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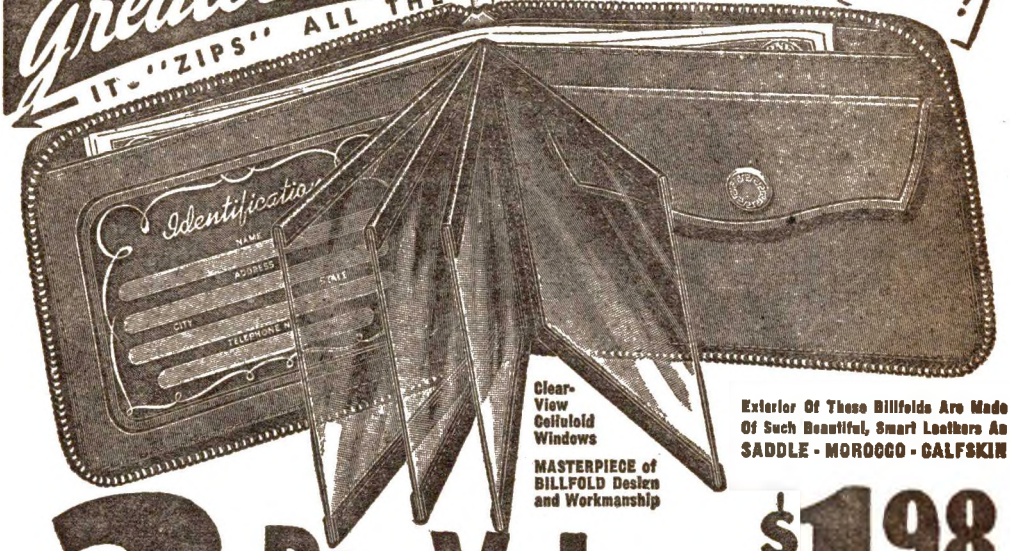

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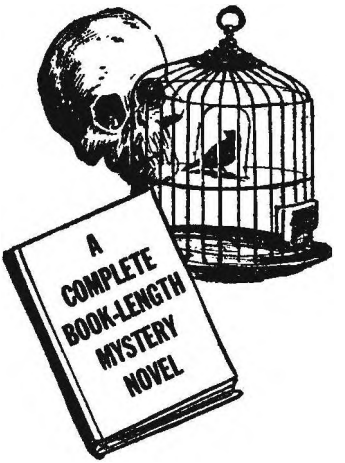

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And

Next Issue's Novel: Mr. and Mrs. North in PAYOFF FOR THE BANKER, by FRANCES and RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

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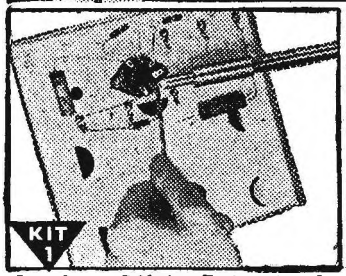

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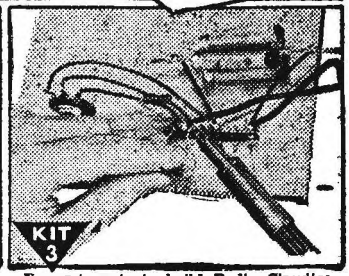

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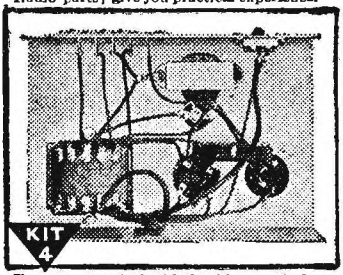

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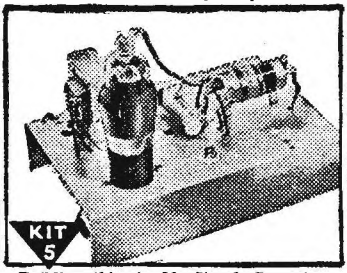

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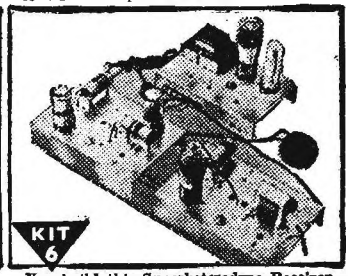

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The LINE-UP

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

IT HAD taken Mary Hunter a long time —fourteen months to be exact—to overcome the grief, the desperate sense of loss, which had sickened her when her young husband, Rick, died in the cockpit of a roaring Wildcat somewhere far off in the Pacific.

But now, at last, life was beginning again. She was a working girl. She had a new apartment. And she was on her way home to three cozy rooms with a big bag of groceries in her arms. It was not an exciting way to live, but it was satisfying.

When the news of Rick's death first reached Mary she had thought that life was over for her. Even before Rick—back when she was nineteen and had hated George Merle, an influential banker, because he had come between her and his son, Josh, she had thought she could not go on.

She knew better now. Life had shown her that things do not last forever—not even hate and love. It was absurd that she had ever hated old George Merle. It was absurd to think he had ruined her existence.

She reached the apartment building. The old man who ran the elevator took her up to the fourth floor. He stood watching her while she walked down the narrow hall. At her door she paused, placed the bag on the floor, took her key out of her purse and unlocked the door.

Pushing the door open, she picked up the package and entered the private hall leading to her own suite.

An Amazing Shock

She took four quick steps, then stopped at the entrance of the living room. The bag fell out of her arms. There was the crash of breaking glass. She didn't hear it. She was staring into the room. She was saying through lips that were stiff and white with fear:

"No. No! Not you again. Not *again*!"

She did not scream. Later, the old man in the elevator testified to that. But Mary was never able to say whether she had screamed or not. And that was why few people believed her story when it was told.

But at the moment there was nothing in Mary's mind but the awful horror of death. For the man in her living room was dead. There were three bullet holes in his chest. But even more terrifying than death itself was the fact that she knew him. He was George Merle!

Panic-stricken, Mary picked up the telephone and called Pam North, whom she had met at a party only the week before.

That call had a great influence on the events that followed in such alarming and breath-taking sequence, and it plunged those two popular sleuths of radio and fiction fame, Mr. and Mrs. North, into the most spectacular murder chase of their career in the J. B. Lippincott Company Main Line Mystery Novel, originally published at $2.00 per copy, which will appear complete in our next issue:

PAYOFF FOR THE BANKER

By

FRANCES & RICHARD LOCKRIDGE

Pam and Jerry North rushed to the scene after advising Mary to call Lt. Bill Weigand. They arrived almost simultaneously, and in the space of a few moments Mary found herself cast in the role of chief suspect.

No one had seen George Merle enter her apartment. She hadn't screamed when she

(Continued on page 8)

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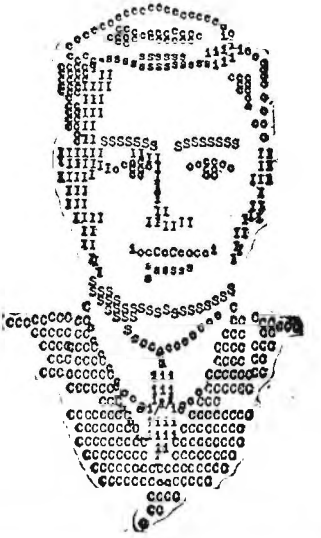

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THE LINE-UP

(Continued from page 6)

found Merle's body—the elevator man was sure of that. And things got rapidly worse when Pam North, bewildering all and sundry with her fascinating double-talk, dragged forth the information that Merle had once prevented Mary from marrying his son, Josh, by threatening to cut Josh off without a penny.

No Weapon in Sight

There was no sign of the murder weapon. Asked if she owned a gun, Mary Hunter admitted that she had one in her trunk. But when Sergeant Mullins searched the trunk the gun was gone.

Pam soon decided in her own deliriously happy way that Mary was innocent—though she couldn't say why. Yet, oddly enough, she kept turning up evidence that implicated Mary more deeply. Mary had been working in the same bank where George Merle was president. She had rented her new apartment from Oscar Murdock, who was Merle's confidential secretary.

The only piece of evidence which pointed away from Mary involved a typewritten note found among Merle's papers. It read:

Dear Mr. Merle: Everything is fixed up, finally. L. will show up there about five tomorrow and a check will be okay. But no shaving of the amount, L. says. Sorry. But apparently it is the best we can do.

O. M.

The "O.M." in the note obviously referred to Murdock, though he denied writing it when questioned. It took considerable digging to find "L." and to find the check. But even when Weigand located the check he found himself still far away from a solution to the crime.

It was Pam and Jerry who hit upon the key person in the baffling case that was fast building around them. Their hunt took them to the Hotel Main. But they were too late. By the time they reached the hotel the killer had struck again—and the lips of the one person who might then have put them on the trail of the murderer were forever sealed.

Up until this second violent death all information had pointed to George Merle as

(Continued on page 10)

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THE LINE-UP

(Continued from page 8)

being well-liked by everyone—a philanthropist and solid citizen. But when the scene suddenly shifted from New York to the Merle's Long Island estate and the Norths got into high gear with their sleuthing, the skeletons in the banker's closet soon began to dance.

It was there, amidst the luxury of rolling lawns and the glittering Long Island Sound, that the Norths brought to light a grim tangle of twisted personal relationships, involving Josh Merle, his friend Jameson (both recently invalided out of the Navy) and an organist named A. Wickersham Potts, who was too clever for his own good.

PAYOFF FOR THE BANKER, coming up in the next issue of THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL MAGAZINE, is a fast-moving, smoothly written baffler, rich in suspense, humor and lively incident—far and away the best of the Mr. and Mrs. North mysteries—and they've all been Grade A. And we don't need to tell you that the Norths come through with a brilliant triumph in a very satisfying manner.

From the Reviews

The reviewers really got behind the story and gave it a fine send-off. Here are some samples of the critical plaudits:

Baltimore News: "Send up a racket in celebration of a new Mr. and Mrs. North mystery yarn."

Knoxville News-Sentinel: "This is one of the best in a series of thrillers notable for a delightfully humorous style and skillful plot."

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(Concluded on page 112)

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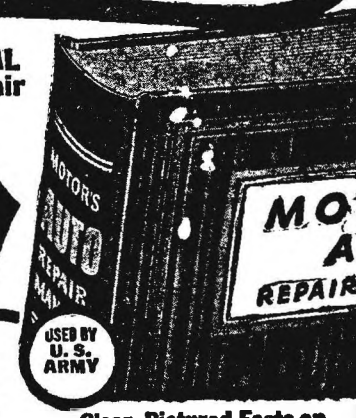

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THE THIRTY-FIRST BULLFINCH

BY HELEN REILLY

CHAPTER I

IT WAS five o'clock of an October afternoon when the first of that series of events took place which was to involve Cliff Shaver, youngest member of the great law firm of Doge, Bascom & Doge, in the celebrated Bedford case. The indicator on his desk buzzed sharply.

When Shaver entered the Judge's room he found the old man seated at his desk, the telephone receiver at his ear, a pad and pencil in front of him, and a frown on his face. From time to time he voiced an abrupt question or asked to have something repeated, but for the most part he listened in absorbed silence.

At the end of five minutes he replaced the

receiver with a click, rang again, gave orders to have a New York, New Haven & Hartford time table brought to him, dismissed his secretary, and threw himself back in his swivel chair. Without removing his gaze from the gray oblong of cloud-swept sky he motioned Shaver absently to a chair.

Bascom, his leonine head and his long, hard-bitten sardonic face surmounted by a great crop of snow-white hair, was at this time one of the most impressive lawyers at the New York bar. After a moment of concentrated thought he spoke suddenly in the deep growl that was characteristic of him.

"Got any engagements you can't skip for the next three or four days, Shaver?"

"No, sir."

"Good. I've got a job for you. I've just had a long-distance call from a friend of mine, John Bedford. Know who he is?"

"Consolidated Light and Power?"

The Judge nodded. "That's the man. But they're only using his name now. He got out of active business a year ago on account of his health. Heart shot to pieces. Took a trip round the world in his yacht, got back about three months ago, and went up to this place of his on an island off the New England coast.

"Well—he's just destroyed the will he made in this office sixteen years ago, and he wants someone up there in a hurry to get another into shape. Shaver, I know you well enough to realize that you can keep your ears and eyes open and your mouth shut. There's something going on up there." The Judge paused and drummed on the desk with his fingers. "But I'd better give you an outline of that household so you'll know where you're at.

"I've known John Bedford for a good many years now, more than I like to count, in fact, and of all the obstinate devils I ever met he's the worst—when he gets a notion into his head, no matter how absurd it is, there's no budging him. But here's the story:

"He married very early in life, a managing, handsome woman whom he never forgave for roping him into an uncongenial union. By that marriage he had one son, Mark. Mark and his father never pulled together very well: the boy was too like his mother—too cautious and calculating, no zest or fire, but a good fellow in his way.

"Just short of twenty-one he married secretly and without the consent of either of his parents a dancer, famous at the time, Niña Menendez, a Spaniard. At first the Bedfords were furious, and then the old man unexpectedly came around. Took a great fancy to his bizarre and beautiful daughter-in-law and made a settlement of five hundred thousand dollars on Mark. One child was born of this marriage, a daughter, and shortly after her birth Niña died—laughed and danced her way into an early grave, I guess. Burnt her candle in the middle as well as at both ends.

"John Bedford transferred the affection which had skipped his son and landed on his daughter-in-law to this grandchild. When the baby was three years old he made his will in this very room, and except for a few bequests and legacies the bulk of his estate was to go to this granddaughter, Anne.

"But that's not the whole of the story. Five years ago Mark Bedford married again, a Miss Trenchard, socially a top-notcher, no money, but family—that sort of thing. I remember that at the time the girl's mother tried to get a good settlement for her daughter, but there was nothing doing as far as John was concerned.

"He stuck to his decision that what he had already given Mark was sufficient for any young couple, particularly as they would live with him anyway—he has a half dozen houses scattered about different parts of the world. The second Mrs. Bedford presented her husband with one child, a boy, named Charles—must be about four now. They're all up there at that place, including a couple of guests.

"One year it was Theosophy with John, then it was Occultism—this season it seems to be doctors. But this time he made a lucky strike. He met a Dr. Helfant in Paris, quite a big gun in his way, an American doing research work abroad, and Helfant got interested in him and traveled back home with them.

"John thinks this man is the only one in the world who understands his constitution, and when they passed through New York he was trying to persuade Helfant to pay them a long visit. So the doctor is probably up there also. And the old lady, Claire Bedford's mother, is there too. That's about all."

THE Judge paused, staring down at the desk from under his bushy eyebrows as though he found what he wanted to say

Riddle of a Little Bird that Lost Its Voice!

rather difficult to get into words. Then he asked a question, obviously of himself, since Shaver couldn't possibly know the answer.

"What's going on up there in that house on the island? Why is John Bedford so strung up and excited, and why did he destroy that will? I wish I knew. I wish I knew!" He rapped sharply on the mahog-

I could put my finger on I got the impression that he was worried. I'd go up there like a shot myself, but I have that Denby case in court to-morrow, and the Denby people are to be here at ten in the morning—so it's out of the question.

"In the meantime there isn't a moment to be lost. Bedford's been suffering from a dis-

Directly in the glare of the flashlight, the sheriff saw a huddled mass (CHAP. XIX)

any. "There must have been some sort of upset between Miss Anne and her grandfather—his destruction of his will may have been just a gesture, and yet—it's not like him.

"No, there's something odd about the whole business. I can't tell you what I mean, for I don't know myself." Bascom paused, staring at the somber square of gray sky. "I only know that without his saying a single thing

ease of the heart for the last two or three years, and he may die suddenly at any moment. You can catch a night train—where's that time table?" He rang again, and his secretary entered with it in her hand.

"Let's see—ah, yes, seven-twenty from Grand Central. You'll have to change at Boston, and you'll get into this little town at—three-fifteen. I'll telegraph and have you met.

Will—and Runs into a Grim Cycle of Death!

"And now—" the Judge stood up and put his hand on the younger man's shoulder—"I'll tell you this. If it were just the will I'd send one of the other men, Trent or Burchell, but I want you to go in a double capacity—as a lawyer first, of course, but after that I'm sending you to represent me.

"Keep your eyes and ears open. Try to find out what I'm worrying about. It may be nothing, it may be something. If there's anything wrong get into communication with me at once and I'll drop everything and follow you. There's a man up there who might help.

"It isn't the Bedford millions I'm worrying about—it's an old friend." He took his hand from the younger man's shoulder after a short pause and finished briskly. "Get what money you'll need from Sneider. Good-bye and good luck."

* * * * *

Two hours later, Shaver, his bag packed, a new tin of tobacco in his pocket and his heavy coat on his arm, strode up to Track 27 on the upper level of Grand Central Station. At the gate he found the new office boy waiting for him with a slightly dirty face and a very white collar.

"Boss told me to give you this." He handed Shaver a fresh copy of *Town and Country*. Comfortably seated in the train, after he had stowed away his things Shaver discovered why the Judge had had the magazine delivered to him. There was a double-page spread of the country home of John Bedford, Esquire, on its lonely island off the New England coast.

He looked at the pictures curiously. The place was enormous. One of those turreted and battlemented affairs big enough to house an army, set in gardens as large as the Trianon's—with this difference, that close on two sides the ocean boomed against the rocks, and beyond the trim spaces, rolled and planted and pruned, thick underbrush and towering pines made a wilderness of forty or fifty acres petering out into long sand spurs that ran down into the spume of the Atlantic Ocean.

If old Bedford had wanted to get away from humanity he had certainly succeeded, for a more desolate spot than this island set down in the waste of waters a mile off the coast could scarcely be imagined.

For a while after he had thrown the magazine aside Shaver sat back in his seat looking out into the night and wondering about his errand. It was all exceedingly vague. Thirty or forty millions and a lot of relatives. If there was to be trouble of any kind, what was he to do?

THE journey passed uneventfully enough, and at a quarter past three the next afternoon Shaver climbed down out of the dusty branch train and found himself on a small wooden platform in a patch of sand surrounded by dense woods of pine.

No other passenger had alighted at this sandy Mecca, and he was just wondering what was to become of him when the sharp clatter of a Ford engine sounded from somewhere close at hand, and a moment later a man strode up from behind the small shed that did duty as a station and called his name.

He was a dark fellow in the neighborhood of thirty, with a mop of black hair flung back from his forehead, spare, a little above medium height, and rather offhand in his manner.

"I'm Dr. Garrison," he announced, "from Mr. Bedford's. I was coming over to town, and Mrs. Bedford asked me to meet the train. Sorry to be late, but my chariot"—he waved toward the dilapidated Ford beyond the fence—"refused to start."

Shaver picked up his bag and followed Dr. Garrison down the path and into the car, which jolted along the narrow track through the pine woods for some time, the two men talking casually of indifferent matters. The young lawyer was curious about the status of his companion, for the Judge had said nothing about a second physician, but the man was certainly not communicative.

"You're visiting at the house over there, Doctor?"

"I'm not a visitor. I'm assisting Dr. Helfant, a guest of Mr. Bedford's."

"Oh, I see. Is it—er—interesting work?"

"Not particularly."

"Judge Bascom spoke of Mr. Bedford's meeting Dr. Helfant abroad. You weren't with him there?"

"No. After he came up here to this place he wanted a man to get his notes into shape and to look after a small practice on the mainland that he's going to take over when he's settled. Mr. Bedford wrote to my chief in New York—Polyclinic—and they thought I needed a rest, so they sent me up here. That was about two months ago."

"I should have imagined that this would be a rather out-of-the-way place for a doctor of any prominence."

"Oh, Helfant's not interested in that end of it at all. But he wants a little work to do just to keep his hand in while he devotes most of his time to research work of his own."

After this the conversation flagged, and they drove along in silence, until presently the woods began to fall away, and from the character of the land Shaver guessed that they were nearing the sea. As they came out of shelter the wind hit them.

"Looks to me," Garrison muttered, eying the sky with disfavor, "as though we're in for a blow."

He turned the car down a little hill as they

Shaver was dragged and lifted from his position at the bottom of the boat, plunged into icy water (CHAP. XXIV)

came suddenly in sight of the water, and drew up two hundred feet farther on at the door of a boat house. When the doctor had put the car away he crossed the cement platform and climbed down into the long, narrow body of a speed boat riding easily in its berth, and Shaver followed gingerly after him. There was a low thrum as Garrison pushed a lever, the boat moved forward under the archway, and a few seconds later, cutting the big green rollers at a dizzying speed, they were headed for the open sea.

Here there was no time for conversation. The doctor was busy at his work, and Shaver, cowering before the wind, was occupied in keeping the spray out of his eyes and in getting his breath without absorbing a heavy dose of salt water.

