itself was clear and blue as the sky.

Gay mattresses strewed the broad concrete rim. On one of them Selena in her white swimming suit lounged with Dr. Nate Croft. The young doctor, who presumably had not thought me sick enough to merit a visit, was wearing white trunks. He lay very near to Selena and his bare arm, I noticed, was lying lightly against hers. Marny was there, too. In a brief bra suit of yellow cotton, she sat on the edge of the pool, dangling her long, tanned legs in the water.

The moment they saw me, all three of them came clustering around me, laughing, chattering, commenting on the wheel chair. When Selena had told me that Netti was fired, I had felt at the end of my tether. But the freedom of the wheel chair, restricted as it was, had brought a return of hope. I laughed and kidded back at them with the inward satisfaction that at least my carefreeness was fooling them.

Having delivered me, Jan seemed to feel that his employee duties were fulfilled. Grinning, he stripped off the blue polo shirt and strode to the rim of the pool. He lingered there, lazily flexing the muscles of his chest and arms. His physique was really phenomenal. As I watched

him, I noticed that Marny was watching him too.

Her lids were half closed and the curly lashes concealed her eyes. But there was a strange expression on her young face, intent, almost greedy.

Jan dived into the pool. His face appeared from the blue water. He was laughing and pushing back his long hair.

Marny caught me looking at her. Her face quickly assumed its normal, impudent grin.

"The wages of abstinence, Gordy," she said. "No drink, no smoke. Let Jan be a lessoi. to you."

Jan was playing with a large, red rubber ball now. Tossing it up in the air and catching it, throwing it and diving under it like an exhibitionistic sea-lion. Selena had been standing by me with her hand absently on my shoulder. Suddenly she ran to the pool, dived in and swam to Jan. She was as at home in the water as the big Dutchman.

She reached him. She grabbed the ball just before he caught it and squirmed away, laughing a deep, husky laugh. Jan lumbered after her. He caught her leg. The ball slipped from Selena's wet fingers. It bobbed away, floating, bright scarlet, on the water.

Neither of them seemed to notice it. They went on struggling. We could see their sun-tanned limbs, entangled as Selena fought, only half-earnestly, to escape. Selena was wearing no cap. The beautiful molding of her head showed as the wet hair clung around it. She broke away from Jan and he leaped for her again. As his arms closed

around her, I caught a glimpse of her profile. Her eyes were shining and her red lips were parted in a hot, excited smile.

I felt sharp pain in my shoulder. I looked up. Nate Croft was gripping me so fiercely that the knuckles of his fingers were dead-white, and his eyes, fixed on the struggling brown bodies in the pool, were blazing with fury.

I was learning quite a lot about my captors. But this fact was, perhaps, the most revealing. There was no need to wonder any more why a doctor would risk his entire professional career by becoming party to any conspiracy against me. A man who could react that violently to Selena's contact with another male would do anything for her—commit murder if necessary.

That supposedly playful struggle in the pool had done something queer and heightening to the atmosphere. Even I had been infected by it. Without warning, Nate Croft leaped from my side and dived into the pool. Marny shot after him. They hurled themselves on Selena and Jan, and the spell was broken. All four of them continued the struggle, but the tension was gone.

They were still, however, caught up in the aftermath of that odd quadrilateral emotion. They seemed to have forgotten me.

Unobtrusively I started to move the chair back away from the pool. Constantly supervised as I was, I could never make plans in advance. I had to seize opportunity whenever it offered itself. I maneuvered back to the arch of blue plumbago. With my one good hand, I steered

through the arch and propelled the chair as quickly as I could up the level grass path, onto the terrace and into the library.

My impulse was to search for the old woman. She must be somewhere in that luxurious, rambling bungalow, which was big enough to house a dozen old women. The door leading from the library to the inner corridor was ajar. I started toward it.

Just as I reached the door, I heard footsteps in the passage beyond it. I peered through the crack between the half open door and the frame and saw Mrs. Friend moving down the passage away from me.

With her in the house, I knew any attempt to explore would be hopeless. So I spun the chair around, guiding it at random toward the fireplace. Above it, on the ochre-washed walls, hung four photographs in identical frames. One was a photograph of Selena; one was of Marny; one was of Mrs. Friend, and the fourth was of a severe, white-haired man with a bristly, belligerent mustache—presumably Gordon Renton Friend, the Second.

CHAPTER XII



I LOOKED at the picture of the man who was supposed to be my father and who had died twenty-nine days

before. It was a formidable enough face. I could imagine how utterly different the household must have been with him at the helm.

I felt an odd sympathy with him. Just how much were we tied up together? Mr. Moffat was coming tomorrow. I was to recite Mr. Friend's *Ode to Aurora*. Did that connect somehow with old Mr. Friend?

My suspicions, which had been partially smothered by the knowledge that Nate hadn't attended Mr. Friend at the time of his death, flared up again with renewed violence.

Perhaps the Friends *had* murdered the old man and had tricked Dr. Leland into signing a death certificate by some typical Friend ruse which they were afraid might not hold up indefinitely. There was of course, still no evidence to support that theory except a servant's chance remark which had been reported to me second-hand. But what other possible explanation could there be for the cat-and-mouse game the Friends were playing with me and for their passionate determination to convince me I was Gordy Friend?

And, whatever their plan, where was the real Gordy? Still off on a genuine bat? Or were they hiding him somewhere until I had paid the price for the murder?

The thought of Gordy made me realize what I should have realized immediately. In the group of family photographs above the mantel, there was no picture of Gordon Renton Friend, the Third.

That there should be one *was* clear. They would not have omitted

the only son. I looked at the wall closely and detected nail holes on either side of the photographs of Marny and Selena. There were patches, too, where the ochre was a shade darker. Unquestionably there had been three photographs and the pictures of Marny and Selena had been moved to give a symmetrical effect.

I might have guessed that the Friends were thorough enough to have removed Gordy's photograph now that I was mobile in a wheel chair.

While I sat gazing apprehensively at the patches on the wall, the phone on the corner table started to ring. Quickly, before the ring could attract Mrs. Friend or anyone else in the house, I rolled the chair over and picked up the receiver. My pulses were racing. I had no plan, only an instinct that any contact with the outside world was desirable.

I said into the receiver in a flat, impersonal voice: "Mr. Friend's residence."

A man's voice replied. It sounded elderly and rather fussed.

"May I speak to Mrs. Friend? Mrs. Friend, Senior?"

"Mrs. Friend is out at the pool," I lied. "Can I take a message?"

The man coughed. "I—ah—to whom am I speaking?"

Be careful, I thought.

"This is the butler." For safety I added: "The new butler."

"Oh." The man paused. "Yes, perhaps you would give Mrs. Friend a message. This is Mr. Petherbridge, the—ah—the late Mr. Friend's lawyer. Please tell Mrs. Friend that I

will be up tomorrow afternoon with Mr. Moffat as arranged unless I hear from her to the contrary."

"Very well, Mr. Petherbridge."

"Thank you. And—er—how is her son, by the way? What a distressing accident! I trust he will be well enough for tomorrow?"

"Yes, Mr. Friend seems pretty well," I replied. In my precarious role as butler, I dared ask no more than: "Tomorrow's the day then, sir?"

"Yes, tomorrow." Mr. Petherbridge made a strange gurgling sound that might have been a cough. "Tomorrow's the ordeal."

The ordeal.

"Anything else, sir?" I asked.

"That will be all. Kindly have Mrs. Friend call me if the plans are changed."

There was a click that cut me off remorselessly from contact with Mr. Petherbridge.

For a moment I sat with the receiver in my hand. I was still an invalid emotionally as well as physically. My control over myself was slight and that conversation, so incomprehensible and yet so filled with hints at a plan coming to a head, toppled me over with anxiety. The ordeal—tomorrow. Time then was a crucial factor. I had only a few hours left before—something happened. The trapped feeling was almost more than I could endure.

Slowly I let the receiver slip out of my fingers back onto its stand.

"Telephoning, Gordy?"

I looked up. Marny was standing in the doorway. She was leaning against the door frame, a cigarette lolling from her red mouth. Her

young eyes, curiously bright, were fixed on my face.

"Just a call came in for Mother," I said. "A Mr. Petherbridge."

She moved to my side and put her hands on my shoulders. Suddenly the cynical veneer left her face and she was just a young, unaccountably frightened kid. In a strange broken voice, she blurted:

"Is it too awful?"

"Too awful?"

"You're such a sweet guy. I can't bear watching what they're doing to you. Selena . . . Mimsy . . . Nate, all of them. They're fiends."

Impulsively she slid onto the arm of the wheel chair. She put her arms around my neck and pressed her cheek against mine. When she spoke again, her voice was choked with sobs.

"I hate them. I've always hated them. They're as bad as Father." She was kissing my cheeks, my lips, wildly. "They'll do anything—anything and never care."

I was staggered. Was this some new diabolic ruse of the Friend family? Or had I, incredibly, been given an ally when all hope seemed gone? I put my arm around her, drawing her close.

She was weeping passionately now. I kissed her hair. She shivered and clung closer.

"Marny, baby," I said, "what are they doing to me?"

"I can't—I can't—I—"

"Marny, was Mr. Friend—"

She pulled herself out of my grasp. She looked down at me, her face spattered with tears. Then she turned abruptly and ran out of the room.

I hurried the wheel chair out onto the porch.

"Marny," I called. "Marny, come back."

She was running down the grass path away from me. She paid no attention. In a moment she had vanished through the arch which led to the swimming pool.

Fiends. That ominous word echoed in my ears. *Mimsy, Selena, Nate—they're all fiends.*

And it was Marny who had said it, Marny who was in the conspiracy, Marny who knew exactly what they were going to do to me.

"Hello, dear. All alone?"

I looked up. Mrs. Friend had come out of the library. She had a wicker garden basket looped on one arm. In her hand she carried a large pair of garden shears. Who did she remind me of? One of the Fates? The Fate who cuts the thread of life?

"How nice, dear. I thought you'd be down with the others by the pool. We can have a little visit together. Let's go around the corner into the patio. It's shady there."

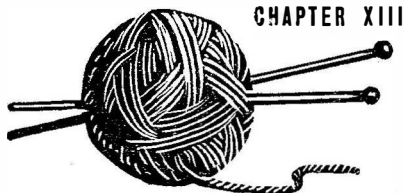
She started pushing my wheel chair down the terrace, chattering blandly. It was almost unendurable having her invisible behind me. I think I half expected her to plunge the scissors into my neck.

"Here we are, dear."

We had entered a little walled patio. White and green porch chairs were arranged under the shade of a drooping pepper tree. Mrs. Friend maneuvered my chair close to one of the others and sat down. She produced knitting from her garden basket. Everything Mrs. Friend did

was so unswervingly maternal. That was the most frightening thing about her.

"Well, dear"—she smiled up from the knitting—"how does it feel in the wheel chair? Overtiring yourself?"



CHAPTER XIII

OF ALL of the conspirators, I was sure now that Mrs. Friend was the most formidable. If only I could break her down, the whole edifice here might collapse. But how? She was so sublimely sure of herself and I had nothing—nothing except Mr. Petherbridge.

Casually I said: "Mr. Petherbridge just called."

"He did, dear?"

"My father's lawyer."

"I know that, Gordy. What did Mr. Petherbridge want?"

"He said to tell you he was coming tomorrow afternoon with Mr. Moffat as arranged unless he hears from you."

She smiled. "Oh, good. Then I won't have to telephone him."

Her monumental placidity was exasperating beyond words.

"Why is Mr. Petherbridge coming tomorrow?" I asked.

"For the meeting, dear," she said gently. "The Clean Living League. He's a member you know. Your father insisted that he join and your father was a very lucrative client. I'm afraid, as a Clean Living

Leaguer, Mr. Petherbridge's tongue is a little in his cheek."

I said: "Then there's going to be a meeting of the whole league here tomorrow? I thought you said it was just Mr. Moffat."

"Oh, no, dear, the whole league." Mrs. Friend had come to the end of one ball of wool. She took its tail and started to weave it onto the next ball. "Didn't I make that clear? It's to be a memorial service for your father with Mr. Moffat presiding, of course. I suppose service isn't quite the right word."

"Mr. Petherbridge called it an ordeal," I said.

"And so it is, my dear. You wait and see. So terribly, terribly good we have to be. No liquor, no cigarettes, of course. Not even an ash-tray visible. All of us in black. No make-up. And a sort of dismal holy expression. Like this."

She put the knitting down and twisted her face into an expression of the most lugubrious piety.

"I do hope you'll be able to put on the right face, dear."

Mrs. Friend was being charming. I was beginning to learn that she used her charm as a decoy whenever I got near a danger spot. Pulling the conversation back into the path I wanted it to take, I asked:

"And just what am I expected to do tomorrow?"

"Why, nothing, Gordy. Just look respectable and be polite and try to pretend you're not bored. Oh, yes, and you can recite the *Ode to Aurora*, too." She glanced at me under her lids. "Have you learned it all yet?"

"Not all of it."

"Then we'll all help you tonight. Mr. Moffat would love that so because—well, dear, you were always thought of as the damned one of the family, you know. It would give him enormous satisfaction to feel you had been reformed." She put the knitting down on her comfortable lap. "You never know, dear. Perhaps the meeting will bring your memory back. Of course, you never met Mr. Moffat and you never attended one of these California meetings. But you had so much of the same thing in St. Paul. Perhaps it'll strike a chord."

It was a terrific strain never taking what they said at its face value, trying to catch a hint of the truth from an inflection or an overtone.

Now I was thinking: Gordy was the damned one of the family, the one with the bad reputation. If Mr. Friend had been murdered and the fact was discovered, Gordy would, therefore, be the most obvious suspect. And Mr. Moffat and Mr. Petherbridge had never seen Gordy. Gordy, then, was the only member of the family who could be represented by a substitute without the ruse being immediately obvious.

Yes, the Friends would have a sporting chance of getting away with the incredible scheme of which I suspected them—if they were daring enough. And, heaven knew, they were daring.

Mrs. Friend's sweetness had the effect of scented pillows smothering me. An overwhelming desire to push my way out into the open rose up in me. Surely, whatever resulted, I could be in no worse a situation than I was right now.

"You want a chord struck?" I asked, deliberately challenging her. "You do want me to get my memory back?"

"Gordy, what a weird thing to say." She put the knitting down on her lap and made a weary grimace. "Surely you still don't have those foolish suspicions."

"Maybe it'll save a lot of time," I blurted out, "if I let you know that Selena never fooled me about the old woman. I've still got her handkerchief anyway. And Netti admitted she existed. I was able to get that much information out of her before you fired her."

"Gordy, you're not insinuating that I fired Netti because—"

"I'm not insinuating any more. I'm telling you that all four of you—Selena, Marny, Dr. Croft and you—have been feeding me a pack of lies from the very beginning."

"Darling, thank heavens!" Mrs. Friend caught up my hand and squeezed it. "At last, you're being frank with me. You can't know how grateful I am. What exactly do you think we're lying about?"

"I don't think. I know." I wasn't going to mention my suspicions about old Mr. Friend's death, of course. That would be far too dangerous. "You're lying about that old woman."

A sweetly patient smile played around her lips. "If I knew what you meant about the old woman, dear, perhaps I could explain."

"The old woman who came into my room last night." I was smart enough not to add that the old woman had said I wasn't Gordy Friend. "The old woman Selena said

was just a figment of my imagination."

I glared at her, thinking: *She'll have to break now.* But Mrs. Friend had never looked less like breaking.

"Selena said there wasn't an old woman living in the house?" she repeated. "My dear, how strange. Of course there's an old woman living here."

I had expected almost anything but that.

I said: "Then why did Selena lie about her?"

"My dear, I can't imagine." Mrs. Friend's voice was soothing. "Of course I don't know the circumstances. You are still an invalid. Perhaps whatever happened flustered you and Selena thought you'd sleep better if she pretended it was all a dream."

Once again Mrs. Friend had managed to make me feel like a fool.

Weakly, I said: "Who is she then, this old woman?"

"Your grandmother, dear. The poor darling, she's my mother. She's been living with us ever since we came to California."

"I can see her then?"

"See her?" Mrs. Friend's face lighted up with a smile of incredulous gratitude. "Would you really like to? She's always been so devoted to you. And, I'm afraid, you've rather neglected her. If only you would have a little visit with her, it would make me so happy."

That was typical of Mrs. Friend. You shot an arrow at her and she caught it and then started to croon over it as if it were a beautiful flower you'd presented to her.

But this time, surely, she'd over-

reached herself. She thought she was being smart by pretending she wanted me to meet the old woman. But neither she nor anyone else knew that last night the old woman had admitted I wasn't Gordy Friend. With any luck I could turn her latest scheme into a boomerang.

I said: "How about going to see her right now?"

"That would be lovely." Mrs. Friend stuffed her knitting back into the garden basket and, rising, kissed me sweetly on the cheek.

She started to wheel my chair into the house.

"It's only this, dear, that you're suspicious about?"

"Yes," I said, lying.

We went down a sunny corridor into a wing I had not explored. We stopped before a closed door. The little contented smile still curling her lips, Mrs. Friend tapped and called:

"Mother? Mother, dear?"

My fingers, gripping the arms of the wheel chair, were quivering.

"Martha, is that you?" An old, querulous voice sounded scratchily through the door.

"Yes, dear. Can I come in?"

"Come in. Come in."

Mrs. Friend opened the door and pushed my chair into a beautiful lavender and gray bedroom.

In a chair by the window, an ancient woman, with a shawl arranged over her shoulders, was sitting looking out at the garden. As Mrs. Friend wheeled me nearer, the old woman did not turn. But I could see her profile clearly. I studied the lined, parchment skin, the large eye sunken in its socket. There was no doubt about it at all.

My "grandmother," sitting there in the wheel chair by the window, was definitely the old woman who had stood over my bed the night before.

"Mother, dear," said Mrs. Friend, "I've brought you a surprise."

The old woman shifted laboriously in her chair so that she could look at us.

This was the moment.

The old woman peered at the wheel chair and then at me. Slowly the wrinkles around her mouth stretched into a smile of quavering delight.

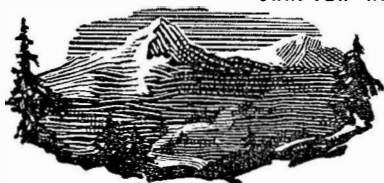
"Gordy," she cried, holding out her thin hands to me. "My darling Gordy's come to see his old grandmother."

Mrs. Friend brought the two chairs together. The old fingers were running up my arms. The old lips, dry and parched, nuzzled affectionately against my cheek.

Marny's voice, broken and wild with weeping, seemed to be right there in the room.

I can't bear watching what they're doing to you. They're fiends—all of them—fiends!

CHAPTER XIV



MRS. FRIEND controlled that "little visit" with the firm hand of a stage director. After five minutes of conversation, she submitted me to another kiss from "grandmother" and

wheeled me out of the room.

In the sunny corridor, she beamed at me. "There, darling boy, she's not particularly frightening, is she?"

I could have said: *She isn't, but you are.* I didn't.

She wheeled me out onto the terrace and at that moment Selena, Nate and Marny trooped up the grass path through the flower beds. They crowded around us in their swimming suits.

"Selena, dear, we've just been to see Grandmother." Mrs. Friend's voice was gently chiding.

"What on earth made you tell Gordy she didn't exist?"

"Oh, it was just that I'd been asleep, Mimsy. I was confused. Gordy was scared. I thought it was easier to reassure him that way."

Mrs. Friend sighed. "Selena, dearest, I'm afraid you won't go ringing down the centuries for your intellect. Now, be a good girl. Tell Gordy you're sorry."

"I'm sorry, baby. Next time an old lady climbs into bed with you, I'll give you her whole life history."

Did they really think they were still deceiving me?

"There." Mrs. Friend smiled daz- zlingly. "Everything's cleared up now, Gordy."

She started organizing us. Selena, Nate and Marny were ordered off to change their wet swimming suits. I was turned over to Jan who wheeled me back to my room, quite unnecessarily changed my pajamas, and pushed me into the huge living-room.

Cocktails were being served. The family and Dr. Croft were lounging in chairs before the vast plate glass

window, chatting, laughing, like any family having a good time.

Mrs. Friend permitted me a single cocktail with Nate Croft's sanction as a "special treat." Tomorrow was to be a day of gloom, she said. We should all celebrate today.

The celebration was carried over into dinner with champagne which was served in a glass-walled dining room by a maid I had never seen before. Netti's successor? We were all supposed to be terribly, terribly at our ease. No one was. I frankly sulked. Marny was silent and keyed-up. Selena and Nate—and even Mrs. Friend—were much too gay for conviction.

They were nervous. That meant things were coming to a head.

When we sat over coffee in the living room, looking out at the staggering panorama of sky and mountain, Selena perched herself on the arm of my wheel chair. It was an uncomfortable position. Only an excess of affection or the simulation of it could have made her take it.

I suspected the latter. Almost immediately, she squeezed my shoulder and chanted:

"In taverns where young people mingle, to sway their lascivious hips. Really, that's divine. I've been saying it over and over to myself all day. Gordy, it'll be sheer bliss having you recite it tomorrow. Come on, let's teach you the rest."

"Yes," put in Nate, obviously following a cue. "I'm crazy to hear the poem. Never did, you know."

Without looking up from her knitting, Mrs. Friend said:

"Marny, dear, run get the book from Gordy's room."

Marny tossed back her glossy black hair, glanced at me for a strained, ambiguous moment and then hurried out of the room. Soon she was back. Selena took the book from her and searched through the pages.

"Just two more verses, Gordy."

Nate had left his chair and was standing behind Selena, his hand resting with pretended absence of mind on her bare shoulder. Mrs. Friend put her knitting down in her lap. Marny lit a match for a cigarette with a sharp, spurring sound. They were all so conscious of me that I could feel their concentration like fingers on my body.

They were losing their subtlety. I was sure that the poem was part of their plan now.

Dreamily Selena started to recite:

Oh, mothers moan sad for their strip-
pling.

Oh, wives yearn at home for their
spouse.

Both are down in the dark tavern
tippling,

Debauched in their careless carouse.
Besotted they slump to the floor. Ah,
Ere they drown in the beer's fatal foam,
Restore them, relieve them, Aurora,
Our Lady of Home.

Mrs. Friend crinkled her nose. "Really, it's enough to drive Mahomet to drink, isn't it? I'm afraid your father wasn't a very good Swinburne, Gordy." She smiled at me. "Now, be a good boy, dear. The first line. *Oh, mothers moan sad for their . . .*"

Selena was watching me under half-closed lashes. Nate was watching me. So was Marny.

"No," I said.

Selena's arm, thrown over my shoulder, stiffened. Nate's mouth went tight. Mrs. Friend said:

"No—what, Gordy dear?"

"I'm not going to learn that god-damn poem."

Marny's eyes were bright. Mrs. Friend rose and moved toward me.

"Now, dear, don't be pettish. I know it's preposterous. But, please!"

I shook my head.

"Why not, dear?"

She was rattled. For the first time the tranquil smile was so phony you could see right through it.

"I won't learn the poem," I said, "because this is a free country and I don't want to learn a poem which should have been strangled at birth."

"But, darling, I told you. For Mr. Moffat's sake!"

"I should care for Mr. Moffat." I paused, gauging the tension. "It doesn't matter whether I read it or not. You said so yourself."

Dr. Croft, trying to be the gruff, boys-together doctor, said:

"Gordy, old man, let's not be ornery about it. Your mother wants you to recite it."

I looked at him. It was better, somehow, dealing with a man after all those smothering females.

I said: "I might be persuaded to recite it."

"Persuaded?" He looked hopeful. "How, Gordy?"

"If they stopped lying and told me why they really want me to do it."

"Lying." Nate echoed the word sharply. "Gordy, I thought we were through with all these suspicions."

Mrs. Friend, still flustered, opened her mouth, but surprisingly Selena spoke first.

"All right. That's putting it up to us." She laughed, her husky, amused laugh. "Why not tell him the truth?"

"Selena!" snapped Mrs. Friend.

"Don't you see how stupid we're being? You bawled me out for lying about Grandma. This is much sillier. He doesn't believe us. That's obvious. What's the point of trying to fool him when he won't be fooled?" She leaned down, letting her shining hair brush my cheek. "Poor Gordy, you must think we're fiends incarnate. And I don't blame you. But it's all so silly, because the truth's so—innocuous."

CHAPTER XV



I LOOKED up at her blandly smiling mouth so close to mine. I wished she wasn't so beautiful.

"The truth," I said, "is innocuous?"

"Of course." Selena was watching Mrs. Friend. "I'll tell him?"

I was watching Mrs. Friend, too. From the slight puckering around her eyes, I was almost sure that Selena was improvising and that her mother-in-law was uneasy about its outcome.

Tartly she said: "Do what you think best, Selena."

Selena nuzzled closer to me. "Of course the poem is important. And you were awfully smart to realize

it. We didn't tell you because—well, it's all tied up with your drinking too much. Mimsy's always been worried about it. Then this amnesia came, and she thought maybe, since you'd forgotten everything else, you'd forget your craving for alcohol. She was scared that by telling you the truth about tomorrow—about the poem, it would make you think of yourself as a drunk and spoil your chance of being cured." She turned to Mrs. Friend. "That's true, isn't it, Mimsy?"

This was being okay with Mimsy. She had quite regained her composure. She had even picked up her knitting and was working the needles.

"Yes, Selena," she said.

I glanced at Marny. Marny was the key. There was no expression on her face. She was sitting, flat-eyed, watching Selena.

"Okay," I said. "So far so good. You've been lying because you were trying to save me from the beer's fatal foam. So?"

"It's awfully stupid, baby." Selena's hand was stroking the back of my neck. "It's all something dismal from your father's will."

I looked at Mrs. Friend. "That's why Mr. Petherbridge is coming? He's not really a member of the League at all."

She flushed faintly but said nothing.

"Yes, baby," said Selena. "That's why Mr. Petherbridge is coming. In fact, that's why Mr. Moffat and the Clean Living League are coming, too."

"To hear me recite the *Ode to Aurora*?"

"That," said Selena, "and a couple of other things. Oh, it's so absurd. Let's get it over with. Your sainted papa was dreary about drink. Check? You drank. Check? Your father wanted to stop drinking. Check? So he did this. He made this corny will. You get the money because you're the only son. Sure. But you only get it provided you're cold sober thirty days after his death, sober enough to recite the *Ode to Aurora* before the entire Clean Living League and then, afterwards, sign their abstinence pledge.

"Mr. Petherbridge is coming as a referee. If you can recite the poem and sign the pledge, you get the money. It is your father's way of making you teetotal." She kissed me on the ear. "There, baby. That's the awful, awful truth we've been keeping from you."