In an incredibly short time land showed up off to the left, evidently the island for which they were making. They drew nearer and nearer, then the doctor ran the boat neatly under the wide arch of another house, almost a duplicate of the one they had left behind.

It was a walk of at least half a mile up through the gardens. The salty flavor of a wilderness set down in the sea had been carefully preserved, but the oaks and larches, the flaming maples and birches rustling fitfully in the breeze must have been transplanted from the mainland at tremendous cost.

As they left the shelter of the trees and crossed a velvety rise of shorn turf, great masses of scarlet salvia, banked against the gray stone terrace of the huge battlemented house, ran down to meet them.

In the lofty hall a butler took Shaver's things, and murmuring gently that tea was being served he led the way into a long white-paneled drawing room where a number of people were gathered together in front of a blazing fire.

CHAPTER II

AT THE mention of his name a woman in a white gown with a shingled head the color of young mink came forward and took his hand.

"I'm Mrs. Bedford," she said. "How do you do, Mr. Shaver. Find a chair, won't you—no not that, a more comfortable one—and I'll give you some tea. Hello, Doctor, had a bad crossing, didn't you?"

There was a murmur of introductions, tea was handed to him by a footman, and Shaver, sitting down at a little distance from the others, looked about him with close if well-concealed interest. Mrs. Bedford had reseated herself at the tea table, and in the light of the fire—for it was now dusk outside—she made a delightful picture, busy with cups and saucers, pots and silver tongs and slices of lemon, but not too busy to flash him a pleasant glance from time to time and to inquire about his journey.

Shaver thought her one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen—and not at all in the modern manner. Luxuriant, fruitful, the Venus de Milo in a smart gown, she had the luminous gray eyes that the French painters of the Sixteenth Century loved to give their women.

To one side of her, his knees crossed, his cup balanced on a sinewy hand, sat Dr. Helfant. He was a big man with a skin the color of a gypsy's; indeed he looked not unlike a gypsy, his quick eyes bright under straight black brows and his whole face sharply and definitely modeled.

Lounging easily in his chair, he gave an impression of complete control, and Shaver could well believe that he was a man of mark in his profession. From his manner he fully appreciated the charm of his hostess, and with the enjoyment of a man who finds himself comfortable in the society of a pretty woman he was relating the particulars of his own journey from the mainland an hour before.

On the big davenport to the right of the fire sat two people. The first of these was a well-groomed elderly woman who was evidently slightly deaf, for Shaver's name had to be repeated to her, and then she looked at him with a sharp glance of attention. She was Mrs. Trenchard, Claire Bedford's mother.

Mark Bedford, the old man's son, sat at the other end of the divan. He had acknowledged Shaver with a slight nod, returning his gaze with a negligent air to his magazine. Behind glasses his pale blue eyes looked dull and tired, and his rather full-jawed face wore a look of strain. Of average height and with a face that would have been handsome except for a sullen expression, he seemed like an athlete who had gone stale.

There was one other person in the room. Shaver had caught no more than a glimpse of her face as she had turned at Claire Bedford's murmur of his name. It was the granddaughter, Anne. In her arms she held a white kitten.

She was a slim, rather small girl with blue-black hair rolled away from her small, almost colorless face and fastened in a knot at the nape of her neck. Odd-looking. Transparent lids dropped heavily over her eyes. Her expression was indifferent rather than cold, and her manner suggested a reserve of power that felt no need of the ordinary give-and-take of social amenities. She had not spoken at all.

The firelight danced impartially over all the occupants of the beautiful room, but the conversation was sustained by Helfant and Mrs. Bedford, with an occasional remark from Shaver, who was stimulated and excited by the comfort of his surroundings and by the sharp contrast of these different personalities. Garrison, after drinking a cup of tea in silence, had gone away, and neither of the other two, Mark Bedford or the young girl, displayed any interest in their companions.

Yet Shaver reflected that under the circumstances it was only natural. If there were tension and trouble in the house, these people were of the old man's blood, and it would react on them much more strongly than on the others. But if the father and the daughter had not joined in the general conversation, neither had they spoken to each other.

AT THE end of a half hour the entrance of a manservant created a diversion. He said something to Mrs. Bedford, who called out in a clear voice, "Anne, your grandfather would like to see you now, dear, in his room."

The girl turned slowly from the window, and without glancing at anyone she let the kitten slip from her arms and made her way toward the door. As she went Mark Bedford looked after her and then at his wife. Some unspoken communication passed between them.

Shaver stood up. Claire Bedford did likewise.

"You'll want to go to your room, of course." She rang a bell, and said when the butler appeared, "Plimpton, show Mr. Shaver his room, please." Shaver turned and followed the man out into the long dimly lighted hall.

Left alone in a big comfortable bedroom at the end of the corridor on the floor above, the lawyer sat down to sort out his impressions. He took each person in turn. Garrison, now, the chap who had met him at the train. Had he brought an air of constraint into that room with him?

Once or twice Helfant, Mrs. Bedford, the silent Mark had shot a peculiar look at Garrison which was instantly withdrawn. They seemed to be watching him. And when he had gone away there was a small perceptible pause as though they had waited for a movement of some kind. And yet beyond a brief answer or two to Mrs. Bedford he had not spoken.

As for the young girl, her persistent position at that distant window, where she stood gazing out into the gathering dusk with her back to them all, caressing the kitten, and her curt, almost abrupt refusal of a cup of tea, had been distinctly odd.

But perhaps the Bedfords were that way —not a—a friendly sort of family. Mark had certainly not distinguished himself by his affability. But he had come suddenly to life when his father had sent for Anne. There had been a whole world of meaning in his glance at her retreating figure and in the quick look he had flashed his wife. And even Claire Bedford's gracious manner had been a little forced at times.

He was still trying to focus all these relationships when a servant came to the door with a message. He was to come at once to Mr. John Bedford. Shaver picked up his typewriter and his brief case and followed the man down the wide staircase to a door on the right. At the man's knock it was opened abruptly by Mark Bedford, and Shaver stepped inside.

For a second he stared about him curiously at the great oval room and its two occupants. But the room could wait. It was evident at once that he had interrupted a conversation between the two men. Mark Bedford's face was flushed, and his eyes gleamed angrily. Shaver turned his observant gaze on the older man.

John Bedford, wrapped in a dressing gown of some thick white material, was seated in a carved chair drawn close to the fire at the end of the room. He was a small old man, thin almost to the point of emaciation, but strikingly alive, his bald head fringed with a few soft white locks, his hawklike gaze fastened on his son, his eagle nose poised, a last outpost of strength in the fallen contours of old age.

For a moment after Shaver's entrance there was a pause, during which the old man continued to look steadily at his son, who had turned back toward him, his hands in his pockets, his glance nowhere, but strength in him too, a bulldog strength.

Then the old man came to himself, glanced toward Shaver, muttered, "Yes. Yes. The lawyer, eh? Why didn't Bascom come himself? You look a young fellow, but you'll do, I guess. Find a place for those things. Sit down." And again he turned his gaze, impish with mischief and insolent with the weight of power, on his son, who had nothing to offer but bodily strength and a dull burning rage.

"That's all, is it, Mark?" the old man asked in a voice softer than a sucking dove's. "—All you've got to say? The last word— the very last—and *not* a woman's? It isn't, is it?"

The blood surged into Mark Bedford's face. His hands, thrust out of sight, must have contracted sharply, and with his jaw set in an almost futile effort at control he answered, "Yes. All—all I have to *say*. I won't use any more *words*." His gaze was fixed with furious menace on his father, who re-

turned it imperturbably with his own hooded scrutiny—and then abruptly, like a dog retreating before a stronger foe, Mark Bedford walked out of the room.

"Eh—just see that that door is shut, young fellow, will you?" Bedford asked coolly. "That's right—thanks. Verify, verify, it pays. Never underestimate your opponent, young man, never." He rapped sharply on the floor with his stick to emphasize his words, and Shaver knew he was thinking of the man who had left the room.

BUT here a sudden sound diverted the young lawyer's attention. It was a little trill of melody, spilling out small and irresistible, a triumph of delicate harmony—a bird singing somewhere in the great room—but such a bird as Shaver had never heard.

The old man's face lighted up at the first note, and he got out of his chair. Throwing the blanket aside hastily and hobbling, with the aid of his stick, forty feet down the room, he came to a stop at the wide windows where, high up in the wall, hung a beautiful cage in which a small bluish bird was swinging on a chain. He beckoned Shaver to come near.

"My bullfinch, sir," he said proudly. "You never heard a song like that before, eh? Good boy!" He thrust a lean finger through the bars (the bird was very tame) and stroked the blue feathers. "He wants something to eat." Taking a cracker from a silver dish on a table close by and breaking it into little bits he dropped it on the floor of the cage. But the bullfinch merely looked at the crumbs and hopped away.

"Ah—you rascal! You're spoiled. Want a little nip with your meal. Want some of my drink, I see." He turned to Shaver. "He likes his cracker moistened with the barley water I have at night. Patience, patience!" He stroked the bird again. "That's a virtue for a bird, anyway." And nodding at the bullfinch almost as though it were human he turned and led the way back to the fire.

"This business, now, that you came about, young fellow. Are you married, eh? No? You should be. Married and poor and with a troop of brats, pulling the devil by the tail. Better than to be pulled by the tail yourself, bothered, bothered, bothered by the pack of them!" Again the stick rapped sharply on the floor.

"I want to make my will."

"Yes, sir. Judge Bascom—"

"Never mind him. He knows nothing about it. Nobody knows. But I know. They think I'm old and doddering—they think because I can't leave this room—"

Shaver opened his typewriter and arranged a little table as the old man brooded, his eyes on the fire, muttering disconnected words. While he waited the young man looked about him. The room was oval, the fireplace at the far end, where the corners were masked by curved bookcases, with a wide swing of windows to the east, looking out over the water.

Violet velvet felting covered the floor, the hangings were of royal purple embroidered with silver, a sonorous note against the white panelling, unbroken by a single picture, and the furniture, austere and yet comfortable, was of some gray wood that gave out silvery gleams in the light from the big fire of logs.

He was recalled from his scrutiny by the old man, who asked sharply, "Are you ready, young fellow?" Shaver looked at the powerful drawn face and nodded.

They worked for an hour. Once a manservant entered the room, switched on more lights, and withdrew. Once the bullfinch sang again, and the old man threw himself back in his chair and listened with delight until the last note had died away.

It was almost seven o'clock when, as suddenly as he had begun, almost in the middle of a sentence that had been written and rewritten a half dozen times, he stopped.

"That's all now. Come back after dinner—or, no—to-morrow morning. I'm not going to die tonight." He chuckled, and his stick rapped the floor again. "They'd like that, sir! Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" He paused—mouthed at the fire. "Run away now and get something to eat. Good-night."

Shaver picked up his things. He was almost at the door when the old man called him back.

"Ought I to finish it now? Eh, do you think? What?"

For the first time as the old eyes looked into his Shaver saw a shadow in them—of uncertainty, wavering, doubt—that brought the Judge's words sharply home to him later. But it was gone in a moment.

"No. No. To-morrow," he muttered, his eyes hooded. Shaver nodded and went out.

IN THE hall outside he arrived at the foot of the stairs just as Claire Bedford started down, and he halted involuntarily. There was a flashing quality about her face tonight. She wore a simple sheath of green brocade wrapped around her beautiful body and fastened with a great gold buckle at her waist. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and on her slim feet were fitted a pair of gold slippers.

She stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Well, you've finished your work. That means you can dine with us." Was she asking two questions or only one?

Shaver smiled and shook his head. "Thanks. But if you'll permit me I'll have

something in my room. I've got a lot of copying to do and some papers to look over. So if you will excuse me—"

"Not at all!" said a soft mocking young voice from behind. "Mr. Shaver must come and have a cocktail with us, now that he's borne the heat and burden of the day." It was Anne Bedford in a little white silk dress that made her look like a child.

"Come on into the dining room," she continued, "Dr. Helfant and I have been experimenting, and we've got everything in the shaker but Father's Ed Pinaud's."

A striking change had taken place in the young girl within the space of two hours. She was gay, impertinent, charming as she led the way along the hall. Shaver speculated on the cause of this change as he drank his cocktail; then with a murmured word of excuse he left the dining room and went slowly upstairs.

His fire had evidently been well tended, for it was burning merrily. He drew a chair close to it and sat down. Outside, the wind howled mightily, a banshee of a wind, wailing and screaming and banging at the windows with a fury that seemed inspired. He was just falling into a pleasant doze when a voice at his elbow said, "Dinner, sir?" and he looked up to find a man setting a well-filled tray on a small table beside him.

It was the same man who had come into the oval room and turned on the lights—John Bedford's personal attendant. When the tray was settled to his liking and he had placed a straight-backed chair in position, he took a note from his pocket and handed it to the young man. "From Mr. Bedford, sir."

Shaver waited until he was alone to tear it open. A single line was scrawled across the sheet:

Come down to me at eleven-thirty.

That was all.

He frowned as he removed the silver covers. The message startled him. Why had the old man changed his mind about finishing the will to-night? A vague cloud of doubt and suspicion rushed back over the young lawyer. Then he dismissed the matter angrily from his mind and devoted himself to the excellent food in front of him. After that he lay back in his chair, stretched his feet toward the blaze, and when a servant had come and removed the tray he settled himself to think.

But an unbearable drowsiness began to creep over him; his lids drooped, his limbs

Shaver stood still, staring at the muzzle of a black automatic pointed at the stranger (CHAP. XVI)

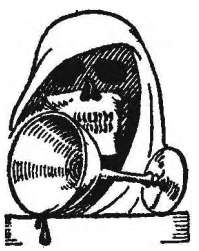
felt like lead. He tried to fight it off—in vain. Just before he fell asleep he heard the sharp rattle of rain against the windows. The storm had come.

A single silvery chime from the clock on the mantel woke him abruptly. Good Lord! It was half-past eleven. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. A narrow squeak! Very likely if he were more than five minutes late the old man would beat him with his stick! He threw water on his face, brushed his hair, and picking up his brief case and typewriter he opened the door and stepped out into the silent hall.

Everyone had evidently gone to bed, for there was only one lamp lighted in the great dim corridor, and in the downstairs hall there was no sound. He stopped at the door of the oval room and tapped lightly. There was no answer. Then he tapped again. Probably the old man had fallen asleep, too. After a few moments of hesitation he opened the door and stepped into the room.

Here there was no lack of light—the lamps burned brilliantly. But the first and only thing that Shaver saw at that moment was the body of John Bedford. He had fallen a little sideways in the great carved chair, his head thrown back, his eyes and mouth both open. Shaver drew in his breath sharply. The old man was dead!

CHAPTER III



FOR a moment Cliff Shaver stood still looking at the motionless figure in the chair. The old gentleman had evidently been having an evening meal of some kind, for a silver flagon of a peculiar shape, a glass, and a small plate of biscuits stood on the table in front of him.

He must have died instantly, for there was no sign on the waxen face of any struggle. He looked almost as though he had fallen asleep in a queer stiff attitude with his eyes open.

The room was intensely still, its silence accentuated by the slashing of the rain against the windows and the dull thud of the waves on the rocks outside. The young lawyer shuddered; nevertheless, he advanced with a firm step toward the shriveled figure.

But there was no faintest stir. The first thing to do, of course, was to summon help. A heavy velvet bell hung beside the fireplace, but he dismissed that. No use rousing a pack of hysterical servants. No. He must notify Mark Bedford.

A slight sound from somewhere close at hand startled him. It seemed to come from the room beyond, and he walked hastily to the door and looked in. The adjoining room, fronting on the sound, was evidently a bedroom, but it was too dark to see any object. The air was quite cool as though a window were open.

In a loud voice Shaver called, "Anybody there?" There was no answer.

Returning to the oval room, he looked again at the still figure in the carved chair to which the flickering firelight gave an eerie suggestion of subtle movement. He must get someone without delay. He went quickly out into the hall, then stopped to consider.

How was he to tell which of the closed doors in the corridor above belonged to Mark Bedford? A sudden thought struck him. Garrison had gone into a room down the hall when they separated after their entrance into the house during the afternoon. He went to the first door to his right and rapped sharply. There was no answer and he turned the handle. The room was dark. He struck a match and looked around.

He found himself in a small windowless room with a telephone booth in one corner, a table against the wall holding two desk phones, covered with writing material, telegraph and cable blanks, and a number of directories. He was about to turn away when a sudden thought struck him.

He grabbed the 'phone and put the receiver close to his mouth. "Long Distance, please, operator, and hurry, will you?" he said in a low voice. While he waited he listened intently but there was no sound outside.

"Hello, I'm calling New York—Bryant six one eight. This number—X one four.... Very well, I'll wait—will you rush it, please?" A clock on the wall ticked loudly. There were clocks in every room in the house.

"Hello, Mrs. Bascom. Mr. Shaver speaking. . . . The Judge is not there? May I leave a message for him? Will you tell him that John Bedford is dead? No one knows it yet. I've just discovered his body." He put the receiver back on the hook and went out into the hall.

His second attempt at locating the doctor was more successful. This time his knock produced a sound of quick footsteps behind a closed door which was opened abruptly by Dr. Garrison. He was completely dressed, and he did not look at all surprised to see the lawyer. "What is it?" he asked sharply, standing on the threshold.

"Mr. Bedford — is — dead — over — there —in that room," Shaver answered excitedly and led the way across the hall and back into the oval room. He stood to one side as Gar-

rison approached the body of the old man and stooping over it went through a perfunctory examination.

"He's dead, all right," the doctor said coolly, straightening.

"What killed him?"

Garrison shrugged. "Heart, I guess. They've been more or less expecting this. We ought to get hold of Mark Bedford—keep the women out of it. What time is it—almost twelve? Wait here and I'll get Bedford."

LEFT alone, Shaver stood looking intently at the dead man. Now that the immediate shock of his discovery had subsided he was beginning to be a little curious. He thought again of that look of—what had it been? Doubt, fear?—in the old man's eyes when he had left him that afternoon.

But that was absurd. The doctor had seen nothing out of the way. And yet—what was that sound he, Shaver, had heard in the next room? The wind? He shrugged. No limit to a man's imagination once it got started!

The entry of Garrison at this point put an end to his conjectures. He was frowning. "Mr. Bedford's not in his room, but unfortunately Mrs. Bedford heard me rapping. I had to tell her. She took it pretty well. She's coming down. Here—let's fix him up a bit."

With professional deftness he bent over the dead man and closed his eyes. Then as he turned away an accident happened that tried the nerves of both men. Garrison's elbow sent the glass out of which the old man had been drinking just before his death crashing to the floor. It broke into a hundred pieces. He began picking them up, muttering at his clumsiness. The opening of the door made them both turn.

It was Claire Bedford. She had thrown a black satin wrap over her nightdress, and her bare feet were thrust into black mules that made a tiny clapping sound. She came forward until she stood close to the dead man and looked down into his face. Neither man spoke, and when she turned to them her eyes were wide and staring.

"It's terrible—like that!" she whispered. "Did he—suffer?"

Garrison shook his head. "No, Mrs. Bedford. He simply—went out. His heart just stopped beating. He felt nothing."

She glanced about her with a wild and shaken air. "What ought we to do?"

"We'll take care of that—don't think about it!" Shaver cried impulsively. "First, have you any idea where Mr. Bedford can be found?"

She shook her head, her eyes on the floor. "No. I—I thought he was in bed. We all went upstairs before eleven. He left me at the door of my room." She looked up slowly—looked from one face to the other. "I don't—I can't imagine—" Then her lips began to tremble. In the little pause before anyone spoke an insidious something had formed itself in the air.

Garrison broke the tension with the curtness of his professional tone. "The best thing for you to do, Mrs. Bedford, is to have a bromide and go to bed. In the morning—"

But at this moment there was another interruption. The door opened again and Dr. Helfant strode into the room. He had on a heavy coat, and he held a cap in his hands. "I saw the lights in the hall," he said. "Is anything—?" And then he saw the body of the old man.

"He's—dead!" Claire Bedford cried in a low tone that she tried in vain to steady.

Helfant approached the inanimate figure, wrapped in its robe of white wool, in the great carved chair.

"Who found him—and when?" he asked brusquely.

"I did." Shaver answered. "He sent a note to my room asking me to come to him at half-past eleven. I was a few minutes late, not more than five, and when I came in, he was—like this."

"You're sure he was dead?"

"Absolutely."

Helfant threw out his hands. "I knew it—I warned him myself. His heart just gave out. And small wonder—had a bang in it you could hear half across the room." He turned to Claire Bedford. "Where's Mark?"

She did not look at him as she answered in a colorless tone. "We don't know."