I glanced at her. She couldn't have looked more innocent.

I said: "And if I'm not sober tomorrow and if I can't recite the poem and if I won't sign the abstinence pledge?"

She shrugged. "Then, darling, no money for Gordy. The whole works, great gobs of it, goes to the league to cleanse Southern California."

They were all looking at me now. Mrs. Friend, bright-eyed, said:

"So you see, darling, how terribly important it is for your own sake for you to learn the poem?"

I stared back. "Sure," I said, "but why are you all so worked up about it? Just out of sweet, spontaneous affection for me?"

"Of course, dear," said Mrs. Friend. "After all, you recite this poem and you're terribly rich. You

don't recite it and you're destitute."

I looked at Marny. I rather thought that she shook her head infinitesimally.

I went on: "But your inheritance is all right whatever happens to me? Yours and Marny's?"

"Of course, dear," said Mrs. Friend.

Marny suddenly got up then. She stood, young and tense, silhouetted against the great view of evening mountains.

"Don't believe her," she said.

Mrs. Friend shot her a horrified look. Marny stared back, her young face fierce with contempt.

"For God's sake, now you've started, tell him the whole truth."

I smiled at her. My ally was crashing through, after all.

I said: "Which means that you all have a personal interest in this?"

"Of course we do."

"Marny!"

Marny tossed back her glossy black hair. "They make me sick with their dreary deceits. Okay, Mimsy. Do you want me to say it for you? Gordy drank. Selena couldn't stop him. You couldn't stop him. I couldn't stop him. Father held us all responsible. We didn't struggle with the devil enough, he said. So we're all in the same boat. It was up to us to see he was cured of drinking. Father saw to that all right. Neither you nor me nor Selena get a red cent of the money unless Gordy passes this test in front of the league."

She swung round to me. "There's the pretty little story. A true story, for a change." She dropped down on the sofa, tucking her legs under

her. "Thank God it's out now."

My relief was so great that I wanted to laugh. They were still lying to me, of course. But the thing they were lying about seemed absurdly unimportant now. I had suspected them of such satanic evil. I had convinced myself I was in the clutches of murderers who were planning to foist their guilt upon me. And the real secret behind their charming facade had merely been—this.

Marny with her girlish impetuosities, had been exaggerating. They weren't fiends at all. They were just a bunch of very uncomfortable people in a jam.

Mrs. Friend was watching me. "So you will do it, darling, won't you? It's not just for our sakes. It's for your sake, too."

"For my sake?" I queried.

"Of course, dear."

"Don't you mean for Gordy Friend's sake?"

She stiffened. Selena and Nate exchanged a glance.

"Gordy, dear," began Mrs. Friend.

"It's really not worth while going on with the lies," I said. "Where is Gordy? Off on a bat, I suppose. How embarrassing of him. The whole Friend fortune at stake and Gordy's off in a tavern somewhere, debauched in a careless carouse."

Dr. Croft said crisply: "This is beyond a joke, old man."

"You think so? I think it's terribly amusing." I grinned at him. "I suppose you unearthed me in your sanitarium. You certainly delivered the goods, didn't you? One amnesiac, fake Gordy Friend guaranteed to recite the *Ode to Aurora* to Mr.

Moffat, and win a fortune for the Friends."

Mrs. Friend had risen. Her face was as pale as paper.

"How about it?" I said. "Do we go on playing Guess Who I am? Or do we come clean?"

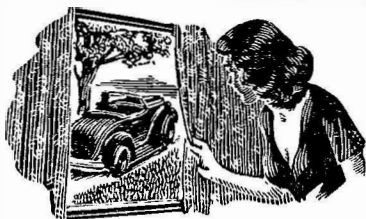
Suddenly Marny laughed. She got up from the couch. She pushed her way through the others and kissed me enthusiastically.

"You did it," she cried. "From the beginning, I knew you'd win."

"Which means, of course, that I'm not Gordy Friend?"

"Of course you're not Gordy," said Marny. "Until Nate brought you home from the sanitarium, none of us had ever seen you before."

CHAPTER XVI



SO AT LAST it was out. They had needed Gordy desperately for their inheritance. They couldn't find him. They had invented a false Gordy. It was as simple as that and it was enough to explain everything. Why now should I cling to my far darker suspicions which had never had anything but the flimsiest evidence to support them?

Mrs. Friend was watching Marny. When she spoke, her voice was gentle.

"We've worked so hard. It's been so difficult. Why did you have to do this now?"

"Do what?" challenged Marny. "Tell him the truth? He's got to be told the truth."

Mrs. Friend shrugged wearily. "You could at least have left the decision up to someone more responsible."

"Who's someone more responsible? You?" Marny laughed. "A wonderful job you've made of it. You with your elaborate web of lies that had us all tangled up before we could look around. He's a clever man. You and Nate have been handling this like morons. Five minutes after he returned to consciousness he was beginning to suspect he wasn't Gordy."

With great difficulty Mrs. Friend managed one of her smiles.

"Well, dear, there's not much point in mutual recriminations. The damage has been done." She turned the remnants of the frayed smile on me. "You must please believe me that we've been acting for what seemed to be the best."

"Best for whom?" flared Marny.

Nate Croft moved toward her. Behind the smooth, doctor front, he was a very angry man.

"Okay, Marny. You've had your fun making your pretty little scene. Now keep out of this and leave it to someone who has some conception of the importance of the situation."

"The importance?" Marny turned on him savagely. "The importance of having the no-good Friend inherit Father's money on a sham? The importance of keeping Dr. Croft's holy nose clean?"

"Really!"

"Really." Marny's lips curled. "For a doctor, you have an extraor-

dinary conception of importance. Do you think it's attractive the way we've been treating this man? He's lost his memory. The poor guy doesn't know who he is. We try and make him believe he's someone he isn't. He sees through it. And yet he's stuck here with a broken arm, a broken leg, completely at our mercy. We've been torturing him. That's what we've been doing. And you talk smugly about my not realizing the importance of the situation—when you're doing this to one of your own patients because you're besotted with lust for Selena."

Nate's flush deepened. Selena, who alone seemed as calm and amused as ever, laughed.

"Marny, darling, try just for once to keep lust out of your dialogue."

"If you kept it out of your life, I might keep it out of my dialogue." Marny turned to me. Her hand went out hesitantly. "I couldn't bear watching what they were doing to you. I wanted to tell you the truth. But I knew I couldn't. Not till it came out naturally, like this in front of them all."

Mrs. Friend said acidly: "You're developing those lofty sentiments rather late in the day, aren't you?"

"Oh, I'm not trying to whitewash myself." Marny was still watching me. "I'm as guilty as they are. We all went into this together. But please try to think that I'm not quite as much of a louse as the others."

Selena laughed again. "I'm beginning to see the light. Our little Marny has developed one of her well-known weaknesses for the tortured victim in the wheel chair."

Marny flared: "Shut up, Selena."

Selena grimaced. "Oh, dear, I brought lust into the dialogue again."

I looked at the two girls, Marny who had defied her family and risked a fortune to help me, Selena who from the start had serenely made a sucker out of me.

Why was it Selena who still made my pulses beat quickly?

Marny, her straight brown eyes fixed on my face, repeated, "Do you hate me?"

I grinned at her. "On the contrary, after the things I've been suspecting, I could take you all, Nate included, in my arms and give you big, juicy kisses. How about giving with the facts, though?"

"What is there to tell? You must have guessed almost all of it. The night Father died, Gordy went off on a drunk. He'd been drinking all day. I was the last to see him. He passed me in the hall, saying he was fed up with the family and going off to Los Angeles. I didn't try to stop him, because we didn't know till later that Father was dying and none of us had the slightest idea he was leaving that clause in his will anyway. Afterwards, of course, when we read the will, Gordy mattered terribly. We ransacked L.A. for him."

"But you haven't found him?"

Selena gave a rueful shrug. "No, baby. He's probably in Mexico by now. Gordy's drunks usually end up in a Mexican bed."

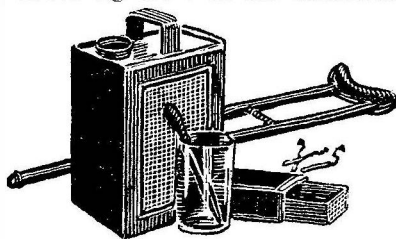
Mrs. Friend had sunk into a chair. She looked resigned and tired.

I said: "There you were with no Gordy and everything depending on him. So Nate produced me from

his sanitarium as an understudy."

Selena nodded. "You seemed like the answer to a maiden's prayer. You'd lost your memory. Neither Mr. Moffat nor Mr. Petherbridge had ever seen Gordy and, after Father's death, we'd fired all the old servants. There wasn't anyone who knew Gordy by sight except Jan and Jan doesn't count." She smiled up at me. "All we had to do was to convince you that you were our long lost Gordy, teach you the poem, and the day was ours."

"Even having your right arm broken fitted so admirably." Mrs. Friend gave a small sigh. "A left-handed signature on the abstinence



pledge couldn't have been proved a forgery." She scooped up strands of uncooperative hair. "It was a heroic attempt anyway."

I said: "Very neat so far. But what were you planning to do after I'd got you the money and the real Gordy showed up? Once Mr. Petherbridge and Mr. Moffat saw the real Gordy the whole conspiracy would be obvious."

"But they would never have seen the real Gordy. We would have left California, sold the house."

"What would you have done with me? I'd have had a complete hold over you. I could have blackmailed you indefinitely."

"That was a gamble we were prepared to take. After all, having money and being blackmailed is better than having no money and not being blackmailed. Besides"—Mrs. Friend reached for her knitting—"we'd been resigned to blackmail anyway. Before Nate produced you, we had been playing with the idea of hiring some unscrupulous character to put on a deliberate masquerade. A man like that would certainly have blackmailed us." She smiled. "I don't think, somehow, you would have done anything like that, would you?"

"Of course he wouldn't, Mimsy," said Selena. "He's a divine man."

Mrs. Friend's fingers did serene things with the coral wool.

"I suppose we're all criminals really and should feel guilty about it. I'm afraid I don't. Not at all. My husband's will was unfair. You must admit that. We have every moral right to the money. And the prospect of it going to the Clean Living League—" She shivered. "Wait till you see them tomorrow. Mr. Moffat with a couple of million dollars! The very thought curdles my blood."

Mrs. Friend's placid gaze came to rest on my face.

"Marny was right. We should have given up the pretense earlier. I fired that dreary, drunken Netti because I was afraid she was making you suspicious. And, the time we've had with Grandmother! You see, because she's so old and a teeny bit wandering, poor dear, we thought it would be safer to keep her out of the conspiracy. We just told her Gordy was back and hoped

to keep her in her room until the danger was over. She embarrassed us by creeping into your room."

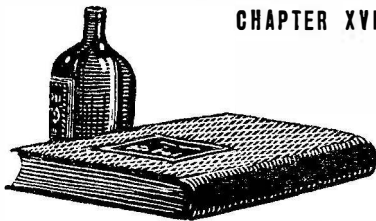
She sighed. "We underestimated Grandmother. This morning when I realized that you were determined to bring on a showdown, I explained the whole situation to her. She was thrilled. She simply adored pretending she thought you were Gordy just now." She shrugged. "Grandma's turned out to be much more of a law-breaking type than any of us."

She paused, looking out of the plate glass window.

"You know," she said suddenly, "you can't imagine what a relief it is to be able to speak the truth again—the whole truth."

Perhaps it was because I had, during the last days, become accustomed to disbelieving Mrs. Friend on principle, but there was something about the faint exaggeration of stress upon the words "the whole truth" that started suspicion stirring inside me again. The story they had told me was plausible, but after all, the other lying stories they had fed me from the beginning had sounded plausible, too. Was it possible that I was once again falling for a colossal bluff?

CHAPTER XVII



I FELT a crazy desire to challenge them, to know once and for all, from their own lips, that old Mr. Friend

had not been murdered. I knew it was crazy, of course, but did nothing about it.

"Yes," murmured Mrs. Friend, "there is great pleasure in telling the truth, even though, by telling the truth, we have lost all chance of ever getting the money which is legitimately ours."

When I didn't say anything, she made a little grimace. "Tell us. Now you know the truth, do you think we're very shameless?"

"Yes, baby." Selena smiled up at me. "Are you terribly shocked?"

I suppose I should have been. After all, even if old Mr. Friend's will had been on the whimsical side, they had all of them been unscrupulously prepared to break the law and use me as their stooge. But I wasn't shocked. Although Mrs. Friend and Selena had between them less ethical equipment than a gnat, I felt a positive affection for them.

"I'm not shocked," I said. "Maybe I'm a criminal type myself, which brings up the one question that really interests me. Okay. I'm not Gordy Friend. Who am I?"

Personal excitement that had nothing to do with the Friends started my nerve ends shivering. Peter . . . the propellers . . . iris . . . those dim, tantalizing clues stirred in my mind.

Mrs. Friend put down her knitting. She looked faintly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, dear. I'm afraid that's one thing we can't tell you."

"Can't tell me?"

"No, dear. You see, we don't know."

I turned to Marny who still sat curled up on the edge of the couch.

I said: "Is she speaking the truth?"

"That's true," Marny said. "We haven't the faintest idea who you are."

I felt like a prisoner, almost reprieved, who sees the door of his cell slam again in his face.

Dr. Croft, who had for so long let the women hold the floor, took control at that point. "When you were received at the hospital, there was absolutely no clue to identity on you, no wallet, no papers, nothing except the clothes you were wearing and they seemed to be brand new with no laundry marks." He paused with a faint smile. "You must realize that I took a tremendous risk lending you to the Friends the way I did. I'd never have taken that risk if you'd been someone with a name, an identity who might at any moment have been claimed by relatives."

"But the people who brought me to the sanitarium?"

"They were motorists who found you lying unconscious at the side of the road. Perhaps you gave a ride to a hitchhiker who blackjacked you and stole your valuables and your car. The wound on your head is such as might have been made by a black-jack."

Mrs. Friend gave me a sudden, sweet smile. "Don't worry about it too much. I'm sure your memory will come back soon. Meanwhile, think of us as your family."

"Yes, baby," said Selena, rubbing her soft cheek caressingly against the back of my hand. "We simply adore you. We honestly do."

If I'd felt sardonic, I could have

pointed out that, since they had kidnapped me, the least they could do was to house and feed me until I found somewhere else to go. But I didn't feel sardonic. It's lonely being a man without a name and without a past.

Nate Croft said: "Of course, when the right time comes, we'll do everything we can to see that you're restored where you belong." He looked faintly awkward. "I must admit that while the little masquerade was on, I did my best to discourage any shreds of genuine memory you showed signs of developing. All that will be changed now. You can rest assured that my services as a psychiatrist are completely at your disposal."

"Free of charge?" I asked.

He looked even more awkward. "I don't blame you for feeling antagonism toward me. As a doctor, I have acted in an unorthodox fashion. My only excuse is that I didn't feel it would do you any serious harm and, believing as I do that Mr. Friend's will was outrageously unfair, I thought you might be the means of doing the Friends a great deal of good.

"Which brings up quite an important point." Nate's hands were in his pockets now. "Now you've heard the set-up, what's your point of view? About this will? I mean, if you'd been Mrs. Friend or Selena or Marny—or me for that matter—how would you have behaved?"

I glanced down at Selena for whom Nate was "besotted with lust" and by whom I was so nearly enchanted myself. I studied Mrs. Friend's magnificent maturity and

Marny's stripling loveliness.

I said, which was true, "If I'd been you, Nate, I'd probably have done exactly the same thing—especially if the Clean Living League is as preposterous as they make out."

"Oh, it is," said Mrs. Friend quickly.

"Then, in that case"—Nate was studying his own manicured thumbnail—"maybe you might feel like . . ."

He didn't finish the sentence. There was no need. It was perfectly obvious what he was driving at.

"We would guarantee," put in Mrs. Friend quietly, "that you'd get into no trouble. Even if the little trick was exposed, we would take the entire blame. We would swear that you were an amnesia patient whom we'd deceived into genuinely believing he was Gordy. You'd just be an innocent victim of our guile. We're doing that for Nate, too."

"At worst, it's only a technical breaking of the law," said Nate.

Selena leaned over me, her warm red mouth drooping in a conspiratorial smile.

"Oh, please do. Who cares whether it's moral or not? It's just that it's fun to have a lot of money and awfully dreary not to have any."

Perhaps an amnesiac is automatically anti-social. Or perhaps it was just because Selena was so beautiful and wasn't lying to me any more, and was married to a drunken bum who'd abandoned her at the only moment when he could have helped her. In any case, I knew exactly what I was going to say.

"Okay. I'll do it, provided you'll cover me if there's any trouble and

help me afterwards to find out who I am."

Selena traced the curve of my cheek with her finger. "You're an angel."

Nate Croft, now the climax was passed, had reverted to the jealous male. His cheeks flushed with pink.

"Selena, don't paw him about."

"Why not, dear? He's so pawable." Selena drifted to Nate then, kissing him absently on the cheek. "But we're so grateful to you, too."

Mrs. Friend rose and, coming toward me, picked up the volume of Mr. Friend's poems from the floor. She returned to her own chair, searched through the book and gave a contented little grunt.

"Now, dear, you must be sure to learn the poem perfectly. Mr. Moffat is probably down on his knees right this minute praying that you'll hicough or do something distinctly drunken and be disqualifiable."

She looked up. "Only two more stanzas. The one we read and the last one. Let's read the last one."

She produced a large pair of shell-rimmed glasses from her work bag and balanced them on the end of her nose.

Emphatically, stressing the rhythm, she read:

Oh, now is the time when Temptation,
Like the serpent of yore, must be
stunned.

We must flush every foot of the nation
Till our quarry is slaughtered and
shunned.

Though our country is stained, pray
restore her.

Up and scour her with spiritual soap
Oh scour her and scourge her, Aurora,
Our Lady of Hope.

She put the book down on her lap. She peered at us all over her spectacles.

"Your poor father! Never tell a soul but he drank a whole glass of brandy on our wedding night."

Magnificently she had asserted herself again. Through the force of her personality, she had turned us all into a harmless little family party cozily sitting around after a good dinner.

"Ready, dear?" Mrs. Friend's gentle smile had settled on me. Once again she raised her hand and beat a heavy rhythm in the air.

Oh, now is the time when Temptation . . .

CHAPTER XVIII



WHEN I had the poem word-perfect, Mrs. Friend announced that it was time for us all to go to bed so that we should be particularly clear-headed in the morning.

Marny offered to wheel me to my room.

Once we reached it, she pushed my chair near to one of the beds on which she dropped down, her black hair tumbling around her young face. The indignation with which she had fought my battle for me against the family seemed to have left her. She was her cool, sardonic self again.

I smiled at her. "Well, I've got a lot to thank you for. If it hadn't been for you, they'd never have broken down."

"You're welcome."

I watched her curiously. "Why did you call them fiends?"

"Because they are fiends. They weren't treating you like a human being. To them you were just a hunk of flesh they were pushing around for their own advantage. I was sorry for you." She grimaced. "I'm being like Mimsy now—making a good story. I wasn't all that Christian. I was scared too. I knew you were getting suspicious. I was afraid you might get panicked and call the police and ruin everything."

"Looks like you were smarter than they were."

"Maybe."

"And certainly franker."

Her cool eyes watched me. "After what you've been through, I'd think a little frankness would go down well."

"It does," I said. "Then you're not sorry I decided to forgive and forget and help them?"

"Them? Don't be silly. You're helping me as much as them. Of course I'm delighted. I want that money more than I want anything in the world." One of her straight long legs was dangling over the edge of the bed. She swung it restlessly. "God, how I want that money. And when I get my share, I'll lam out of this place so fast you won't see me for dust."

"What have you got against it?"

"I've got everything against it. Ever since I can remember, home's been the place where you get

trampled on. First it was Father. You should have seen me when he was alive. I was a little gray frightened mouse, scurrying into the wainscot if anyone raised their voice."

She stared down at her leg gloomily. "And then Father did die. For a while I thought life had begun. I painted my face. I bought the smartest clothes, the sheerest stockings. I had a cocktail before every meal, I smoked like a blast furnace. I even had a *date* with a *man*. This was it, I thought. Then I started to realize that it was all just as bad as it had ever been—worse really."

It was quite new for me to think of this girl with her flourished cupid's-bow mouth, her brash exhibition of leg and her cynical chatter as a transformation, only three weeks old, from a mousy frightened child under Mr. Friend's patriarchal thumb.

I asked: "Why was life just as bad after your father died?"

She looked up quickly. "Mimsy and Selena, of course."

"Mimsy and Selena?"

"You try being a woman in the same house with Mimsy and Selena." She kicked out savagely with her leg. "It was almost better with Father. At least he wasn't sinister."

"Sinister?"

"Oh, they don't know they are." She pulled herself up onto the bed and sat cross-legged. "It's just that they're both terrifically forceful characters and all that force was bottled up by Father. Now, with him gone, they're expanding—blossoming like those monstrous South

American man-eating plants. They suck everything in, including me. They swallow everyone."

She was staring at me fixedly now, the glossy hair swinging free around her shoulders. I had the strange feeling that somehow between the lines of what she said there was a warning.

"Tell me," she asked suddenly. "Why are you going through with this plan? There's nothing in it for you."

"There's nothing in it against me, is there?"

"I don't think so."

"Then why shouldn't I do it out of general chumminess?"

She shook her head. "You're not doing it for general chumminess. You're doing it for Selena."

For some reason I felt uncomfortable.

"You're just like all the rest. You're letting her swallow you up. She swallowed Gordy up—what was left of him, poor guy. And she's swallowed Nate." She gave a bitter laugh. "Remember I told you I had my first date with a man three weeks ago? That man was Nate. I met him and brought him home. He was supposed to be my beau. No one ever mentions that now, do they? Selena took one look at him and gobbled him up like a hippopotamus gobbling water-weed. And you . . ."

"Maybe I can take care of myself."

"You?" Marny laughed again. "Just wait and see. Any minute now she'll be walking into the room. She'll be so gay and amusing about tomorrow. That's what will happen

first. Then she'll start having a pain in her eyes and telling you how awful it was being married to a drunk. Then she'll say Nate's awfully sweet, of course, and she's devoted to him, but what big muscles you have." Her sarcasm was withering. "You take care of yourself? Water-weed! That's what you'll be. One big, green mouthful."

My reaction was curiously mixed. Part of me said: *She's right. Watch out.* Another part strained to leap to Selena's defense. It was checked however by Marny's clear, ironic stare.

She said: "You think I'm jealous, don't you?"

"Do I?"

"Of course you do." In a quick change of mood her face was deadly serious. "Please believe me, for your own sake. She'll be poison to you. She's bad—really bad. It's not just Gordy, Nate. It's every man that comes near her." She paused and added harshly: "Jan, even."

"Jan!"

"Yes, Jan. I saw Selena with Jan just before Father died. I—oh, I suppose I shouldn't have told you. It's bitchy. But what difference does it make if only I can make you see?"

A vision of Jan's naked body swam across my mind. It merged with a vision of Selena's lithe figure, struggling in the pool. Anger, of a violence that startled me, flared up in me.

Marny was still watching me. "Selena got bored with Gordy. Without raising a finger, she let him drink himself into a sodden pulp. She took up with Nate just so she could use him. Soon she'll throw

him on the junk pile, too. And you're next on the list for liquidation."

"What's it to you whether I make a fool of myself or not?"

"What's it to me?" She gave a shrug. "I don't know. Maybe it's because I can't bear to see Selena get away with things. She's got some plan up her sleeve with you. I know she has."

"Plan?" I was uneasy again. "What sort of plan?"

She shook her head slowly. "I don't know. But there's something. I can tell it in her eyes." She touched my hand with a gravity that was almost naive. "Please promise me you won't trust her."

It was a funny moment. This was the warning I had half been expecting. But all that seemed to matter was that Marny was looking very young and tired and forlorn. I slid my arm around her, drew her close and kissed her on the lips.

"Thanks for the warning, baby."

"You won't pay it any attention."

"Who knows?"

"But you'll see. Sooner or later you'll find out what she's up to and you'll come screaming to me to say how right I was."

"Okay. That's a bargain. When Selena poisons me; I'll come screaming to you for an emetic."

I kissed her again. For a moment her lips relaxed against mine; then they went tight and hostile. She wrenched herself free.

"For God's sake, stop kissing me."

"Why, Marny?"

"Because . . ." She stared at me, her mouth unsteady. Then she jumped off the bed. "Oh, hell, I'll

go get Jan to put you to bed. You boys should get together anyway and form a club."

As she ran to the door, I caught a glimpse of her face. It was white and stricken.

I felt like a heel.

CHAPTER XIX



Soon Jan came. He was in pajamas. His blond hair was ruffled and, from the droopiness of his lids, I imagined Marny had awakened him. But he was as amiable as ever. Mechanically, he went through the routine of preparing me for the night. I'd never liked his touching me. That night, with the vision of him and Selena together in my mind, I felt an unbridled desire to lunge my one good fist into his broad face.

He carried me back to bed as if I were a baby, tucked me in, smiled with all the friendly sweetness in the world and loped out.

It was only after he'd gone that I faced the truth which I should have faced days before.

Marny was right, of course, about my obsession with Selena. I didn't love her. It was nothing as fragrant and romantic as that. It was worse. Although she had cheated me and lied to me from the start, Selena was in my blood.

Even now, when vague suspicions

of an even vaguer danger ahead preyed on me, I could still be excited because I knew that at any moment Selena would be coming.

The door opened and there she was.

"Hello, darling. Has Marny been warning you against me? I saw a predatory gleam in her eyes."

She came to the bed and sat down. She took my hand in hers and tilted back her head, laughing out of sheer animal spirits.

"I'm sorry I'm so late. I've been having a terrible time with Nate."

I was happy now. "What's Nate been up to?"

"Oh, since I'm not pretending to be your wife any more, he said I ought to move over into one of those dreary guest bedrooms in the other wing." She leaned over me, kissing me on the mouth. "All those technical proprieties, they're so dismal, aren't they?"

"Terribly dismal."

Her shoulders were bare. I let my hand stray up over the warm, smooth skin. She slipped back against the pillows, wheedling her hand under the nape of my neck.

"Baby, I'm so terribly glad about tomorrow. You really are an angel. Funny, it all turned out for the best, didn't it? I mean, Gordy'd never have been sober enough to recite that poem himself." Under their thick lashes, her eyes slid sidewise to glance at me. "Poor Gordy. I'm devoted to him. Honestly I am. But sometimes—well, it's rather drab being married to a drunk. Can you understand that?"