"Good Lord!" Helfant cried. "He couldn't be out of the house on a night like this!" To give point to his words the wind sent the rain slashing against the far windows. No one answered, and the doctor frowned.

Shaver felt a little thrill run along his nerves. For the vague, almost formless suspicion at the back of his mind had now taken a definite shape. He stepped forward and cleared his throat nervously.

"Is it possible," he asked, turning to Helfant, "that Mr. Bedford did not die a *natural* death?"

The pause that followed these words was like an explosion.

Then, "What do you mean?" Claire Bedford cried in a low tone of horror. But Shaver was looking at Helfant significantly. The doctor had given a start and was considering. He turned again to the shrunken figure settled listlessly in a corner of the great chair and stooped over it. This time he made a longer examination, flexing the arms, turning back the eyelids, scrutinizing the tongue and the inside of the mouth.

Shaver meanwhile had picked up the sil-

ver flagon. It was some sort of vacuum arrangement with a heavy silver-topped cork. He lifted out this cork. The vessel was empty. He shook it, turned it about in his hands. Helfant was bending over the dead man. Claire Bedford was watching him breathlessly. Garrison had turned away. Shaver lifted the flask to his nose and sniffed.

"Here, Doctor," he cried sharply, "smell that—will you?"

Helfant grasped the flask and lifted it. "Where's the glass this man drank out of?" he cried harshly.

From behind Garrison said, "I broke it—been wondering what to do with the pieces," and he held out his hand, which was full of the shattered fragments, and poured them down on the table. Helfant bent over the little heap. Then he stood erect, his arms dropping to his sides, and his voice, grave and deliberate, rang through the room:

"Good God! Mr. Bedford has been poisoned!"

CHAPTER IV

"STOP that!" It was Helfant who saw Claire Bedford begin to shake, her knees giving way under her so that she could scarcely stand erect. "Pull yourself together!" he went on roughly as he put her into a chair and tried to startle her back to self-control. "This is no time for any of us to think of ourselves. We have a duty to—him." He nodded toward the dead man.

He was a good psychologist. The woman in the chair closed her lips and, sitting erect, she fastened her eyes on the doctor.

"What we now have to consider," Helfant went on gravely, "is whether this is a case of suicide or murder."

"Suicide?" Shaver cried incredulously. "I don't believe it for a moment. No man was ever farther from the type who takes his own life. I was with him this afternoon for two hours. I listened to him talk. He discussed his affairs in detail. He was full of plans. What was in that flask, Doctor? Prussic acid?"

"Yes, hydrocyanic acid—one of the most deadly poisons known to man."

"Besides," Shaver went on, "I understand Mr. Bedford never left this room. How could he get hold of it? And the flask holds more than a single tumbler of barley water. Would he have mixed himself a double dose of poison? Wouldn't he have put it directly into the glass?"

"I believe you're right," answered Helfant, who had been following the lawyer's reasoning with close attention.

In her chair Claire Bedford gave a stifled moan. "I wish Mark were here," she cried suddenly. "Where is Mark?" And she looked wildly from one man to the other.

Helfant gave the other two a meaning glance and turned to her. "Come, Mrs. Bedford," he said soothingly. "This has been rather hard on you. Let's go into the other room. Mark will turn up all right, don't worry about that. In the meantime, Garrison, you'd better notify the authorities. I don't suppose they'll get over to-night, but it ought to be done, anyway."

He helped Claire Bedford up out of her chair and gave her his arm. "Come." His voice was quietly authoritative.

She turned a white face over her shoulder. "Ought we to leave him alone?"

"Suppose," suggested Shaver, "we ring for his man and have him stay here until the proper authorities put in an appearance."

Helfant said: "Good. You do it, will you? We'll go into the living room and wait there."

When he was alone Shaver gave the velvet rope a vigorous pull. It was answered in a few moments by the man who had brought up his dinner. At sight of his master the fellow's jaw dropped and his eyes widened with fright.

"Not dead, is he, sir?" he gasped in a trembling voice.

Shaver nodded, eyeing the man narrowly. If this was a case of murder, everyone was more or less under suspicion. The man must have sensed his attitude, for he cried out, "Before God, Mister, I know nothing about it!"

"What are you talking about?" the lawyer asked coldly. "We didn't get you in to talk. Just stay here and see that no one touches anything." Then, as he turned to leave the room, he asked as an afterthought, "You weren't in there in that bedroom awhile ago, were you?"

"Not since eight o'clock, sir. At that time I got Mr. Bedford's things ready for the night, laid out his sleeping suit, and turned down the covers. About five minutes after eleven he rang for his barley water. He has it every night. And I brought it up to him. He was well and strong, sir, when I left him."

"Right," Shaver said crisply. "Well, just stay here until someone comes." For a moment his comprehensive glance swept the great oval room in a last searching gaze. At the far end behind glinting bars was a huddled handful of blue feathers. What had John Bedford said, standing there under the windows in the late afternoon? That every night he gave the Bullfinch a cracker *moistened with his barley water!*

He walked up to the cage quickly. At that moment there was a little stir and two tiny lidless eyes uncovered themselves. The bird was alive! Then . . . but the old man had been so positive in his declaration! He stepped closer.

But there was no trace of food on the floor of the cage; the mother-of-pearl bath on the side was filled with water—that was all. Just as he turned away with a thoughtful expression, his foot touched something. He stooped and picked it up. It was a small tumbler about the size of a whisky glass. Shaver stood turning it over in his hands.

IF THE old man had given the bird anything this was most likely the container. Yes, there were some grains of fine sand on the bottom.

Looking back hastily to make sure that he was unobserved, he slipped the glass behind a fold of the curtain on the window ledge where he could put his hands on it later. It was too large to lie in his pocket without notice. Then he made his way slowly out of the room.

The apartment at the other end of the hall, as he opened the door and surveyed it, was scarcely a fitting background for tragedy, with its satin surfaces, gleaming shaded lights, a vast spread of ivory paneled walls and flowers everywhere, and the smell of flowers. But there was one harmonious element, the slashing of the rain against the windows and the muffled shrieking of the wind held down and controlled by the thickness of the walls.

But if the room itself suggested serenity and repose the little group of people lost in the vastness at the far end contradicted this impression.

Shaver stood back and regarded them curiously.

Garrison was on his feet in front of the fire, his elbow on the mantel, his hand shading his eyes as he stared down into the flames. Peculiar chap, Garrison! Shaver surveyed him warily. A sharp, decisive fellow ordinarily, he had not been particularly forward in his movements since the discovery of the body. He had not spoken in the oval room after the word "murder" had been pronounced. He had done nothing, in fact, except to say that John Bedford had died a natural death.

But neither had Helfant done anything, for the matter of that. His eyes shifted to the older man. It was only then that he saw Mark Bedford. He moved forward unobtrusively to get a better view. The man was slouched down in a corner of the great couch, his elbows propped on his knees, his face in his hands, as he listened to Helfant's quiet recital. He had been out in the storm, for his shoes and the bottoms of his trousers were wet.

The doctor was saying slowly, "I'm afraid we'll have to face it, Mark. Your father was poisoned. I think the best thing we can do now is to figure out, each one of us, our own movements all evening. The police will arrive at any moment and they're bunglers generally, wanting a ready-made culprit. With a careful eye to the libel laws, they can blacken a man very thoroughly before you can say 'knife.' Come, Mark, snap out of it. Your father couldn't have lived very long, anyway; the best you can do for him now is to find his murderer."

But Bedford neither moved nor spoke in answer to this appeal, and Helfant glanced meaningly at his wife. Claire leaned forward and put her hand on her husband's arm. "Dr. Helfant wants to help us, dear," she said softly. "When you walked in here a few moments ago—like that—all wet—suppose the police had been here. What would they have thought?"

Mark Bedford sat up abruptly and shook off her hand. His face was convulsed, his eyes bloodshot and glaring. "Do you think I murdered him?" he asked roughly.

"God God!" Helfant cried in exasperation. "Haven't you any sense, man? No one need ever know that you left this house tonight."

"Oh, let's have the truth!" Bedford answered. "I did have a quarrel with my father. I'm sick of lies—lies and deceit and pretense. I did want him to leave some of his money to Charles. I did threaten him, yes, I did. Let them make the most of it." He surveyed all their faces in turn. The outburst seemed to have calmed him a little.

"Poison!" he went on slowly. "Prussic acid! Why didn't he taste it? It was in his barley water, you say. Wouldn't he smell it?"

"That's true," Helfant agreed in a puzzled tone. "I don't see how he could escape smelling it. It has a very individual odor, not to be confused with anything else. Naturally I never drank it, so I don't know what it tastes like, but at least he should have been warned by the smell."

Bedford sat up straight. "The bullfinch. Every night my father gives him a cracker broken up in some of his barley water—he must be dead, too."

Shaver spoke for the first time. "No, Mr. Bedford. The bullfinch is not dead; he's sleeping quietly in the bottom of his cage." It was at that moment, in the pause that followed these words, that a scream came in to them faintly, a single cry of horror in a woman's voice. On top of all that had gone before, the effect was paralyzing.

Mark Bedford said dully, "That's Anne.

She's discovered Father."

GARRISON was already gone from the room. Shaver slipped quietly after him. Claire Bedford had fallen back in her chair, white and trembling again under this second assault, but there were two men there to take care of her, and he did not hesitate.

When he reached the door of the oval room he found it open. The great sweep at the end was like a stage. The dead man sat in state in the carved chair, and kneeling at his feet the young girl crouched, her head buried in her arms, as she leaned against the little table and wept silently. At the sound of Garrison's voice behind her she raised her head. Then she sprang to her feet.

For a second the dark-haired doctor and this pale girl with her small head flung back looked at each other. Then, backing away from him, she cried in a strangled voice, "I—hate you! . . . Don't—come near me—"; and with a leap she sprang past him in a spasm of uncontrolled terror. Passing Shaver without seeing him, she ran, sobs tearing at her throat, the length of the room and out through the door.

The doctor remained where the girl's cry had halted him for almost a full minute before he followed her from the room, his eyes on the ground, his face pallid, utterly unaware of the lawyer who stood well back in the shadows scrutinizing him closely. It was then, as he listened, his eyes on the dead man, that Shaver became conscious of another presence. Whirling swiftly, he saw Plimpton, the butler, peering around the edge of the door.

Their eyes met, and the man, a tall, well-built fellow, surprisingly young and good-looking, stepped forward at once. "Is there anything I can do, sir? I heard a cry."

Shaver stared hard at him before he answered. "Cry? There was no cry. Did anyone send for you? What do you want in here?"

"I thought I might be of use, sir."

"The most useful thing you can do as far as this room is concerned is to keep out of it. Understand? Where's that other fellow? I told him to stay put."

"Matthew? He stepped down to have a cup of coffee, sir. I'll send him directly." The man bowed, his face impassive. Left alone, Shaver looked thoughtfully in front of him. In the cage at his elbow the bullfinch raised his head and with a mournful croak he hopped to his feet and, extending a claw, began to peck at it.

For long Shaver stood immobile, wondering about Plimpton and Matthew and trying to come to some sort of a conclusion. But he got nowhere. His mind went to the bullfinch as it croaked again.

CHAPTER V

KNOCK, knock, knock! Three klopping sounds broke the silence that was like a kernel in the outside noises of the storm. There was someone at the front door, someone who wanted to come in and who was using the massive knocker with great effect. Shaver, from his position at the end of the room, glanced at the clock on the mantel a little to the left of the dead man's head.

It was five minutes of one. Quick work, if it was the police. And it was the police. For, two minutes later, Mark Bedford, accompanied by Helfant, came through the door with a tall, rangy man in a shabby raincoat.

The introduction was brief and to the point: "Sheriff Tilden." Shaver nodded and followed the man with his eyes.

He approached the figure of the dead man, glanced at him keenly for a moment, and then turned to listen patiently to the story that Helfant was telling him. All the time he was listening his blue-bearded jaws—for he needed a shave—moved in and out as he chewed something, and his light-colored eyes went over the room in a careless fashion as each point in the story was elaborated.

Shaver's heart warmed to the uncouth figure, so utterly foreign to these luxurious surroundings. A country policeman! It was foolish to expect anything from him, and yet the man inspired confidence with his lack of emotion, his clear glance, his tolerant comprehension.

Helfant was forced to do most of the explaining, for Mark Bedford, after a long look at his father, had turned away shuddering, and with his hands in his pockets and his head bent he stood motionless, enveloped in a sort of dull inertia which it seemed impossible for him to shake off.

Tilden's eyes, in their frequent journeyings, lingered from time to time on the son of the dead man. He was very casual, and it was only when Helfant came to the question of the poison that he showed any life.

"Prussic acid," he said slowly, in a clear-cut New England drawl that was not without humor in its deliberate inflection. "Now, how much prussic acid, Doctor, would kill a man?"

"One or two drops."

"What is the effect?"

"It paralyzes the heart, causing instant death."

"In how long?"

"Difficult to say, Sheriff. Almost instantly,

or it might take three, four, five minutes."

"Humm. Any of it in the house?"

"Lots of it. Enough to kill an army—in my surgery."

"I see. Any gone from the bottle?"

"Wait—I'll get it for you."

Helfant left the room quickly, and the sheriff continued to move his jaws as he contemplated the scene with patience. That seemed to be his dominant characteristic, patience.

In the cage, against the slashing of the rain, the bullfinch raised his head with a mournful croak. "What's that?" Tilden asked with a slight air of interest.

"My father's bullfinch," Bedford muttered. "He was crazy about the thing. Perhaps"—his voice took on a sardonic ring—"it's mourning for him."

The sheriff sauntered toward the golden cage illuminated by the soft light of a shaded lamp and surveyed the bird carelessly. His sinewy hand with its long sensitive fingers inserted itself between the bars.

"He's mad about something," he observed laconically. "What's wrong with you, old fellow?"

"Oh, that's just his tag," Mark Bedford explained apathetically. "He was given to my father by Senator Graham—one of a batch imported from abroad. I believe they put a little numbered band about the leg of each one."

Tilden peered. "That's right," he said. "I can see it. So your father was fond of the bird?"

Mark gave a short laugh. "I think he liked it better than any of us—except Anne."

"Who's Anne?"

"My daughter." Pride of race, security in the immunity that wealth bestows animated Mark Bedford's voice for a moment as he raised his head with an aloof look. Tilden's jaw continued to move in and out. He was unimpressed.

"I see. Like to talk to her—later. This bird now—I'm interested in birds. Know anything about birds, Mr. Bedford? Sweet singers, bullfinches. Father showed good judgment. I saw one wild once—pretty song—must have escaped from somewhere."

"Mr. Bedford told us a while ago," Shaver said, "that his father always gave the bird a cracker moistened with his barley water when it was brought in to him at night. It might be important to know why on this particular evening he omitted the ceremony."

"Yes."

At this moment Helfant reëntered the room carrying a small bottle in a handkerchief. It was almost full of a clear, colorless liquid. He handed it to the sheriff, cautioning him not to unfasten the glass stopper.

"Any taken out of it?" Tilden asked.

"Not that I can see," Helfant answered. "And there seem to be no finger prints. I'm not an expert, but finger prints ought to show up on glass, oughtn't they?"

"Yes, Doctor, but the person who handled it might have used rubber gloves or a cloth, loosening the cork by this corrugated edge, see?"

THE sheriff put the bottle down on the table. He was not interested in the bottle. Helfant's glance met Shaver's; he evidently shared the lawyer's amusement in this odd specimen of a country police force.

"The bedroom now—have you examined that, any of you?" All three shook their heads. "And, by the way," he went on, "like to have a record of the evening, straighten things out, fill all the gaps—see what I mean? Now let's have a look at that bedroom."

Mark Bedford led the way through the alcove, and opening the door that Shaver had gone through several hours before, he switched on the lights and stood aside in that same attitude of sullen detachment. Tilden's clear, roving gaze embraced him for a mo-

[*Turn page*]

ment inclusively before he turned his attention to the room itself. Paneled walls, a dim ivory, and deep sea green draperies and curtains provided a calm and beautiful background for the few pieces of furniture.

But the countryman's gaze was not concerned with the great canopied bed against the opposite wall, nor with the carved chest and dressers, tables and chairs. He was looking at the windows, long French windows that took up the entire end of the room to their left.

Very deliberately he reached into his pocket and fetched out a black leather eyeglass case. From this he extracted an old pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, one side of which was mended with a wire hair curler, and fitting this complicated structure over his eyes, he began examining the floor.

On the violet velvet felting in front of the window nearest to the alcove he found something that interested him. As Shaver stepped close, he pointed it out. It was a shower of tiny dark spots on the delicately tinted surface. "Window opened and shut recently, during the rain, see?"

Instantly Shaver remembered the draft of cool air he had felt when he stepped into the darkened room after his discovery of John Bedford's body. But he said nothing, because he was still in doubt.

Tilden opened the French window, and a gust of wind flung rain furiously in his face, dashing fresh drops on the carpet. He closed it hastily. "Guess we'll let that stand over till morning. What's out there?" He waved a long thin hand toward the windows.

"The wind and the sea," Mark Bedford answered.

"Yeh, I know, but right outside, I mean."

"A brick terrace."

"Extend on up in front of that other room?"

"No—just outside this. That's one of the reasons why my father had these long double windows put in; they can fold back, and he used to have his bed rolled out there on warm summer nights."

"I see. Anyhow," the sheriff continued ruminatively, "a person wanting to get to your father without being seen would find this an excellent path."

"But," objected Helfant thoughtfully, "here we have a matter of poison. There was no object in the murderer's having appeared in person. Although we do not know how or when, the poison must have been dropped into that flask before it was carried into the oval room."

"Seems reasonable," agreed the sheriff. "And yet it's only by gathering all these meaningless little odds and ends together that we can hope to get on the right track. What time did it start to rain to-night?" He looked at the three men in turn. Bedford shrugged.

Helfant said, "I don't know." Remembering the noise like shot at his window just before he fell asleep, Shaver said, "Walt. I think I can tell you—a little after half-past eight; certainly not sooner."

"That servant now," Tilden went on. "He'd be in here fixing things for the night, eh?"

"That's true, of course," answered Helfant, who had been following the drift of the sheriff's argument with close attention. "You mean the man might have opened the window to ventilate the room for the night and that those rain spots might have been driven in then?"

Tilden shook his head. "No. I want to know whether he threw this catch before he left. You see—the window's unlatched now."

"My father always latched it the last thing at night," Mark Bedford answered. "We often came in this way to see him through the garden."

"Then we can eliminate the catch. As far as this servant and leaving the door open are concerned—the old gentleman looks a bit peppery—I don't guess he'd fancy his bedroom floor wet from the rain. We'll ask the fellow himself. But first, Mr. Bedford, tell me, your father kept pretty much to these rooms of his?"

"He lived here entirely, getting about with his stick, or with Matthew or one of us helping him. He never passed the door of that room in there since we returned to the house over two months ago. He had his books and his work."

"His work?"

"Yes, he was writing an account of his early days in the steel mills, and he was very much interested in it."

"Hmm. Where did he keep this—this writing?"

"As he finished it he put it into his safe."

"What safe?"

"The one in this room. There, the other side of the bed." Mark Bedford crossed the room, touched a little spring in the molding, and a panel slid back, revealing a most modern and workmanlike safe embedded in the wall. The sheriff stared at it for a moment as though he were about to ask more questions; then with an enigmatic expression he turned suddenly away, and the three men followed him back into the oval room.

"I think, if you gentlemen will wait somewhere, I'll just speak to this man—alone." He motioned toward the valet Matthew, who had returned to his post, and who had risen quickly at their entrance, his face leaden with an expression of stupid alarm.

"I'm going to bed," Mark Bedford answered shortly. "If you want me you'll know where to find me." He nodded curtly, turn-

ing on his heel, and Shaver and Helfant, left to themselves, went back into the living room at the far end of the great dim hall and sat down before the fire.

CHAPTER VI

FOR a while they sat there in silence, each man occupied with his own thoughts. The women had disappeared. It was almost two o'clock, but the storm, instead of dying away as the night advanced, had become more violent.

After a few minutes they began to talk in low tones—of the crime, of the possibility of the police getting across from the mainland in the morning, of the sheriff and his capacity for handling the task with which he was confronted.

"Has it occurred to you, Doctor," Shaver asked, "that if this poisoner is not discovered—we are more or less isolated here—he may claim another victim?"

Helfant shrugged. "You have in your mind more or less the idea of homicidal mania, I suppose?"

But Shaver stopped him. "You're wrong. I have no idea. The whole thing is a complete mystery to me. I never saw a person in this house before to-day. But you, now, you know the ins and outs of this entire household—have you formed any theory?"

A look of constraint had come into Helfant's face, and he stared straight ahead of him with a frown. Then he spoke suddenly in his decisive fashion.