"I can't understand life ever being drab for you. After all, there's not

only Gordy. Nate's crazy about you."

"Nate." She gave a throaty sigh. "Yes, I suppose he is. He wants me to divorce Gordy and marry him."

"He does?" I asked sharply.

"That's why he helped us. He didn't want to help at all until I pointed out how depressing it would be to marry him if I was penniless. After all, if I was going to divorce Gordy, it was so much more sensible to have Gordy rich, so's I could get a fat cash settlement, wasn't it?"

For a moment the shamelessness of that admission took my breath away. *Poor Nate*. I thought again. Less dimly this time.

"So after this is over, you're going to divorce Gordy and marry Nate?"

"Oh, baby, it's so bleak thinking of things way in the future like that. Of course Nate's awfully sweet. But he's a bit of a stuffed shirt."

She rolled over onto her hip so that she faced me. Idly her fingers started playing with the sleeve of my pajama jacket. She pushed it back, staring down at my arm.

"Baby, such hands. I've always adored them. And the muscles—really, like a stevedore's."

It amazed me how separate my mind and my emotions had become. Marny had prophesied almost exactly the sequence of Selena's conversation. But instead of acting as a warning, that knowledge gave me a strange exhilaration.

"Know something, baby?" Selena was stroking the hairs on my arm. "I never enjoyed anything so much as pretending to be your wife. It was exciting lying all the time. And

it's exciting touching you, too." She leaned one inch closer and kissed me on the mouth. "You're like something fizzing in my veins."

She twisted a lock of my hair out from under the bandages.

"Darling, don't you really know who you are?"

"No."

"Maybe you're married."

"Maybe."

"To a nasty little woman with a stringy neck and curl papers."

"Could be."

"Baby, wouldn't it be wonderful if you never got your memory back?"

I stroked her cheek. "Would it?"

Her eyes were flat, dreamy. "I think that's what really makes you exciting. Who are you? Nothing. No identity. No habits. Just Man. That's what you are, baby. Man. Oh, don't ever get your memory back."

"Like me this way?"

She was smiling a swift, enchanting smile.

"That's it, baby. Never get your memory back. I'll divorce Gordy. I'll be rich, stinking rich. You can be rich, too, because you can hold Gordy up for an enormous check. And we'll go off together and do the most wonderful things. And you'll be part of me. You'll be something I've made. I'll have taught you everything you know." Her hands fluttered over my chest. "I'll have taught you everything you know—when the cast comes off."

My pulses were racing. I couldn't stop them. My blood was racing, too, so that it was almost a pain.

"Baby." She whispered that, her lips warm against my ear. "Baby,

tell me. Do you love me?"

"Love?" I gripped her shoulder, drawing her back so I could look at her. "Love's a rather prissy word to use around you, isn't it?"

"Oh, baby." She laughed, a deep, husky laugh. "You and me."

She jumped off the bed then, her hair tossing around her shoulders. She moved around the bed where I couldn't see her.

"Baby?"

"Yes, Selena."

"I'm undressing. Turn the other way."

"I am turned the other way. I can't see you."

"I know you can't, you dope. That's what bothers me. Turn around."

I moved around in the bed. She was standing between me and the window. She undid her dress at the back and let it fall to the ground at her feet.

She was smiling at me, her teeth gleaming white between the red, parted lips.

"You and me, baby," she said.

CHAPTER XX



WHEN JAN wakened me the next morning, Selena had disappeared. My first glimpse of the Dutchman was sufficient to remind me that this was The Great Day. His huge body, normally naked except for his scanty

swimming trunks, had been forced into a white shirt, with knotted black tie, and a seersucker suit. His blond hair had been slicked down, too. He looked awkward and unconvincingly holy.

He bathed me and dressed me, as completely as the casts would allow, in an equally dour suit and shirt combination with a mourning armband of black. I was arranged in the wheel chair and pushed out to the glassed breakfast porch where the others were all assembled.

At a first glance I scarcely recognized the Friend woman. Mrs. Friend's face was devoid of make-up. Her hair was pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She wore no jewelry and had managed somehow to switch off her magnetism and assume an air of be-reaved piety.

Both the girls were in unrelieved black, too.

In spite of her subdued appearance, Mrs. Friend was as efficient as ever. Mr. Petherbridge, she told me, was arriving before the league convened. It was part of his duties as executor of Mr. Friend's will to inspect the house for signs of depravity—bottles of liquor, ash trays, things like that. He would be coming in an hour.

Mrs. Friend whisked us through breakfast and held a conference in the living room where the Clean Living League meeting was to be held. In spite of the room's lavish splendor, Mrs. Friend had contrived by sheer genius to create an atmosphere of respectable stodginess. Photographs of old Mr. Friend himself and of sour-looking relatives

had been exhibited clumsily in the least suitable places. Wooden chairs had been arranged in rows to seat the members of the league and at one end a cluster of chairs around a table indicated where Mr. Moffat and the family party would preside.

Mrs. Friend made me recite the *Ode to Aurora* three times and coached me as to the correct demeanor for an ex-sinner who had seen the light.

"We don't have to worry about Mr. Petherbridge," she said. "He's an old fuss-budget, but I think he's on our side. Mr. Moffat's the danger, of course. He'll be crazy for something to go wrong. The slightest slip-up and he'll make a claim. We can't very well afford a law-suit and all the embarrassing things a law-suit might bring out. You realize that?"

I saw only too well why we couldn't afford a law-suit.

"You'd better know the pattern of these meetings, dear. First, there'll be a jolly song. Then Mr. Moffat will give a speech about your father. Then you'll recite the poem. Then Mr. Moffat will probably launch into a jolly harangue about another lost brother redeemed. After that you'll sign the abstinence pledge. That means you're never to drink again, darling boy.

"Then the meeting will end with another jolly song, and they'll all troop up to greet you as a fellow member. I've told Mr. Moffat they can spend their sunshine hour in the pool so we'll get rid of them from the house after that. Got it?"

"Yes," I said.

"And don't mention the amnesia,

dear. We haven't told Mr. Petherbridge or Mr. Moffat that Gordy is suffering from amnesia. We thought it might make Mr. Moffat suspicious. But since he hasn't the remotest idea you're a fake, he won't try and trip you with awkward questions."

"I hope so," I said. "Incidentally, are you sure none of the members ever saw Gordy?"

"I don't see how any of them could have, dear. I really don't." Mrs. Friend stared at the two girls. "Marny, you're all right. Selena"—she sighed—"I wish there was something you could do with your bosom."

"I can cut them off," said Selena.

"No, dear, I don't think that will be necessary." Mrs. Friend took one final, all-observing glance around the room. "Now I'll get Grandma. She's thrilled at the idea of sitting in on the meeting and I think she'd make a good effect next to Gordy."

She went out and came back soon with Grandma, draped in black crepe, spry on her arm. She was settled in a seat next to my wheelchair. She leaned toward me, bringing her own atmosphere of lavender and dust. An ancient lid was slowly lowered and raised over a bright eye.

"This is fun," she whispered. "More fun than the radio."

She was still cackling when a maid came in to announce Mr. Petherbridge.

Mr. Friend's lawyer was tiny and fluttery with a pink bald dome and blue, watery eyes. He looked like one of those butterflies that somehow manage to last through the

winter and totter shabbily through the first few days of spring.

Mrs. Friend took his hand. "I think you know everyone. My mother. Marny. Selena. Gordy . . . Oh, no, I don't believe you do know Gordy. Mr. Petherbridge, this is my son."

Mr. Petherbridge looked at the cast on my right arm, seemed undecided as to whether or not to shake my left hand and then gave up.

"Ah, yes. I heard of your accident. What a merciful escape."

He smiled awkwardly. In fact, he seemed extremely embarrassed by the situation.

Mrs. Friend laid her hand on his arm. "Dear Mr. Petherbridge, I know this is uncomfortable for you. But you have to inspect the house. Remember? Let us at least get that over with before our guests arrive."

Mr. Petherbridge tittered. "I must admit, I never quite understood your poor husband's enthusiasm for the Clean Living League. Myself, I always enjoy a glass of sherry before dinner, I'm afraid."

"Mr. Petherbridge, you naughty man."

Mrs. Friend led him out of the room. After a moment Jan came in and sat down stiffly on one of the wooden chairs. Soon Mrs. Friend and Mr. Petherbridge reappeared.

Mrs. Friend was looking guardedly pleased.

"There. That's cleared up," she said. "Mr. Petherbridge feels our house is no more sinful than the average American home, don't you, Mr. Petherbridge?"

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Friend."

He sat down next to Mrs. Friend, his little hands scurrying back and forth over his pin-striped trousers. He was getting more and more nervous. I wondered why.

Splendidly adequate, Mrs. Friend kept the conversation simmering until the sound of an automobile was audible from the drive.

"Ah, that will be they. The League. Mr. Moffat, I understand, has chartered a bus to bring them all at once. They enjoy doing things in a group. Things are jollier in a group."

Soon the maid, rather rattled, came in, said: "They've come, Mrs. Friend," and scuttled out.

People—thirty or forty of them—started streaming into the huge room then. For some reason, I had expected the Clean Living League to be as dour and lugubrious as our own mournful clothes. I was completely wrong. Most of them, men and women alike, were dressed in white—a discreet gesture, I felt, toward someone else's mourning. But they were far from lugubrious.

Bouncy was the word for them. Although, as they descended upon us, they assumed expressions suitable to greet a bereaved family, they were all bursting with a sort of inner heartiness. I felt that they had come from a jolly good romp somewhere—on the shore, probably, tossing balls to each other and wading and maybe uproariously burying one of the stouter men in the sand and dancing around him.

In spite of their hearty manner, however, none of them looked healthy. The men were either fat and middle-aged or young and

scrawny with a fine display of pimples.

Of the women and girls I didn't see one who would ever be on the receiving end of the drunkest sailor's whistle. They reeked of self-complacency, too. They were obviously thanking Aurora for their own purity which set them loftily above those unfortunates whose romps were vitiated with tobacco and drink and sex.

I saw what Mrs. Friend had meant the night before. The prospect of these people with several million dollars behind them indeed curdled my blood.

CHAPTER XXI



CHATTERING in respectful undertones, nudging each other in the ribs, carrying on little pure flirtations, they swarmed over the wooden chairs and seated themselves facing our family group.

Until then there had been no sign of Mr. Moffat. I suspected he was staging his entrance, and I was right. A moment after the Aurora Clean Living League had finally seated itself, a man's figure appeared at the door, paused there a second and then strode eupeptically through his seated satellites straight up to Mrs. Friend.

He grasped her hand, shaking it up and down vigorously.

"Mrs. Friend, Mrs. Friend. A sad occasion. A very sad occasion. But we know he's still with us, do we not? Part of the sparkling summer light. Part of the lovely garden flowers. Part of the glorious sunset." He beamed. "There is no death, Mrs. Friend."

Mr. Moffat was unbearably dynamic. Large, youngish, with tightly curled reddish hair and red hairs on his thick wrists, he projected personality as if he was charged with it from a battery concealed beneath his crinkled seersucker suit. He was unbearably chummy, too.

He swung to me, picking up my left hand and pumping it.

"And this is Gordy." He surveyed the casts. "A crack-up, eh, boy? Well, sometimes we need a real shock to help us Come Through. Ah, alcohol, that weevil-like borer. It's caused many a worse tragedy than a smashed arm, a broken leg. You were lucky, boy. And we're lucky, too, for today's a great day, I understand. Today you're Coming Through."

He leaned over me. From the faint dilation of his thick nostrils, I could tell he was sniffing for alcohol on my breath. Coming Through, apparently, was the Aurora Clean Living League's term for conversion.

I smiled weakly. "I'm Coming Through," I said.

Mr. Moffat slapped me on the back.

"Fine, glorious." His bright, dirty brown eyes were trying to register a delight he obviously did not feel at the prospect of my Coming Through. "Let's be frank, boy.

There's a little situation today. Money, boy. A question of the allocation of money." He bowed at the twittering Mr. Petherbridge. "What is money—when the best things in life are free? The rolling breaker, Gordy. The sunshine over the little kirk on the mountain. The sunlight, boy, in your mother's eyes when you come home to her from your wanderings. Those are the things that brace you."

His smile flashed big, irregular teeth. "We've always been lucky, boy. When times are lean, there's always a good friend ready to put his hand in his jeans for us. Lucre, the old Bible folk called it. Filthy lucre. We're not going to have filthy lucre come between us and a—pal."

Having unburdened himself of this disastrous speech, Mr. Moffat slapped me on the back again, swung around dramatically to face the crowded chairs, lifted both arms as if he was about to hail the rising sun and cried ringingly:

"At it, boys and girls. Aurora's song."

One of his raised arms became a conductor's baton. A seedy girl had seated herself at the piano. She played a tremolo octave and, to a man, the group rose and burst into a loud, merry song. I caught only snatches of the words—*Aurora . . . jollity . . . sunshine . . . no death . . . Come Through . . .*

Aurora's song concluded, Mr. Moffat embarked upon his eulogy of Mr. Friend. From it emerged the sharp division between those who had Come Through and those who had not Come Through. Those who had not Come Through were mis-

guided sinners doomed to a life of blind debauch on this planet and utter annihilation after death. Those who had Come Through earned the inestimable privilege of Mr. Moffat's society both on this earth and, eternally, after death in some jolly Valhalla of Cleanliness.

I tried to visualize the grim old man I had seen in the photographs frolicking with Mr. Moffat's flock and then returning from the romp to excoriate his family's wickedness. The thought made me faintly nauseated. Mr. Moffat was extolling Mr. Friend's many virtues, ending with his talents as a poet. Suddenly, before I was prepared for it, he swung round to me with a flourish reminiscent of a circus ringmaster and cried:

"And now we have the great pleasure of hearing his very own son, who is Coming Through to us, recite what is probably his most inspiring work—his *Ode to Aurora*."

A chatter of applause sounded.

Mr. Moffat held up his hand. "But first there's something I'm sure my friend Gordy here would want you all to know." His voice lowered to an awesome whisper. "Until recently, he was steaming down the Wrong Track. All the weaknesses, the frailties. Alcohol, boys, that weevil-like borer. Even worse, boys. But now, girls, he's seen the red signal. Now he's swung the lever, he's switched tracks." He paused, raising both hands over his head and clasping them together like a victorious boxing champ. "Now, girls and boys, on this glorious summer day he's Coming Through—to me, to you."

The applause was thunderous. Grandma, at my side suppressed a cackle behind a small handkerchief.

I felt so sure of myself that I decided to abandon the meek method of recitation suggested by Mrs. Friend and to adopt some of Mr. Moffat's rousing swagger. I belatedly:

Seven sins lead our sons to Perdition,
Seven sins that lure youth like a
Whore . . .

I got my audience. Steadily, accurately, I progressed through the *Ode*, increasing the passion of my delivery from verse to verse. When I had finished, applause soared. Mr. Moffat, a look of undisguised fury in his eyes, swung round and slapped me on the back. Almost before I realized it, he had grabbed a document and a pen. He was thrusting them at me. I glanced at the first line.

I hereby declare that from this day on, I abstain from all uncleanness, the sordid habit of alcohol, the

I didn't need to read any more to recognize the abstinence pledge. I held the pen in my left hand over the document. For a moment I hesitated. This was it. Once I signed the forged name, I had irrevocably thrown in my lot with the Friends for better or for worse.

In that second while I hesitated, Selena sprang up as if possessed by a cleanly rapture. Her eyes aglow with evangelical fervor, she clutched my arm.

"Sign it, Gordy boy," she cried. "Oh, renounce forever, alcohol, that weevil-like borer."

Mr. Moffat looked taken aback by this unexpected burst of ardor. As I glanced from him to Selena, the need to control an irresistible giggle obliterated every other consideration from my mind. I scrawled a clumsy pretense of the words Gordon Renton Friend, the Third, at the foot of the pledge.

Selena sat down with a sigh. Mr. Moffat snatched the paper and brandished it.

I had Come Through.

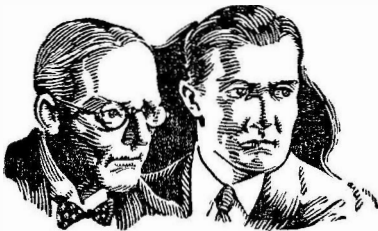
The League was still clapping. With a swoop of the hand, Mr. Moffat gave his musical signal. The tremolo octave wobbled from the piano. The League rose and burst into a closing paean to Aurora.

It was all over as quickly, as easily as that. Either Mr. Moffat was bowing to the inevitable or he had decided to postpone any legal contentions to the future.

As I looked at him, trying to guess what was in his mind, I had the uneasy suspicion that Mr. Moffat was not the type to bow to the inevitable.

Something other than coarse reddish hairs, I felt, was up his sleeve.

CHAPTER XXII



MR. MOFFAT was booming happily.

"Now, boys and girls, here's some fun. Mrs. Friend has invited us to

hold our Sunshine Hour in her glorious pool."

In a clatter of chairs, the League rose and started to swarm around me. As one after another gave me a word of cheer, I noticed that two strange men had slipped into the room and were standing uncertainly by the door. One was elderly and stooped, with a red-veined nose and white hair. The other was young and solid with an air which marked him definitely as someone who had not Come Through to Mr. Moffat.

While youths and maidens giggled their hopes for my speedy recovery, Mr. Petherbridge bustled away from Mrs. Friend and joined the two men at the door. The three of them were talking together in low tones.

Gradually the Aurora Clean Living League was spilling out through the library and the french windows toward the pool. When the last member had paid his respects, Mr. Moffat wrung my hand again.

"Welcome to us, Gordy boy. Welcome. There'll be many a glorious spree ahead for all of us, I'll be bound. And the filthy lucre?" He gave a rich, false laugh. "Where do the life earnings of the Father belong but in the lap of his widow and his fatherless children—provided they have been proven worthy?"

Mr. Moffat, much jollier than a man who had just lost several million dollars ought to have been, strode away to supervise the Sunshine Hour. Before he left, his eyes flashed to the two men with Mr. Petherbridge and then flicked away as if he was pretending he had not seen them.

I noticed that, but Mrs. Friend,

apparently, did not. Her face was radiant.

"We've done it," she breathed.

She hurried after Mr. Moffat. Selena and Marny had taken Grandma back to her room and Jan had disappeared.

I had the room to myself now except for Mr. Petherbridge and the two strangers who were still by the door. I glanced at them, feeling uneasy. As if my glance were a signal, the three men started toward me.

Mr. Petherbridge seemed almost beside himself with nervousness now. "Ah, Mr. Friend, you—ah—seem to have carried off your duties as stipulated in the will."

"Then Mr. Moffat can't start anything?"

"So far as the terms of the will are concerned—ah—no." Mr. Petherbridge's dainty face was purple with the embarrassment. "But . . . Mr. Friend, before we discuss the matter further, there is something, something rather distressing."

He made a little fluttering gesture toward the stooped man with the red-veined nose and the white hair.

"This is Dr. Leland, Mr. Friend. I do not know whether you two have met. Dr. Leland is the physician who was attending your father when he—ah—passed on."

My nervousness was almost panic. Mrs. Friend had not planned on Dr. Leland.

Dr. Leland was watching me from tired, heavy-lidded eyes. His hand came out.

"I don't think I've had the pleasure, Mr. Friend."

Relief flooded through me. I took the dry, horny hand.

"And this"—Mr. Petherbridge was almost whinnying as he indicated the second man—"this is Inspector Sargent."

Inspector! My guilty conscience was like an arresting hand clamped on my shoulder.

Young Inspector Sargent did not take my hand. He was smiling at me, a steady, meaningless smile.

"Maybe there's a room that's more private, Mr. Friend," he suggested. "What we have to say is—well, it's of a confidential nature."

Mrs. Friend wasn't there. No one was there. I was on my own now. Gesturing for the men to follow, I wheeled my chair out of the living room across the passage into a small sitting room.

I thought of Mr. Moffat's sidelong glance at the inspector when he left. Almost certainly this had something to do with Mr. Moffat, was some wild bid of his to have the will overturned.

Inspector Sargent closed the door. The three men grouped themselves around me. I felt quite calm. The potential danger had banished my nervousness.

"Well, gentlemen?" I said.

The inspector had sat down without being invited. He took a notebook and pencil from his pocket. He was still smiling at me.

"Excuse the notebook, Mr. Friend. Just regulations." The pencil gripped in a large, square hand, hovered over the opened book. "Your name is Gordon Renton Friend, the Third? You are, of course, the son of the late Mr. Friend who died a month ago in this house?"

"I am."

I'd said it then. I'd committed myself. There was no turning back.

"I understand that you and your wife arrived here from Pittsburgh about two weeks before your father died. Is that correct?"

Now, if ever, was the time to mention the amnesia. Yet Mrs. Friend had kept it back from Mr. Petherbridge. If I suddenly mentioned it now, it would sound highly suspect. I decided to stall until I knew exactly what the inspector was after.

"Yes," I said.

The inspector's gray, uninformative eyes met mine. "On the day your father died you left for Los Angeles?"

"Yes."

"To visit?"

Although I had not dared use the amnesia, I could at least blur the issue with alcohol. Gordy's drinking habits were common knowledge.

I said: "I might as well be frank. I'd been drinking. I didn't go to L.A. to visit. I just went—on a bat."

"I see." For the first time when he might legitimately have been amused, the inspector stopped smiling. "About what time of day did you leave?"

Marny had told me. When was it? "Some time in the evening."

"Before your father was known to be dying?"

"Of course."

"But you were here during the earlier part of the day?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice anything at all unusual that might have happened?"

I could feel anxiety in my stomach—like a rat gnawing a floor

board. I said: "Afraid I wouldn't have noticed much of anything. I was quite full of rye."

CHAPTER XXIII



INSPECTOR SARGENT closed his notebook.

"This isn't pleasant, Mr. Friend." His voice was meant to sound apologetic. It didn't. "It's just that a certain party's been making—well, what you might call trouble."

"Mr. Moffat?"

A faint flush diffused his face. "To be exact, yes." Now he had admitted that Mr. Moffat was behind this, I felt steadier. Mrs. Friend had said he'd never suspect I was an impostor.

I said: "I should think it was pretty obvious that any trouble made by Mr. Moffat was on the interested side."

"Naturally. I realize that there is a large amount of money at stake." Inspector Sargent was a formal young man. "But a policeman has to follow up complaints. Since I did not want to disturb the bereaved family, I went to the only two disinterested men."

He indicated Mr. Petherbridge and Dr. Leland.

"And from what I learned from these two gentlemen," continued Inspector Sargent, "I realized that

Mr. Moffat's complaint justified further investigation."

The rat was back gnawing the floor board.

I asked: "And Mr. Moffat's complaint?"

"I think, Mr. Petherbridge and Dr. Leland should tell you what they told me," said Sargent.

"Mr. Friend, please realize how painful this is to me." Mr. Petherbridge had tumbled breathlessly into the conversation. "It had almost passed from my mind until Inspector Sargent questioned me. But, on the day your poor father died, he telephoned to me. He seemed in a high state of excitement and made an appointment for me to come around the next morning. He wanted, he said, to change his will—"

Inspector Sargent broke in: "Now, Dr. Leland, maybe you'll tell Mr. Friend what you told me."

For the first time Dr. Leland showed genuine embarrassment.

"It's like this, Friend," he said. "I'd been attending your father ever since he came to California. That was a bad heart he had."

I nodded.

"Well, that evening your mother called me, I found Mr. Friend in bad shape. There were all the symptoms of a serious attack. I stayed with him for several hours, doing what I could. Then sudden cardiac failure supervened and he was dead in a few minutes."

He paused, the heavy lids drooping over his eyes. "Now, you're not a doctor, Friend. No point in going into medical details. There was every reason to suppose your father had succumbed to the natural course

of events, a heart attack. I signed the death certificate without the slightest suspicion that anything might be wrong—and I claim that any other doctor in my position would have done the same."

He paused once again. It was an ominous pause.

"But, since Inspector Sargent came to me, some of the symptoms have worried me. I'm not saying I agree with Moffat or the Inspector. It's just that I am no longer secure in my diagnosis. There is a possibility that Mr. Friend may have died from an overdose of the digitalis I prescribed for him."

"You see, Mr. Friend," said Inspector Sargent very quietly. "That is Mr. Moffat's complaint. He charges your father may have been—murdered."

There it was—the noose.

The inspector went on: "Under the circumstances, I'm afraid there will have to be an autopsy." He produced a paper from his pocket and put it down on the arm of his chair. "I have brought an exhumation order. It has to be signed by a member of the family. I thought it would be less painful for you to sign it than for your mother."

I searched my mind for a loophole that was not there.

"And what if I tell you I refuse to have my father dug up to satisfy the spite of Mr. Moffat?"

"A refusal to sign might indicate that you were uneasy about the results of the autopsy."

Inspector Sargent was watching me with steely intensity. I stared back at him. It was not one of my better moments.

"My right arm's in a cast," I said. "It won't be much of a signature."

"Anything—a mark—will be sufficient with these two gentlemen as witnesses."

Inspector Sargent produced a fountain pen.

For the second time that day I scribbled Gordon Renton Friend, the Third with my left hand. Mr. Petherbridge and Dr. Leland signed, too. The inspector put the document back in his pocket.

"I know you won't be feeling comfortable in your mind until the autopsy is over with, Mr. Friend. I should be able to get you the result in approximately twenty-four hours."

Inspector Sargent shook my left hand and smiled his broad, unfathomable smile.

"If I were you I wouldn't mention this to the family. You'll only get them nervous. And it would be a shame to get them nervous, if no murder was committed, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

He opened the door. Mr. Petherbridge and Dr. Leland shot out. Inspector Sargent followed.

As soon as they had gone I made my way into the living room to find the Friend family alone. The girls had changed but Mrs. Friend was still in her meek, widowish black.

She glanced up when I entered.

"The Clean Living League's just bundled off in its bus. Darling boy, I do think it was rather naughty of you not to come out and say good-by to poor Mr. Moffat." She paused, selecting a particularly juicy chocolate from a box on her lap. "By the

way, dear, who was that nice-looking boy with Mr. Petherbridge and Dr. Leland?"

I said: "That nice-looking boy with Mr. Petherbridge and Dr. Leland was a policeman."

All three of them stared.

"And what did he want, dear?" Mrs. Friend asked finally.

"He wanted Gordy Friend to sign an exhumation order." I let them have it right between the eyes. "He thinks old Mr. Friend was murdered."

Marny crushed her cigarette into an ash tray. Selena stood up. Even Mrs. Friend's reaction was sufficiently strong to make her hand with the candy freeze in mid-air.

More than anything, I felt tired.