"You're thinking of Mark Bedford. Don't! That's utterly out of the question. He's a peculiar chap in some ways, but murder his own father for any reason under the sun—no, a thousand times, no!"

Shaver forbore to say that he had not been thinking of Bedford at all, but of Garrison and the little scene between him and the young girl in the oval room.

But Helfant went on as though he were talking to himself: "No man in his senses who had a crime to hide would act as he has done all evening, deliberately attaching suspicion to himself by his manner. That simply proves that he knows nothing whatever about it.

"I feel convinced it was some unknown person who did this, someone who had a grudge against John Bedford. No man can accumulate all those millions without making bitter enemies."

"But the night, and the storm?" objected Shaver. "It would be exceedingly difficult for anyone to cross from the mainland."

"Tilden did it," Helfant countered. "I tried to do it an hour earlier—wanted to get across to see a sick patient."

"But," Shaver shook his head, "I think you're wrong about the murderer being someone outside the house. The whole thing was cunningly arranged by some person who knew every slightest detail of the household routine."

The doctor turned and looked at him sharply. "You're not keeping anything back, are you?" he asked quickly. "That's right—you were the first on the scene, weren't you?"

"No, I'm not keeping anything back. I know no more than you do of the actual commission of this crime, but there are some questions I'd like to have answered. That butler, Plimpton, he's a queer proposition. Much too intelligent-looking for a servant. I surprised him stepping very softly, very softly indeed, into the oval room awhile ago. What did he want there? Now——"

But he was not able to go on with his argument, for at this point the door opened and the lean, rangy sheriff came up to the fire and threw himself into a chair, his long legs extended toward the blaze. His face was gloomy and troubled.

"That man—that servant Matthew knows nothing of this vile crime; nevertheless, he has cleared up the ground for us. That barley water. Every night at ten o'clock the butler brings it up, freshly made, and places it on the serving table in the dining room. It stays there until the bell rings in the valet's room.

"Then this chap goes down and fetches it into the oval room. The time varies, but only within certain limits. Sometimes, he said, the old man rang for it at eleven, never earlier, and sometimes as late as twelve.

"To-night Mr. Bedford rang at ten minutes past eleven. The man took it in to him as usual. He noticed nothing out of the way except perhaps that the old gentleman looked a little more wide-awake than ordinary.

"And that's all he has to tell. As far as the bedroom window goes, he says positively that he did not open it. In fact, he's sure that it wasn't raining at the time that he arranged the bedroom for the night. But he wouldn't have opened it anyway, because the wind was high, and the old man hated drafts. There is a ventilating system over the doors that takes care of the fresh air."

THERE was a moment's silence. Then the sheriff turned toward Helfant. "Now, Doctor, was the surgery door generally kept locked?"

"No." Helfant shook his head. "When I first came here I did think of it, but when I became used to the household it appeared to

me a foolish gesture. There was no one who would touch anything."

"So that anyone—anyone could have entered and possessed himself of enough of that poison to accomplish his purpose?"

Helfant thought for a moment. Then he said slowly, "I'm afraid what you say is true."

"But why—why this particular moment?"

Shaver had his own ideas about this, but he said nothing. To walk warily at this time was imperative. A false lead might be worse than none. Presently he would hear from the Judge, and his responsibility would be ended.

With a shrug the sheriff turned again to Helfant.

"Now, Doctor, suppose you give us an account of what happened this evening—say from seven or eight o'clock on."

Helfant nodded, and stared into the fire as he collected his thoughts. "Dinner was at seven. We were all there—and when I say 'we,' I mean Mrs. Bedford, Mark, Miss Anne, Dr. Garrison, and myself."

"Not Mrs. Trenchard?" Shaver interrupted.

"No; as you know, or perhaps you don't know, she is living in the cottage at the foot of the gardens. It is a pretty little house not five minutes away. At any rate, we left the table a few minutes before eight, and the others went directly into the living room. I went to my surgery—I call it that; it was the library, but Mr. Bedford very kindly had it fitted up for me when I first came here. Well, I went into the surgery to do a little work."

"What kind of work?"

"Oh, a list of people for Garrison to see over in the town there, and I made up several prescriptions. Then I checked an article I'm sending to a medical journal, and after I'd finished that I joined the others in here. That must have been about half-past nine."

"What were they doing when you came in?"

"Let me see." He frowned thoughtfully. "Mrs. Bedford was writing letters, Dr. Garrison and Anne were talking——"

"And Mark Bedford?" the sheriff prompted quietly.

Helfant turned his head quickly, and the eyes of the two men engaged for a moment. Then he continued, "Mark? He was just—walking about—nothing much—I don't remember particularly."

The ruminative jaws continued to move in and out. "Now, was Mr. Bedford—eh—unsettled, you know, and er—in a sort of—rage—like he's been since I came? During the evening, I mean?"

Helfant pressed his lips together, the frown on his face deepening. "No," he said shortly, "I can't say I noticed anything strange about him. And I think you're making a mistake, Sheriff. The man is always like that, more or less—dour, silent——"

"Whoa!" Tilden said softly. "Hold up, Doctor, hold up! I'm not accusing the man of anything, I'm just asking you questions. But go on—what happened after that?"

"Well, at a few minutes after ten someone spoke of being thirsty, and as I had to go out again, back to the town over there, we all went into the dining room for a drink and some sandwiches."

"You saw the silver flask?"

"Yes—in fact, we looked at it especially. John Bedford had it made for himself a short time ago, from his own design. It's a beautiful thing."

"Did anyone touch it?"

"We all touched it," the doctor said promptly. "It was handed about. It's a queer shape, you know, but well balanced and well designed."

The sheriff nodded. "You all handled it. Humm—I see. And what happened then?"

"About twenty minutes after ten I left the house. I wanted to get across and back before it was too late. The storm had begun and I saw we were in for a real blow. I took the launch and started out. It was tough going. I'm a pretty good sailor, but that wind had me scared.

"About halfway across, the engine began to skip, and I turned her around, for I knew that I could never make it. The weather was pretty ugly by this time, and once or twice I was afraid I was headed for the bottom.

"But I got back all right—only it took me an infernal time. When I came into the house the halls had been lighted up, and I heard voices in the oval room. So I went in, thinking Mr. Bedford had been taken suddenly ill. The rest you know."

There was a moment's pause while Tilden apparently drowsed, his eyes half shut, his jaws moving languidly. Helfant stood up. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to try and get a little sleep. I've got a lot to do to-morrow—always supposing we can get across."

HE WAS half way to the door when the sheriff sat up.

"One moment, Doctor."

"Yes?" Helfant sauntered back.

"Who broke the news of his father's death to Mark Bedford?"

There was a noticeable pause before Helfant spoke again. "I did," he answered quietly.

"Yes? When—and where?"

"In this room. We had come in here with Mrs. Bedford, Dr. Garrison and I—we wanted her to get away from that gruesome sight—and—Mark joined us here, so—I told him."

"How did it happen that he wasn't the first to be informed?"

The doctor looked at Shaver and Shaver looked back at him. "Well," he answered slowly, "the fact is—he wasn't—he couldn't be found when his father's body was first discovered."

"Oh, he wasn't in the house. Where was he?"

The doctor's tone was sharp. "I would advise you to ask him yourself. I do not know." He had evidently determined to say nothing more.

Tilden nodded. "Yes—thanks—yes, I will. Well, good-night, Doctor."

Helfant said good-night and went out of the room.

For a second or two Tilden retained his somnolent attitude; then, as the door closed, he sat up briskly in his chair and turned to the lawyer.

"You called Judge Bascom on the phone tonight, didn't you—and he was busy? Well, he was busy talking to me. Your call couldn't have come at a more opportune moment." Beneath the man's twang there were traces of a diction that did not altogether belong to a country sheriff.

Shaver stared.

"And it was about this very case he was calling. Although when he began he had no idea that it was to have such a sudden and tragic end."

"Then you're not a sheriff at all?"

"Oh, yes, I am. Some years ago I left my work in New York and settled down in the country, outside that little town over there. I won't trouble you with the details, but I owe a debt of gratitude to the Judge which I am now anxious to repay.

"I hope I can do it by busting this case. Unless I'm mistaken, it's going to be complicated. Yes, I'm one of Millport's three deputies, so that's all square. And now—let's hear what you have to tell."

Shaver had listened to the quiet man with a vast sense of relief. For in spite of those few words in the office, he had been impressed by the Judge's solemn manner, and now the responsibility was lifted from his shoulders.

Without more ado he went quickly through his tale, of his discovery of the body, the slight noise in the bedroom, the sensation of cold air, as though a door or window had been opened, the little scene between the girl and the doctor in the oval room, and finally, his discovery of the small glass on the floor beneath the bullfinch's cage.

"Let's have a look at that," said Tilden, who had followed his words with close attention. Shaver got up and led the way into the hall and down its length.

As the two men approached the staircase, a shadow, fleet and silent, flitted up the rails so noiselessly that, although both men were aware of the vague sensation of its passing, neither could have sworn to seeing a human being.

They stared at one another for a moment, listening intently, then opened the door of the oval room and stepped inside. But when Shaver reached the window behind which he had placed the little glass, another surprise awaited them. It was gone

CHAPTER VII

MORNING crept up out of the sea and the wind and the rain, a dull glimmering twilight of discordant sound booming desperately about the huge house, lonely on its island. On a couch in a corner of the great oval room the body of John Bedford lay stretched out beneath a shining piece of brocade, his hands folded in the placid resignation that all his life he had denied. Matthew had been replaced by another servant and in his cage the bullfinch huddled drowsily, displeased at the absence of the sun.

Shaver, after a few hours' sleep, was up and about early. In the hall downstairs he came upon the little boy, Charles, who was being led by his nurse, a rosy-cheeked girl in white, out into the glass enclosure at the back.

The child raised a grave, inquiring face at Shaver's greeting and pointed proudly to the white kitten parading beside him. "Cat—pretty cat!" he said, waving a chubby finger and looking at the strange man for confirmation.

Shaver played with him for a moment and then turned thoughtfully away. In the dining room he found the sheriff and Garrison. In spite of the driving rain that slanted past the windows and gave a gloomy and foreboding cast to the morning, Tilden was beaming his way through a plate of bacon and eggs and pouring himself a second cup of coffee.

Garrison, on the other hand, looked strained and edgy. He scarcely touched his food, and he kept smoking rapidly.

The sheriff was saying, as he salted his eggs with a discriminating hand, "You, now, Doctor, er—you saw nothing last night that would help us any? No? And heard nothing either, I suppose? Everything just as usual?

"Humm. I proposed to Mr. Bedford and Dr. Helfant that we have each member of the household tell his story of the evening, and in that way, through some little detail,

we might pick up a line, see? You yourself now—this is as good a time as any to hear what you've got to say."

"I'm afraid there won't be much to help you in it," the young man answered curtly. "But you're welcome to what I've got."

"Well, I understand you brought Mr Shaver over here from the train in the late afternoon. Go on from there."

"Yes, that's right. And after we got back here I went to my room."

"Where is your room?"

"It leads off the surgery, and you have to go through the surgery to reach it. Helfant's is on one side—mine on the other."

"Go on. Don't mind my interrupting you. I like to get things clear."

"I read until it was dinner. After dinner—"

"Hold up, Doctor. At dinner, now, how did everybody seem?"

"Seem? Well, as far as I could make out they were all in their right senses. I don't go about peering into people's faces trying to analyze their emotions. You've been tapping in on Freud."

"Beg pardon?"

"It's all right. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Yes," the sheriff continued patiently—"your story of the whole evening. It might help. Miss Anne, now, the old gentleman's granddaughter. You know her pretty well, Doctor?"

Garrison moved in his chair but did not raise his eyes. "I've been living here almost two months."

"Ample time," Tilden murmured ironically. "Let me change the shape of my question. Miss Anne is nothing more to you than a pleasant acquaintance?"

"A very pleasant acquaintance."

"There was not by any chance a closer connection between you?"

"Certainly not."

The negative was decisive, but the young man's gaze was shifting and uneasy. Tilden shook his head.

"I guess I got it all wrong. Queer how servants *will* talk."

He went on musingly: "Unfortunate accident, your breaking that glass in the oval room last night—the glass out of which the old man drank just before he died."

"What do you mean by that?" Garrison sat up abruptly.

TILDEN'S gaze was cold and fixed. "Just what I say—it was an unfortunate—accident. But go on with your story of the night. It's interesting. What did you do after dinner?"

"After dinner we went into the drawing room."

"Leave it any time during the evening, Doctor?"

Silence.

"Shall I tell you? You stepped out into the hall, you and Miss Anne, to exchange a few words in private just where that big orange tree stands."

"Well informed, aren't you?"

Tilden reached for a peach. "Servants," he said smiling. "You'd be surprised—universal eye—sees all, knows all. But I mustn't interrupt. Go on—you came in here later, a little after ten o'clock. You had that silver flask in your hand?"

"Yes. It was passed around."

"I see. And after that?"

"After that we all went to bed. I mean—into our rooms," he added quickly. "Except Dr. Helfant. He wanted to make a visit."

"Dr. Garrison, when you came back from that town over there yesterday afternoon what were you wearing? A slicker?"

"No—it wasn't raining at that time."

"And according to your statement you did not leave the house at all last night?"

Silence again. Tilden let a moment pass before he asked curtly, "Then what was your slicker doing in that porch at the back of the hall this morning still damp from the rain?"

"Ah—now I remember." Garrison had whitened again. "I wasn't sleepy when I got into my room, so I went out for a cigarette."

A faint smile appeared on the sheriff's face for a moment. It seemed to bother Garrison more than an open accusation of falsehood.

"So you were out there on that porch smoking, Doctor, after the others had gone to bed. Now from there you could see into the hall, of course. You could see the door of the oval room, you could see Matthew bringing in Mr. Bedford's barley water, you could see the staircase." Tilden was watching the man closely. "Well, did you see anything?"

"No. And may I point out that you've made one little mistake? I could have seen Matthew bringing in the old gentleman's barley water, Mr. Sheriff, if I had been there at the time. It just happens that I wasn't."

"At what time, then, were you in that vestibule, and for how long?"

"I went into my room at half-past ten and left it almost immediately, so that I must have been out there from twenty minutes of eleven until ten of eleven."

Tilden nodded. "But, tell me, Doctor, if you went out there for a smoke why did you throw away your cigarette just after you'd lighted it?"

"I don't remember that I did."

"I found it this morning on the edge of the lawn, see?" And the sheriff produced from his pocket a sodden cigarette from which not more than two puffs had been taken. "It was lying under a little bush at

the open end of the porch, or it would have melted completely."

Garrison got up suddenly from the table. Tilden rose to his feet also, and thrusting his long, lean body forward he stared menacingly into the younger man's face.

"And now I'm going to tell you the truth, Doctor. Anne Bedford is not an acquaintance: she is the girl you wanted to marry. John Bedford found this out and forbade her absolutely to have anything to do with you. He didn't throw you out of the house—because of your position with Dr. Helfant, who is his guest.

"But in spite of the old man's opposition you refused to give the girl up. Then John Bedford destroyed the will leaving his fortune to his granddaughter and sent for a lawyer to make another. The night that lawyer entered this house John Bedford was murdered."

THE color had now completely drained from Garrison's face. His eyes blazed, and the hands hanging at his sides clenched and unclenched convulsively.

"How dare you make such accusations?" he cried in a breathless tone. "They are unfounded—insolent. I know nothing whatever about the murder of John Bedford. I heard nothing and saw nothing. That's all I have to say to you." And he walked out of the room.

Shaver was about to speak, when the sheriff raised a warning hand. Tiptoeing across the room, he stopped before the swinging door into the pantry and with a sudden movement flung it open. Plimpton was standing just outside. Undoubtedly he had been eavesdropping.

But not a muscle of his face moved as he said smoothly, "The phone in the hall, sir—I'm on my way to answer it," and with superb aplomb he crossed the long paneled room and disappeared.

He came back in a moment and said that Mr. Tilden was wanted. When the sheriff returned he was frowning.

"Police headquarters." He said laconically. "Wanted the dope. Don't think they can get any men out here to-day. There's the devil to pay all along the coast, big floats tumbling around, docks smashed, roofs off summer cottages. Happens every couple of years or so." He sauntered to the window and stood looking out into the driving rain.

"And the worst of it is, we may have forty-eight hours of this." Then he turned to the lawyer, his light, far-seeing eyes narrowed. "I don't like it, Shaver, don't like it. Too much responsibility. There's danger here—I feel it. I'm like a dog—I can smell it." He dropped into a reverie.

At this moment the door from the hall opened again, and Mark Bedford came in. The man's face was haggard, his eyes red rimmed, as though he had not slept. He nodded curtly to the two men, sat down at the table, and poured himself some coffee.

When he had finished one cup and begun another he turned to Tilden.

"I hear you've been questioning the servants. Discover anything?"

"Nothing new." The sheriff was frowning at a rough plan of the house that he was drawing on the back of an old envelope. "Can you tell me, Mr. Bedford, how many exits there are from this house—apart from the servants' wing?"

"Good Lord, I don't know. Let's see. The front door—then you can get out through the conservatory—that's beyond the living room. Then you have to go clear back to the passage off the music room, where there's a door from a little service stairs that runs to the second floor."

"Who uses this service stairs from the second floor?"

"We all do. It's much shorter than coming down the main stairs and along the hall if you want to get outside."

"But if you were coming directly downstairs, into any one of the main rooms, the big staircase would be better?"

"Decidedly."

"I see. Now, did you use that service staircase last night when you went out for a walk, after going up to your room at half-past ten?"

Bedford put down his cup with a leisurely air. "I did," he replied.

"On your journey to and from the house, inside or out, did you meet anyone?"

"No."

"Strange," mused the sheriff. "Just at the bottom of that little staircase on the dark wood of the passage there's the clear imprint of the front of a woman's slipper. Muddy, you know. I've examined the maids. They deny having been in that part of the house at all. Strange." He stood up.

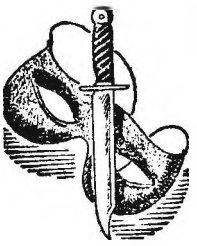
Bedford nodded indifferently, but the hand that he put out for the sugar tongs was shaking perceptibly.

In the hall outside the two men came suddenly on Anne Bedford. She had her back to them, and she was pacing the heavy Persian rug methodically, gazing down at its surface.

"Good-morning," Tilden said. The girl whirled quickly, and with her head thrown back she stood facing them.

Her concentration had been so complete that she had apparently expected nobody behind her. And her first shock had obviously been fear. Then a defensive reaction took her, and she was swiftly defiant. She did not move. She stood stiffly before them.

CHAPTER VIII



"WERE you looking for something, Miss Bedford?" the sheriff inquired pleasantly.

The girl, her small head still held erect, looked at him a moment before answering. She had recovered her composure almost instantly, and when she spoke her voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

"Yes. I am trying to find a string of beads that I lost somewhere. They're white corals that belonged to my mother. The clasp is wretched, and I'm always dropping them about."

"Have them on last night?"

"Yes. When I came down to dinner, but they were gone when I went to bed."

Her dark beauty wore well, for there was not a line in the smooth oval of her face. Shaver, remembering her as she stood beside the dead body of her grandfather at the end of the huge room the night before, marveled at her self-possession now.

"Are these they?" Tilden produced from his pocket a coiled string of white stones flecked delicately with pink and dropped them into the slim outstretched hands.

At this moment a voice from behind said, "What—again, Anne?" and Claire Bedford joined the little group. "Those eternal beads. How clever of you to find them, Mr. Tilden. I think you ought to arrange to stay the winter just to keep track of them."

The girl had not asked where he found them. She turned away and entered the dining room, and the smile vanished from the older woman's face. "Is there any news?" she asked in a low tone.

"You mean about that maid?" Tilden said. He turned to Shaver. "Mrs. Bedford was kind enough to give me an interview early this morning. No—there was nothing in that. The girl left the house to go down and see the cook in Mrs. Trenchard's cottage. She was back before eleven."

Claire Bedford shrugged, her face weary. It changed at the sound of a child's voice. With a glance at the little boy who was coming toward them holding his nurse by the hand, Tilden led Shaver down the corridor to the door of the oval room.

But once they were inside the room, with no company save that motionless figure stretched out beneath the pall of brocade, the sheriff, instead of proceeding at once to action, threw himself into a chair close to the bullfinch's cage and waved Shaver toward another. "Talk a bit," he said, feeling for his pipe. "Find out what we've got—I want to get my bearings with these folks. What's the matter with that chap Bedford? Where was he last night? Here's a time-table that needs a lot of filling in."

Shaver glanced down at the envelope and read the scrawled memorandum thoughtfully:

Ten fifteen—they all go into the dining room.

Ten thirty—they leave it—Helfant goes out—the others to their rooms.

Ten forty—Garrison goes into porch at back of hall.

Ten fifty—returns to his room.

Eleven thirty-five—John Bedford is found dead.

Eleven thirty-nine—Garrison is informed.

Twelve two—Bedford enters the house.

"Now then," the sheriff said briskly. "Where was Bedford from some time after half-past ten until twelve o'clock? And why was Garrison fully dressed fifty minutes after he went into his room to go to bed? Bedford's the only one who acknowledges being out—yet some woman went down that little staircase from the second floor, went down and came back.

"Was she following Mark? Or was it Miss Anne maybe—going out to meet Garrison? And instead of following Bedford, was he following her—following his daughter to see where she was going at that time of night? We've got to answer all these questions?"

"Those corals?" Shaver asked.

"Found them in the hall, close to where Miss Anne was looking for them this morning. Did you notice that she was startled when I first spoke to her? And how quickly she got back her nerve? We're up against it, Shaver, for this reason: Someone in this house is a killer.

"If it becomes necessary, the second life is going to be easier to take than the first. This was a vile murder, and the mind that planned it was calm and free from fear. But consequences, now—that's going to flurry him a bit." The sheriff plucked at a tassel on the chair arm.

"I'm not excluding the servants absolutely—I went over them pretty thoroughly this morning—but with the exception of that butler I don't think there's anything there. Plimpton, now—Plimpton interests me. As far as the rest of the house goes, that leaves us Mark Bedford, Dr. Helfant, Garrison, Mrs. Trenchard, Claire Bedford, and the granddaughter."

AT SHAVER'S exclamation as he named these last the sheriff nodded. "Oh, yes—but we'll consider them later. We may know more then. Now let's give this room the once-over."

For a half hour the two keen-eyed men examined the oval room, the alcove, and the adjoining bed chamber, foot by foot. The result was meager.

Caught in the fringe of a table cover near the bullfinch's cage there was a long splinter of fresh bright pine. The sheriff examined the French windows in the bedroom again without new results, then turned his attention to the spots on the floor. Except for these, there was not the slightest mark on the violet-colored felt with which both rooms were carpeted.

At last, with a frown the sheriff threw himself into a chair again and took a survey of the great oval room, but this time he seated himself in the carved chair close to the fireplace where the dead man had been found. He was lost in thought, his eyes roving, his fingers tapping the wood. At the end of a few moments of concentration he turned to the young lawyer.

"Let's take our possible criminals in order. Mark Bedford, now—how'd he strike you? Where was he last night at half-past eleven? Mind you, we'll argue for the time being that the noise you heard in there was the murderer coming to see whether he'd made his killing. Well, Bedford was missing. Where was he?

"Now, he showed pretty clearly by his manner that something was vitally wrong with him. Was *he* the man who came round through the gardens, crossed the terrace, and entered the bedroom through that French window to make his observation? We can't say yet—but he might have been.

"Now, this doctor—Dr. Helfant. What have we got on him? Mind you, we're just clearing the time space now. He was out also."

"Yes," objected Shaver, "but on a legitimate errand."

"So he says," Tilden answered. "But we're not taking anyone's say-so; that's got to be proved. *He* might have been the man who was in that bedroom."

"Now—Garrison."

Shaver frowned. "Would he have time to get out, go all the way round past those rocks, and in at the porch to his room before I knocked at his door?"

Tilden got up. "We'll find out. I'll go over the same route—see what it registers on your watch. Don't forget that you telephoned before you roused him. At least four minutes must have passed. Get out your clock."

The long lean figure disappeared into the alcove, and at the closing of the window in the next room Shaver looked down at the little second hand ticking its way round the tiny dial. Two minutes and twenty seconds elapsed before Tilden entered the oval room from the hall.

"You see?" the sheriff said. "*He* might have been the author of the sound. As for the women, they're easy. They had plenty of time to get clear before the alarm. Now I want a look at the old man's papers. He was writing a book. There ought to be a lot of stuff around, rough notes. We'll give them the once-over."

The big walnut desk placed sideways beneath the left bow of the windows was innocent of papers on top, carrying nothing but a large, immaculate blotter, a fresh pad of paper, and a neat assortment of sharpened pencils.

But in the wide drawer beneath there were a number of neatly inscribed yellow sheets. Tilden sat down and began to read them slowly. They were evidently the first pages of an uncompleted eighteenth chapter, and across the bottom of the last page there was a scrawled reference: "See page thirty four—diary."

"So he kept a diary," Tilden said. "Now that'd be a handy thing to get hold of. I wonder——" But his search, which included every possible nook in the room where such a thing could have been placed, was unavailing. The bedroom was equally barren. Suddenly Shaver thought of the safe.

"Isn't it in there, don't you suppose?" he suggested to the sheriff. "He was a methodical old fellow, and people were about a good bit in these rooms—the man Matthew, the members of the family."

"Right!" Tilden agreed. "Now I wonder——" He found the catch in the paneling, and the little door slid back. But the safe was locked.

"Too bad," the sheriff said mournfully. "Hello!" He leaned forward and peered at the shining metal. "A number of finger prints here. Interesting point. Might have been the old gentleman's. . . . Wait a bit." Again he fetched out the steel-rimmed spectacles and leaned forward, staring intently. "Two sets." he announced. "At least two sets—see there." He pointed.

Shaver shook his head. "I see only a few faint marks. They all look alike to me."

Tilden wheeled suddenly and began to march up and down past the foot of the bed. "Who was it dashed upstairs last night when we came out into the hall after everyone was supposed to have gone to bed? Oh, it wasn't imagination. We wouldn't both imagine the same thing. Was it someone who had been in here trying to get at this?" He pointed toward the safe. "Let's go back to that desk and see if we can find the combination."

But their second search was as unavailing as the first. Evidently the combination was locked up in the old man's memory, and it would be necessary to open the safe by force to get at the contents.

"Nevertheless," insisted the sheriff, "someone was having a try at that last night when he thought the coast was clear, I'll bet my shirt."

Back in the oval room again he picked up the long splinter that Shaver had found, and turned it over in his fingers. "Pine," he announced, "fresh pine—of the poorest quality. Now where did that come from?"

But before Shaver could answer they were interrupted by the entrance of the old man's valet. He was carrying a plate of crackers in his hand when he came face to face with the two men. His jaunty bearing vanished, two or three of the biscuits slithered across the edge of the dish and fell on the carpet, and as he knelt and picked them up he tried in vain to recover his composure.

CHAPTER IX

"WELL, well!" Tilden said in his slow drawl.

"What's the matter—er—what's your name?"

"Matthew, sir," the man supplied nervously, attempting a smile that was hardly successful, for it exposed all his yellow teeth in a hideous grimace. The man was evidently frightened.

The sheriff stared at him with sudden interest. "Sit down, Matthew. I was just going to send for you. Glad you came of your own accord. What are those crackers for?"

"The bullfinch, sir."

"Put them down and take a seat."

"Thank you, sir."

Matthew, heavy of jowl, with plump, puffy white cheeks, neat grizzled sideburns, and a tonsure of well-clipped gray locks, lowered himself to the edge of a chair, his fat hands trembling as he held them against his knees.

"I saw you last night?"

"Yes, sir. You questioned me then, and I told you all I knew. I don't——"

"That's true. You weren't about this morning when I was talking to the other servants. Well, I'm going to question you again now."

"But I told you all I know. I think——"

"Stop thinking, Matthew; it doesn't become you. Just answer."

The sheriff did not raise his voice, but his aspect was extremely threatening, and Shaver felt sorry for the valet. The man was such a coward and so obviously terrified.

Tilden stood looking down into the fellow's face; then he nodded as though satisfied. "Matthew," he began gently, "your finger prints are all over that silver flask that held the barley water with which Mr. Bedford was poisoned."

"No, sir, no, Mr. Sheriff, I only pushed the top down a little. It didn't seem firm when I picked it up."

"We'll let you tell that to a jury—later. Now, what else have you to say?"

There was a pause, during which a bead of perspiration made its way down Matthew's shining temple into his sideburn. Shaver's pity turned into a strong desire to laugh, but Tilden kept his eyes fastened steadily on the man's face as he shook his head from side to side.

"Now is the appointed time and the hour. When you're behind bars you're going to be sorry you didn't talk while you had the chance."

"I didn't do it, Sheriff, I didn't. I knew I'd be suspected. It's only what the servants are saying—and about Miss Anne . . ." Now that he had begun to talk words dribbled freely from his mouth. "They're a new lot and they don't know the family, sir, nor the old gentleman neither. . . .

"When he called a lawyer the day before yesterday on the phone I knew he was getting soft—he was like that—give you a whack with his stick and then a coat or a hat or a fiver. He was a good master to me and I swear before my God——"

"Stop!" There was a dead silence. "What are the servants saying about Miss Anne?" And as the man still remained staring at him in a dazed fashion, "This is a case of murder, Matthew. You'd better put everything out of your mind now but your own safety. Unless we discover the real criminal you certainly will be in bad. Come clean, and I promise that you'll be looked out for."

"Yesterday afternoon"—the shivering valet began in a low voice—"I heard the old gentleman say, 'You won't kill me.'"

"To whom did he say it?"

"To his granddaughter, Miss Anne."

"Where?"

The man glanced around fearfully. "Here. In this room."

"How did you come to overhear that?"

"I was coming through that door there." He pointed toward the alcove.

"Yes? Where was the old man?"

"Sitting in his chair."

"And where was his granddaughter?"

"Facing him across that little table. She had her hands on it and she was leaning over and looking down at him while he talked to her."

"Umm. You came into the room when you heard Mr. Bedford say that?"

"Yes, sir. I was startled, like, and I didn't have time to stop."

"Then what happened?"

Mr. Bedford threw his stick at me—and I

went back into the bedroom."

"And then?"

"Miss Anne went away, sir, in a few minutes, and Mr. Bedford called me."

"Well, go on—what else?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Not—not then, sir."

"Well, what did you see later?"

THE valet turned his head from side to side and inserted a finger under his collar as though it were too tight for him. "It was in the hall last night."

"What time?"

"A little after nine. I had put some caviar and bloater paste in the dining room, as the family 'most always has a snack before they go to bed——"

"Wait. Why were you doing that? It's not your work, is it?"

"No, not rightly, sir, but it was Plimpton's night off."

"Oh, I see, Plimpton's night off. Go on."

"Well, I had fixed things up in the dining room, and I stepped out into the hall to see if everything was all right, like. Behind the plant, that there orange tree, I heard voices, and I stood still, not wanting them to see me."

"Who were they?"

"Miss Anne and Dr. Garrison."

"What were they saying?"

"I couldn't catch—I mean, I didn't hear anything until Miss Anne says in a slow sort of distinct way you couldn't mistake. 'I won't marry you as long as my grandfather is alive.'"

"What happened then?"

"I went back into the dining room, and through the door I see the young people joining the rest in the drawing room."

"Thank you, Matthew," Tilden said genially, and the valet took out a large silk handkerchief—no doubt one of the dead man's—and wiped his brow. "And now tell me, was Mr. Bedford fond of his granddaughter?"

"He was, sir, and crazy about her Ma before her, Mr. Mark's wife that died—the first wife."

"And was his granddaughter fond of him?"

"Yes, in her way, but she never give in to him like the others."

"What do you mean by 'her way'?"

"Well, Miss Anne is the silent sort, only she could blow up sudden, too, like the old man, fit to kill you. She used to have terrible tantrums when she was a child—nurses couldn't do nothin' with her. But she gets—white and —stiff—when she's in a rage, and the old man laid about him with his stick or swore at you."

"How does Miss Anne get on with the rest of the household? Servants all like her?"

"She's not the popular kind, but she's always pleasant."

"Now, tell me—were Miss Bedford and her stepmother friends?"

The valet hesitated. "She took her Pa's marrying again hard. And then Miss Anne is kind of stand-offish with everyone."

"Yes. And now young Mrs. Bedford. She popular with the servants?"

"Oh, yes, sir. She's the lavish kind. And very good about time off. Yes, sir. A very nice lady."

"You can't think of anything else I ought to know?"

"The servants are all frightened, sir—about the poison. But they're a pack of fools. They think they're all going to be killed."

Tilden laughed. "Well, I guess that'll be about all, Matthew." Then, as the fat man almost leaped from the chair, he said sternly, "But remember this, my man—don't repeat a single word of what you've been telling me to anyone else. Understand?"

The valet began a torrent of expostulations, and Tilden waved him from the room. When they were alone both men avoided looking at each other for a moment, and then the sheriff said slowly, "I guess we'll have to have a talk with this young lady."

"Why, it's—it's unthinkable!" Shaver cried.

"Well, now, I guess you put your finger on it there. All murder is unthinkable. It isn't a matter of thought. It's done in a fog of—of emotion, you know—rage, or revenge, or lust, money lust—and women are no more exempt from these things than men—not even young and pretty women. We'll have a look at her, anyhow."

He went to the bell rope, and when Matthew appeared once more, panting a little with alarm, Tilden told him to ask the young girl to step down to the oval room.

While they waited, the sheriff sauntered up to the bird cage.

"What's the matter with this fellow?" he said, looking at the bullfinch, who was huddled against the bars, a dejected ball of blue. He chirruped softly and the bird opened filmy eyes, got up and hopped to the bath, took a beakful of water and huddled down again.

"You know, Shaver," he said, turning away from the cage after a moment, "that's one of the things I can't understand about this case—that glass on the floor there, or rather it's having been removed from the window ledge. Why? The old man most certainly didn't give it any of that barley water, or the bird would be dead. And yet why did he depart from an invariable custom on that particular night?"

They were interrupted by the opening of the door. Anne Bedford had come into the

room. Her face was white and set as she held up her head and looked at the two men with what, if it had not been so quiet, would have been a sort of insolent defiance. Her tone when she spoke was cold and hostile.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Miss Bedford. Just like to ask you a few questions about what happened yesterday afternoon and last evening."

"Then I would like you to do it in another room." She turned and walked toward the door without a single glance at that improvised bier to the left of the fireplace where her grandfather lay dead under the shimmering piece of brocade.

The two men followed her down the hall into the drawing room, and Tilden said, as she faced them in the dull storm light with her back to the windows, "Suppose we just talk this over comfortably?" Suiting the action to the word, he sat down carelessly on the arm of a chair.

"Thank you. I prefer to stand."

SHAVER, very uncomfortable, remained in the background and watched the girl curiously. Something had occurred since breakfast to change her demeanor. Her ivory pallor had altered to a chalky white, and the indifference with which she generally bore herself was now rigidity. Her slate colored eyes beneath the thick fringe of lashes which gave her a child-like air of innocence were keen and alert.

"Miss Bedford, there was a quarrel between you and your grandfather lately. Will you tell us what it was about?"

"Yes. He took exception to my—to my friendship with Dr. Garrison."

"I see. Now the old gentleman sent for you yesterday afternoon, did he not?"

"Yes."

"And it was the first time in four or five days?"

"Yes."

"Well, would you tell us what took place at that time?"

"Nothing that was of any importance. My grandfather tried to have me see things from his viewpoint, and I was compelled to tell him that I had my own opinion, which it was impossible for me to change."

"You quarreled with him?"

"No, there was no quarrel. On the contrary, when I left him"—for a second her throat worked, but she quickly regained possession of herself—"we were friends again." Her eyes never left Tilden's face.

The sheriff reached into his pocket and brought out a stick of chewing gum. Then he went on again.

"Now, last night, Miss Bedford, in the drawing room here, you were with Dr. Garrison—talking to him?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

"Now you're putting too much of a strain on my memory."

"But your grandfather's opposition had not made any difference in your relationship?"

"No."

"So that when you went upstairs at half-past ten you and the doctor were still friends?"

"Certainly."

"Then why, Miss Bedford, when you turned away from your grandfather's body in the oval room, did you cry out to Dr. Garrison, 'I hate you. I hate you'?" And now the long lean man had abandoned his pretense of indifference and was leaning forward in his chair, his eyes fastened on the girl's small white face.

Just for an instant she flinched. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"It was a moment in which I was not myself. I loved my grandfather very dearly. Just at that second, when I saw Dr. Garrison, the man who had, without any blame on his part, caused our difference—I unreasonably—shrank from him. Had I met him five minutes later, when I was in full possession of my senses, such words as you quote me as saying would never have been uttered."

There was a short pause; then Tilden said heartily, "I see. A very good explanation, miss. I only wish," he went on thoughtfully, "that Dr. Garrison could explain his movements half as well. You see, after you had all gone upstairs last night, Dr. Garrison turned up again."

And now, unmistakably, he had made a strike. Her figure did not move, and her hands were hidden in the folds of her dress, but she drew in her breath sharply and caught her lip between her teeth. But if the sheriff had hoped she would rush into words he was disappointed, for she waited silently for him to go on.

"Yes," he repeated casually, "that's the truth—he left his room again. Someone in this house who hated the old gentleman secretly dropped poison into that flask of barley water. Now you see, miss, what with this enmity between your grandfather and the young man——"

"There was no enmity on Dr. Garrison's part."

"Oh, I see. He didn't mind your grandfather's objecting to him as a—fit object for your regard?"

The small head went higher. "I explained to Dr. Garrison the position I was in. I made him see that it was simply a feeling of being slighted on my grandfather's part—a feeling

[*Turn to page 40*]

DICK WON ALL AROUND WHEN...

AFTER GUARDING HIS HORSE ALL NIGHT, DICK O'NEIL, EX-MARINE AND OWNER OF "IWO JIMA", LONG SHOT, OVERHEARS SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION ON MORNING OF BIG RACE

that I was a child still—that was causing the trouble. I explained to him——"

"You told him, in fact," Tilden said quietly, "that as long as your grandfather was alive you would never marry him."

"Yes."

She had no sooner assented to this last damaging statement than its implication came home to her with its full force. For a second she stood perfectly still; then, with a slight motion of her hands, as though she were warding something off, her control crumpled.

Before either of the men could move she said, through sobs which threatened to deprive her of her voice, "I don't know who poisoned my grandfather. I will tell you nothing more."

With a rush she was past the sheriff and out of the room.

"Peculiarly unanimous in their declarations—Garrison and Miss Anne," Tilden said dryly. Then he swung toward the door and threw up his hand. "Listen!"

CHAPTER X

OUTSIDE in the big hall there was a confused murmur of voices, and with a hurried, "Wait here, will you, and keep an eye out," the sheriff strode from the room.

Shaver was glad to be alone. Anne Bedford had utterly confused him. Was she the innocent creature she looked—or something much more sinister? She had parried Tilden's thrust as adroitly as a lawyer, yet at the end she had betrayed herself. Throwing himself into a chair beside the fire, he lighted a cigarette and stretched out his legs. He wanted to think over the girl's testimony.

And in the back of his mind something else was taking shape, something that eluded him, an impression that he had received during that afternoon session with the old man when he had been drafting the will. But try as he would to admit this idea that was knocking at the door of his mind, he could not get hold of it.

All it really was was a sort of quickening, as though a voice were saying, "Now you're getting close to it, something interesting, something important, don't you remember?" But he couldn't remember, and his thoughts kept going back to the girl.

Beyond the windows the rain and the wind battled persistently. He had been sitting there some time when the door opened and Tilden came in, accompanied by a big, burly man in a well-cut uniform.

"Captain Cox," the sheriff said, introducing the two men, "Mr. Shaver."

Captain Cox of the state police was a man in his late forties who would have been good-looking except for a pair of dark eyes set too close to his nose. But he made up for any defect in his appearance by his air of authority and the weight of his manner.

"So you got across, Captain," Shaver said pleasantly.

"Across? Oh, yes, yes. As soon as I got word this morning from the barracks I borrowed the government launch from Merripoint. Mr. Bedford was a big man, you know, a public benefactor in these parts. Poison, eh? You're the lawyer, I understand?"

Shaver did not like his tone. Tilden murmured unobtrusively, "Told the captain what we've been doing—all the evidence we have to hand."

"Tilden, I consider that you've done very well. Very well, indeed. We don't look for expert work from you fellows. Too much to expect; not in your line. Well, we're here now. I've got ten men with me, including my medical officer. From what you tell me it looks like the girl. Any ideas, Sheriff?"

"Not many," Tilden conceded with a laugh.

The captain nodded. "One of the richest men along the coast. Bedford; owns half that town over there. This is going to make a sensation. We've got to be right on the job." He turned to Shaver briskly. "That will, now—hadn't I better have a look at it?"

"No," Shaver said quietly.

"What's that?"

"No," Shaver repeated, still more quietly.

"Do you realize that I am in charge here, sir?"

"I don't care whether you're in charge or not. I don't care what you are. You're exceeding your authority when you ask me to show you that will, and you ought to know it."