"You don't have to worry," I said. "I played the rôle of Gordy Friend with distinction." I paused. "You don't have to bother to look surprised, either."

"Surprised?" Selena whipped around on me. "What do you mean?"

"I suspected it from the start. You've always known Mr. Friend was murdered. That's why you imported me."

Mrs. Friend got up. She stood massively in front of me.

"Imported you—for what?"

"To take the rap, of course. Where's Gordy, by the way? I suppose you've hidden him until the whole dirty business is over and I've been convicted."

"You fool," flared Selena.

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Friend's gaze was still fixing mine. "If you think that, I'm afraid you are rather a fool."

Very slowly, she added: "I know you have every reason not to trust my word. But I'm telling you the truth. None of us has the faintest knowledge of this incredible accusation or where Gordy is. And you were imported, as you so quaintly put it, simply for the reason we told you and for no other." She paused. "You believe me?"

"Does it matter whether I do or not?"

"It matters to me because I am fond of you." She took Selena's hand. "The girls are fond of you, too. I do not want you to think we are—fiends."

There was that word again.

"Perhaps," continued Mrs. Friend, still scrutinizing my face, "you may believe me if I appeal to your reason. How in the name of common sense could we put the blame on you? It is conceivable that we might have been able to, if we had convinced you that you really were Gordy. But we have not convinced you. All you would have to tell the police was that you were an amnesia victim.

"Once you'd claimed you weren't Gordy, the police would be able to get witnesses to prove you were right. The old servants knew the real Gordy. People from Pittsburgh where Gordy worked. People from St. Paul where Gordy grew up. My dear young man, you would be exonerated before you could say Aurora."

She was smiling now, that incredibly serene smile of hers.

"As a matter of fact, instead of your being in our clutches, things are quite the reverse." She had been

holding her chocolate all this time. Now she put it in her mouth and chewed it. "It looks to me as if we are at your mercy"

Mrs. Friend, of course, had done it again. There was no flaw in her logic. As always, she had made me feel like an ass.

"So, dear?" queried Mrs. Friend.

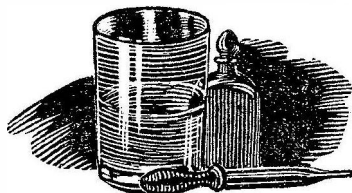
I shrugged. "Okay," I said. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right. I'm sure it was a most awkward situation with the policeman. No wonder you were a little rattled."

She picked up her knitting and started the needies going.

"Now, dear, tell us exactly what happened."

CHAPTER XXIV



BRIEFLY and quickly I outlined my experience. When I had finished, Mrs. Friend put down her knitting.

"You see, dear. How right I was? There's nothing to get excited about at all. It's all obviously a preposterous charge trumped up by Mr. Moffat. Not a grain of truth in it. What a revolting man."

Her continued calm seemed now to border upon idiocy.

I said in exasperation: "Whether Mr. Moffat's accusation is trumped up or not, the least we can do is to be prepared for whatever happens."

"Yes," said Marny suddenly. "You're right."

"I'm sure, dear," murmured Mrs. Friend, "that you will handle it admirably, Gordy. What do you want us to begin with?"

"You can begin by telling me exactly what happened the day Mr. Friend died."

"Why nothing happened, dear."

"At least one thing happened, I know. He fired Jan. Why?"

Mrs. Friend blinked. "I haven't the slightest idea. If you really want to know, ask him. Marny, dear, run and find him."

Marny pushed herself off the couch and went out of the room. Soon she came back with the Dutchman. He was still in his respectable seersucker suit with his blond hair plastered down.

"You ask him," I said to Mrs. Friend.

She put the question very slowly. Jan seemed to understand, and he broke into a gale of laughter. The three women continued to ply him with questions. He reacted with a succession of gestures which were meaningless to me. But Mrs. Friend seemed to grasp their significance. She nodded him away. After he'd left, she turned to me.

"Well, that's that. He doesn't know."

"Doesn't know?"

"That was what he was trying to convey. My husband called him in, bawled him out and fired him. Jan didn't understand what it was all about. He just accepted the situation. Jan's always accepting situations and laughing." She blinked again with faint derision. "Where does the investigation go from here?"

"When Mr. Friend died, did he have a nurse?"

Mrs. Friend shook her head. "Only when he was seriously sick. But after he showed an improvement we sent her away."

"Then who took care of him?"

"All of us, dear. Jan fixed him up. The girls and I saw that he got his medicine. None of us sat with him very much, I'm afraid." She sighed. "You'd understand that better if you knew Father. He wasn't a very amiable patient."

"And his medicine was—digitalis?"

Mrs. Friend shrugged. "I really don't know, dear. It was something in drops. So many drops. You mixed it with water."

"It was digitalis," said Marny. "You know perfectly well it was."

"I forget the difficult names, dear." Mrs. Friend gazed at me. "Anything else?"

"Who gave Mr. Friend his medicine that day?"

"I believe I gave it to him in the morning. He had it twice a day."

"Who gave it to him in the evening?"

Mrs. Friend glanced at Selena. "Wasn't it you, dear?"

"No," said Marny, "it was me. At least I was going to give it to him."

I echoed: "Going to give it to him?"

Marny nodded. She looked pale, uneasy—far more aware of the potential danger than Selena and Mrs. Friend.

"I went into his room just after dinner. That was when he always took his second lot of medicine. He

was in a frightful temper. I offered to give him his medicine but he wanted Gordy."

"Gordy?"

She nodded. "I went up to Gordy's room. He was pretty tight. I made him as presentable as I could and sent him down to Father."

"And it was after Gordy had seen his father that you met him in the hall and he said he was going to Los Angeles?"

"Yes. I said: 'Is he acting up as usual?' Gordy cursed and went on to the garage. Then I returned to Father to give him his medicine."

"Did you give it to him?"

"No, Selena was there."

I turned to Selena. "That right?"

"Yes, baby. I was there when Marny came in."

"And you'd given Mr. Friend the medicine?"

She puffed at her cigarette. "No. He said he'd already had it."

I felt a shiver of uneasiness. "So Gordy had given it to him?"

"I suppose so."

I turned back to Marny. "When was all this?"

"About eight-thirty. It began at eight-thirty and ended somewhere around nine. He seemed all right then."

I turned to Mrs. Friend. "When did you discover he was having an attack and send for Dr. Leland?"

"Around ten-thirty, I'd say. He usually went to sleep around eleven. I just looked in to see if he wanted anything and—and found him."

It all fitted, of course. I didn't quite know what I was feeling.

"Mr. Petherbridge said your father called him and told him he was

going to change his will a couple of hours before you called Dr. Leland. That means Mr. Friend was in a bad temper. He called for Gordy. Gordy was drunk. So Mr. Friend called Mr. Petherbridge and said he was going to change his will."

My gaze settled on Mrs. Friend.

"Try and laugh that off. Mr. Friend threatens to cut Gordy out of his will and then asks for his medicine. Everyone knows that an overdose of digitalis would be fatal to a man with a bad heart."

I paused, still fixing Mrs. Friend with my gaze.

"What's the betting that Gordy never went off on a bat? What's the betting he murdered his father, got cold feet and made a getaway to Mexico?"

I felt dejected and terribly tired.

"If the autopsy shows poisoning, there isn't a policeman in the world who couldn't pin the crime on Gordy Friend in twenty minutes."

I laughed hollowly. "And to Inspector Sargent, I'm Gordy Friend. I signed the abstinence pledge. I signed the exhumation order. Even if you didn't plan it that way, it amounts to the same thing. I'm going to be accused of the murder."

Mrs. Friend's swift fits of anger always took me by surprise. One came upon her then. She stared at me, her handsome face flushed.

"Really, to accuse my own son of murder under my own roof. And you—you who haven't even met him."

"It's not my fault I'm under your own roof," I said. "And I'd be delighted if I'd never heard of your

son. But since I happen to be under-study for him, I, at least, have the right to speculate about him."

Marny gave a short, humorless laugh. Selena sat down on the sofa next to Mrs. Friend.

"Mimsy, darling, don't be stuffy. He's right. We've got to be ready. If Father was murdered, they're bound to say it was one of us. I certainly didn't murder him. Did you?"

Mrs. Friend shrugged pettishly.

"Don't be silly, Selena."

Selena glanced at Marny. "Did you?"

"Sure," drawled Marny, "if it makes Mimsy feel any better."

"You see, Mimsy?" Selena shook back her hair and watched Mrs. Friend serenely. "It must have been Gordy. He's the one who had the opportunity and the motive. Of course, I think Gordy's a lamb but, if he'd been off on an ordinary bat, he'd have been back by now."

Mrs. Friend had become all Mother. "I know," she said, "that my Gordy would never deliberately murder Father."

"It wasn't deliberate," suggested Selena. "Maybe Father asked for his medicine. Gordy was drunk and didn't count the drops properly. He gave him an overdose by mistake. Then he got scared and ran away. Gordy always runs away from things." She turned to me hopefully. "It could have happened that way, couldn't it?"

"Maybe," I said. It was just possible.

Selena laughed as if everything had been solved and there was nothing more to worry about.

"There," she said.

"So we all live happily ever after." Marny was watching Selena through cigarette smoke, her eyes dark and derisive. "Since you're so bright, what are we going to do with this poor guy here? We've stuck him with being Gordy. What do we do next? Do what he accused us of doing? Stick him with a murder he didn't commit?"

Selena caressed my knee.

"Yes, baby, what shall we do with you?"

CHAPTER XXV



IN SPITE of the grimness of the situation, the touch of her fingers on my knee was still as exciting as ever. Not that it mattered. Things were far too bad for me to let her make a sucker out of me any more. "If the autopsy report is okay," I said, "I'll stay on and see this through. If it isn't okay, get me out of here fast."

Selena looked interested.

"Get you out?"

"If you know what's good for you." There was a certain pleasure in being tough with the Friends at last. "I may not know who I am but I know I'm no sacrificial lamb. If Inspector Sargent thinks Gordy killed your father and starts arresting me as Gordy, I'll come clean with the whole story. Then, at least, I won't be a candidate for the electric chair."

Selena's eyes widened. "But what about us?"

"That's why I said you'd better get me out of here fast. You'll have to hide me somewhere where the police won't find me. Then you'll have to put them onto the trail of the real Gordy. After that the rest will be up to you."

Selena said: "But Inspector Sargent has seen you. If he found Gordy, he'd know he wasn't the one who signed the abstinence pledge."

"He's only seen me wrapped in bandages. Gordy and I look reasonably alike." I grinned. "You and your mother-in-law could convince Einstein the world's flat. Between you, you could certainly persuade the inspector he had a little eye trouble."

Selena pouted. "Really, baby, I think you're being rather selfish."

Marny had been watching us. Suddenly she laughed.

"So you're getting rugged with her at last. I didn't think you had it in you."

Selena said: "Shut up, Marny."

"He's the one you've got to shut up now." Marny perched herself on the arm of my wheel chair. "I adore this. The worm's finally turned."

I laughed. When I needed her, Marny was always there. "Know any place you could hide me—till the casts come off?"

"Sure." Marny glanced down at Selena. "Selena's passionate doctor has a cabin way up on the mountains. Once we got you there no one would find you for weeks."

"Once you got me there—exactly," I said. "A cripple with a couple of broken limbs can't travel

under his own steam."

"That's easy, too. We'll have Jan drive you up. In fact, you can keep him to take care of you. You can trust him. If you asked him to bury a body, he'd do it and forget it five minutes afterwards. And if the policeman asks where he is, we can say we've fired him."

She swung around to face the others. "Any complaints?"

To my surprise, both Selena and Mrs. Friend seemed pleased.

Selena said: "I think that's really rather divinely clever."

Mrs. Friend, completely calm again, murmured: "Yes, dear, it's a sensible plan from everyone's point of view. Selena will ask Nate. I'm sure he'll understand."

She seemed to have adopted Marny's plan as her own. "How pleasant to have things settled." She glanced at her watch. "Good heavens, it is past time for lunch. I wonder what is delaying them in the kitchen?"

She rose. "I must investigate. And, Marny, do go and see Grandma. She gets so peevish when she's hungry. Oh dear, do you suppose we'll have to explain all this to Grandma? It's really too complicated."

Her voice trailed off as she moved out of the room. Marny followed her, leaving me alone with Selena.

She still sat at my feet, letting her hand rove caressingly over my knee. Suddenly she looked up with a grimace.

"Baby," she sighed. "Isn't this dreary?"

"That's one word for it."

"I do hope you don't have to go

off and hide in that cabin of Nate's." Her hand moved to my arm. "Wouldn't it be nicer if I came, too?"

I smiled at her. "For a smart girl you're almost feeble-minded."

"Am I, baby?" She laughed. "I suppose I am." Her face, warm and heady as a summer afternoon, was suddenly close to mine. "But, darling, all those things I said last night I meant."

"What things?"

"About how you excite me. About touching you. It's true. This is different from anything else. I think about you when you're not there. It doesn't matter who murdered who or . . . Baby!"

Her lips were torridly on mine. She squirmed up so that she was half sitting on my knees. Her arms weaved around me. I pulled her closer. Her fair, tumbling hair tickled my eyelids. Through the hair I saw something moving in the room. I pushed her hair back, still kissing her.

Dr. Nate Croft was standing in the doorway.

He stood very stiffly, staring at us, his eyes blazing in a cold, stricken face.

"Selena!"

Selena twisted away from me, stood up and saw him. She pushed her hair back behind her shoulders and smiled at him cheerfully.

"Hello, Nate, dear."

Most men, feeling the way he obviously felt, would have done something violent. Dr. Croft, apparently, was not the violent type. He dropped into a chair, as if his legs had melted.

In a pinched voice, he said: "Does it have to be every man, Selena?"

"What do you mean?" She stared, open-eyed. "Really, aren't you being rather complicated?"

He looked up, his face haggard and exhausted. That's what happens when you love Selena, I thought.

"This time I thought it'd be safe," he said. "I put on the casts. I—oh, what difference does it make?"

"Darling, please. So stuffy."

"Stuffy?" Anger and a sort of weary hopelessness made his voice shake. "I gambled everything to help you because you said you loved me. Remember? You said you'd divorce Gordy and marry me because you loved me." A laugh forced its way between his pale lips. "You'll never marry me, will you?"

Selena moved to him, caressing his arm.

"Darling, it's so silly thinking about things in the future."

"And if you do, it'll still be every man who comes in sight." His eyes met mine now. "It's wonderful. I recommend it. Try it sometime—if you haven't already. Try falling in love with a tramp."

"Nate!"

He swung around to her. "That's the word for you, isn't it?"

Selena laughed her deep, full-bodied laugh.

"It'll do, baby, but I think you could have thought out a nicer one." She kissed him perfunctorily on the ear. "Darling, quit being so suspicious. I was only kissing him because he's going away."

Nate stiffened. "Going away?"

"Yes, honey. The most exasperating thing's happened. You might as

well hear it now and get it over with. The reciting of the poem and everything went wonderfully. We thought we had everything in the bag. Then that dreary Mr. Moffat . . ."

With a bald callousness that shocked me, she told him exactly what the dreary Mr. Moffat had done. Then, giving him not a moment to catch his breath, she went on with my theory about Gordy and the plan for getting me out of the house if the autopsy report was bad.

I'd been sorry enough for Nate before. I was almost too sorry for him as I saw his face crumple and his lips start to quiver. I'd taken a lot from the Friends but I had nothing much to lose. Nate had everything to lose. His hopeless desire to make a monogamous wife out of Selena had already lured him into gambling his entire career. Now he was faced with the possibility of exposure as an accomplice in a murder charge. A connection, however faint, with murder spelled the end of a doctor's existence.

"Do you see, baby?" Selena concluded, almost absentmindedly. "If the police are objectionable tomorrow, we'll have Jan smuggle him up to your cabin. That'll be all right, won't it?"

"But, Selena," he stammered, "if the police find him hiding out in my cabin—"

"And, later when it's time for the casts to come off, you can just run up there and do it for him. Then he'll have to be on his own."

She slid her arms around him and nestled against him, her lips close to his.

"I know you'll be a darling about it, won't you?"

"Selena . . ."

"And you mustn't be selfish, baby." She caressed his ear. "After all, you got him into this jam. The least you can do is to help him out of it."

Mrs. Friend came in then. She smiled at me and then at Nate.

"Hello, Nate, dear."

She crossed leisurely to my chair and started to wheel me toward the dining room.

"The only thing now is to be patient until the inspector comes tomorrow. I'm so glad Nate came to lunch. Cook's thought out a really rather daring aspic . . ."

CHAPTER XXVI



WE ATE the rather daring aspic and settled down to be patient. Our plan, unsatisfactory as it was in almost every way, at least had the virtue of simplicity. We decided that if the autopsy report indicated murder tomorrow afternoon, we would somehow stall the police from any serious investigation until the next day, and after nightfall, Jan would smuggle me to Nate's cabin by way of a disused trail through the desolate, uninhabited mountains. Jan had to be rehearsed in his role. That was all.

Marny and I decided to do it be-

tween us. We found Jan lying on his bed, in a blue towel bathrobe.

He grinned at Marny, stared inquiringly at me.

Marny put her hand on his huge arm. "Jan, tomorrow you take him"—she indicated me—"in car. Okay?"

He nodded, still grinning.

"You take him to mountains—place in mountains where you took Selena. Remember?"

He nodded again.

"When you get there, stay with him all the time."

The blond lock flopped again as he nodded.

"And don't tell anyone."

His big bronze hand moved over hers, enveloping it completely.

"Ja," he said. "Ja."

Marny glanced at me. "He's got it."

"Oh, wait a minute." She turned back to Jan. "When you drive to mountains—don't go out front drive. Go back way."

His face clouded.

"Here." Marny picked up a pencil, found a piece of paper and drew a rough sketch of the house indicating the front drive and the winding track at the back. She showed it to him.

"The back way." She pointed. "The way Gordy used to take."

Understanding smoothed the wrinkles out of his tanned forehead. He took the pencil from Marny and drew a cross halfway down the back path. He looked at her questioningly.

Marny stared at the cross. "No, Jan. Not there. Just the back way. Gordy's way. Take the car and—"

she pushed the pencil along the track and then right off the paper. "To the mountains. To Selena's place. Understand?"

He understood then and grinned. He was still grinning when Marny and I left.

After our visit with Jan, Nate left for his sanitarium fairly early. The three Friend women and I managed to get through dinner and an evening of desultory card-playing. But I couldn't keep my mind on four-handed gin rummy. I saw so many pitfalls ahead, so many things that might happen to make a hash of my very makeshift plans.

It was a relief when Selena caught my eye and grinned.

"I'm ready for bed. I don't know about anyone else."

Mrs. Friend, playing with Marny, discarded a card and then picked it up again with a little cluck and discarded another in its place.

"Selena, dear, are you still going to sleep in the same room with this darling boy? It seems rather odd."

Selena laughed. "Of course I'm going to, Mimsy. He still needs a nurse." She turned to me. "Don't you, baby?"

"Yes," I said.

"And I'll read you some more of Father's poems to send you to sleep. There's a wonderful one against sex. You'd like to hear that, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," I said.

The game was finished. Mrs. Friend had won handsomely from all of us. I didn't own any money so I couldn't pay her. But she insisted upon collecting from the girls. Selena went off for her purse, tell-

ing me to bring the book of poems when I came. Marny picked up the gray volume of verse and opened it at random.

In a deep, booming voice she recited:

Sex, sex, sex
Where the hussy solicits for hire.
Sex, sex, sex
Drags the flower of our youth in the
mire—

"Oh, God, what a filthy mind Father had." She tossed the book down on the piano, sending the framed photograph of old Mr. Friend lurching over on its face.

Mrs. Friend called: "Marny, really."

"Well, he had." Marny stared at her mother. "How much do I owe you?"

"Three dollars and seventy-five cents, dear."

"Okay. I'll get it or I'll never hear the end of it."

Marny hurried out of the room. Mrs. Friend gave me a rueful smile.

"It's the principle. I've always tried to make the girls realize that a debt is something that must be paid." She sighed. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm not butting my head against a wall. Excuse me, dear. If I don't watch them, they'll probably just take the money out of my own purse and give it back to me."

She moved out of the room in pursuit of the girls, absently patting the stray hairs of her upsweep.

I was very jittery at the prospect of tomorrow. I thought it might be steadying to have Selena read me Mr. Friend's atrocious poems. I wheeled myself to the piano and

picked the book up. Automatically I restored Mr. Friend's picture to its original upright position.

As I did so, the back of the frame, which must have been dislodged by the fall, dropped off and a white envelope slipped out from the space between the frame and the back of the photograph. I picked it up. Type-written across its front was the single word:

MIMSY

The envelope was not pasted down and there was a sheet of paper inside. This letter hadn't come through the mail. Someone in the house must have written it and concealed it in the back of the photograph.

Because I was innately suspicious of everything in the Friend house, I started to take out the sheet of paper. Hearing footsteps in the hall, I slipped the envelope into the pocket of my jacket, set the photograph up in its original position and wheeled myself away from the piano.

Mrs. Friend came in, clutching dollar bills and change in one hand.

"I got it," she said triumphantly. "The girls went to bed, dear. Shall I wheel you to your room or can you manage by yourself?"

"I can manage myself."

She moved to my side, smiled at me and picked up my hand in hers.

"You know, dear, I've grown fond of you. You're like my own son."

"That's what the police are going to think."

"You!" Mrs. Friend slapped archly at my hand. "It's being cooped up in that wheel chair which makes you so gloomy. I've just re-

membered. There's a pair of crutches somewhere in the store-closet off the library. Tomorrow we'll get them out for you. Won't that be nice?"

She leaned over and kissed me, bringing her heavy, expensive perfume.

"You trust me now, don't you?"

I grinned. "Do I?"

"A very sweet boy," she said. "We'll remember you a long time."

She moved majestically out of the room.

She was right about remembering me a long time. We'd all of us remember each other until we died either in our beds or in the electric chair.

I wheeled myself to the gray and gold bedroom. A sound of hissing water from the bathroom told me that Selena was having a shower. Maneuvering the chair across to my own bed, I pulled the envelope out of my pocket. I knew it must be important. Uneasily I pulled out a single sheet of paper. It was a type-written note which said:

Dear Mother: I've thought this out and I've decided there's no use waiting for the autopsy report.

Please believe me I didn't plan ahead to kill Father. After he bawled me out and called Mr. Petherbridge and said he was going to cut me out of the will, the idea came. He asked for his medicine. It was so easy to pour half the bottle in. He didn't notice. And then when Dr. Leland signed the death certificate I thought I'd got away with it. But I haven't, of course. I never get away with anything.

Well, I hope you get the money. I think you should. Weather you believe it or not, I did it to make life less im-

possible for you. Anyhow, good-by. And don't worry about me. The way I've figured out won't be painful.

The hairs at the back of my neck had started to crawl. Dizzily I glanced at the signature which had been written in pencil, clumsily, the way a right-handed person would sign with his left hand.

It was signed: *Gordy*

CHAPTER XXVI:



For a few seconds, when I first started to read that diabolic communication, I had thought it was a genuine suicide note from the person who had murdered Mr. Friend. I didn't think it for long, of course. That clumsy signature told me the truth and it overwhelmed me.

This note, announcing that the murderer of Mr. Friend was preparing to commit suicide, was signed *Gordy*. But it wasn't meant for the real Gordy, the Gordy who had disappeared.

It was meant for the false Gordy.

It was a letter to Mrs. Friend from *me*, telling her that *I* was going to kill myself.

As I stared blankly, one word kept me hypnotized, one misspelled telltale word.

Weather.

There could be no doubt who had written that note.

I saw then how appallingly right my suspicions had been. While I was still lying unconscious in Nate's sanitarium, the Friends must already have had this destiny prepared for me. They had needed me to trick the Clean Living League and Mr. Petherbridge, yes. But that had been only the prologue to their plan. They had known that suspicion of Mr. Friend's murder would leak out. They *had* known they would need a victim.

That had always been the role intended for me. Once again that evening, with a brilliant half truth, Mrs. Friend had deceived me and made the "victim" theory sound ludicrous. But when the police arrived tomorrow, I was supposed to have committed suicide.

I saw now why Mrs. Friend and Selena had fallen in so readily with Marny's feeble scheme for hiding me in Nate's cabin. All they cared about was keeping me satisfied until their plan could be put into execution.

I had been given the double, the triple, the quadruple cross.

Marny had always been right. There was only one word for the Friends.

They were fiends.

For it was surely *They*. Selena had written the note. The "*weather*" told me that. But that didn't mean she was in it alone. I could see Mrs. Friend finding the note while Inspector Sargent bent over my dead body, reading it with dewy eyes and murmuring:

"The poor boy, the poor darling boy."

The note said I wasn't going to

wait for the autopsy report to come in. That meant I was going to kill myself tonight.

The way I've figured out won't be painful.

I sat there in the wheel chair, hideously conscious of the immobilizing cast on my leg.

I was frightened then—really frightened.

Suddenly I became conscious that the shower in the bathroom had stopped. Hastily I slipped the note into my pocket. Something Marny had said the day before came back.

Some day you'll discover what Selena's up to and you'll come screaming to me.

Marny!

The bathroom door opened. Selena came out. She had twisted a scarlet towel around her like a toga. One golden shoulder was bare. Her fair hair was piled on top of her head. She looked magnificent.

"Hello, baby." She smiled daz- zlingly. "Here comes your pseudo-wife."

She wasn't my pseudo-wife, I thought.

She was my executioner. . . .

Slowly she moved into the soft pool of light from the lamp between the beds. She lighted two cigarettes from her platinum case, and, lolling across my bed, put one of the cigarettes between my lips.

"I'd better call Jan and have him put you to bed. I can't get at you in that chair."

Once I was out of the wheel chair and in bed I was trapped. I smiled back at her.

"Not yet, baby. Sitting up I feel more masculine."

"You!" She slipped into my lap, twining her arms around my neck. She smelled faintly of bath salts. "Does this hurt your bad leg?"

"No."

She was stroking my cheek. "Wasn't Nate childish tonight?"

"Was he?"

"I mean, making all that fuss. Being so stuffy. Baby?"

"Yes."

"You're not mad that I kissed him, are you? After all, we do need him. I had to be nice to him."

"I don't mind your kissing Nate."

She pouted. "I wish you did. I want you to be jealous if any man touches me. Darling, be jealous."

Her lips slid over my cheek.

Selena murmured: "When this is all over, you'll send for me, won't you? You'll tell me where you are?"

"Sure, Selena."

"Oh, I know you think I'm stupid. You'll probably bully me, tread on me. But please say yes."

"I've said yes."

"Darling."

I drew her head back so that we were looking into each other's eyes.

I said: "Know your trouble, baby? You're in love with me."

"Yes, I really think I am."

Incredibly, as she stared at me, tears glistened on her thick lashes. Her enchantment was so intoxicating I wondered how I would be feeling if I'd believed her. She grimaced suddenly.

"God, what a fool I am. I want a drink. I'll get you one, too."

She slid off my lap and hurried out of the room. I felt curiously hollow and shaky. Was it to be this way? With a drink? The old, simple

way of the poisoned drink? I wished I was steadier.

I was becoming obsessed with the thought of Marny. I needed more than my wits now. I needed an ally. Could I trust Marny? I thought of her dark, sardonic eyes. That made me feel a little better.

But a meeting with Marny would have to be clandestine. Selena must not know. The tray of medicine stood on the table by my bed. I saw the little vial of red sleeping capsules. I took two capsules out and put the vial back. With difficulty I managed with the fingers of my left hand to open the capsules and pour the white powder inside my palm. I eased the empty capsules into the pocket of my jacket.

Selena came in with the drinks.

I noticed with satisfaction, that they were straight jiggers of whisky. She crossed to me, smiling. She put one drink down on the table and held the other out to me.

"Drink, baby."

I patted my knee with my cupped hand.

"Get back where you belong first."

She gave a husky laugh. She put my drink down on the table and slipped onto my lap. I kept my left arm behind her, my hand swinging free, close to the drinks. Her back was turned to the table. She couldn't see.

She leaned her cheek against mine. Her soft hair was brushing my ear. I emptied the powder into my drink. I swirled it around with my finger. I switched my drink with hers.

"Darling," she murmured. "It'll be so wonderful to get away from

here. I hate the Friends." She nestled even closer. "Oh, baby, let's get rid of the Friends."

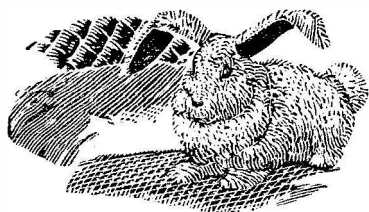
"We'll drink to that," I said. "To get rid of the Friends."

She laughed and, twisting around, picked up the two drinks. She handed me the one she thought was mine. We raised our glasses. Her dark red lips were parted a trifle.

I thought: If there was poison in that drink, I'm a murderer.

"Down the hatch." My voice sounded strange and harsh.

CHAPTER XXVIII



SHE TILTED the glass to her lips and swallowed. So did I.

"B-rr, that was strong." She grimaced and, taking the two empty glasses, put them down on the table. As she eased around, to slip her arm behind my neck again, her face was grave, almost wistful.

"Baby, I meant that, you know."

"Meant what?"

"That I love you." She gave a funny little laugh. "Know something? I've never loved anyone before. I always thought the world owed me a living. And then you came along."

I was watching her, seeing what would happen. I could feel the skin across my forehead growing tight.

"I came along?" I said.

"With you, it's different. Darling, this is different. I'm not used to it. It hurts. Baby, it hurts. That is love, isn't it? When it hurts?"

"I'm supposed to know?"

Her lids were drooping as if they were too heavy for her. A dazed quality was creeping into her stare.

"You don't love me, do you? Funny. I've just realized that. You don't love me. That's funny, isn't it?" She laughed. It was a thick, muddled laugh. "But it doesn't matter. When you love someone, you don't care if he loves you . . ."

She swayed forward, her lips finding mine and pressing against them.

"Darling, I love you. I love you. I . . ."

She was warm and heavy against me. I could feel the weight of her breasts through the scarlet towel. Her bare shoulder brushed against my chin. She was still clinging to my neck. Then I felt the fingers loosen their grip. Her hand trailed around my throat. With a little sigh, she drooped backward and slid off my lap.

She was lying at my feet. The scarlet towel had folded back. Her hair had broken loose and swirled over the green carpet like gleaming filaments of wire.

She was asleep, not poisoned.

She hadn't tried to murder me and I hadn't murdered her.

I felt a terrific sense of relief.

But the danger was the only thing now. I wheeled my chair around her to the table where Gordy's gun was kept. I'd feel a lot better with a gun.

I pulled the drawer open. The gun was not there. With a growling

sense of futility, I searched every conceivable hiding place in the room, including Selena's tumbled clothes.

I didn't find anything, of course.

It was clear now that someone other than Selena had been selected to carry out "the way that wasn't painful." It was equally clear that it was going to be achieved with Gordy's gun.

Gordy committing suicide with his own gun. What method could be more impressive to Inspector Sargent tomorrow?

I wheeled the chair out of the room into the passage. There was no light but there were many windows and a California moon outside. It was easy to find my way along the heavy carpet without making any noise. I reached the corner that led to the other wing and turned it. Marny's was the first door to the left. Mrs. Friend's room was next to it. I'd noticed that when Marny had taken me down to Jan.

I turned the handle of Marny's door noiselessly and pushed the door inward. The room was in darkness. I wheeled the chair in and closed the door as gently behind me. I pushed myself to the bed. Moonlight streamed in through the parted drapes. I could trace the outlines of Marny's face, young and quiet in sleep.

I tapped her shoulder lightly and her body grew rigid. I knew she was awake and about to scream.

I said: "It's okay. It's me."

"You . . ." Her voice was uncertain. She twisted over on her side and snapped on a bedside lamp.

The black hair was tousled around her oval face. Without her make-up

she looked about fifteen. She stared up at me, her eyes ready to be suspicious. I was just as suspicious of her. A misplaced confidence at this stage of the game would cost me my life.

As we stared at each other, I noticed something lying on the bed, beyond her propped against the wall. It was a large, pink wool rabbit with shabby, drooping ears. She'd been lying there in the dark asleep with a toy rabbit! Suddenly, I wasn't suspicious any more.

"Remember our bargain?" I said. "If Selena poisoned me I was to run screaming to you for an emetic?"

I took the "suicide" note out of my pocket and tossed it to her. She pulled the sheet of paper out of the envelope and, holding it under the light, pored over it. Slowly she looked up, her face paling.

"You—you found this?"

I told her all about it. I concluded: "Selena wrote it. I can tell from the spelling. You said she was up to something. See what it was? I'm supposed to commit suicide tonight."

She didn't seem to be listening while I told her about what I'd done to Selena and about the missing gun. She just sat there, staring at me, clutching the letter.

Suddenly she dropped the letter and threw her arms around my neck.

"Thank God, you found out in time."

She gave a little sob. Her lips, young and clumsy, were pressed against my cheek.

"And you came to me, didn't you? When you were in trouble, you came to me!"

She clung to me as if a dream she had never really believed in had come true. Behind my anxiety I felt rather proud. In the last few days my masculinity had been disastrously undermined by Selena and Mrs. Friend. Having this young kid trembling against me, brought my self-confidence back.

"Don't worry, baby." I stroked her thick, black hair. "I'm not dead yet."

She stared up at me, her pupils wide with horror.

"But they can't be that bad. They can't!"

"You were the one who called them fiends. Remember? You hadn't guessed about this?"

"Of course not. But I knew Selena was up to something." She shivered. "What are you going to do? Call the police?"

"And get myself arrested for conspiracy against the League? It's not that bad yet."

"But they'll be trying to kill you."

"They'll have to catch me first." I nodded at the wall. "Mimsy sleeps in there, doesn't she?"

"Yes."

"I don't like the idea of her ear clamped against the wall. Put on some clothes. We're moving to the living room to talk."

Obediently she slid out of bed. Her small feet wriggled into worn felt slippers. A drab gray wrap that looked as old as Marny lay on a chair. She put it on, smiling self-consciously.

She moved to the door and opened it, glancing down the corridor. She nodded like a conspirator and I wheeled myself out of the room. She

ran back, turned out the light and closed the door. Noiselessly she wheeled me down the dim passage to the living room. It looked too big and exposed. We went into the little sitting room where I had had my talk with Inspector Sargent. Marny turned on a light and shut the door.

"You'd better lock it," I said, thinking of Gordy's gun.

CHAPTER XXIX



MARNY hurried to the door and locked it, then crossed the room and curled up in a chair, watching me. She had given up trying to be a sophisticated imitation of Selena. She was just a quiet, pretty kid. I liked her a lot better that way.

"Well?" she said.

"Okay," I said. "In the first place, we've learned from the note that Selena knows the autopsy report is going to show poison tomorrow. That means she's known all along that Mr. Friend was murdered. When you went back to your father's room after Gordy passed you in the hall, Selena was there, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Probably the two of them murdered him together. I think they worked it together. Maybe it wasn't premeditated. Mr. Friend was cutting Gordy out of the will and that

included Selena. He asked for the medicine. They gave him the overdose."

Thoughts were coming at an almost hectic rate.

"Once they'd done it, they couldn't be sure Dr. Leland would sign a death certificate as heart failure. Gordy, the black sheep, was bound to be the most likely suspect if the murder was discovered. If everything worked well with Dr. Leland, he could come back. If the murder broke, he'd remain hidden. It was sticking Gordy with all the danger, of course. But that's typical of Selena."

Marny was watching me in bright-eyed silence.

I went on: "But Dr. Leland signed the death certificate. Not only that, when the will was read, Selena realized that none of you would get any money unless Gordy came back. Then Nate found me. Selena realized it was a much better bet to exploit me. I could go through the act with the League and later, could supposedly commit suicide as Gordy. Afterward Selena could pick up the money and she and Gordy could start off somewhere else under a different name." I paused. "Does that make sense?"

"I suppose so," said Marny. "It's the sort of devious thing Selena would think up."

"Okay. Then it comes down to one question. Where's Gordy? He must be somewhere near here so he can keep in daily communication with Selena. It must be a hiding place near here."

She stared at me blankly. "You can't mean in the house?"

"No. But your mother told me yesterday that there was an old farmhouse way off at the back of the property. You know it?"

"Of course I know it."

"It's on the way to Nate's cabin, isn't it?"

"Yes. Did you guess that?"

"This evening, when you were trying to explain to Jan that he was to use the back way to drive me out tomorrow, Jan drew a cross on the map. Did the cross coincide roughly with the position of the old house?"

Her face was dark with amazement. "Yes, yes, it did. But how could Jan know?"

"Someone would have to take food to Gordy," I said. "And someone would have to take messages from Selena. I'm ready to bet ten to one that Gordy's been hiding in that house all this time."

Marny jumped up excitedly.

"Then if—if you're right—what?"

"Baby, you're going to drive me down there—now."

She said explosively: "Are you crazy? In that cast? You couldn't get out to the car even."

"A crutch," I said. "There's a pair of them in the closet off the library. I think I can work it with a crutch."

"But Gordy may have a gun. How could you protect yourself with only one arm and a crutch? Please, please, let me go alone. I know the house. I can move quietly. I can creep up the back way. I can tell whether there's anyone there."

I shook my head. "This is my danger. Do it my way. Run along, get a crutch and a flashlight. The

sooner we start the better."

She looked so forlorn and worried that I reached up with my left hand, drew her down and kissed her on the cheek.

"Be a good girl. Run along."

She smiled a sudden, vivid smile. Then she hurried to the door, unlocked it and slipped away.

I glanced around the room for some makeshift weapon of defense. Lying on a desk by the window, I saw a paper knife. I crossed and picked it up. It was more than a paper knife, really. It was a dagger in a leather sheath—a souvenir probably from the Pacific war. I drew the knife out of the sheath and tested its blade on my thumb. It was razor sharp.

I slipped it in my pocket, feeling a lot easier in my mind.

Marny came back soon. She was wearing a black suit and a white shirt. She carried a flashlight and a single crutch.

I tried it out. After a few minutes, I got the hang of it. With the crutch under my left arm and my left leg dragging, I could move very slowly forward.

Then when I signaled, Marny helped me back into the wheel chair and took the crutch.

"Okay, baby," I said, "let's get going."

Marny went ahead. As I followed her into the living room, she picked up a whisky bottle from the table and pushed it down beside me in the chair.

"Something tells me we may need it."

She preceded me through the library, out onto the terrace and

around onto a gravel drive which led to the garages.

In the moonlight, it was easy enough to see what we were doing and, since the garages were at the opposite end from Selenia's and Mimsy's rooms there was little risk of waking them.

Marny backed a car out of the garage. With her help and the crutch, I managed to swing myself into the front seat. Marny handed me the whisky, put the crutch in the back and pushed the wheel chair into the shadows where it wouldn't be noticed if anyone should come to the garage while we were away.

She scrambled into the driver's seat and glanced at me questioningly.

"Okay," I said.

Marny nosed the car out of the gravel parking circle and down the drive. Neither of us talked as we swerved off the drive onto an old track which led away from the house toward the vast, desolate range of mountains.

The track seemed endless. It was one of those sections of Southern California where the moment you've left habitation you might be on another planet. Bare scrub lands stretched on either side of us, and the desert mountains, like the skeletal remains of prehistoric monsters pressed close around us.

"There's a little canyon tucked away," said Marny. "He had an avocado orchard there."

"Are we getting near?"

"Yes."

"Then turn off the headlights."

She obeyed. For a couple of minutes we drove on by the light of

the moon. Then the track swerved to the left.

"It's down here," she said.

We had reached the mouth of a little canyon. Ahead, gleaming faintly white, I could make out the shape of a building.

Marny drove off the road so that the car was partially concealed. She got out, handed me the crutch and, pulling the keys in their black leather container out of the ignition, clutched them in her hand with the flashlight. I propped the crutch under my armpit and she helped me out. In the moonlight her face was white and tense.

"You're crazy," she said, "walking with that crutch. You'll kill yourself."

I patted her hand. "Don't worry. Just follow my lead. This is going to be a cinch."

Together we started laboriously down the track. She supported me on my right side. That helped a lot. As the white blur got nearer, I could distinguish an old bungalow and another building attached to it.

"A garage," whispered Marny. "The back part of the house is a garage."

CHAPTER XXX



NO LIGHT showed from any of the windows. It was a dead house. It looked as if no human foot had trodden near it for years. We came up to it. A rotting picket fence di-

vided off what had been the yard from the surrounding wilderness. There was a little gate sagging on its hinges and a large area cut in the fence for the driveway to the garage.

"The garage first," I whispered.

We skirted the gravel of the drive. My crutch made no noise on the rough grass. We reached the garage. The double doors were drawn shut. Cautiously Marny slid them back making a space large enough for her to squeeze through. She turned back and eased me in after her.

It was dark inside and the air smelt stale and dusty.

"The flashlight," I said.

Marny turned on a beam of light. A car was standing in front of us—a new, dark blue sedan, not at all the sort of car to be discarded in an abandoned house. Marny gave a smothered exclamation.

"It's the car he went away in. Gordy's car."

She ran to the front window and threw the light inside. I followed. The keys were still dangling from the ignition. The car was empty. Marny turned.

"You're right. He must be here—in the house." Her voice broke. "What are we going to do?"

"There's no light. He's probably either asleep or drunk. How many doors are there?"

"One in the front. One in the back."

"How many rooms?"

"Just a kitchen, a sitting room and a bedroom."

"Know the window?"

She nodded.

"Okay. We'll make sure he's there. If he's asleep and we don't wake him—so much the better."

She turned out the flashlight and started silently out of the garage. I hobbled after her.

She led the way around the garage to the back of the house. Marny crept up to a window at the extreme left. Together we peered through it. The moonlight, splashing in, showed me a small, bare room. An empty cot with a mattress stretched along one wall. It looked as if no one had gone near it since the house was vacated.

We peered through all the windows. One thing was certain. Neither Gordy Friend nor anyone else was in the house.

"With the car in the garage he can't have gone anywhere." Marny shivered. "Do you suppose he heard us and fled?"

"Let's take a look inside."

The door groaned as she tugged it open and helped me into the house. We were in the kitchen. The air was foul and sour.

Marny shone the flashlight around. There were no empty cans, no refuse, no indication that anyone had been living there. The bedroom told me the same story. There was a vast spider web stretched from the ceiling to the leg of the bed where it was anchored.

"No one could have been in this room for a month," I said.

"Then why the car?" Marny's question was shaky. "If Gordy hasn't been living here—why the car?"

She twisted away toward the door which led to the living room, the

car keys still clutched in her hand. As I lumbered after her, a new thought was coming—a thought which threw our whole theory out of gear and sent a cold tingle up my spine.

We stood together in the doorway of the living room staring along the beam from Marny's flashlight into that moldering, empty shell. The fetid smell was even stronger in here.

The floor-boards were sagging and broken. The wood had warped, too, making the surface billow.

"Let's get out of here."

Marny gave a little grunt of disgust and turned, swinging the beam from the torch in an arc.

For one second before it passed back into the bedroom, it illuminated the corner to our right.

"Marny!"

"What?"

"Shine the light back in that corner."

She obeyed. As the light settled there, I saw my first glance had not deceived me. Two of the loose floor-boards were splintered. The light patches where fragments of wood had been broken off showed that the damage was recent. I could even see the splintered-off pieces themselves, scattered over the dusty floor.

"See?" My voice sounded harsh and strange.

"Oh-h-h!"

"It's got to be you," I said. "I'd never make it, goddam it. It's got to be you."

It was one of those strange moments where we understood each other without saying what we

meant. Marny pushed the flashlight into my left hand which was clutched around the handle of the crutch. I kept the beam steady. She ran to the corner. She wrenched at one board. It gave immediately. She tossed it aside. She tugged up another board, and then another. She was working wildly as if, in some way, violence helped.

I took a few steps toward her. Four floor-boards had been wrenched up now. I looked down into the shallow pit she had exposed. She had come back to my side. She was clutching my arm savagely. And she was whimpering.

I had been almost sure of what I would see but that didn't make it any easier. I didn't look long—only long enough to see that the body of a man was lying there, a man who had been shot through the chest.

Marny's fingers dug into my flesh. The whimper coarsened into a harsh, racking sob.

"Gordy!" she said. "Gordy!"

I had known that too, of course.

We'd found what we'd come for all right.

Marny was sagging against me. My instinct was to get her out of that charnel room. But I couldn't. She was the one who had to get me out. Then, I leaned back against the wall of the house, propping the crutch at my side.

"Cigarette?" I asked.

Having a specific task to do seemed to make it better for her. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and the tangy smell of smoke was wonderful after that other smell. But I was still half sick with shock,

not because we had found the murdered body of a man I had never met but because the discovery implied something I could hardly bring myself to think about.

In the moonlight Marny's face was deathly white.

I said: "All right, baby?"

"Yes. I'm all right."

"I'm terribly sorry—getting you into this."

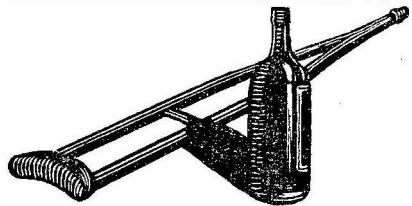
"Don't be silly. As if it has anything to do with you. We had it figured all wrong, didn't we?"

"Not wrong, baby," I said bitterly. "Just not enough."

"Enough?"

"Haven't you got it?" I should have grown used to the idea that Selena's wickedness was without limit, but now I felt an absurd sense of desolation, as if I had loved her very much. "We thought they both murdered your father together. We just didn't go far enough. Selena gave him the overdose and, as she was doing it, Gordy came in. He realized what she had done. You can't trust a drunk with a secret, so she lured him down here and shot him. One murder, two murders."

CHAPTER XXXI



MARNY lifted her face to me. Her eyes were wide with shock. When she spoke her voice was little more than a taut whisper.

"But why would Selena murder Father? He was killed because he was going to cut someone out of his will. Was he going to cut her out of the will?"

"Don't you see? Mr. Friend fired Jan that day because he must have seen Jan and Selena together."

"You mean Jan helped her?"

"You said yourself he'd help you bury a body and forget it a couple of hours later. He probably didn't help in the murders. She probably just used him to get Gordy buried here."

"But Gordy? Without Gordy alive, she couldn't have collected a cent under the will."

"She didn't know about the clause in the will then. None of you did." I laughed harshly. "When Mr. Petherbridge read the will the next day, Gordy and her chance for a fortune were both buried down here under the floor. She must have had a bad couple of moments until Nate produced me and saved the day for her."

"Then—then you don't think Nate and Mimsy knew?"

"I'm sure they didn't. Nate's far too lily-livered to get mixed up with murder, even for Selena. And your mother? She'd never have stood for Gordy being killed, would she?"

"No." Marny's voice was emphatic. "Never in a million years." The tip of her cigarette glowed in the darkness. She said suddenly: "She did have to kill you, didn't she? Selena. She couldn't pin the blame on the real Gordy because the abstinence pledge was signed and that would expose the whole conspiracy."

"Sure," I said. "My suicide tonight is the only possible way it can end happily for her. You see, she's banking on the fact that you and Mimsy are in this too deep to squawk when Sargent identifies my body as Gordy." I laughed again. "Too bad I'm not going to oblige her, isn't it?"

Marny was watching me brightly in the moonlight. "Well, what do we do now?"

"We don't have much choice. We might as well call up Inspector Sargent right now."

"And tell him about Selena?"

"What do you expect me to do? Commit hara-kiri to save her skin? You've certainly got me tabbed as stuck on Selena, haven't you?"

"Weren't you?" She drew her hand quickly out of mine. "Oh, what difference does it make, anyway?" She dropped the stub of her cigarette and crushed it with her heel. "It'll come out about the conspiracy. You, me, Mimsy, Nate—we'll all get into trouble."

"Sure." I glanced at her. "But I guess your glamour days are over. No money now."

"I don't care," she said vehemently. "I'll be glad to be rid of the whole bunch of them forever."

"You've got guts, haven't you?"

"Me?" She twisted round, staring up at me. "You're the one with guts. You're the one who's taken the beating."

She put her hands on my arms and, reaching up, kissed me. Her lips were sweet; her body was young and firm against mine. For a moment she made me forget what a horrible night it was.

"We'd better get started." She slid away from me. "You wait. I'll drive the car up."

"No. I'll walk and like it."

I slid the crutch under my arm. Hobbling back to the car helped me feel independent. I was tired when we reached it and the skin under my arm was burning. She helped me in, put the crutch in the back and scrambled into the driver's seat.

Her hand felt for the ignition and then she glanced uncertainly at me.

"The keys," she said. "Did I give them to you?"

"No. You had them in your hand when we went to the house. I saw them."

"Then I must have dropped them when we found it. I—I'll have to go back."

"Into that room?"

"I don't mind. Really I don't." She gave me a fleeting smile. "It won't take a minute. Here." She handed me the whisky bottle. "Have a drink. You'll need it. I'll be back in a second."

She slid out of the car and then, turning back, took the bottle from me. "I'd better have some, too."

She drank, handed me the bottle and hurried away toward the house. I watched her slim, straight figure until it blurred into the featureless moonlight.

Alone, I started to think of what was ahead of us. Back at that old house with Gordy's body lying beyond the thin walls, what we had to do had seemed simple. It didn't seem simple now.

I'd have to hand Selena over to Sargent, and that would mean the end of Nate as a doctor, the pau-

perization of Mimsy and Marny and the probable arrest of all of us. The entire Friend household would crumble like the walls of Jericho.

I tried to think if there was any way of saving something from the impending wreck. As my thoughts strayed barrenly, I heard a sound that started my pulses tingling. It came behind me from the trail which led from the Friend's house and it was the drone of an approaching car.

The drone grew louder. Luckily our car was hidden behind the bushes. Soon its headlights fanned through the branches near me and passed on. The automobile was headed directly for the old farmhouse.

In a moment it stopped. I heard the click of a door opening, another click as it closed, and footsteps on the gravel.

Uneasy thoughts jostled each other. It couldn't be the police. It must be Selena, then. But could she have recovered from the sleeping tablets? Most likely it was Jan. I realized then, with goading anxiety, just what must be happening.

If my body was to be palmed off as Gordy's, Selena could never risk a possibility of Sargent's finding a second body so inadequately concealed.

And if she had awakened from her doped sleep, and found me gone, she would have known she couldn't be sure of me. This must have been planned earlier. Probably she had divided the job in two. Her job had been to kill me. Jan's job had been to dispose of Gordy. Not knowing Selena had failed in her task, he

was going ahead with his assignment.

As the truth straightened itself out, anxiety for Marny started to crawl through me. I tried to steady myself by reflecting that she must have heard the car. But, when the minutes passed and she did not return, anxiety mounted, urged on by wild speculations.

I told myself that, if I was right and it was Jan, Marny could handle him. But could she? Jan as an assistant in a double murder was a very different proposition from the grinning, friendly Jan she had known about the house.

My own helplessness galled me, I knew it would be folly to hobble after her on the crutch. Instead of helping her, I would be an added burden. But as minutes succeeded minutes, the suspense became unendurable.

At length, I twisted around and tried to reach the crutch on the back seat. By a great effort I just managed to touch one end. Then it slipped down and fell to the floor. I struggled to reach it but the back of my seat was too high. With a feeling of despair I slumped back against the seat.

Grunting, I sat there, gathering my strength for a second attempt. The bottle of whisky lay on the seat at my side. I picked it up and took a large gulp of liquor.

It was sheer chance that I did not swallow it immediately. But I didn't. As a small amount of liquid trickled down my throat, my sense of taste was suddenly alerted. I let a little more seep down, testing it. It tasted wrong, thick and bitter. I

spat what was left out of the window.

The whisky had been very thoroughly doctored.

CHAPTER XXXII



IN DESPERATION, I realized what had happened. We had picked the bottle up from a table in the living room before we left. The whisky had been planted there by Selena. The living room had been the place she had selected for my "suicide."

If our scene in the bedroom had worked according to schedule, she would have given me a drink, and later I would have been found—a suicide with Gordy's gun in my left hand.

That's what might have happened. But, in a fever of anxiety, I realized Marny had taken a drink from the bottle and might even now be lying defenseless out there in the darkness.

The extreme emergency sharpened my faculties. As I stretched back once again vainly groping for the crutch, an image slid into my mind—an image of Nate Croft, white-faced and desperate that afternoon when he had entered the living room and found Selena kissing me. He had said:

Does it have to be every man that comes along? This time I thought

*I'd be safe. I put on the casts . . .
I put on the casts!*

I had accepted his word as a doctor. But wasn't it possible that the casts had been a lie? What if Nate had pretended my right arm was broken to assure a left-handed signature? And the cast on the leg?

This time I thought I'd be safe.

I thought of his bitter way of loving Selena, his knowledge of her promiscuity and his passionate desire to keep her faithful. What if he had, unknown to the family, put an unnecessary cast on my leg to keep me "safe" from Selena? A chastity belt in reverse.