"It will have to be produced finally."

"I am going now to telephone to my firm for instructions. You will address all questions to them. They have been Mr. Bedford's lawyers for years, and they will inform you as they see fit." Shaver walked out of the room.

He was still waiting for Long Distance to get his number, in the little room toward the back of the hall, when he turned and found the sheriff at his elbow. Tilden's eyes were twinkling. "I take it," he said, puffing happily at a big cigar, "that you don't like our captain. Captain gave me this," and he inhaled a puff of smoke and blew it out reflectively.

"Consummate ass!"

"No." Tilden shook his head. "You're wrong. He's a good man—done a lot of good work, but a little—er—abrupt." Then, dropping his casual tone, he looked back over his

shoulder to make sure that the door was shut, but not satisfied with this he opened it and glanced into the hall. It was empty. Returning to the room, he stood with his back against the door. And now he spoke in a quick low tone from which all trace of jocularity had vanished.

"Look here, Shaver, are you in earnest—are you in on this to the finish? Good. But you ought to understand what that means. I warn you that there's going to be danger. This was a well-planned crime. And the man who gets too close on the scent is going to get his. If we're watching, we're also watched." He paused, frowning at space.

"I wish they'd sent another man instead of Cox. Cox will want to *do* things. He'll force the pace." He ruminated again. "Why was John Bedford killed? I have my own ideas. That will, now. Er—I don't know what the ethics of the thing are, but it seems to me that the most important thing to do now is to discover the old man's murderer."

Shaver looked at him. "There isn't any will."

"There isn't any what?"

"There isn't any will. The document I prepared and drew up was not signed. It's nothing but waste paper."

TILDEN'S gaze narrowed. "And it was before it could be signed that Bedford was murdered." He pondered, then asked abruptly, "May I have a look at it?"

"Come upstairs."

In the big bedroom at the end of the corridor on the second floor the sheriff stopped the young lawyer as he made a motion toward the brief case that held the interesting document. "Wait—tell me in detail again just what you did from the time you left the old man in the oval room until you went back into it again and found him dead."

With a puzzled look Shaver complied.

The sheriff threw himself into a chair and listened to the tale with closed eyes. When the young lawyer came to the sensation of drowsiness that had overpowered him after his meal, the long lean man sat up.

"Expected that—it was clearly indicated. Shaver, you were drugged. Either that cocktail or something on the tray was fixed. Never mind, never mind, go on with the story. Before you fell asleep, were you looking at the will?"

"I meant to. It was lying on the table here, beside me, and the case was just where you see it now, at my elbow. The will was on top of it."

"In plain view, then?"

"Yes."

"What happened after that?"

"Nothing that I can remember. Just as I dozed off I reached up and pulled out that light." He pointed to the lamp at the right of the chair.

"Was there any other light in the room?"

"Yes, that globe over there by the door was lit, but it was dim and didn't bother me." He reached for the brief case, but Tilden stopped him.

"No, don't look at it yet—it might blur your impression. Just try and remember exactly how you left the sheets."

"Wait." Shaver answered quickly. "Here's something. It was folded in three. I always keep a rubber band about documents of this kind. I do remember that just before I fell asleep it was lying on the middle portion with both sides up in the air like a tent, and I can distinctly recall dropping the rubber band inside on the flat portion so's I'd have it later."

"All right. No, don't touch it yet. Now—when you woke up was it just as you left it?"

"As far as I can recall, yes."

"Then what did you do?"

"When the clock struck, rousing me suddenly, I turned round in my chair, folded one side of the paper down on the other, and slipped it, just as it was, into the brief case."

"Then the will should be properly folded, with the rubber band inside on the top sheet."

"Yes."

"Now open it."

Shaver did as he was told, drawing the long white oblong carefully from the case. Tilden bent closer as he unfolded it. The rubber band was gone.

The sheriff smiled grimly. "A little too much care. Overplayed his hand. The person who wanted to see that will came in here while you were asleep and, afraid of making a single distracting motion while near you, instead of picking up the thing and unfolding it, he slid it across the surface of the brief case just as it was and carried it over to that other light."

Like a dog performing a trick he dropped on his hands and knees, and began to crawl in a direct line from the chair in which Shaver sat to the other light beside the door. He was almost at the wall when he picked up something from the rug and stood erect.

Between his fingers he held a small gray rubber band. "Well, that's settled. Someone got at you. The question is, who was it? Now let's have a look at the will itself."

SHAVER handed over the unsigned document, and the sheriff settled himself and read it carefully.

"Good Lord," he exclaimed as he put it down, "this is calculated to enrage them all! The girl gets the bulk of the money, it's true, but look at those conditions. She can't

marry until she's twenty-five, and then only with the consent of the trustees. If she does, she gets nothing. And she's in love with this chap *now*."

"I don't see how she'd benefit by the old man's death?"

"She'd stand her chance, wouldn't she, of inheriting through her father? There are only the two children, herself and the little fellow, Charles. I tell you, Shaver, the more I think this thing over, the more tangled it gets—and the blacker. That girl has resolution enough to poison an army. And strength of will. Did you notice those small, strong hands? And her self-possession was immense.

"And take Garrison," he went on. "He's nervous, and he's lying. Why did he knock over that glass that held the poison? And what was he doing out and around last night? As for Mark, ever see such a jaw on a man? And he looks as though he's in a continual fever. Of course, he gets nothing whatever in the will.

"Then there's Helfant—he could carry off anything—and we haven't examined that launch yet to check up on his alibi. Moreover, that surgery was never locked—and there's enough stuff there to put an army out of business. I don't like it, Shaver. They're all too plausible.

"Let's get back downstairs. Listen, I want to do a lot of outside work, go over that terrace outside the bedroom, give the gardens a fine-tooth comb, clear away all the dead wood. You take the inside. Hang around. Watch all these people. There's a story behind this crime, and until we know what it is we're working in the dark." He looked at his watch. "It's almost half-past ten. If I don't see you before, come up and wait for me here after lunch."

He left the room, and the young lawyer followed him a few moments later. The hall was dim and silent. He wandered into the great white-paneled drawing room and looked about. The conservatory opened off the far end, and the connecting glass doors were partially obscured by draperies—it would make an excellent post of observation.

He picked up a magazine and entered the place, settling himself in a stiff chair, and waited for something to happen. Sooner or later all the members of the household ought to drift in here, and he trusted to his good eyesight and excellent hearing to offset his distant position.

He had been reading for five minutes when he heard the drawing-room door open. Shifting his chair a little, he saw through a long slit in the velvet curtains that Mark Bedford had come into the room. Now that the man was alone he made no effort to hide his expression.

His jaw was hard-set and his gaze fixed and burning as he paced up and down with a restless driven motion between the table and the fireplace. At the end of every few turns he would stop, stand motionless, and stare straight ahead with a wild expression. Then he would start on again with increased speed.

Suddenly, without any warning, he came to an abrupt stop before the table and picked up a book. Claire Bedford had entered the room.

She stood still for a moment when she saw her husband, and then came on down past the table and seated herself in a chair close to the fire. Her eyes seemed larger and more brilliant than ever, perhaps because of the shadows beneath, and she kept glancing from the storm-swept windows to her husband and back again.

"Have they—discovered anything, Mark?" she asked after a moment, when Bedford did not speak.

"No."

Whenever she averted her gaze Mark Bedford studied her watchfully. She wore a dark dress of some kind that accentuated the lovely curves of her body and the luster of her skin. For a moment, as he stood regarding her while she looked into the fire after his curt negative, the man's sullen expression broke up, gave way to irresolution, and he took a step toward her. She turned at his motion, their eyes met, and his face settled heavily again.

At this she broke into a little breathless burst of words that seemed forced from her. "I'm afraid, Mark. I'm terribly afraid. And you don't talk to me. Everything is changed—dreadful—what's the matter? I'm horribly frightened."

THERE was no doubt that this was true. Her face was pale and her hand trembled as she took a cigarette from a box at her elbow and lighted it with a nervous movement.

"You'd better have one of those doctors look you over, then," her husband retorted roughly.

"I don't need any doctor. It's just—the awful shock. If your father had—died naturally we wouldn't have minded so much; after all, he was an old man, but this—" A shudder convulsed her.

"Forget it!" her husband said roughly. "You can't do anything about it, and if you bring on an attack of nerves, that won't help any." The man showed no softening of any kind as he stood looking down at her, his blue eyes cold, his mouth tight shut.

"I don't see how you can be so calm!" she retorted, tears coming into her eyes. "Think of the publicity, the scandal, the talk—those

awful papers will carry headlines—there'll be photographs of us all—the most intimate details of our lives will be exploited. And these policemen in the house, stamping about and turning things upside down, upsetting the servants, asking impertinent questions. The ugliness of the whole business—oh, it's dreadful—a nightmare.

"Why did we have to be selected for a visitation like this? Trouble, trouble, nothing but trouble." Her tone was bitter. "We've been hangers-on long enough. What have we ever had of your father's money? It's been all about us, but we might just as well have been paupers for all the good it's ever done us. And now—this—on top of everything."

"Oh, so that's it, is it?" Mark Bedford said in a sneering tone, striding closer and staring down into her face. "Money. That was always in your mind."

"Haven't I the right to think of the money?" she demanded, sitting up nervously. "What about Charles? Oh, don't talk to me again about the money your father settled on you at the time of your first marriage—what is it?—a miserable five hundred thousand. Riches to a poor man—but to you—to Charles—thirty thousand a year. What could you do with that? Why, we couldn't even live on it. I don't care for myself, but it's so unjust."

She got up suddenly and stood in front of him, laying her hand on his sleeve with what was almost a caress, and again for a moment it seemed as though the secret constraint between them was about to be broken by her appeal.

Then Mark Bedford drew back, not roughly but none the less decidedly, and the slim hand fell lifelessly to Claire Bedford's side. With a shrinking movement she dropped into a chair, swirling her black draperies over her slim knees, as she looked, with eyes that held more than a shadow of fright, toward her husband, who had abruptly turned his back and was again standing at the table, going on with his sullen pretense of examining the books.

"Mark," she asked, and her tone was so low that Shaver could only just catch the halting words, "what's the matter? Won't you tell me? Why did you go out last night? What were you doing? Won't you talk to me?"

The thickset figure whirled with lightning speed, and the man's face was distorted with rage as he glared down into the terrified one lifted to his. "I'm your husband. The law regards us as one. You'd better not—for your own sake—attempt to ask too many questions."

Before she could open her lips again he left the room.

CHAPTER XI

IN THE silence that followed Mark Bedford's abrupt departure Shaver was afraid to move. What was the dead man's son hiding and why did the question of his whereabouts at the time of his father's death enrage him so? Then he transferred his attention to the woman in the chair.

She lay back, her eyes closed, breathing deeply between parted lips, while her hands, startlingly white against the black stuff of her gown, moved restlessly, twining themselves in and out. She looked down and contemplated them for a moment, then returning her head wearily to the cushions she shut her eyes, and Shaver thought—he could not be sure—that tears were making their way from beneath her eyelids.

The little clock on the mantel chimed half-past eleven, and at the same time the door opened again, and this time Helfant's tall figure appeared. So intent was Shaver on the scene before him that the magazine on his knee slipped and dropped to the floor. At the sound Claire Bedford raised her head.

"What's that?" she cried in a startled tone.

"What's what?" Helfant asked, walking down the room until he faced her.

"That in there." She sprang to her feet and pointed toward the music room.

Shaver threw himself back in his chair and closed his eyes as the doctor strode to the glass door and flung it open. With a faint and rhythmic snore the young lawyer simulated sleep. For a second Helfant remained still and Shaver thought that he had turned away, when the Doctor said over his shoulder:

"It's just Mr. Shaver asleep in here, Mrs. Bedford. He's a wise man."

At the sound of his voice Shaver opened his eyes and stood up.

"Excuse me," he murmured. Then, "Awake half the night."

"Like the rest of us," Helfant said, smiling. His face sobered. "Come in here, Mr. Shaver, and talk to Mrs. Bedford." As the younger man joined him and they passed through the doorway together, he added in a lower tone, "Don't say anything to alarm her. She's shaky."

As they approached, Claire Bedford sat up in her chair. She was making a strong effort to appear normal.

She ran her hands through her hair, crossed one knee over the other, and cried, "Give me a cigarette, please." She accepted a light from Shaver. Then, with a little laugh, "Yes. Don't look at me like that, you

two men. I know I'm upset, but I'm not going to faint or have hysterics. Tell me, Doctor, have they discovered anything?"

The nervous eagerness of her tone was poorly concealed. The doctor glanced malevolently out of the window at the storm.

"Damn the weather—I beg your pardon—but if it weren't for that I'd pack you two women, you and Miss Anne, into a boat and take you for a ride somewhere. You're both strung up to top notch, and if you're not careful something's going to snap." He looked at Claire indulgently, then at Shaver. "Anything, anything to take their minds off this horrible tragedy."

The door opened, and Anne Bedford came in. She stopped short at sight of the group beside the fire, and as the doctor jumped up she said, "Good-morning. Morning, Claire," and then, with an expression of hardness that reminded Shaver of her father, "I see we're an island completely surrounded by police this morning."

Unlike her stepmother, the young girl had made no effort at mourning attire. Her dress was white, girdled about the hips with a soft green leather belt, but her face belied the freshness of her costume. She looked troubled and tired in spite of the force of her tone and manner.

Shaver said to himself as she sat down and took a cigarette. "There's strength there," and he wondered for a moment why she was able to dominate the situation so much more completely than the older woman. He recalled Tilden's drawled statement, "Oh, it might have been either of them," and he looked at both women afresh with a peculiar sense of nightmare.

"Bridge? How about a game of bridge?"

For a second Claire Bedford stared at the physician, her lip trembling, but Anne welcomed the brisk suggestion. "Excellent," she said, jumping up and throwing her cigarette into the fire. "No, don't ring. I'm afraid a policeman will answer the bell. I'll get the things."

Five minutes later they were seated about the card table in front of the fire, and Helfant was nimbly shuffling the deck. "Penny a point," he said. "And no cheating!"

THEY were, all four of them, making a tremendous effort: Shaver to conceal his interest in his companions; the others, to conceal—Heaven knew what. For almost an hour they played. The conversation was light but—except on Mrs. Bedford's part—not particularly nervous. And yet the strain was terrific. Outside the windows the wind and the rain kept up a ceaseless duet, and beyond the door into the hall blue-clad figures scurried, intent on the solution of the crime.

Shaver was dummy when the door opened and Mark Bedford, followed by Captain Cox, severe and towering, came into the room. The other players dropped their cards, and all four faces were turned inquiringly on the newcomers. There was no doubt that the state officer was shocked at the sight of these people occupying themselves in so irreverent a manner.

"I would like to have Mrs. Bedford's deposition," he said severely.

Claire Bedford rose. "Count my winnings, Anne," she said over her shoulder as she moved away with Cox to the far end of the room.

Shaver took particular note of the fact that the girl added the score correctly and counted the money that Helfant laughingly disgorged. She shoved his share across the table to the young lawyer, saying, "Claire is cuckoo, isn't she? She owes us each four dollars and thirty cents."

Her hands were steady and her face calm, and yet Shaver was sure he could detect a throb of excitement in her low, controlled tone. From the other two near the windows, question and answer, question and answer. The captain's deep voice, full of the majesty of the law, bore down heavily on the stillness.

The three still seated at the table remained silent, for the most part, with the exception of desultory comments on the weather. Shaver wondered what Tilden was doing, what he would make of all this if he were here.

Mark Bedford sat in an armchair some little distance away from the two groups, his face buried in his hands, a lonely, almost a commanding, figure in his immobility. The clock on the mantel chimed one. Simultaneously four musical notes rang dimly in the hall outside.

"Lunch." Anne Bedford rose and settled her belt firmly around her hips. Cox said, "Thank you, Mrs. Bedford," and Claire Bedford, with a little tired motion, passing her hand across her forehead, answered, "Yes. You're coming into the dining room with us, Captain? You must be famished after all your work." And the entire party, Mark Bedford bringing up the rear, crossed the hall and entered the dining room.

"Another place, Plimpton," Mrs. Bedford murmured to the butler, who was holding her chair. "We shall be six."

The alteration was deftly made, and after a momentary hesitation chairs were pulled out and they seated themselves. Dr. Garrison's place between Shaver and the young girl remained empty. After the soup had been served Claire Bedford said to the butler in a low tone, "Send someone to Dr. Garrison's room, please, and tell him that luncheon is on the table. He probably didn't hear the gong."

Shaver was watching Mark Bedford with close attention. The heavy, phlegmatic man was like a person in a trance; all his actions had a mechanical perfection which his restless eyes contradicted. The talk broke out in a spatter, died away, was revived again.

The most natural person at the table was the young girl. The captain alone preserved an uncompromising silence, attacking his meal with vigor and decision and with a becoming sense of the gravity of the occasion.

Suddenly the hall door was thrown open and a tall young footman faced the assembled gathering.

"He ain't there," the footman announced baldly. The butler moved forward. "Dr. Garrison is not in his room," he translated.

Shaver saw a small white hand lower a teacup with a trembling movement and withdraw. No one spoke. But Cox was already on his feet striding toward the door. In the pause that followed his abrupt departure they could all hear the commotion that was immediately set on foot.

Sharp orders, the tramping of feet, impatient questions, the opening and closing of distant doors broke the ordered stillness. Within a few minutes a thorough search of the house had been made, but the young doctor was nowhere to be found. Troopers with big blue ulsters buttoned about their throats were sent into the storm to beat up the gardens.

MEANWHILE in the dining room the pretense of a meal moved on. Plates were taken away, to be replaced by other plates. Bedford sat moodily in his chair, staring at the table cloth. Claire Bedford drank cup after cup of tea thirstily and smoked one cigarette after another.

The young girl, her head bent, looked at the twined fingers of her clasped hands, her face a mask except for an occasional dilation of the sensitive nostrils. The search, carefully carried out, was evidently fruitless, for Cox, although his men were still scattered over the more distant parts of the island, came into the room shaking his head.

"Mr. Bedford, I'd like you to tell me how many boats you've got," he said sharply. "Want to check up on them."

Their host turned an astonished face on the captain. "But you don't think Dr. Garrison deliberately left the house in a storm like this—I mean—to get away?"

Cox smiled. He was not talking. The whole business was queer. "He's gone, anyway, Mr. Bedford. That's all we know. The boats?"

"There's a service launch, a speed boat, and a dory. Then there's a Cape Cod rowboat with an outboard motor, and a lot of small rowboats. I think that's about all."

Bedford, for the first time, was interested, and his face, with the stir of life on it, had become much more prepossessing. Shaver, sitting quietly in his chair, had missed nothing, and he noted with surprise that Cox had, after all, a species of intelligence.

He was not giving away what he thought to these people. As soon as Bedford had finished giving him the list of boats, Cox went to the door and dispatched a trooper to examine the boat house. The captain came back.

"When was Garrison last seen?" he asked. "Anyone here talking to him this morning?"

"He was at breakfast when I came in," Shaver said. "He went to his room directly after that—I should say about half-past eight."

"And you, Dr. Helfant?"

Helfant shook his head. "No. I was in my own bedroom doing some reading until almost lunch time. I know I could never get out in this." He waved toward the windows.

"Oh, but surely," hazarded Claire Bedford, "he must be somewhere around. No one would attempt the crossing with that wind. It would be madness."

A trooper appeared in the doorway. "The Cape Cod rowboat's gone, sir," he announced. Cox left the room. As the door closed behind him it was Anne Bedford who spoke—for the first time—and she seemed to have difficulty in getting out the words.

"What is he going to do?"

Shaver answered her. "Send out a general alarm, I guess. So as to catch Garrison if he turns up anywhere along the coast."

She gave a little gasp, and the young lawyer wanted to turn and look at her, but his attention at that moment was sharply drawn to another point. His chair was placed in such a way that he faced the windows. These in turn overlooked, from between encroaching trees, almost leafless now, a stretch of rolling lawn laid like a handkerchief at the foot of the towering pines that obliterated all but a gray sliver of storm-swept sky.

And it was the sight of something—a man—crossing that distant square of shorn grass that had attracted Shaver's eye. The figure—certainly not a trooper, from his dress—was hurrying with bent head and rapid strides toward the cover of a copse of birches slanting sharply sideways under the lash of the wind.

Something in the man's build, in his gait, reminded Shaver of the butler, Plimpton. And just before the furtive, quickly moving figure disappeared from sight he became sure. Five minutes previously the man had been in the dining room removing the last course and placing fresh cigarettes and cigars. Now he was scurrying on some secret errand. Where to? With a word of excuse

to Mrs. Bedford, Shaver got up and left the room.