In the first rush of excitement before I had time to weigh the deduction soberly, I pulled out the paper-knife, tugged up my trouser leg and started to hack at the plaster. I knew I was risking a serious fracture if my hunch was wrong, but I didn't care. The chance of being able to get to Marny overrode everything else.

It didn't take long to crack off the cast completely. Time was too precious for me to work on the arm. All I needed at the moment were two legs and one arm.

I slid out of the car and eased my weight onto my left leg. It felt stiff and weak, but at least I could walk.

Fear for Marny blotted out everything else. I picked up the knife and slipped it into my pocket. Warily I moved around the bushes and out onto the trail.

In the moonlight I could see the other car, a station wagon, parked in front of the farmhouse. As I moved toward it, a figure emerged

from the front door of the farmhouse. I slipped into the shadow of a bush. As the figure moved nearer, I saw it was Jan.

He hurried to the station wagon, and groped inside. Then, carrying a square, dark object in either hand, he returned to the house.

As noiselessly as I could with my stiff knee, I moved after him. Marny must certainly have taken the same route but there was no sign of her lying by the path.

I reached the picket fence. I tiptoed along the grass which bordered the drive to the garage. Marny wouldn't have gone to the garage. Her only object had been to retrieve the keys from the living room. Cold sweat breaking out on my forehead, I skirted the garage to the back of the house.

The moonlight, cruelly bright, shone down, illuminating the area. There was no trace of Marny. I inched my way along until I reached the living room window and could see inside.

The rays of the moon cast a dim light into the room. My eyes at once went to the corner where we had left Gordy's body. To my astonishment, I saw that the boards had been replaced. At the other side of the room, I made out the huge figure of Jan. He was bending to place two square objects next to a group of four or five similar objects.

They were cans of gasoline!

As I stared, a woman's figure appeared in the doorway behind Jan. Her white hand moved to his arm. He turned, and, from the way he stooped, I could tell that he was kissing her.

They stayed there together clasped in a fierce embrace. I could see the girl's two white hands scurrying to and fro across Jan's great back. Hatred made me dizzy and even blotted out my fears for Marny.

So Selena had arranged to come with him!

Dimly, as I watched them, I thought: This is the way Nate must have felt. Poor Nate!

And then, suddenly, they were gone. The front door opened. There was a brief pause. Then, I heard the station wagon drive away, its tires crunching on the gravel.

It happened so quickly I couldn't make sense of it. Why should they bring gasoline here and then go away? Had it something to do with what they'd done to Marny?

As I stood rigid, I heard the faint sound of footsteps in the kitchen. I understood then. She had sent Jan away. Jan had been only an innocent stooge. That's why the floor-boards were back in place. His one function had been to bring the heavy cans of gasoline. His reward had been that kiss. She was using him just the way she had used Gordy, Nate and me.

From now on, Selena was working it on her own.

I knew then what I would have to do. I would catch her red-handed.

Her shadowy figure appeared once more. She ran to the corner and started tugging up the floor-boards. It was horrible seeing her on her knees, avidly dragging up the boards.

It didn't take her long. In a few moments she hurried across the room. She picked up one of the

heavy cans of gasoline, dragged it to the far corner. She swung the can and I heard a splashing sound of the gasoline pouring into the shallow pit beneath the floor.

The plan was diabolically simple. With all that gasoline, one match could destroy the tindery house, Gordy, the car, everything. No one would notice the glare. Some day someone would notice that the old house had burned down at last. And that would be that.

When the can was empty, she dropped it. The fumes of the gasoline must have choked her, for she headed straight toward the window.

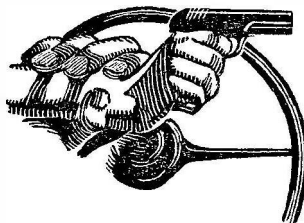
I ducked out of sight. But I had seen enough to make the hairs at the back of my neck crawl, enough to make the very ground beneath my feet seem shaky and insubstantial.

Because, in moving toward the window, she had come into the moonlight and I'd seen her clearly for the first time.

And it wasn't Selena.

It was Marny!

CHAPTER XXXIII



I LEANED back against the clapboard wall. My thoughts were spinning like a kid's firework, as I saw how appallingly I'd let myself distort the truth. Once again I had been hopelessly tricked. I had done exactly

what I had been supposed to do. I had fallen into the deadliest of all the traps that had been set for me.

Every motive I had ascribed to Selena applied just as well to Marny. Old Mr. Friend had found Marny and Jan together and had threatened to cut Marny out of the will. Marny had given him the overdose just as the drunken Gordy walked in. Marny had lured Gordy here to this old house and shot him—and later had used Jan to do whatever dirty work was necessary.

The skein of her cunning was untangled for me then. How had I found the "suicide note" that evening? Simply because Marny, who knew I was going to take old Mr. Friend's poems to my room, had contrived it so.

She had been able to read my thoughts, as plainly as if they were headlines, before I had even thought them myself. She had known I would be curious and read the note, and that, from the deliberately misspelled "weather," I would think Selena had written it. She had known I would remember my bargain with her and somehow get away from Selena to her.

Because that was essential. So long as I was in the bedroom with Selena, she could never get at me. But once I had trundled my chair to Marny, the rest should have been simple. She had already stolen Gordy's gun. She could have wheeled me into the living room, offered me a drink from the doped bottles, and after I had passed out . . .

But things hadn't happened that way. I'd been smart enough to doped

out that Gordy was in the farmhouse and had insisted on coming here to prove it. She couldn't have refused to drive me without arousing my suspicions. So from then on she'd had to go along with me, improvising.

She'd improvised brilliantly, however. She must have made arrangements earlier for Jan to bring the gasoline, arrangements she had no chance to alter. She had wanted to be there in the house alone to deceive Jan, so she'd told me she'd dropped the keys to the car and had to go back for them. She had pretended to take a drink from the doped whisky, hoping I would follow her lead and drink, too.

Now, while she was preparing to destroy Gordy's body, I was supposed to be lying helplessly doped in the car.

Once the fire had started, all she had to do was to drive me home, bundle me into the chair, wheel me into the living room and fake the suicide. Even if the police found traces of the sleeping powder, they'd never suspect. After all, I was an invalid and full of sleeping powders anyway.

And, as she had said herself, there was nothing to fear once I was dead and there was no saving me. Mimsy, Selena, and Nate were too deeply involved to expose her.

Yes. That was brilliant improvising.

I thought of Marny from the beginning—Marny posing as the frank one. Marny subtly poisoning my mind against Selena, Marny assuming the role of little helper so that, when the time came, I would go

with her like a lamb to the slaughter.

I shivered. Inside the room I could hear Marny dragging a second can of gasoline across the uneven wooden floor.

Marny had talked about fiends. There had only been one fiend in the Friend house.

I forced myself to plan, because the danger was still great. It would be hopeless to rush her in the house because she had the gun.

Gradually I saw I had one advantage. She almost certainly did not know I had discovered the casts were fakes.

I was supposed to be back in the car, doped with the whisky.

Okay. That's where I was supposed to be. That's where I would be.

I slipped away and limped back to the car. I collected the flakes of plaster and tossed them under a bush. Getting into the car, I wrapped a robe around my legs to conceal the fact that the cast had gone.

I rejected the idea of releasing my right arm, because I would not be able to hide the fact that the cast was gone. With two legs, one arm and preparedness, I should be more than a match for one frail girl.

I put the whisky bottle ostentatiously on my knee and slumped back against the upholstery with my eyes closed and my mouth open. She would be coming soon.

I didn't hear her come. Suddenly, I was conscious of her face at the car window, only a few inches from mine.

For a long moment she stood there, watching me. Through my lashes, I could see her black, glossy hair, and her eyes shining with a

flat, hard, dangerous brightness.

"Are you awake?" she whispered. I pretended to be in a doped stupor.

She leaned closer, her breath warm against my cheek. Then she giggled, a high, tittering sound like a naughty little girl.

She drew back, and pattered around the car. The other door opened. She squeezed into the driver's seat next to me. She giggled again, excitedly, and put the key in the ignition.

I was thinking rapidly. She had the gun. It was probably in the right-hand pocket of her jacket. And the right-hand pocket was on my side.

She started the engine to back onto the trail. Now was the moment to act, when her hands were busy.

The car began to lumber backward. Swiftly my left hand grabbed at the pocket.

She screamed, a sudden, sharp scream, and clawed at the back of my hand with long fingernails. The car stalled. Her other hand lunged at my face, scratching savagely at my cheek. For one second I almost had the gun. Then she wrenched it free.

I saw the muzzle pointed at me. I jerked her wrist upward. There was an explosion and then the tinkle of smashed glass. She fought with the ferocity of a demon, screaming with rage.

She went for my eyes with her nails. I ducked and another shot rang out. And a third.

Her screaming stopped as if someone had cut a sound track with a knife. The gun clattered to the floor. Then her body slid downwards and

her fingers unwound from my wrist as she slumped to the floor of the car. Something dark was welling up, soaking her white blouse under her left breast. Her eyes grew blank. A gurgling sound came from her lips.

I bent over her. One of the bullets had gone through her heart.

She was dead in less than a minute.

I got out of the car and stared at the farmhouse, at the ominous red light pulsing through the windows.

Gordy's funeral pyre was burning.

I turned back to the car. Beyond Marny on the floor something gleamed white. It was the suicide note. I put it in my pocket.

I had to get away, far, far, away. I knew that. But how? Not in this car with its splintered windshield and the body of Marny.

Then I remembered Gordy's car, parked in the garage with its key in the ignition. I ran toward the burning building. The conflagration hadn't reached the garage yet. But in a few minutes, the house, the garage, everything would be swallowed up.

CHAPTER XXXIV



REACHING the garage, I opened the double doors and ran to the car parked inside. Clumsily, I shifted the engine and backed the car out on the gravel path, well away from

the menace of the flames.

I sat still for a minute, thinking.

The horror was over and Marny was dead. But how to explain this to Inspector Sargent?

I would have to disappear. I saw that. If the police knew there had been two Gordy Friends, it would be disastrous. I could escape in this car. No one would miss it. What did it matter that I didn't know who I was? That was child's play in comparison to this Friend mess.

But what would happen to Selena and Mimsy? Confronted with the disappearance of me and Marny, the police would start a search. After finding a charred male body in the burned farmhouse and Marny's corpse in the second car, Inspector Sargent would almost certainly arrest Mimsy and Selena.

Now that I know how fiendishly they'd been exploited, my old affection for Mimsy and Selena returned. I couldn't walk out and leave them to face the rap for three murders they hadn't committed.

As I shifted my position, the suicide note in my pocket made a crinkling noise. That little sound gave me an idea. I thought about the letter.

Yes. After all, there still was a way.

Getting out, I ran back to the other car, pushed Marny's body to one side, and drove it into the garage. The house itself was blazing furiously now.

I picked up the revolver, made sure no plaster fragments were inside. Then I pulled out the crutch and scrambled out of the car.

As I left the garage, flames were

skittering over the roofs. In a few minutes the garage would be burning, too.

I carried the crutch and the revolver around to the back of the house and tossed them both through the rear window into the roaring flames.

There were the casts to think of, too. I now was sure the cast on my arm was as phony as the cast on my leg. With the dagger, I split the plaster off and flexed my arm. Like my leg it was stiff but obviously sound. I threw the plaster pieces and the sling through the window, went up the path, collected all the fragments of my leg cast and brought them down and threw them into the building, too.

This done, I got into Gordy's car and returned to the Friend residence.

When I reached the house, I crept through the french windows into the dark library. I groped for the writing lamp on the desk and turned it on. The typewriter stood where it had always stood by the telephone. There was paper, too.

I slid a piece of paper into the typewriter. I knew exactly what I was going to say.

So, I typed:

Dear Mimsy:

This is terribly important. Tell Sargent Marny killed Father. I knew it all along. I walked into the room when she was giving him the overdose. I knew with Father dead I'd be rich. Marny made me promise not to tell, so I agreed. That's why I went off on a bat. I was scared. I wasn't going to tell but now Sargent suspects, it's different. Marny realized that, too. She made me promise

to meet her tonight in the library after you'd all gone to sleep.

I had to dope Selena, so I could get away. Marny was waiting here. She said Sargent would find poison in the body at the autopsy and it would all come out. She said if I told she'd done it, she'd accuse me of helping her. I said it was hopeless. Sargent would find out the truth anyway. She said maybe I was right and that the only thing to do was to escape while there was a chance.

But she wasn't going to leave me behind, knowing what I knew about her. She'd stolen my gun. She brought it out then. She said I had to go with her in the car or she'd shoot me. I pretended to agree.

I'm helpless in the casts. But I said I couldn't get into the car without crutches. I said she must get me a crutch. I pretended they were in the attic instead of the closet so that I'd have more time to write this while she's away. She's locked me in here. She'll be back any minute.

She says she's going to escape to Mexico and take me with her. I don't believe she's going to take me with her. She mentioned the old farmhouse and looked funny. She has the gun. I think she's going to stop at the old farmhouse and try to kill me. No one would think of looking there. I'm going to try to stop her. But if I don't, if I'm not back here tomorrow, go to the farmhouse. Please, Mimsy, please. She'll be here in a second, I must stop. I—

I picked up a pencil in my left hand and signed a clumsy, scrawling *Gordy* at the foot of the page. I slipped the note under the typewriter so that they would be bound to find it in the morning.

That story, compounded of truths, half-truths, and lies, was the best I could do. At least it pinned the crimes on the right person and drew

Sargent's attention to the farmhouse. When he searched the ruins and found the remains of Marny in the garage and the remains of Gordy in the house, the note would be sufficiently vague to enable him to form his own theory as to whether Marny killed Gordy first or Gordy killed Marny.

After the flames had done their work, he couldn't possibly tell that Gordy had been dead for a week. At any rate, if some quirk of the fire left something undestroyed, the right things were in the right places—the crutch and the casts in the room with Gordy's body.

Between the lines, there was also a message for the Friends. I was telling them obliquely that Marny had killed Gordy the same day she killed her father. I was letting them know the truth and hinting broadly at the attitude they should take with the police, in order to clear themselves.

They might even get the money, I thought with amusement. The police need never know a false Gordy had existed or that the signature on the abstinence pledge was a forgery. Once they believed that Marny had killed her father, there was no legal hitch to Mimsy's and Selena's inheritance. They would have trouble with Mr. Moffat, of course. But, between them, Mimsy and Selena were really expert trouble girls.

An image of Selena came into my mind. Not one image but a dozen images merged together. I thought of my first staggering glimpse of her. I thought of her bending over me in the moonlight. I thought of

her as she had been tonight, her honey-brown arms twined around me, her dark blue eyes looking deep into mine with those unlikely tears smudging her lashes.

I love you. I really think I do. This is different. This time it hurts. It must be love when it hurts, mustn't it, baby?

I had thought of her as a murderer then, a black-hearted, lying murderess. Now, with a queer pang, I thought:

Maybe she meant it. Maybe for the first time in her life she was on the level.

I wanted to run up the stairs, slip my arms around her and feel the velvet warmth of her skin against mine.

But I knew that it wasn't to be. If I saw her again, how could I leave her?

And I had to go.

I crossed back to the desk and opened the drawer where Mrs. Friend kept her cache of money. I couldn't go out into the world penniless. I took fifty dollars. When Mrs. Friend realized what I was doing for her, she would think it cheap at the price.

I turned out the light. There was a bathroom across the hall. I was grimy and disheveled and there was a little blood on my sleeve. I washed up. I stuffed the towel in my pocket to be destroyed along with Marny's fake suicide note. I hurried back to the garage, got into Gordy's car, jammed my foot on the starter and drove quickly away.

I didn't know where I was going. I didn't care.

Just so long as it was—away. . . .

EPILOGUE

I WAS in the drab lobby of a cheap little Los Angeles hotel when I read the newspaper. I had been there a week because a cheap hotel in a big city was a good place to hide.

Not that I had much reason to hide any longer. I had read the papers avidly since the sensational murder case at Lona Beach had broken, and things were turning out exactly as I had hoped.

Sargent was satisfied that Marny had murdered her father and, although the farmhouse had been so completely destroyed that it was almost impossible to reconstruct what had happened there, fragments of the cast had been found which convinced Sargent that Gordy's body was mine.

Mimsy and Selena, who had put on a magnificent show, were almost completely free from suspicion. Even Mr. Moffat, in a press interview, seething with frustrated fury, had indicated his intention of waiving all claims to the Friend fortune.

My link with Mimsy and Selena through the papers was the only thing that made me feel alive. As my fifty dollars dwindled almost to the vanishing point, my mind remained as blank as ever as to my own identity.

A thousand times a day, I said to myself: "Peter. Iris. A plane. Seeing someone off on a plane."

But these words, that had once seemed so full of meaning, now had association with only the Friends. Selena carrying the black spaniel out of the gray and gold room. Selena bending over the vase of

irises, her fair hair shimmering, her red lips parted in a smile.

The future was blank and featureless as a drowned man's face.

It was evening when I bought that particular newspaper. I sat down gloomily in one of the lobby's worn red-leather chairs and glanced at the front page for any new Friend story. The photograph of a man at the head of a column of print caught my eye.

Wasn't there something dimly familiar about that young, narrow face with the close-set eyes and the flopping mane of black hair? Under the photograph was the following caption:

ADMITS TO ASSAULT AND ROBBERY
OF MOVIE STAR'S MATE

Half-heartedly at first, I started to read that the boy, whose name was Louis Crivelli, had been arrested in San Diego for a car hold-up. Under police questioning he had admitted to having bummed a ride from a certain Peter Duluth, slugged him and stolen his car one month before. This, the paper said, only deepened the mystery surrounding the disappearance of Peter Duluth, recently discharged from the Navy and married to the famous movie actress, Iris Duluth.

A month ago, having said good-by to his wife who had flown with the USO morale unit to entertain the American Army of Occupation in Tokyo, Mr. Duluth had left Burbank Airfield and had never been seen again.

The police were going to take Crivelli to the spot where he claimed to have abandoned Mr.

Duluth and were going to start a new search from there. It was believed now that Duluth was probably suffering amnesia caused by a blow on the head struck by Crivelli.

At that point I was told to see page 3, column 7. Half-hearted no longer, I leafed through the paper to page three. Above the continuation of the story on Crivelli, was a photograph, captioned:

LAST PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN OF
PETER DULUTH

An army bomber, its propellers whirring, stood on a huge airfield. In front of it, staring at each other rather foolishly, were a beautiful dark girl and a man.

To me, of course, they weren't just a beautiful girl and a man. Nor was the plane just a plane.

I remembered the plane. I knew the girl. And the man's face was as familiar as my own—for a very good reason.

It was my own.

The sense of relief that rushed through me was indescribable. It wasn't that memory of my whole life came tumbling back in one instant. It wasn't as wholesale as that. It was just that every detail of that moment, caught in the photograph, sprang into life for me.

Seeing someone off on a plane . . . Peter . . . Iris. The way the wind from the propellers tugged at Iris' skirt. Iris' voice:

Peter, darling, miss me.

I remembered it all as if I had left the airport only ten minutes ago.

"Iris." I said her name out loud. It was wonderful.

There was more in the paper. At the end of the column I read:

Iris Duluth, who was only informed of her husband's disappearance last week, flew back from Japan immediately upon receiving the news and arrived at her Beverly Hills home yesterday morning.

That's all I waited for. A phone booth stood in a dreary corner of the lobby. I ran to it. My hands had quite a time getting a nickel into the right slot. The operator looked up Iris Duluth's number and got it. A girl's voice said:

"Hello."

I was going to ask, "Is this Iris Duluth?" But there was no need. That voice was as much part of me as my own fingers.

"Hiyah, baby," I said. "Thought I'd let you know I'll be home in the hour."

"Peter!" There was a catch in her voice that made my heart turn over. "Peter, I can't believe it."

"Neither can I."

"Darling, I've been half out of my mind. Where are you?"

"Downtown L. A. A cheap hotel."

"But what happened?"

"I got konked on the head, I guess."

"I know that. And I told you to be careful. I might have known. But none of that matters now. Peter, darling, half of California's been after you. Where on earth have you been?"

Where had I been? I thought of Selena. Matched up against that voice, her glamour dissolved like a mist. Suddenly, Selena seemed sleazy. And I started to wonder just

how I was going to explain her away to Iris.

"Peter, tell me. Please tell me. Where have you been?"

"It's quite a story, baby."

"But tell me. There are dozens of reporters here, plaguing me."

"Get rid of them—quick."

"Of course I will. But I've got to tell them something."

"Tell them I've been visiting."

"Visiting? Visiting whom?"

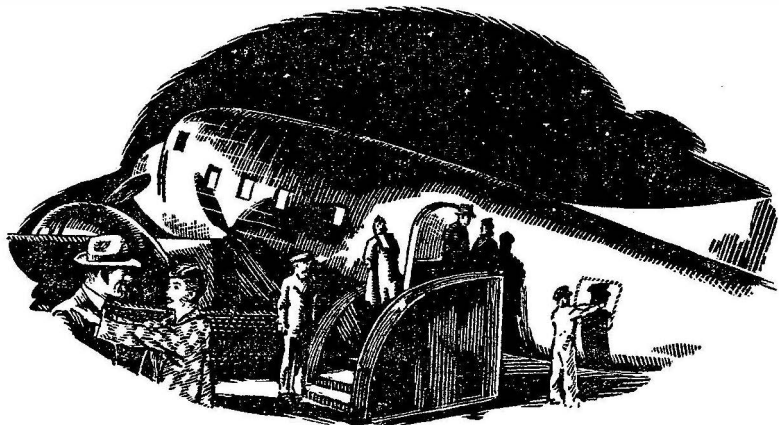
"Oh, people."

"What sort of people?"

I was wondering if I had the price of a taxi or whether I'd have to bum it from Iris.

"What sort of people, Peter?"

"I guess you could call them friends," I said. "Yes. That's it, baby. Tell them I've been visiting friends."



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Sudden death in an exclusive girls' finishing school demands a velvet-gloved sleuth.

A CROSSWORD PUZZLE FEATURE

The coffee pot

To find the missing words in this story, the solver must first work the crossword puzzle, seeking each word's meaning in the text of the story itself. A stands for Across and D means Down.

INSPECTOR CROSS was catching up on his reading. He had finished George (56A) "Fables in Slang" and was deep in the adventures of Captain (8A) when the call came. "A whale of a story," he sighed, as he marked his place and picked up the phone. A hysterical maid gave him news that sent him rushing into (42A). Her mistress, the famous Roberta (36D), was dying, and shrieking she had been poisoned.

Cross thought about her as the police car sped up the avenue. Bobbie, as she was called by her intimates, had played Little (29A) as a child, had later created a sensation in "Dear (9D)," and risen to histrionic heights in "(6D)." Was her career to be cut short at the (31D) old age of thirty-one?

Entering the apartment, Cross knew that the saga was indeed (38D). The maid was hunched in a chair, weeping. A deeply tanned man strode up and down nervously. He gave his name as Dr. (45A) Ball.

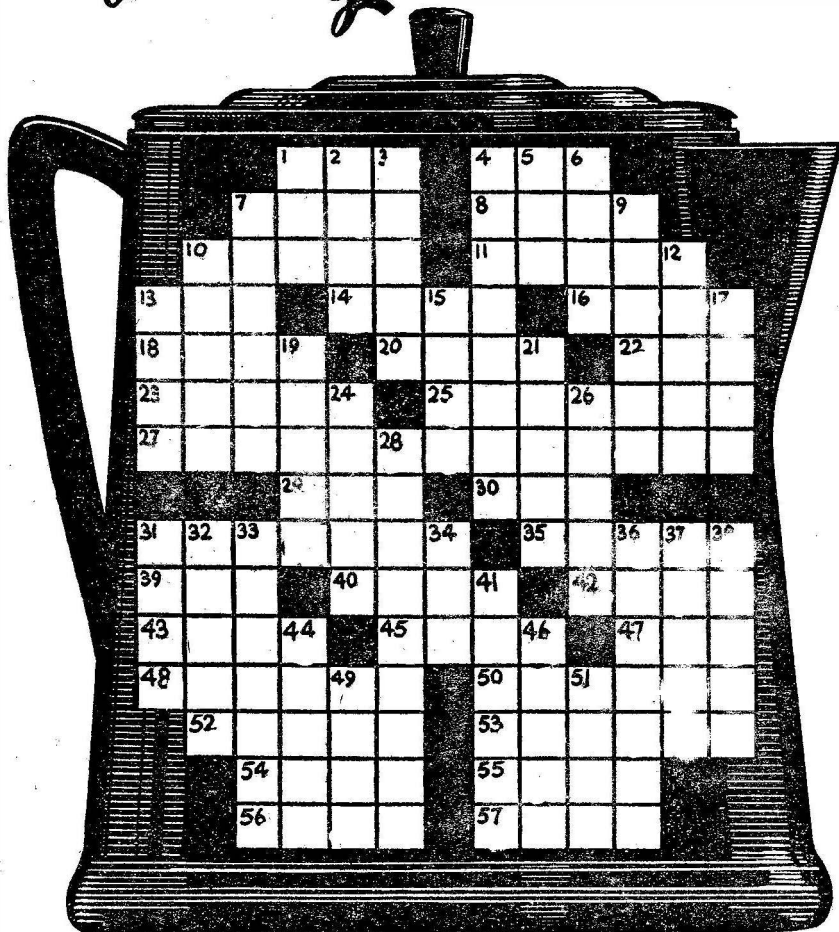
"It is my (7D), Inspector, that Bobbie was not poisoned, in spite of her maid's hysterical report," the doctor said, as they stood beside the ornate bed which had become Bobbie's (7A). "She had had several warning attacks of acute gastric trouble for which I was treating her. She called me this evening, said she wasn't feeling very (43A), and would I come right over. Unfortunately my (4A) was out of order and I had to (19D) my visit for an hour. I arrived to find her (14A)-conscious. I gave her what (28D) I could but—" And he gestured toward the beautiful lifelike corpse.

Cross nodded, then picked up a glass of (15D) that stood on the night table, smelled and tasted it. He went into the black (44D) bath and hunted through the bottles there. He searched the desk. On Bobbie's engagement pad he found one entry for that day: 5 P.M.—(27A). He felt that he had (53A) a clue when he discovered that the same notation was made for the next two days.

Cross watched Dr. Ball make out the death certificate, then (47A) him good night, thinking as he left, "We'll see if we can catch the (37D) who did this!"

mystery

BY MARGARET PETHERBRIDGE



Being the kind of detective who (2D) away at his trade, he made discreet inquiries that (54A) him the next afternoon to a large brownstone house in the (55A) Seventies,

where Bobbie's friends had celebrated on the day of the tragedy.

Now Cross was noted for using a variety of disguises, and on this occasion he doffed his usual (13D)

suit and made himself up as a (35A). Such was his skill with (57A) and padding certain places that he presented himself at the door (50A) in the knowledge that (49D) could penetrate his disguise.

The hosts appeared to be a dark, foreign-looking man called (17D) Pool and a sad-eyed youth whose name was (13A) Ace. Listening to scraps of conversation, Cross decided that one of these men had been Bobbie's current (21D).

The only refreshment served, oddly enough, was strong black coffee, brewed from the finest (10D), and poured from a huge silver coffee pot. Silver (32D) of thick cream were passed around. But Cross suspected that some of the coffee was laced with rum, for the conversation became very risqué and the party began to (46D) into a brawl. In fact, it soon took on the aspect of a (24D).

Finally, Pool announced that Mlle. (51D) Budd, the famous French danseuse, would entertain them. Lights were lowered and an exotic dark-haired girl appeared. She was clad in an (48A) wrap which covered her from head to (22A). She began to (26D) to the strains of a cakewalk. As the dance grew more animated, she threw off the wrap and appeared to be clad only in a few flowery (40A).

There was a good deal of the (12D) in Cross. He was shocked by the dance but, like the Sphinx who (20A) imperturbably scanning the desert, he stayed until the bitter end. Even when a tough sergeant, just back from (39A), tried to hug

him, Cross maintained his disguise.

"(16A) to you, (30A)!" he giggled, in a simpering falsetto, and (41D) him into silence.

As the party thinned out and the guests went off in (11A), Cross, with the wisdom of a (52A), hid himself behind some stunted orange (3D) which grew in the conservatory. After a tiresome vigil he saw two shadows (10A) in the doorway.

"What (23A)?" said someone.

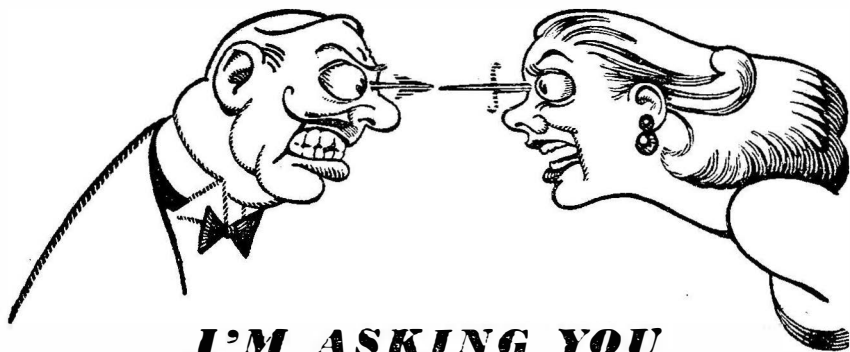
"All okay," came the answering whisper. "Have you got any more of that (18A)? I want to put some in that Budd girl's coffee at the party tomorrow, just like we did with Bobbie yesterday. She's just as bad as Bobbie—threatening me with a (25A) to get back the money she invested in my non-existent coffee business!"

"(5D)!" thought Cross, and tried to (31A) his memory of the voices he had heard that afternoon.

"Here it is," grunted the first speaker. "You're (1A) to get caught if you're not careful."

The inspector drew his gun, leaped out from the foliage and snapped on the lights. An (1D) of complete amazement transfixed the two criminals as they faced what they thought was a harmless woman.

"Mr. Pool and Dr. Ball!" exclaimed Cross, in his natural baritone. "Your names will look well in large (4D) in tomorrow's papers. I arrest you for the murder of the beautiful Bobbie, pin-up girl of America. . . . And now let's (34D) ourselves down to the station house. I want to wash out the taste of that coffee with oolong from (33D)."



I'M ASKING YOU

Why Do They Do It ?????

IN THE first place, I am *not* in an ugly mood. I am full of loving kindness, just like always. Sweetness and light and all that sort of thing.

Only, there are times when I get to wondering about some of the odd phenomena of this big, beautiful place called Mystery Land.

Take this matter of staring. Know what I mean? "He stared at her." "She stared at him." Both of them stare at everybody and everybody stares back. For no reason that I can see.

Why do they do it? In this mystery I am trying to read just now, Peter and Joy, the main characters, keep staring so much that I've had to lay it aside until I feel stronger.

Am I allergic to staring? Was I stared at once too often in my infancy? Should I see a doctor?

I mean Joy will enter a room, pausing on the threshold to stare

at Peter, who thereupon exclaims "Joy!" and stares right back at her. It isn't that either of them is astonished to see the other, or anything else I can figure out from my personal experience with human mentality, so-called, or from reading the story.

Then they stop staring at each other and start staring at this, that and anything, including the furniture, until one of them begins to stare blankly into space. That's where I usually leave them.

You can't blame mystery people for staring at a dead body. But why stare when somebody merely says, "Hello there, Joy!"

What do they think they're doing? To stare, according to Webster, is "to gaze or look fixedly, as through fear, wonderment, surprise, impudence; to fasten an earnest and prolonged gaze upon some object."

By WILL CUPPY

Aside from the fact that you wouldn't have time, you can't do that as often as Joy does it without a dangerous strain on the eyes, the emotions and the basal metabolism. You'd strip your gears in two pages. You'd come apart. There must be a mistake somewhere.

I inquired about this a few years ago when I was hired to edit and put into English some soap opera radio scripts dealing with mystery, a job to which I attribute my chronic nervous imbalance and premature white hairs. I simply asked the author most given to manhandling the verb "to stare" why he did it.

"Because I can't think of anything else at the time," replied the honest lad. Which may shed some light on the subject.

So-o-o. When a whodunit author writes, "She stared at him," just what is in his mind? Nothing. Nothing whatever.

Goodness knows I have tried to stop this senseless and horrible practice. I once waged an outright anti-stare campaign in a weekly mystery column of practically world-wide distribution and, I suppose, considerable influence. I attacked staring on the grounds of bad prose, punk characterization, malice aforethought and general imbecility.

I explained that one or even two stares in the same book might be extremely effective, but that too much is too much. After the first few stares the Law of Diminishing Returns sets in and you're stuck with a lousy whodunit.

Letting that sink in, I added that a character who stares and stares,

apparently from a total lack of any other means of expression, is a character in whom no one could possibly believe, let alone follow with bated breath. He's dead on his feet and so is the book.

And more in various veins. I snarled, I begged, I jested. I cried into my critiques. And guess what. The staring increased by leaps and bounds until I am now in the state in which you see me. I have often wondered what happened.

Do mystery authors read the wrong column? Or don't they care what I say? Then why don't I shut up?

If I may bother you with a few more gripes, why do so many mystery girls have red hair and green eyes? I have nothing against this combination, but I get fed up with it after six in a row.

Why not blue or brown eyes for a change? It just happens that I have a passion for blue. Or you could call it a curse.

Detectives have red hair and green eyes, too. Desmond Shannon has 'em. Peter Clancy is a redhead. I never noticed his eyes.

Why are so many mystery men named Peter, with or without red and green effects? It's getting so that you hardly ever meet a juvenile lead who isn't named Peter. What this country needs is fewer young men named Peter who are in love with girls named Joy.

What makes mystery people throw up so often? For a heroine it is mere routine to state, when she first sees the victim, that she fears she is going to be sick. Sometimes it's a false alarm, sometimes not. Why

does she do this? I must ask my psychiatrist.

English characters, especially, do it. They love it. It turns my insides over.

In his latest mystery, "Unsuspected Chasm," (reviewed in this issue) Michael Innes says of his hero, attacked by fear of high places, "He dropped on his knees and vomited—as quietly as he could." If he can write it, I can quote it. Later on in the same book, a dog obliges in a similar way. The dog was already on all fours.

Who am I to teach elementary manners and common decency to a Professor of English at Adelaide University? Why do I even mention the subject if I'm so cultured, refined and supersensitive? Because I am such a jackass that I thought it

might do some good. It won't.

And another thing. I wish old ladies in mysteries would stop exclaiming "Fiddlesticks!" and "Fiddle-de-dee!" They seem to think that the mere sounding off with one of those every so often establishes them as whatever character they're pretending to be—a wacky matriarch, a spinster sleuth or the like.

It doesn't, though. It merely stamps them as a lot of old copy cats. Aunt Ray exclaimed "Fiddlesticks!" once or twice in "The Circular Staircase," and they can't let it alone. They've been dragging it in and worrying it to death ever since.

In real life old ladies have learned some new words for use when they want to get tough. They never say "Fiddlesticks!" or "Fiddle-de-dee!" Well, hardly ever.

Latest Whodunits Pass in Review

LOVE HAS NO ALIBI. By Octavus Roy Cohen. The Macmillan Company. \$2.

Jim Hanvey, Mr. Cohen's old sleuthing ace, makes a brief appearance here as a bank detective, gold toothpick on his watch chain and all. Since he would hardly know his way around the up-to-the-minute night spots, main job goes to hard, efficient Max Gold, who hasn't much to do, at that.

The big idea is the love of Kirk Douglas, young architect, for Dana Warren of the Ricardo and Dana dancing act at the Club Caliente, both pathological starers. Somebody shot another girl in Kirk's place, but most customers will concentrate on the tender passion written up in the her-body-was-soft-and-warm style. This little item contains our dream girl, one Candy

Livingston, a socialite inhabiting the alcoholic joints. She is nerds, but she has \$20,000,000.

UNSUSPECTED CHASM. By Michael Innes. Dodd, Mead & Company. \$2.

Professor Innes, darling of Phi Beta Kappa circles and other fanciers of cultural whodunits, is out with another scholarly tome about illicit trafficking in art, simply loaded with so many learned cracks that you'll either sink or swim. Anyway, the first few chapters are plenty exciting, where Richard Meredith, an antiquarian, gets into a cellar full of stolen goods such as the Horton Venus, one of Giotto's frescoes, the Mykonos marbles and the Tobermary figurines.

After that, you visit the Scottish

Highlands and California in search of the big boss of the gang, erudite wit snapping around you like fury.

THE SHOCKING PINK HAT. By Frances Crane. Random House. \$2.

Who needled the cyanide into wealthy Ernest K. Leland, then shoved him down one of those San Francisco hills in his big black convertible? Which character faded into the fog at the murder scene? And whose colorful headgear was found in the back seat? These and many more questions face top-ranking Patrick Abbott (blue-green eyes), just back from the South Pacific, and his wife Jeanie (amber eyes and jet-black tresses), not to mention Inspector Bradish, who thinks Nancy Leland, the widow, did the deed.

Also, what about the beauteous blonde in the Mexican nightclub and Rosalie Wong, daughter of the housekeeper? And the rumors of dope and the devil? Stick around and you'll hear Pat's detailed explanation after he has trapped the fiend into a confession with some of his best tricks. This polite treatment of a rowdy plot is a don't miss item.

HOLY DISORDERS. By Edmund Crispin. J. B. Lippincott Company. \$2.

Ye author of "Obsequies at Oxford" has dashed off another entertaining baffle of the uppish and fairly funny school, all about the murder of an organist in Tolnbridge Cathedral, another fatality in the Bishop's Gallery and abortive attempts at more killings. Clues are supervised by Gervase Fen, an Oxford professor with a tendency to quote Lewis Carroll and a weak tummy, resulting at one point in an attack of *mal de mer* on dry land for customers fond of this gambit. He all but knocks himself out with a solution that should satisfy, after turning in a fiend in whom you may or may not believe.

This comes complete with a hunk of

Chaucer in front, quotations from the major poets at the head of each chapter and a goodly rush of the King's English containing, oddly enough, quite a bit of staring.

THE LYING LADIES. By Robert Finnegan. Simon and Schuster. \$2.

Some lowdown framed Ralph Flavin, a wandering poet, for the murder of a housemaid in the village of Hamilton, when it's plain to see that he wouldn't harm a fly. (But his poems were awful.) Sheriff Horgan, a fool, jails the innocent youth, then along comes Dan Banion, a bright reporter with a line of detectivism and a knowing way with the hicks.

Look out for Beth, madam of a local dive; Shirley, a broken butterfly, and maybe Ronald Higley, a lonely heart. Seems at one point as though Esther Berglan, the corpse, may be another girl altogether, and what's this about Adelaide Gwinn poisoning her husband? This is reasonably exciting and full of rather hideous small-town atmosphere. Three violent deaths in all. An all-out nausea sequence in the first chapter might well have been omitted.

WHO KNOCKS? Edited by August Derleth. Farrar & Rinehart. \$2.50.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's shivery "The Shadows on the Wall" quite properly leads the van in these "twenty masterpieces of the spectral for connoisseurs" assembled by the indefatigable Mr. Derleth, who also provides an informative foreword about ghost stories in general and his entries in particular. Half a dozen of the contributors move or moved in weird circles. Others include Algernon Blackwood, H. R. Wakefield, Lady Cynthia Asquith, E. F. Benson and May Sinclair. Funny ghost tales are banned except in the case of A. E. Coppard, and he isn't *very* funny.

the Perfectionist

I HAD nightmares about it for several years afterwards—the kind where something is on your heels, and you make desperate efforts, each more futile than the last, to escape it—and I always felt bad about them when I woke up. I never could decide whether I was justified in having bad dreams at all.

It began when I went to live with Aunt Muriel in 1933. I hadn't had a job for six months when I got the letter of invitation from her, and I hadn't eaten much at all for two weeks.

Aunt Muriel wasn't exactly my aunt, to begin with. She was a sort of great-aunt, once-removed, on my mother's side, and I hadn't seen her since I was a beady-eyed kid in knee breeches.

The invitation might have surprised me—though she explained in the letter that she was an old woman, getting lonely, and felt the need of some kindred face near her



—only I was too hungry to wonder.

There was a money order in the letter, and a ticket to Downie, where she lived. After I paid the back room rent with the money order and got myself a meal with double portions of everything, I had two dollars and thirteen cents left. I caught the afternoon train to Downie, and a little before noon the next day I was walking up the steps to Aunt Muriel's house.

Death paints the picture.. by MARGARET St. CLAIR

Aunt Muriel herself met me at the door. She seemed glad to see me. She wrinkled up her mouth in a smile of welcome.

"So *good* of you to come, Charles!" she said. "I really can't thank you enough! So very *good* of you!" She ran to italics.

I was beginning to warm up to the old girl. She didn't look any older to me than she had fifteen years before. She'd been held together by whalebone and net collars then, and she still was. I put the more flattering portion of this idea into words.

"Oh, Charles," she chirped, "you *flatterer!*" She gave me another smile and then led me into the hall.

I followed her up the stairs to my room on the second floor front. It had a high ceiling and a tall four-poster bed which should have had curtains around it to cut off the draft. After she left, I put my imitation leather suitcase in the big closet and went into the bath next door to clean up.

Lunch was laid on the dining room table when I came down, and a maid, who looked a good deal older than Aunt Muriel, was fluttering in and out with more dishes. With my aunt's encouragement, I ate enough to keep me comatose all afternoon, and then sat back with a cigarette and listened to her talk.

She began by doing a good deal of commiserating with herself on the subject of her age and loneliness, and a good deal of self-congratulation because she was going to have a young kinsman around from now on.

It developed that I was expected

to make myself useful in small ways like walking the dog—an unpleasant Pomeranian named Teddy—and taking letters to the mail box. This was perfectly all right with me, and I told her so.

There was a short hiatus in the conversation. Then, picking Teddy up off the floor where he'd been during the meal, she installed him in her lap and launched out on an account of what she called her *hobby*. In the last year or so she'd taken up drawing and it had become, from what she said, almost an obsession.

Holding Teddy under one arm, she rose and went to the walnut sideboard and returned with a portfolio of drawings for me to look at.

"I do almost all my drawing here in the dining room," she said, "because the light is so good. Tell me, what do you think of *these?*" She handed me fifty or sixty small sheets of drawing paper.

I spread the drawings out on the dining room table, among the litter of dishes, and examined them carefully. They were all in pencil, though one or two had been touched up with blotches of water color, and they were all of the same subject, four apples in a low china bowl.

They had been labored over; Aunt Muriel had erased and re-erased until the surface of the paper was gritty and miserable. I racked my brains for something nice to say about them.

"You—unh—you've really caught something of the essence of those apples," I forced out after a moment. "Very creditable."

My aunt smiled. "I'm *so* glad you

like them," she replied. "Amy said—the maid, you know—that I was silly to work at them so much, but I couldn't stop, I couldn't *bear* to stop, until they were *perfect*." She paused, then added, "Do you know, Charles, I had the biggest difficulty!"

"Yes?"

"The apples kept withering! It was dreadful. I put them in the icebox just as soon as I got through for the day, but still they went bad after two or three weeks. It wasn't until Amy thought of *dipping* them in melted wax that they lasted long enough."

"Good idea."

"Yes, wasn't it? But you know, Charles, I've gotten rather *tired* of apples lately. I'd like to try something else. . . . I've been thinking, that little tree out on the lawn would make a good subject."

She went over to the window to show me the tree she meant. I followed her. It was a young sapling, just coming into leaf. My aunt said it was a flowering peach.

"*Don't* you think that would be a good subject, Charles? I believe I'll try it this afternoon while you take Teddy for a little walk."

Amy helped bundle my aunt up in several layers of coats and mufflers, and I carried the stool, the easel, the box of pencils and the paper out into the garden for her.

She was rather fussy about the location of the various items, but I finally got them fixed to her satisfaction. Then, though I'd much rather have had an after-luncheon nap upstairs, I snapped the lead on Teddy's objectionable little collar

and started out for a survey of the town of Downie.

I soon realized that Downie was the sort of town whose social life centers around the drugstore, but I managed to kill the next two hours by letting Teddy investigate the lamp posts which caught his fancy.

I expected to find Aunt Muriel on the lawn when I got back, hard at work on her drawing, but she had gone in and the easel and stool were gone, too. I looked around for her, but she wasn't in sight, so I let Teddy climb into his box in the dining room and went upstairs for that belated nap.

After all, I couldn't get to sleep. For some irrelevant reason I kept thinking of all those painstaking drawings of the bowl of apples, and I lay on the bed and counted the spots on the wall until dinner time.

The dinner was good, and plentiful. My aunt, however, was definitely snappish. After Amy had cleared away the dishes and my aunt had restored Teddy to his accustomed place on her lap, I found out what the reason was.

"My drawing went *badly*," she complained. "The wind kept whipping those leaves around until I couldn't get a *thing* done."

"I didn't notice much wind, Aunt Muriel," I said rather stupidly.

"You just don't notice things!" she flared. "Why, the leaves weren't still a single *minute*."

I hastened to make amends.

"I can see that a careful craftsman like yourself might be distracted," I placated her. "I'm sorry. I haven't been with artists much."

The reference to herself as an

artist pleased my aunt.

"Oh, I'm sure you didn't mean to give offense," she said. "It's just that I can't work with anything unless it's *absolutely* still. That's why I stayed with the apples so long. But I *would* like to draw that tree. I wonder. . . ." She went into a brown study which lasted until she had emptied two cups of coffee.

"Charles," she said finally, "I've been thinking. I want you to chop that tree down for me tomorrow and bring it into the house. I'll put it in one of those two-quart milk bottles. That way I can draw it without the wind bothering me."

"But it's such a nice little tree," I protested. "Besides, it won't last long after it's been cut down."

"Oh, it's only a tree," she replied. "I'll get another from the nursery. And about the withering, Amy is wonderful with flowers. She puts aspirin and sugar in the water, and they last forever. Of course, I'll have to work fast. But if I put in two or three hours in the morning and four or five after lunch, I ought to get something done."

As far as she was concerned, the matter was settled.

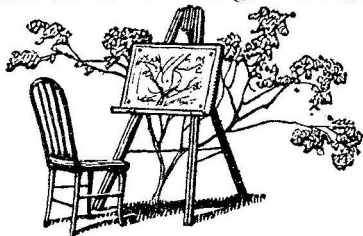
Immediately after breakfast next morning, Aunt Muriel led me to the tool shed in the rear of the house and gave me a rusty hatchet. She watched with ghoulish interest while I put an edge on the hatchet and then escorted me to the scene of the execution. Feeling like a murderer, I severed the little sapling from its trunk with a couple of chops and then carried it into the house.

I spent the rest of that day, and the next three or four days, working

in the garden. I've always liked gardening, and there were some nice things in the place, though they'd been badly neglected. I divided some perennials and fertilized the earth around them with bone meal. Somebody had stocked up the shed with Red Arrow and nicotine sulphate, and I had a good time spraying for aphids and beetles.

Friday morning at breakfast I found a five-dollar bill folded up in my napkin. I raised my eyebrows toward Aunt Muriel. She nodded, yes, it was for me, while a faint flush washed up in her flabby cheeks.

I folded it neatly and put it in my pocket, feeling a warm glow of gratitude for the old girl. It really



was extraordinarily decent of her to provide me with cigarette money. I resolved to go shopping for a little present for her that afternoon.

I found that the resources of Downie were limited. After hesitating between a china fawn and a bowl of fan-tailed goldfish, I decided that the goldfish had more verve. I went in after them, and discovered that Drake, the clerk who sold them to me, had been to California, too, and was practically a friend. I made a date with him for a gab-fest the following night.

Aunt Muriel seemed genuinely delighted with the fish. She oohed and

ahhed over the sinuosity and filminess of their tails and ended by installing the bowl on the little stand beside her easel.

We began to settle into a routine. In the mornings and early afternoons Aunt Muriel drew in the dining room while I worked in the garden. Later in the day I ran errands, walked Teddy, and undertook a bunch of small repairs around the house.

About the middle of my second week with Aunt Muriel, the peach tree withered beyond any hope. She told me at dinner time, with the tone of one announcing a major disaster, that she had had to throw it out. We held a post mortem on the batch of thirty-two drawings she had been able to complete before the catastrophe.

I picked out one of them as having more plastic value than the rest. She admitted it was her favorite, too, and everything was fine. I could see, though, that she was wondering what she could draw next.

The next day she flitted restlessly through the house looking for something to draw. She kept popping out into the yard where I was transplanting antirrhinum seedlings, to ask my opinion of this or that as a subject for her pencil. I noticed, when I went in to lunch, that she kept watching the goldfish bowl speculatively, but I didn't make anything of it at the time.

That night when I returned from Drake's house she met me at the door and led me to the kitchen with an air of mysterious triumph.

"I was a little nervous about it," she said, with her hand on the han-

dle of the refrigerator door. "But really, it came out ever so well!" She opened the refrigerator, fumbled in its depths a moment, and pulled out the goldfish bowl. Moisture began to condense on its surface. I stared at it stupidly.

"I *knew* the fish would never hold still, and yet I was just *aching* to draw them," she went on. "So I thought and I thought—and really, I *do* think it was a splendid idea, even if it was my own! I just turned the cold control way down, and put the bowl in, and came back in a couple of hours, and it was frozen solid!

"I was afraid the bowl would crack when it began to freeze, but it didn't. See, the ice is perfectly clear." She picked up a dish towel and rubbed the moisture away until I could see the two goldfish neatly incased in transparent ice. "And now I'll be able to draw them without any trouble. Isn't it *wonderful?*"

I said yes, it was wonderful and went upstairs as soon as I decently could. The incident left an unpleasant taste in my mouth. Not that I held any especial brief for the continued existence of the goldfish, but somehow . . .

She'd seemed to enjoy watching them swimming about so much, and I'd given them to her, and— Oh, hell!

I woke up the next morning feeling faintly unhappy before I could remember what was disturbing me. When I remembered, I decided that I was acting like a champion chump. To let the demise of two goggle-eyed fish upset me was tops in im-

becility. Whistling, I went down to breakfast.

After the meal was over, Aunt Muriel got the bowl out of the refrigerator and set to work. I went out in the shed and messed around with the spray gun for a while.

Looking up at the scaling side of the house, I had an idea. Why not repaint it? I asked my aunt and she approved. Accordingly, after some calculation, I brought home a bucket of paint from the store and started sloshing it on.

The work proceeded slowly. Days went by and I got to be a familiar customer at the paint store. Aunt Muriel had finished her eighty-first study of the frozen goldfish before I'd given the big house its first coat, and the surface was so bad it was going to require at least two.

Spring drifted imperceptibly into early summer, and I was still painting the house and Aunt Muriel was still drawing the goldfish, both of us increasingly absorbed in our tasks.

I was having a pretty good time. Drake had introduced me to his sister, a vivid brunette with just the combination of honey and claws which attracts me most in a woman, and he'd got another girl for himself. We went out together several nights each week. My room in the city with the unpaid rent, the hopeless hunt for a job, and the hunger, seemed a long way off.

I got the painting on the house done the day before Aunt Muriel decided she had exhausted the goldfish. I felt like celebrating. So I mixed soapsuds and nicotine sulphate, stirred up a mess of Red

Arrow, and pattered among the neglected plants to my heart's content.

Aunt Muriel handed me the last of the goldfish studies at dinner the next day and I went over the entire group with her. I was beginning to hate these inquests over the anatomy of whatever she'd been drawing, but I bore up under it as well as I could.

When we'd finished, she said, "Charles, I've been wondering. Do you suppose Teddy would be a good subject for me next?"

I looked down at the little animal where he was lying in her lap and said, yes, I thought he would, but would he hold still enough?

My aunt looked thoughtful.

"I don't know," she said. "I'll have to try to think of something. Perhaps I could give him his dinner right after breakfast. Or . . ." She went off into one of those periods of meditation of hers and, after a while, I left unobtrusively for my date with Virginia, Drake's sister.

We sat in the porch swing in the dark and held hands while the breeze blew the smell of purple lilacs toward us. It was a sweet, sad, sentimental sort of date.

The next day was Saturday. After breakfast my aunt told me to take Teddy for a walk, and to get him thoroughly tired out. She was going to feed him when I got back and she hoped that the exercise, plus the food, might make him comatose enough to serve as a model.

Obediently, we started out. Teddy and I assessed every lamp post in Downie at least twice, and if he wasn't tired out when I brought him back, he should have been. My aunt

took the lead from his collar and led him to the pantry where his food dish was waiting, piled high with hamburger.

Teddy ate like a little pig. When he had finished he lay down on the floor of the pantry with a resolute air. My aunt had to carry him into the dining room and deposit him in a sunny spot near her easel. He was asleep and snoring before I left the room.

We had lunch late that day, almost two-thirds in the afternoon, so Aunt Muriel would be able to take full advantage of Teddy's lethargy. I was hungry, and Amy had prepared a really snazzy meal, centering around fried chicken southern style. As a result, it wasn't until I had finished with the fresh peach mousse that I paid much attention to my aunt. Then I saw that she was looking distracted and morose.