Just outside the front door he met Tilden, and the two men started in pursuit of the nimble servant. To the right the ground sloped away in a succession of small hills and valleys, culminating everywhere beyond the cleared spaces in low underbrush and heavy pines. As they descended the slope through a rock garden and came out in the meadowland beyond they saw no sign of the figure they were looking for, but they did see, through waving tree branches, the roofs and chimneys of a small house.

KEEPING to the left, and taking advantage of the cover of the birch copse toward which Plimpton had been making, they emerged two hundred yards farther on, at the edge of the garden surrounding the pretty little Queen Anne cottage, its face obscured by furiously driven sheets of rain.

His coat collar turned up about his ears and his hat pulled low over his eyes to keep off the lash of the wind, Shaver followed Tilden's cautious approach to a glimmering stretch of lighted windows in the wall nearest them.

A masking border of laurel received the two careful figures. Secure from observation in that post, both men bent forward and peered through the leaded panes just on a level with their eyes. It was a living room into which they found themselves looking.

A woman—Mrs. Trenchard, Claire Bedford's mother—was standing with her back to them, so that they could not see her expression. But every line of her figure, held rigidly erect, suggested tension. And opposite to her and near the door, the butler, in an irreproachable attitude of respectful attention, was saying something. He must have asked her a question, for presently she shook her head.

"If we could only hear," Tilden grunted, his eyes fastened on the meaningless pantomime being enacted in the comfortably furnished room behind the glass. Suddenly the woman dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands as the butler took a step toward her. He looked threatening, and he raised a hand to emphasize whatever he was saying. Then with a low bow he turned and left the room.

Tilden and Shaver crouched down among the bushes. They saw Plimpton stride down the walk and out of sight. A thousand questions teased Shaver's brain as he watched. What was the connection between Claire Bedford's mother and her butler? What hold had he over the woman to cause her such obvious fright? And why had he been so anxious to avoid observation of his little trip?

Shaver glanced at Tilden, but the latter's face was inscrutable as he made his way out into the gardens and mounted the stone steps to the front door. His loud rap was answered by a trim maid.

"Mr. Tilden's compliments, and would Mrs. Trenchard oblige him with the favor of a few moments of her time?"

The girl went away and returned in a minute to say that her mistress was indisposed. But Tilden would not be denied. Her anxiety to escape them was suspicious. She must have something to hide.

"Just tell Mrs. Trenchard, please, that it's the police and that we will not detain her long," he said firmly.

The second time the girl ushered them into the hall and through a door on the left. They were standing on the threshold of the very room into which they had peered from the garden.

Apparently Mrs. Trenchard had never left it, for she rose from her chair at their entrance and stood looking at them in silent inquiry. Her face was composed now, but she had evidently been crying. She acknowledged Shaver's bow and Tilden's word of introduction with the very faintest inclination of her head and waited for them to speak.

"You have heard the news—heard of Mr. Bedford's terrible death?" the sheriff said.

"Yes, I am shocked, deeply shocked. It seems incredible." She had a grip on herself now, and with a more imperious manner she asked them to sit down. Tilden shook his head.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Trenchard. We came to find out whether there was anything you could tell us, any slight detail that might lead to a clue." All the time that he was talking his eyes kept wandering over the room.

"I'm afraid I can't help you a bit," the woman answered. "You see, I came down here after tea yesterday, for it looked like a storm, and I wanted to get home before it began. I dined here alone and went to bed early. So that I saw no one this morning. Tell me, Mr. Tilden, have the police any idea . . . No? My poor Claire and Mark must be half mad—they're so devoted. What a horrible crime! He was poisoned—and there seems to be no motive."

Mrs. Trenchard was trying hard to keep the sheriff's eyes from straying, and as she spoke she moved until her figure completely blocked a small magazine stand close to the chair in which she had been sitting.

"May I smoke?" Tilden asked, unlimbering his pipe and loading the brown bowl with care while Shaver answered the older woman's questions. Her agitation was deep and sincere, whatever its source. Tilden

stepped past her to throw a few crumbs of tobacco into the brightly burning fire, and she turned nervously, but not in time to prevent his movement.

From the magazine stand he had picked up a man's brown leather left-hand glove. "What's this?" he asked brusquely.

"That? Oh, a glove. One of the men's at the house, I guess. They come in to tea sometimes in the afternoon." The pitch of Mrs. Trenchard's voice had altered curiously.

"It's been wet lately. Whoever wore it was caught in the rain. If it belongs to anyone up there in the house I might as well return it. If not . . ." He looked up at the woman searchingly, but she said nothing more.

Ten minutes later the two men reëntered the big shadowy hall of the sprawling house on the hill above. It was empty, and they were advancing toward the staircase when a trooper stepped out of the oval room. "Captain Cox would like to see you in there —that room where the telephones are," he said.

Tilden opened the door and then stood still, surveying the scene that confronted him.

CHAPTER XII

BEHIND the small Empire desk, comfortably furnished with telegraph and cable blanks, stamped envelopes and engraved paper, sat the captain of the state police in all the majesty that he could summon to his assistance.

Behind him stood two troopers, and in front, a housemaid in gray and white, a girl of not more than nineteen, twisting a corner of her apron in her hand. Her young face was flushed and her eyes round with alarm.

Cox glanced up as Shaver and Tilden entered. "Ah, Sheriff, just the man I want to see. Been checking up on time-tables. Did you or did you not tell me that according to her own testimony Miss Bedford went upstairs to her room and to bed at half-past ten?"

"Right," Tilden said curtly.

"This maid was waiting for her mistress in her bedroom. Miss Bedford came up all right and dismissed her at once because she was suffering." He turned back to the girl. "You may omit the symptoms of toothache. Now, when you came downstairs again a few minutes later what did you find?"

"Miss Bedford was not in her room. It was empty."

The quivering tone carried conviction. Shaver was trying to piece this information into the puzzle. Anne Bedford had been somewhere about the house on the night of her grandfather's murder. Was she the author of that sound in the old man's bedroom?

Tilden did not seem surprised. He was looking thoughtfully at the maid.

"Go on," Cox said with a triumphant glance at the two men. "What did you do then?"

"I waited for a minute, sir, and then I walked to the top of the front staircase and listened, but I didn't hear anything, so I went back along the corridor, meaning to call Cook and see if she had any toothache gum or anything else that would stop the pain."

"What happened then?"

"I opened the door of the back staircase that goes up to our rooms on the third floor. Then I saw something white coming toward me down the hall. I was frightened. At first I thought it was a ghost. Then I saw that it was Miss Anne.

"She was carrying one of those brass candlesticks as she's so fond of, and her face was that pale . . . She never saw me. She went into her room and shut the door. But she looked so strange I didn't dare go back.

[*Turn page*]

I ran upstairs and got into bed, and I fell asleep after awhile, and I never knew what had happened until this morning."

"Now, Gladys, Miss Bedford dismissed you at half-past ten as soon as she came upstairs. What time was it when you went back to her room?"

The girl hesitated, driven finally to the admission, after a good deal of heckling from Cox, that it must have been about ten minutes of eleven.

At the captain's nod she bolted like a rabbit through the door held open by a trooper and vanished.

There was a moment's silence, then Cox said, addressing Tilden:

"You told me, I think, Sheriff, that Dr. Garrison was also out and about after half-past ten?"

Tilden nodded without speaking, his hands in his pockets, his lips closed firmly as he digested the housemaid's story.

"I think the time has come for me to interview this young lady."

"Wouldn't do any harm." Tilden conceded, his jaws moving in and out, his eyes on the ground. A trooper was accordingly dispatched and the little group in the small room waited in silence for the girl to appear.

She came almost immediately, opening the door herself and standing just inside the room, glancing inquiringly toward Cox, who had risen at her entrance, and then with a trace of wonder at Tilden and Shaver and the remaining trooper in the background.

"Miss Bedford," Cox began without preamble, "the housemaid Gladys has just been here. You told Mr. Tilden earlier, I believe, that you retired to your room at half-past ten with the rest of the household and went to bed. Is that correct?"

The girl stared at him watchfully, but did not answer.

"You did not say," he continued in a sharper tone, "that you left your room later, when everybody was out of the way, and came downstairs again."

Anne Bedford eyed him, her face expressionless.

Cox waited for her to speak, but she remained silent.

"Yes," he went on heavily, "you left your room and came downstairs—for what purpose?"

There was no answer. The captain's eyes narrowed.

"At some time during the course of the evening, at some time before a quarter-past eleven, prussic acid was dropped into that barley water that killed Mr. Bedford. We have to find the agent who introduced it. If you know anything—and if you were about you *must* know something—it is your duty to tell us now."

A FAINT smile flickered across the girl's white face. "In other words," she said in a low, clear voice, "you want to know whether or not I killed my grandfather with poison. Well—I did not. Is that sufficient?"

"Come, Miss Bedford," Cox answered with a sarcastic smile, "you're answering my question with a totally irrelevant one. If you have something to conceal I can understand that, but you may be sure that the truth will be extracted, if not here, somewhere else, by due process of law. An exact account of your own movements might have cleared the air. However—" he shrugged and turned toward Tilden.

"We've got Garrison—nabbed him just as he was beaching his boat at Lawson's Point—so we have another exceedingly useful line to pursue."

A glance of intelligence passed between the two men, and Shaver, watching them closely, saw that Cox was pulling a bluff. But Anne Bedford was deceived. Her indifference vanished as she stood looking from one to the other. But when she spoke, so thorough was her control, her voice was clear. She seemed to weigh each word.

"What you say is quite true. Yes, last night I did come downstairs after we all went up to our rooms."

"Now perhaps we'll get *at* something," Cox said triumphantly. "You came downstairs again. You did not, by any chance, pay a little visit to that surgery back there?" His sneering tone was an accusation in itself.

Anne Bedford looked into his face. "Yes," she answered quietly.

In his astonishment Cox thrust his body half across the table and shot back heavily, "So you went into that surgery, did you?—careful no doubt to avoid observation. And after that, may I ask, did you go on into that dining room down the hall? . . . Oh, you did! You went into the dining room. And what did you do in the dining room?"

There was a pause. The girl still stared straight at her inquisitor, but she was very white.

"Did you, by any chance, put what you had obtained from the surgery into your grandfather's flask of barley water?"

There was a gasp from the assembled gathering. The girl put her hand to her throat, and her eyes, which had been so unwavering in their gaze, traveled swiftly from face to face with a movement that suggested terror.

"Answer!" shouted Cox. "Did you put what you had taken from that surgery into your grandfather's flask of barley water?"

"Yes." The monosyllable was so low that it scarcely reached the ears of the spellbound listeners. Someone moved.

"Wait." The girl put up a trembling hand. "You have questioned me cruelly. Now will

you permit me to speak?" She sought composure somewhere—and found it; and as she began again in a low but perfectly audible voice, Shaver, watching her narrowly, could not determine whether it was the effrontery of guilt or the consciousness of innocence that had given her strength when she most needed it.

"You have outlined my movements perfectly, Captain Cox. I did exactly what you say I did. But the thing I put into my grandfather's flask was a sleeping powder, and I did it with his knowledge—we had arranged it that way during the afternoon. I knew just where they were in the surgery, for Dr. Helfant has given them to me more than once when I couldn't sleep. My grandfather couldn't sleep, either. The doctor refused to give him anything because of his heart. But I knew that the loss of his rest was worse for him than anything—and I determined that he should sleep. I tried to do it secretly, for otherwise they would have stopped me."

Her words had come faster toward the end, and there was a faint color in her cheeks as she looked straight at Cox, searching his face with her eyes. And then the captain laughed. It was a short bark of contempt and disbelief. The sound seemed to electrify the girl. She put her hand to her throat, and her eyes darkened.

"Ask Dr. Helfant to step in here," Cox ordered.

The trooper left the room and returned almost immediately with Helfant at his heels. The doctor looked about wonderingly as he came to a halt just inside the door.

"Doctor," Cox asked brusquely, "do you keep sleeping powders in an accessible place in that surgery of yours?"

"They are there, certainly," Helfant answered without hesitation.

"This woman would know where to put her hand on them?" He waved toward the girl.

"I think so—yes. All the drugs are together on a shelf under the windows. But what—"

"Never mind that now. I'm doing the questioning. The bottle of prussic acid was there, too?"

"Yes."

"This young lady couldn't possibly mistake one for the other?"

Helfant did not attempt to answer this. He frowned and looked angrily at the captain. "I don't understand what you're getting at," he said coldly.

"That isn't necessary, Doctor. Just tell me this. Would that sleeping medicine dissolve readily in barley water?"

"Yes."

"Now would you know if one of those powders had been taken?"

The doctor hesitated, but he was forced to answer: "Yes. I made up a fresh box yesterday morning. They are quite harmless, though. For the life of me I can't see—"

"Never mind. How many were there in that box?"

"Twelve."

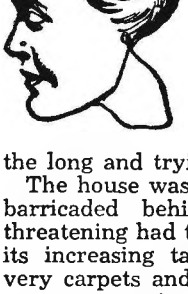
"Then if there are only eleven in it now we will know that this young lady has been telling us a straight story." He turned to the trooper. "Just step into the surgery with Dr. Helfant until he gets that box."

The few seconds that the two men were out of the room seemed interminable. Then Helfant entered with a small green cardboard box in his hand which he gave to the captain of the state police. In the little room not even the noise of the storm could be heard. It was intensely still. The only sound was the shuffling of the oblong papers as they fell one by one on the shining top of the desk.

". . . eight, nine, ten"—every eye was fastened on the little pile—"eleven," Cox said, and then, raising his eyes as he lifted the last, "twelve."

Before anybody could speak or move, Shaver was at the girl's side. After one long stare of terror she had toppled over.

CHAPTER XIII



DUSK had come at last, a storm-filled, furiously battling dusk which lowered itself about the windows of the house on the island with a suggestion of gloom and horror which even the most strong-minded of the occupants found difficult to throw off at the end of the long and trying day.

The house was very still within, its people barricaded behind closed doors, and so threatening had the atmosphere become with its increasing tangle of suspicion that the very carpets and chairs, walls and hangings gave out an air of subtle menace as though, momentarily, they might move and speak, precipitating some tragedy that seemed to be coming closer and closer with the passing of each hour.

In the young lawyer's big comfortable room at the end of the corridor on the second floor two men were sitting before the fire: Branch, the young police surgeon who had just come in, a brisk bullet-headed young man with a pineapple haircut, and a hard, practical blue eye; and the sheriff, long legs stretched toward the blaze, his lazy eyes bright between half-closed lids.

Behind them Shaver stood with his back

to the room, peering out into the thickening dimness as though he were watching for something. From time to time he called a pair of excellent field glasses to his aid. And after each survey he signaled the negative result to Tilden.

Branch was talking about the young girl who had been carried to her room after that scene in the little office. Outside her door a blue-clad trooper had been stationed by the vigilant captain.

"Nerve's gone," Branch said, "—and small wonder. She and this Garrison have been carrying on some sort of game, and now the whole thing's been spilled. I suppose they were trying to manipulate the old man—get a slice of the pie. Looks pretty black for both of them."

Tilden nodded. "You've made the autopsy?"

"Yes—just got through. Everything's in order. Five nice little jars to go to our toxicologist."

"Find out anything definite? I mean, would you hazard a guess at this stage?"

Branch answered: "I wouldn't hazard a guess: I'd swear, just between ourselves of course, that the old man was killed by a dose of that hydrocyanic acid from that bottle in the surgery. Where else could it have come from? The minute the body was opened I smelled it. That passed away instantly and couldn't be produced as evidence, but analysis of the stomach will tell the tale. It's a clear case—no possibility of doubt."

"Queer that the old man didn't smell it," Tilden said.

"Not at all," Branch replied. "He had a cold in his head, I understand."

"Ah! Now doesn't it strike you as odd, Branch, that neither of those other two doctors knew right away that the old man had been poisoned? They both gave it as their opinion at first that he had died naturally."

"No, I don't think it's at all strange when you take this into consideration: you've got to be exceedingly careful in diagnosing poison at any time, and it seemed to be absolutely out in this case when the symptoms could—and did—so closely resemble those produced by a heart seizure.

"Hydrocyanic acid is one of the most deadly poisons known to science. To inhale the vapor is fatal. And the symptoms it would produce would be those of a violent seizure of the heart. The respiration becomes difficult, expiration prolonged, the pulse imperceptible, the eyes get glassy and staring, with the pupils dilated. Then there's a general collapse, followed by coma and death within a period of from two to fifteen minutes after absorption."

"But the odor," persisted Tilden. "I should think that either Garrison or Helfant would have smelled it when they bent over the old man—or Shaver here, for the matter of that. Of course, Shaver wasn't as close to him as they were."

THE doctor shook his head. "It's exceedingly volatile and evaporates almost instantly."

"And yet when Shaver picked up the flask and opened it he got the bitter almond smell immediately."

"Of course; that only bears out what I've been saying. The thing was corked up, and there might still have been a few drops of liquid in it. And as far as Helfant and Garrison go, you've got to take this into consideration also: they're doctors. And this case has got to go to a jury.

"Now, remember that there was no circumstantial or moral evidence of poisoning at all. For instance, a motive established in advance, or the buying or unlawful possession of the drug. That lets them out. But we've got the case cinched, of course, with the chemical evidence, which will be the analysis of the flask and the glass out of which the old man drank—and with the post-mortem, when they get through with the organs in the laboratory."

"Hold up, Doctor," Tilden interrupted. "You said just now that this hydrocyanic acid was one of the most poisonous things in the world. Why should Helfant have such a thing in his surgery? It isn't common to have it around, is it?"

"Ordinarily, no—although it's used in an exceedingly dilute form for cough medicines. But Helfant's an experimentalist. He's got a fine equipment down there—and that reminds me, I want to get some of that bromide from him for that girl.

"So if I've told you all you want to know I'll travel along." He stood up with a yawn. "Want a feed, too. Was routed out at an unearthly hour this morning by Cox, and that was some tough crossing, I'll tell the world."

"Just one more question," Tilden said. "That bullfinch in the cage down there. The old man was in the habit of giving him a cracker broken up in a little of his barley water. Would it kill the bird?"

"Most emphatically, although I'd have to look up the dose. Animals are queer. A rabbit can take more morphine or atrophine than a man who weighs fifty times as much. Amygdalin kills rabbits but not dogs. An adult man can't bear as much strychnine as the smallest snail. and hedgehogs are immune from this very hydrocyanic acid. Another funny thing: while dogs are narcotized by morphine, they can take larger doses than most men, although it crazes cats, horses, cows, and so on."

But Tilden was no longer listening. Wrap-

ped in his own thoughts, he sat still as Branch nodded and left the room. Meanwhile Shaver continued to peer out into the gloom that was fast thickening into absolute darkness. At last the sheriff spoke, after a long period of musing.

"I want to know where that little glass is that you found on the floor under that bird cage on the night of the murder. That's got me going. It's foolish. It's stupid. What was it doing there if it had not been used? And if it had not been used it had no significance and should be of no interest to anyone.

"Now it's quite evident from what Branch said that the bird couldn't have had any of that barley water. But if he didn't, why not? Try as I will my mind keeps going back to that point."

Shaver turned without leaving his post at the window. "Didn't the girl insist that she put a sleeping powder into the flask? Wouldn't that explain the old gentleman's not giving the bird any?"

"Perhaps. Although I doubt whether such a small amount would have any effect. But there you're up against another question: did she, or did she not, put the bromide in the barley water?"

"Well, if she did—and an analysis ought to show it—then she's innocent."

"Not at all," Tilden said coolly. "I told you before that I thought this was an exceedingly well-planned murder. She may simply have been arranging a skillful cover-up. And in this case she would have been wise. I have no doubt at all that she dropped that string of white coral beals when she came downstairs after everybody was in bed. Now——"

"Look here," Shaver interrupted, "you know, if I'd been Helfant I don't think I would have told Cox how many powders were in that box. It makes the case against her very strong—it's the sort of evidence that would go big with a jury. You can't argue it away."

Tilden gazed at him thoughtfully. "Don't forget that this is a case of murder. He had to tell the truth. Besides, he didn't know, when the question was asked, just where it was leading. He couldn't know. Of course, he might have been lying.

"But we're not through with the doctor yet, by any manner of means. Only I don't see how, at this point, we can accuse him of deliberate falsehood. That would be tantamount to calling him the criminal, and that would be too far-fetched right now. No, on the face of it, Miss Anne is in Dutch at the present moment."

A sudden exclamation from the lawyer stopped him. Shaver was focusing the glasses and peering out into the storm. "There's something moving out there—can you see?—beyond that pine."