"Didn't the drawing go well this morning, Aunt Muriel?" I asked.

She shook her head until the pendants of her bright earrings jangled violently.

"No, Charles, it did not. Teddy—" she halted, looking very sad.

"What was the matter? Wouldn't he stay asleep?"

If my aunt had been a different type of woman she would have laughed sardonically. As it was, she gave a tiny, delicate snort.

"Oh, he *slept*," she replied. "Yes, he *slept*. But he kept twitching and jumping and panting in his sleep until—well, really, Charles, it was *quite* impossible. Like trying to draw an aspen in a high wind!"

"That's too bad. I guess you'll have to find another subject."

For a moment my aunt did not answer. Looking at her, I thought I caught the glint of tears in her eyes.

"Yes," she replied slowly, "I guess I will. . . . I think, Charles, I'll go into town this afternoon and buy a few little things for Teddy."

For a moment something cold slid up and down my spine. Then it was gone, and I was thinking it was nice of the old girl, considering how much store she set by her drawing, not to be annoyed at the little dog. . . .

She came up to my room just before dinner and showed me what she'd bought for Teddy. There was a bright red collar with a little bell, a chocolate-flavored rubber bone, and a box of some weird confection called "Dog Treet," which, according to the label, was a wholesome sweetmeat for pets.

She put the collar on Teddy while I watched and then gave him two of the dark brown lozenges out of the "Dog Treet" box. He ate them with a flurry of little growls, and seemed to relish them. . . .

Sunday morning I sat around, nursing the old bones until my watch told me it was time to get going if I didn't want to be late for the all-day hike Drake and I had planned with the girls.

We had a fine time in the country. Drake wandered into a thicket of poison oak, and Virginia, giggling, dropped a woolly caterpillar down my neck.

It was quite dark when I returned to the house. Even before I got inside I noticed that all the lights were on and that there was a general air of confusion.

When I opened the door I found Aunt Muriel standing in the hallway, having what looked like a fit. Amy was standing before her waving a bottle of smelling salts.

"It's *Teddy!*" my aunt gasped when she saw me. "Oh, Charles, he's—"

I put my arm around her comfortingly, and my aunt dissolved into tears. They began to trickle over the coating of talcum powder on her cheeks and drop on the high net collar around her neck.

"It's Teddy," she whimpered. "Oh, Charles, he's dead!"

I'd been expecting it subconsciously, but all the same I jumped.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I let him out in the yard for a little run about three hours ago. He was gone a *long* time, and at last I went out to look for him. I called and called and finally I found him out under the rhododendron. He was *awfully* sick. So I came right in and called the doctor, but when he got here, poor little Teddy—was—was gone. Somebody must have poisoned him." She began to cry again.

I stroked my aunt's shoulder and murmured reassuring words while my mind was busy. Some one of the neighbors? Teddy had been a quiet little beast, but he did bark once in a while, and some people just don't like dogs.

"Dr. Jones was ever so nice and *sympathetic* about it. He took poor little Teddy away in a bag. He's going to take him to a man he knows and have him *stuffed*."

Stuffed? I felt sweat break out along my shoulder blades and under my arms. Mechanically I pulled the

handkerchief out of my hip pocket and handed it to my aunt.

She took it and began to blot her eyes. "It's such a *comfort* to me, anyway," she said, blowing her nose, "to think he did—enjoy his—last day—on earth."

I took her up to her room and mixed her a bromide. I stood over her while she drank and talked to her soothingly and patted her hand. After a while I got her calm enough so I could go to my room.

I lay down on the bed and stared up at the spots on the ceiling for a while. My heart was beating hard and quick. Pretty soon I reached in my coat pocket for cigarettes and began to smoke.



I emptied the pack while I lay there, looking at the ceiling, not thinking about anything, keeping my mind back, with an effort that was barely conscious, from the edge of something I didn't want to explore. About twelve I undressed and went to bed.

I felt soggy the next day. I'd slept, but it hadn't done me any good. Aunt Muriel came in late after I'd pushed aside my toast. She was red-eyed. I said good morning and went out into the garden.

The day was muggy and overcast, and I didn't feel like doing much,

anyhow. I disbudded peonies for a while and clipped off seed pods; then I decided to give the Oriental cherries a light going-over with the pruning shears. It ought to have been done earlier. When I'd finished, I went into the shed for some linseed oil and bordeaux to mix a poultice for their wounds.

Reaching for the can of bordeaux, an unfamiliar gleam in the corner behind it caught my eyes. It was a can of arsenate of lead. The label bore the usual skull and crossbones. I opened the can. About a quarter of an inch of the poison was gone.

It might have been in the shed before, of course; I wasn't sure it hadn't been. I held on to that idea: I wasn't sure.

I don't know what I did the rest of the day. I must have potted around in the garden, trying not to think, until dinner time. Aunt Muriel came to the window once and asked me if I didn't want any lunch, and I said I wasn't hungry.

I guess she spent the day looking at Teddy's box in the living room.

Well, I got over it. Two or three days later, when Teddy came back from the taxidermist's, I'd pushed the whole thing back so far in my mind that my reaction had begun to seem slightly comic as well as inexplicable.

Even when Aunt Muriel got her pencils and started on an endless series of sketches of the little stuffed animal, it was all right with me. If anyone had asked me, I'd have said it was only natural for her to want to draw the pet of which she'd been so fond.

While she drew Teddy over and over again, I started re-roofing the house. It was a rough job because it was full of old-fashioned turrets and cupolas, and the summer was well along before I finished.

Aunt Muriel kept urging me to relax, but I just couldn't be quiet.

After the roof, I started a lath house in back for seedlings. Virginia and I were dating almost every night, and I told myself I was feeling fine. I did notice a slight, steady loss of weight, but I pretended it was due to my smoking too much.

One hot night toward the end of August, my aunt got out the packet of drawings she'd made of Teddy, and I went over them with her.

"I think I'll try a few more," she said when I'd laid the last sketch aside. "And then—well, I must get something else." She looked sad.

"Yes," I said noncommittally. The subject made me uneasy, somehow. But so thoroughly had I repressed my awareness, I had no idea why.

"Charles," she said after a minute. She was looking more depressed than ever. "You've made an old woman very happy. This Virginia you've been going around with so much—are you *fond* of her?"

"Why—unh—yes. Yes, I am."

"Well, I've been *thinking*. Would you like it, Charles, if—if I were to advance you the money to set up a little nursery business here in Downie? You seem to have a real *talent* for that sort of thing. I'd miss you, of course, but if you *wanted* to—I'm sure you'd be happy with Virginia, and—" She choked up and couldn't go on.

The old darling! I went around

to her side of the table and gave her a hug and kiss. I managed to tell her how happy it would make me and how much I'd been wanting to do just what she suggested. A business of my own, and Virginia for a wife! She was better than a fairy godmother!

We sat up late discussing plans for the nursery—location, stock, advertising, policy—items that I found fascinating, and Aunt Muriel seemed to enjoy listening to.

When I went upstairs to bed, I was feeling so elated I didn't think I could ever get to bed. I whistled while I undressed. And, despite my expectations, I corked off almost as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I awoke about three in the morning, my mind filled with an unalterable conviction. It was as if what I'd only suspected, what I'd made myself forget, had added itself up and become, while I slept, an unyielding certainty.

I sat on the edge of the bed in my pajamas, shivering.

Aunt Muriel was going to kill me.

Lovingly, regretfully, she was going to put poison in my food or in my drink. Lovingly, regretfully, she was going to watch my agonies or smooth my pillow.

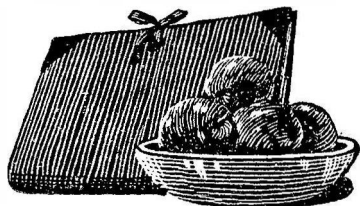
With tears in her eyes, she would delay calling the doctor until it was too late. She'd be most unhappy over the whole thing. And, after I was dead, she'd give me to the best mortician in Downie to embalm. . . .

A week later, after drawing me for eighteen hours daily, she'd consign me to the earth, still regretfully, but with her regret a little alleviated by the knowledge that my

last days on earth had been happy ones. The nursery business and the marriage with Virginia Drake were, you see, to be the equivalent for me of Teddy's red collar and chocolate-flavored bone.

I went over my chain of reasoning rapidly. It was flawless. But there was one thing more—I had to see for myself.

I drew on my bathrobe and tip-toed along the corridor and down the back stairs. When I got into the shed, I lighted matches and looked until I found the spot on the shelf behind the can of bordeaux where



the arsenate of lead should have been. It wasn't there.

Back in my room, I dressed, threw things into my suitcase, and exited in the classical way. That is, I knotted sheets together, tied them to the four-poster bed, and slid down them to the ground. I caught the five-thirty train for the city at the station.

I never heard from Aunt Muriel again. After I got to L.A. I wrote a few cards to Virginia, without my address, just to let her know I hadn't forgotten her. After a while I got into private employment and met a nice girl. One thing led to another, and we got married.

But there's one thing I'd give a good deal to know. What did Aunt Muriel draw next?

the



Ghost went west

Or, Confession
is Bad
for the Soul

By LEO MARR.

EVEN BY the tolerance of modern standards Stephen Boorn hardly qualifies as a gentleman. In fact, he would probably be rated as a "character" in the most unsavory sense of the word. So it is scarcely surprising to discover that his Vermont neighbors in the year 1812 held the same opinion.

Although the elder generation of the Boorn family had won the neighborhood accolade for their honesty, thrift and industry, Stephen, along with his brother Jesse, were drooping branches on the family tree. Displaying little fondness for hard work, they became notorious for their drunken binges.

However, they managed to stay out of trouble until William Boorn, a relative, met Stephen on the road one day wearing a surly expression.

"It's Sal and Russell again," Stephen growled. Sal was his sister, Russell Colvin her rather soft-in-the-noggin husband. "Sal is always bawling about the way he takes the baby off with him for months at a time. We've got to support her while he's gone.

"Then when he returns, she comes running to us complaining that he takes her to bed so much she can't stand it," Stephen went on angrily. "I wish they were both dead. Some day I'll kick them straight to hell."

Strong talk, yes—but not from Stephen Boorn, who was noted for his extravagant threats when irked. However, on this occasion Stephen had uttered words that were to plague him later and all but send him to the gallows.

His bitterness toward Sally and

her husband went far deeper than his annoyance over their domestic discord. It had its roots in the rugged Vermont soil itself. Old Barney Boorn, his father, had forsaken his prosperous farm for a butcher business in nearby Manchester. And instead of turning the farm over to Stephen and Jesse, he had given it to his daughter Sally and Russell. Both Stephen and Jesse had resented that.

Family friendship, of course, was not enhanced by Russell Colvin's habit of hoisting his young son, Lewis, onto his shoulder and wandering off over the Green Mountains, for months on end. During his absence Stephen and Jesse had to work for nothing on the farm which they felt should be theirs.

After his encounter with William Boorn, Stephen went to Manchester and sought out a legal counsellor, named William Wyman.

"I want to know if there's any way of getting an injunction against marital relations between Sal and Russell," Stephen asked. "She's driving me half crazy complaining about the demands he makes on her."

"There is no way, I fear," Wyman told him after due cogitation. "They are legally man and wife, and Russell has his rights."

"Maybe there is no legal way," Stephen replied, rising. "But I know of a way, and I'm going to stop it myself."

A few days later, Russell Colvin and his son, Lewis, were out in a field clearing away rocks.

Shortly after the noon dinner hour, Jesse Boorn came over to help

them. And later in the afternoon, Stephen, who was working for a neighboring farmer that day, strolled over to see how things were going. The fact that all four of them—Jesse, Stephen, Russell and little Lewis—were together developed into a factor of vital importance. A farmer named Johnson, who lived close by, attested to this fact.

Stephen, as usual, could find nothing right in what Russell was doing.

"A one-armed man could do a better job than you're doing," he said.

Colvin resented that remark. Hot words were bandied freely. Jesse took Stephen's side. With this, Colvin lost his temper and lashed out at Stephen with his fists. Stephen picked up a handy branch from a beech tree and counterattacked.

Little Lewis, panic-stricken, turned and fled down the long slope to the farmhouse that represented home and safety. Only his grandmother was there at the time.

Mrs. Barney dismissed his story about the fight as a phantasy of childish imagination. She sent him on an errand. But when little Lewis got back to the house he was promptly seized by his Uncle Stephen.

"You keep your mouth shet about what you seen today," said this cultivated son of New England. "If you don't, I'll kill you."

"What did you do to my father?" the terrified boy asked.

"Aw, we didn't do nuthin' to him," Stephen replied. "He took a fright and ran off to the mountains."

Whether it was fear of his uncle

that kept him "shet" or the fact that such disappearances were not unusual, little Lewis said nothing further. It was taken for granted by everyone that the eccentric Russell was away on another of his jaunts.

But after two years had gone by, people began to remark that Colvin was staying away a darned long time. The generally accepted theory was that he had gone off to fight the British—the war of 1812 was then going full blast.

However, it was not until the winter of 1816 that the Boorn case began to make legal history. The year itself was famous in Vermont as that in which there was no summer whatsoever. An unseasonable blizzard in June put three feet of snow on the ground. A second during the month, two more in July and a third in August kept the drifts piled high.

Despite the endless snowfall, the Boorn case grew hotter month by month. Sally Colvin, who had been so bitter about her husband's importunities upon her person, apparently decided it was Russell and not the importunities which bothered her because she up and gave birth to a boy.

The neighbors seethed with excitement. But Sally remained unperturbed. She took the baby with her to a lawyer.

"I want to swear this child on its father," she said serenely.

"As long as your husband is alive, you cannot swear your child on another man," he told her regretfully.

"But he must be dead," Sally protested. "He's been gone for years."

"Indubitably," the legal light re-

plied. "Yet the law demands proof."

Sally went home to think things over. There Stephen Boorn asked what was troubling her. She told him. Her brother laughed.

"Swear the child on anyone you fancy, sis," he said. "Russell is dead and I damned well know it."

"How?" Sally inquired.

"We put him where the potatoes will not freeze. We sent him to hell."

Sally was far from grieved. Delighted by the roseate possibilities of his remark, she spread the story far and wide in the belief it would



foster acceptance of the idea that Russell was dead. To her disappointment, nothing much happened beyond some speculation as to whether Stephen and Jesse really did know something about Colvin's disappearance.

Several months later Barney Boorn sold his farm to Thomas Johnson, the neighboring farmer who had seen the three principals in the drama gathered together. The Johnson children often played in this very field.

One day, in the following spring, the children brought back to the house a moldy hat they had found. Johnson recognized it as the hat which Colvin had worn while digging stones on the fatal afternoon three years ago.

Still nothing was done. Then, while working in this same field one day, Johnson discovered a hole which upon closer inspection, turned out to be the cellar excavation of a long-since destroyed house. A young apple tree was growing in it.

A short time later, when Johnson went to dig up and transplant this apple tree to his own orchard, he was unpleasantly surprised to find it gone. He was annoyed at this, but not nearly so annoyed as he was by the strange sequence of unhappy events which presently befell him.

First, his winter's wood, piled in back of the barn, was mysteriously set afire and consumed despite the heroic efforts of the amateur fire brigade. Then the barn itself just as mysteriously blazed up and burned to the ground.

The plot was thickening. Someone suggested that the burning of a barn was a useful cover-up for a more sinister crime. What if Colvin's body had been secreted somewhere in that barn?

In the midst of this turmoil, the bombshell burst. One night in the spring of 1819, Amos Boorn, brother of Barney, dreamt that the ghost of Russell Colvin appeared at his bedside and spoke of murder.

"Come with me," Russell said.

In his dream, old Amos Boorn rose and followed. He trailed the ghost to the cellar hole where Johnson had seen the apple tree and the children had found the hat. The ghost pointed a bony finger.

"There," it quavered. "There, when they had murdered me, Stephen and Jesse Boorn flung my body."

Amos Boorn awoke, trembling. He was an old man and attached to the Boorn boys, so he said nothing at first. But when Russell Colvin's ghost appeared to him on the next night, to insist further upon the truth of his story, and again on the third night, the old man's conscience would no longer allow him to conceal the story of the vision.

All the pieces of the case suddenly fell into place. A dog scratched some bones out of a rotten stump near the Boorn house and the boy who owned the dog rushed home to tell his mother. An investigating committee collected certain specimens which seemed to be human bones complete with fingernails attached.

Then on April 27th, 1819, warrants were issued for Stephen and Jesse Boorn. Jesse was arrested, but Stephen was not found. Meanwhile, the investigators dug into the cellar hole and brought up two knives, one of which was identified as Russell Colvin's. They found also more bones, a button and pieces of broken pottery. Sally Colvin identified the button, but was not sure of the knife. Local physicians testified that the bones were from a man's foot.

This smooth series of identifications was suddenly jarred, however, by another doctor, who maintained that the bones were not human. He was actually uncouth enough to produce a skeleton whose foot was compared with the decayed specimens and which demonstrated quite clearly that the bones were not human after all.

This was a dash of cold water, but excitement picked up again when Jesse Boorn was brought down for

the examination. He denied everything until the knife was shown to him. Then he wilted.

"I am afraid Stephen did it, after all," he said.

According to his story, he had not witnessed the murder and did not believe it had been committed until a year before, when Stephen had admitted it to him. In Jesse's version, he had not been present during the quarrel over the rock digging. Stephen and Russell had fought alone.

"Colvin got the worst of the fight and started to run away. Stephen hit him with the beech limb and broke his head."

The hunt for Colvin's body began in earnest. Meanwhile, Stephen was discovered. He hadn't fled, but had quite openly gone to Denmark, New York, to work on a farm.

Stephen denied everything and called Jesse "a damned liar." Jesse then wept a little and retracted his confession. The brothers were put in jail to wait for the grand jury session in September.

This was in May. There were many rumors and alarms in the months that followed, including the planting of an informer in the cell with Jesse, who delivered another "confession" he claimed Stephen had made to him. It was as valueless as Jesse's first statement. But on the 27th of August, Stephen wrote out in his own hand a confession of his murder of Russell Colvin:

May the 10th, 1812, I, about 9 or 10 o'clock, went down to David Glazier's bridge and fished down below uncle Nathan Boorn's and then went up across

their farm where Russel and Lewis were . . . and sat down and began to talk, and Russell told me how many dollars benefit he had been to father and I told him he was a damned fool and he was mad and jumped up . . . and I told him to set down you little Tory and there was a piece of beech limb about two feet long and he caught it up and struck at my head as I sat down and I jumped up and it struck me on one shoulder and I caught it out of his hand and struck him a back-handed blow, I being on the north side of him and there was a knot on it about one inch long.

As I struck him I did think I hit him on his back and he stooped down and that knot was broken off sharp and it hit him on the back of the neck, close in his hair and it went in about half an inch on that great cord and he fell down . . . then I took him and put him in the corner of the fence by the cellar hole . . . and when it was dark I went down and took a hoe and boards and dug a grave. . . .

When I lived to Wm. Boorn's I planted some potatoes, and when I dug them I . . . thought something had been there and I took up his bones and put them in a basket . . . and when it was night . . . pulled a plank in the stable floor and dug a hole and covered him up . . . Lewis came and told me that father's barn was burnt up. The next day I came down and went to the barn and there were a few bones . . . and threwed them in the river above Wy-mans . . . and the next Sunday . . . went and scraped up them little things that was under the stump there and told them I was going to fishing and went and there was a hole and I dropped them in and kicked over the stuff and that is the first anybody knew it, either friends or foes, even my wife. All these I acknowledge before the world.

Stephen Boorn

Manchester, Aug. 27, 1819.

On October 26, 1819, the day of Stephen Boorn's trial, Manchester was jammed with farmers' rigs from miles around. The trial was a steam-roller affair, and both Stephen and Jesse were found guilty and sentenced to be hanged on January 28, 1820.

It was a popular verdict and the large audience was pleased. But later, when the first flush of civic virtue triumphant had worn off, a few people began to have doubts. The thing was simply too pat. Leonard Sargeant, defense attorney for the Boorn boys, scurried about with a petition, getting signatures to present to the Governor of Vermont. Presently he hurried to the jail with the news that Jesse had received a commutation of sentence.

"And what about me?" Stephen asked. "I hang?"

Mr. Sargeant admitted dolefully that it looked that way.

"Why don't you advertise in the newspapers for Colvin?"

Sargeant was baffled. "Didn't you sign a confession that you killed him?"

"I did not kill him!"

Sargeant retired, still puzzled, but game. So presently the following advertisement appeared in the *Rutland Herald*:

MURDER

Printers of newspapers throughout the United States are desired to publish that Stephen Boorn, of Manchester in Vermont, is sentenced to be executed for the murder of Russell Colvin, who has been absent about seven years. Any person who can give information of said Colvin, may save the life of the innocent by making immediate communication.

Colvin is about five feet five inches, light complexion, light colored hair, blue eyes, about forty years of age. Manchester, Vt., Nov. 26, 1819.

No greater proof of the adage that advertising pays was the prompt response this notice evoked. The *New York Evening Post* reprinted it. And presently to the postmaster at Manchester, came a letter from a gentleman in Shrewsbury, N. J.

Mr. Tabor wrote that a man answering Colvin's description was even then gainfully employed on the farm of his brother-in-law at Dover, N. J. Said farmhand had first appeared between five and ten years before, given his name as Russell Colvin, mentioned Manchester and the Boorns and other persons. He had appeared to be mentally deranged.

The letter should have caused excitement in Manchester, but it did not. In New York, however, an officious good Samaritan named Whelpley read Tabor's letter in the *New York Post* and visited the farm at Dover and questioned the farmhand who was not then using the name of Colvin.

When Whelpley spoke to him, he said, "Colvin was my name once, but it is not now."

Convinced that he had the right man, Whelpley coaxed him to return to Vermont.

Word had gone ahead and an excited crowd collected. As the stage drove in, Stephen Boorn was brought from jail to meet Colvin. Stephen wore chains on his legs. Colvin asked what they were for.

"I'm in jail for murdering you," Stephen told him.

"What a joke!" Colvin replied. "You didn't hurt me."

Sally Colvin was brought out, but Russell would have no further truck with her.

The townsfolk were now convinced that the whole thing was a mistake, but the ponderous machinery of the law was not so easily satisfied. The available proof, that Colvin obviously knew every man, woman, child, dog and brick in Manchester was received with suspicion.

It was only two days before Stephen Boorn's expected execution that the special judges arrived in Manchester for a hearing. A new trial was arranged and the murder charge promptly quashed.

Stephen shook the dust of Manchester from his feet, passed into the state of Ohio and obscurity. Colvin returned to Dover. And the case so ended except for the die-hards who insisted that Colvin was really murdered by Stephen and that the man who came back was a paid impersonator.

The important point in the case is—why did Stephen Boorn confess

to a murder he never committed? There have been many such cases in criminology, including the famous English case of William Harrison, for whose supposed murder three people were hanged after confessions, only to have justice confounded when the corpse turned up, hale and sound, years later. What leads people to concoct as complicated a story as Stephen Boorn's confession, complete with details which jibe with known facts?

Sargeant, the defense lawyer, offered a possible reason in his later report of the trial. He felt that the Boorns were so convinced they would be convicted that they offered the confessions in the hope of winning a manslaughter verdict.

There are other unexplained mysteries surrounding the Boorn case however, including Johnson's burned woodpile and barn, and the knife and button identified by Colvin's wife. Did Colvin himself plant them there to get the Boorns into trouble? And burn the barn? Nobody knows. And the father of Sally's baby is still a mystery.



DEATH MAKES A HALLIDAY

(Continued from page 4)

a year under various aliases, but married Kathleen Rollins, a successful writer of romances in her own right, complete with two stepdaughters.

"Sylvia," says Halliday of his girls, "is a coloratura soprano. Kathryn is a Bolshevik. Peace, it's wonderful! However, by marrying their mother, I acquired a wife and a collaborator."

It was while mulling over his salad days from his new pinnacle as a family provider that Halliday recalled a time when, penniless and stranded in New Orleans, he had wandered into a tough bar to ponder his next move.

There a big redhead had bought him a drink and offered some sorely needed tips on where to find a job—only to be ushered from his table by a pair of sinister gentlemen with suspicious-looking bulges in their coat pockets.

The redhead was obviously on the spot. But there was about him, as he was hustled away by his captors, an air of devil-may-care bravado that lingered in Halliday's memory. Out of that bravado and that memory Michael Shayne was born, more than a decade after the event. The author never did learn the fate of Mike's prototype.

"Somehow I've always felt certain he got out of it," Halliday muses. "He seemed—well, invulnerable."

So, eleven-odd years ago, he decided to write a book about the French Quarter paladin and call him Michael Shayne. At the time he fully expected his redhead to find a ready market.

"But it didn't work out that way," says the author. "My regular publishers shied off and wouldn't buy. Being stubborn, I sent the story to an agent and sat back, waiting for him to peddle it."

It developed into a long wait. After awhile the agent gave up. Halliday sent the yarn to another agent. He gave up, too. All in all, he wore out four agents and was turned down by twenty-two publishers before he caught on!

The rest, of course, is detective story history. The amalgamation of Brett Halliday and the rough, shrewd redhead with the heart of gold has become a merger of national importance.

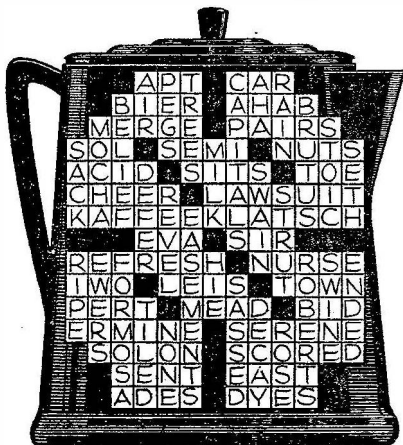
After concluding a successful run in one movie series, Mike is about to embark on another set of adventures for a different set of producers. And his radio program is a solid success.

As a direct result, Halliday, his wife and his two stepdaughters now live a life of considerable affluence in Denver, Colorado. This condition will endure as long as the author can keep on turning out Shaynes and the public wants them.

"It's not exactly a soft job," says Halliday. "But I wouldn't trade it even up for an oil well."

Who would?

(Answer to puzzle on page 106)



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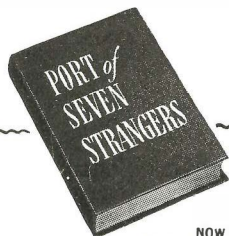
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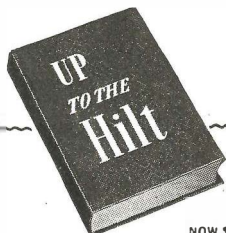
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