Even without glasses Tilden's sharp eyes found the object that had attracted the lawyer's attention. Two minutes later both men were outside the house racing swiftly through the storm in the direction taken by the fugitive. The house was now back of them, and whoever was out there in front of them had waited for the darkness to pursue some secret errand.

IN THE shelter of a group of pines Tilden stood still to consider.

"Plimpton?" Shaver suggested, snatching the chance to light a cigarette.

The sheriff shook his head. "No. I got the idea that it was a woman. But we'd better hurry." He started off again through the slashing rain. They passed rapidly through the deserted rock garden without meeting anyone, and mounted the steep rise to the north. But it was not until the thin, ghostly birches shivering in the wind barred their path that Shaver recognized their whereabouts.

Two hundred feet below stood the Queen Anne cottage, the windows of the living room winking brightly through the murk. As unobtrusively as shadows they made their way across the wide stretch of lawn to the spot close under the leaded casement where they had taken up their stand earlier in the day.

But here a disappointment awaited them. For some reason or other the curtains which had been open a few moments before were now tightly drawn, and absolutely nothing could be seen of the interior of the room. The sheriff deliberated, and then with a glance about to see that no one was watching he began a tour of the walls, with Shaver at his heels.

But for some windows on the third floor, tenanted probably by the servants, the entire place, with the exception of that room in front, was dark. To get a glimpse of that room and to overhear, if possible, what was going on there was Tilden's object.

A beam from his electric torch shot out, playing over the surface of the back door. A moment later there was the tinkle of metal as the sheriff inserted a key in the lock and turned it softly. The door opened, and they stepped over the threshold.

Listening intently, Tilden felt about with his hands, Shaver standing motionless behind him. Convinced that there was no one around in these nether regions, the sheriff sent his light traveling again.

A brief examination disclosed kitchen and service rooms on their right, and on their left a pantry and a dining room beyond. Out in front of them, at the end of the passage in which they stood, lay the main hall, and it

was from this hall that the living room opened.

Switching off his torch, the sheriff pushed open the door and they stood still in the big, dimly lighted front hall. To their left now was the wide sweep of the staircase, and on the right the living room.

Switching off the lamp at the foot of the stairs and plunging the place into absolute darkness, the sheriff moved cautiously across to the closed door and stood listening with all his ears.

Someone was talking inside the room—a woman; then Shaver recognized Mrs. Trenchard's voice—but it was a very different voice from that which she had used in her guarded answers to Tilden earlier in the day. The woman was speaking now with a dull sort of passion which manifested itself even through the barrier of wood. If they could only see!

Yet the young lawyer caught his breath when Tilden turned the door knob without a sound, applying his eye to the long thin crack of light he had exposed. When nothing happened he dropped on one knee and peered into the room on his own account. At first he could see nothing, and then as the crack widened a fraction of an inch he caught a glimpse of a seated figure at the far end.

It was a woman. She was sitting behind a table and her head was buried in the crook of one extended arm. But even though her face was hidden, the light from the lamp fell on her coppery hair, and Shaver could scarcely prevent a quick intake of his breath.

It was Clairie Bedford. And as he recalled the stealthy method of her exit from the house above, and the statement that they had overheard her making to Plimpton that she was going to her room to rest until dinner and was not to be disturbed, his bewilderment deepened. Why should she not come openly to see her mother? Was she afraid of attaching someone's suspicion to the older woman? What was going on?

As he watched she raised her head, and looking toward the spot where Mrs. Trenchard was evidently standing, she began to speak. Her face was pale, and her luminous eyes had heavy shadows beneath.

"You are always ready to take Mark's side. I am doing all I can with him. Of course he's different—changed. Don't you suppose I know that?" She gave a bitter laugh. "Question him? I have questioned him. Look." She pushed back the loose sleeve of her gown. On the white rounded forearm there were ugly purple bruises.

"That's what I got for my pains. Why do you ask *me* what he was doing out on the night his father was poisoned? I tell you I went to my room and to bed. I know nothing whatever about his movements. And as he absolutely refuses to meet me on the common ground even of civility, I can't—and I won't—do anything more."

There was the sound of a stifled sob from Mrs. Trenchard. But Claire Bedford continued to stare straight in front of her, her gaze hard and fixed. "Don't, Mother," she said impatiently. "You'd better come back to the house with me. If you stay here alone you're simply going to go on imagining ridiculous things. Come, get your coat."

The watchers waited for nothing more. Tilden pulled the door shut noiselessly, and both men beat a stealthy retreat. They got to the door at the back of the hall just in time, and as they groped their way through the back passage they heard Mrs. Trenchard exclaim, "Who turned the hall light off?" and Claire Bedford's indifferent answer.

"The bulb must have blown." It was a narrow squeak. Shaver did not draw a clear breath until they were outside again in the storm-swept darkness, making their way quickly back to the house by the shortest route.

CHAPTER XIV

THEY reached the wide stretch of lawn on the hill above in time to see the two women hurrying under the porte-cochère, and then Tilden pulled out his watch.

"Ten minutes of six," he said. "Look here, we're wet now, and we might as well finish our work out here. Suppose we get that matter of Helfant's alibi cleared up? He said he started out the other night and was forced to turn back because of engine trouble in that launch. How about it?"

Shaver nodded his agreement, and they turned around again. The force of the wind as it struck them sideways was now terrific, for the storm was growing steadily worse. Holding his hat with both hands, the lawyer staggered along in the rear through the slashing rain.

Just as they reached the shelter of a privet-lined walk that led directly to the boat house, Tilden whirled sharply and sent his torch sweeping right and left. "Thought I heard something," he muttered. "Wonder whether we're being trailed?"

But nothing suspicious was to be seen, and he wrenched open the door of the boat house, and they stepped inside with a sigh of relief.

A wide platform ran around three sides of the big building, and to this the boats were moored. They were three in number: a long, low polished speed boat in which Shaver had

made his trip to the island; a catboat with furled sails in the middle; and along the left side, the service launch. They crossed the runway and got down onto the deck of the launch.

It was a strongly built, roomy craft, designed primarily for carrying supplies to and from the mainland, but there was plenty of space in the cabin for five or six passengers. Boats were a mystery to Shaver, and he watched Tilden with deep interest as he threw a switch and started the motor.

It was cold, and for a minute or two it sputtered and spat. The sheriff gave it plenty of gas, his fingers moving nimbly, his head turned a little to one side as he listened to the firing. But when the first deafening roar had died down and the engine was running smoothly the skip was plainly audible. Something was wrong with the motor. The doctor had been telling the truth.

Tilden switched off the ignition. Rummaging through the boat's tool box, he found a roll of insulating tape and soon was busy, down on his knees. Shaver, meanwhile, climbed back to the cement runway and, seating himself comfortably with his back against a beam, he lighted a cigarette. After a few moments he became conscious of a draught about his shoulders. Thinking that the door must have been blown open, he got up and walked into the narrow dark passageway.

It was dim where he stood, the light coming from behind; nevertheless, he saw, beyond any possibility of doubt, that the outside door was being pulled shut by someone on the far side. He reached it with a bound and wrenched it open, but when he peered into the driving rain he saw no one.

He ran back to the platform and told Tilden what had happened. The sheriff listened intently as he wiped his hands on a piece of waste and followed Shaver back into the vestibule.

"Thought I was right, somebody *was* trailing us. Let's see if he's left any tracks." He found the ceiling light, switched it on, and examined the cement floor.

Separate and distinct from their own footmarks there was another set, off to one side. Tilden got down on his knees and drew a pencil line about the outside of one of these.

"Whoever the fellow was," he said, "he got a good view looking at us. He knows what we were doing. I want a piece of paper. Maybe there's some in that cabin."

He came back in a moment with a crumpled piece of brown paper with which he made a neat replica of the footprint. "That about finishes us up here. As far as the engine goes, Helfant was giving us the straight goods, the insulation's worn off one of the wires and it was lying on the cylinder head, causing a short. Now let's get back to that oval room; I want another look at it."

Ten minutes later, without meeting anyone, the two men entered the oval room after a word to the trooper at the door. There was a secret air of jubilation about the sheriff now, which Shaver was at a loss to understand. His eyes had lost their sleepy look and darted about as though he had formed some theory that he was eagerly testing out. But he did not proceed at once to work. Instead he stood for some time in the middle of the vast room, frowning thoughtfully.

"It's coming—I'm beginning to see things. I want to get into touch with headquarters in New York as soon as possible. Their report ought to be interesting. Prussic acid, now—" he went on—"a clever crime and a stupid poison. So obvious. So obvious, that is, *if discovered at once.*

"But now, if the old man's body had not been discovered until the next morning, all trace of the poison would have vanished. And it wouldn't have been discovered until the next morning, only that you happened in in response to that note. Very inconvenient, your arrival."

He paused and looked at the younger man. "Have you figured out yet what that sound in the bedroom was?"

SHAVER shook his head.

"It was the murderer coming to wash the flask and the glass out of which the old man drank. Think for a moment and you'll see it couldn't be anything else. There's a bathroom in there. Oh, this was smart.

"The old gentleman is found in the morning—dead. With all the symptoms of heart failure. There is nothing in the flask, no peculiar circumstances whatever. Neither of the doctors would have had any difficulty with the death certificate.

"Now let's take the time again. You came into this room at about twenty-six minutes of twelve. The old man rang for his barley water, and it was brought to him at a quarter past eleven. He probably drank it at once. Let's strike an average and say that he died at twenty minutes after eleven. The murderer was waiting in that room in there for the last gasp, in order to come in here and destroy the evidence.

"Yet he was here for ten minutes and he did nothing. Why? That's the thing that bothers me. Why—why?" he repeated sharply, pacing up and down the floor. From the far end of the room came a hoarse croak, and as Tilden approached the bullfinch's cage the bird croaked again and ruffled his feathers.

The sheriff stood still and looked at him intently. "Not much of a singer, is he? Perhaps he *is* mourning for the old man."

"He sang beautifully that first afternoon," Shaver answered.

Tilden opened the little door of the cage and drew the bird out carefully. Carrying it to the light, he examined its foot. "Irritated here," he pointed to the small spur at the back of the tiny leg. "Look—the band's caught under it. There, old fellow." His lean sensitive fingers moved the band up gently.

For a moment more he continued to stare at the animated bundle of feathers, at the beady eyes winking in their sockets; then he returned the bullfinch to the cage. "I've got an idea," he drawled, "—no, I won't tell you yet. First I'm going to do a little research work of my own. You stay in here—I'm going into the bedroom. If anyone comes in, give me the high sign."

Shaver sat down with his back to the still figure at the far end of the room, but presently the silence got on his nerves, and he rose and walked into the alcove to see what Tilden was doing. The sheriff was down on his knees.

He had tilted one of the lamps so that the felting with which the room was carpeted was brightly illuminated. Here and there a small rug was thrown down, and it was one of these that Tilden was shaking, slowly and carefully, as though he expected a shower of jewels to fall at his feet. Nothing of that kind happened, however.

Suddenly Shaver held up his hand and both men listened. The door from the hall into the oval room had opened, and they could hear the murmur of a woman's voice. Nothing separated the two men from a clear view of the room they had left but a heavy brocaded curtain at the end of the alcove, for the inner door was open. Cautiously Tilden pushed a fold of this curtain aside.

It was Claire Bedford who had entered, closing the door behind her. She came slowly down the room, one hand clasping a pearl necklace at her breast, the other rigid at her side, her eyes turned unwillingly toward the couch where the body of the old man lay. She looked very beautiful—and very strange. There was a passionate intensity about her whole figure. Her eyes were wide and fixed and her red lips parted a little.

To the left of the fireplace at the far end of the vast apartment was a great built-in bookcase, and it was toward this that she was moving, every step suggesting hesitancy overcome by an invincible will. Evidently she wanted something out of the bookcase and was afraid of approaching the figure of the dead man. Yet to reach the bookcase she would have to pass close to the foot of the couch on which he lay, so close that she could put out her hand and touch him.

So intent were the two concealed men on watching her that the voice that rang harshly through the room startled them both.

"What are you doing in here?" Mark Bedford had come in unnoticed and now stood close to the door, his head bent, his eyes fixed in a menacing fashion on his wife.

Claire Bedford whirled suddenly and stood staring at him, her head thrown back in a defensive attitude, her whole body braced after that first moment of fright.

"Mark. You—startled me."

She gave a shaky little laugh, and her hands dropped to her sides. "I thought it was one of those policemen. I wanted a book to quiet me, something soothing, so I came to get one of your father's Trollopes. I want to get back to sanity again." She moved toward him slowly, looking into his face. "The atmosphere of this house is suffocating. I think we'll all go mad if we don't make an effort to shake it off."

Mark Bedford stared at her without answering. She said in a lower, more insistent tone, "Mark, what is it? Why do you look at me like that? Why don't you speak to me?"

The only effect this appeal had on the man was to bring the dull red spots on his cheeks into greater prominence.

"What are you doing in here?" he repeated in the same harsh, monotonous manner.

Claire Bedford threw out her hands indignantly. "My errand is perfectly innocent. Can you say as much of your own?" she answered sharply.

Bedford's response was curious. He lurched forward and brought his hands down on her shoulders with a movement so savage that, remembering the bruises on her arm, Shaver was about to leap forward. But at this moment the door from the hall opened and a trooper thrust in his head.

"Beg pardon, sir, but I'm looking for the sheriff. Captain Cox send me. That Cape Cod boat in which Dr. Garrison got away's been smashed up on the rocks where it was washed in. His hat was crammed under one of the seats—guess he's done for."

CHAPTER XV

FOUR soft notes of the gong in the hall announced that dinner was served, and in the long living room Helfant got up from his chair and turned toward Shaver and Tilden, who were standing at one of the windows talking in low tones of what had happened in the oval room an hour before.

Even the doctor's vitality had suffered under the strain of the long day, and he looked worried and anxious as they all moved together across the hall and into the dining

room. Perhaps the fact that no one spoke openly of the strain that was becoming constantly more intense made it worse. There was a covert suspicion of everybody and everything in the very air.

They found Bedford already seated at the table when they entered the room, an empty cocktail glass beside his plate. Claire Bedford was standing at the buffet pouring the clear orange liquor from a silver shaker into the glasses on a tray which the butler was holding in his hands.

"Another, Mark?" she asked, with a friendly nod toward the new arrivals. "Sit down, everybody."

And while Plimpton placed their cocktails in front of the other three men she went around to the back of her husband's chair and filled his glass herself.

"We all need a bracer, I think," she said, slipping into the seat Shaver held for her. "I wish this storm would die down."

"I think the wind has fallen," the doctor answered. "It will probably blow itself out tonight."

The conversation circled around the storm. Tilden told of other bad northeasters, and Helfant countered with tales of hurricanes in the West Indies. They all seemed anxious to keep as far away as possible from the gruesome shadow hanging over the house. But presently, as the soup was removed, the talk died down—perhaps because the butler was out of the room and the necessity for keeping up a pretense was no longer so pressing.

Mark Bedford, less surly than usual, looked over at his wife and broke the silence with a question. "Has Anne been told about—Garrison?" An involuntary shudder, a tightening of her lips brought tension back into the room even before Claire Bedford spoke.

"No," she answered, her eyes on the cloth, twisting the stem of her glass between restless fingers. "I hadn't the courage. I think we'd better wait. Nothing is sure yet. She's had enough to bear, poor child."

She markedly kept her gaze from Helfant, but he broke the constraint which had arisen among them all at the sound of the young girl's name, by saying quietly, "You know, I feel pretty bad about that. About this afternoon. I hadn't the slightest idea of what Cox was driving at about those powders. But it's all too absurd to speak of. I don't care what the explanation is—she is no more guilty of a criminal intent than—than the man in the moon."

"And—Garrison?" Tilden asked, arranging salted almonds at the side of his plate in a little row.

The doctor glanced at him sharply. "I don't see why, because Garrison lit out, he should be suspected of murder. Perfectly innocent people have done just as foolish things before this."

"Oh, forget it for a while." Bedford spoke roughly, pushing his glass toward his wife. "Fill her up again, Claire—and let's have some champagne. I told Plimpton to ice some."

The man's voice was already a little thick, but without a word his wife tilted the shaker and gave an order to the butler as he put a plate down in front of her.

"Know what the trouble with the engine of that launch was, Doctor?" Tilden asked,

[*Turn page*]

watching the bubbles break at the top of his glass as the champagne foamed into it. "Insulation worn off and a short circuit on the first cylinder."

HELFANT grinned. "So you went down and examined it, did you? Well, I'm glad to have a clean bill of health." He had no time to say more, because the door from the hall opened at this moment and a trooper thrust his head in.

"Want me?" Tilden asked, getting up.

"Captain Cox wants to speak to you."

The sheriff found Cox in the telephone room at the back of the hall. The captain was pacing up and down with a grim look on his heavy face. He waved his hand toward the desk. "Phone's dead," he said succinctly. Shaver, who had excused himself hastily to Mrs. Bedford, was in time to see the incredulous stare which the sheriff turned upon the instrument.

"Say, Captain," the trooper interrupted, "Brown used to be with the Western Electric. What about having him follow up the wire on this end? The trouble may be somewhere on the island. Wire might have been blown down or something."

"All right, De Lancy, you go up and relieve him. He's outside the girl's room. Tell him to take Barlow and Ramsey with him: he'll need help." Then he turned to Tilden. "What do you make of the whole business, Sheriff? We don't seem to be getting anywhere. There's that girl, of course, but until we get a return on that flask we can't *do* anything."

Cox's tone now was markedly different. A good deal of his confidence was gone. Action was evidently a necessity to him, and here in this isolated spot he had struck a problem in crime that defied all ordinary mechanics. There were no fingerprints, no gunmen, no discarded weapons.

He was used to these, and his mind was like a filing cabinet. He went straight ahead, filling up each compartment with information, and then tried to draw a conclusion. The trouble now was that he had too many conclusions, too many prospective criminals, and the captain was frankly at a loss.

The sheriff grinned at him good-naturedly. "You go on back into that dining room and finish my dinner. I want to get into that oval room."

But Cox shook his head. "No, I don't want to get mixed up with these people—that's not my job."

Tilden stared at him for a moment. Then he moved toward the door. "Come on, Shaver. I want another look at that bedroom—this is as good a time as any."

"You'll let me know if you find anything?" Cox called after him anxiously.

"Sure thing," Tilden answered, as with a quick glance about to see that they were unobserved he led the way down the hall and into the oval room. "This time you stay put," he said as he motioned Shaver to a chair.

Shaver sat down and lighted a cigarette. He wished that he had finished his champagne: it might have quickened his wits. What did this latest development mean? If the telephone wire had been deliberately cut, what did it presage? More horror?

Was the invisible force which they were fighting about to make a further move? And Garrison—was he really dead? As for the scene between Claire Bedford and Mark, it was impossible to arrive at any conclusion except this—that the man was concealing something, some powerful emotion that was directing his erratic, almost mad behavior.

A long time elapsed before Tilden came back through the alcove door. Now the expression of life on the lean, saturnine face was more marked than ever as he threw himself into a chair opposite Shaver and brought his hand out of his pocket.

"At first I thought I'd just pulled another bloomer," he said, opening his fingers and staring down at the two things lying on his extended palm. Shaver followed his glance. The sheriff held in his hand the pine splinter that they had found in the morning and two tiny feathers, one a dull blue and the other tile-red.

"Why, they're out of the bullfinch!" he exclaimed.

TILDEN nodded. "Yes. No doubt about that, I guess. I found them in there on the carpet close to the wall. Now I wonder whether the old man ever let the bird out of its cage or whether—" His eyes met Shaver's.

"Suppose," he went on slowly, "that someone wanted to kill the old man. Now the death had to appear accidental—or natural rather—and with the flask rinsed out and the old man safely dead from heart failure no questions would be asked. But what were they going to do about the bird? The liquor which killed the old man would kill the bird, too. What was the logical thing to do? What would you do? Stop and think. The old man is dead—the bird is dead."

"But the bird isn't dead!"

"*This* bird isn't dead," Tilden answered quietly.

"You mean—?" Shaver cried incredulously.

"I mean," the sheriff continued, "that this was a well-thought-out crime. Nothing was left to chance. I mean that the bullfinch was the only hitch—*ergo*, find another bullfinch." He waved his hand toward the cage at the window. "And here we have him."

"Say it in English," implored Shaver,

tamping out his cigarette on the end of a match box.

"I asked you awhile ago, if you remember, what the murderer was doing during that ten minutes that elapsed after the old man's death and before you entered the room. Now I'll answer that question. He was quite busy. He was busy—I say 'he,' but I don't confine him to either sex—he was busy putting a live bullfinch into that cage and removing the dead one.

"The washing of the flask was to come after—only you interrupted that. Moreover, we have now got the explanation of the little glass you found on the floor. In his haste the murderer knocked it over without seeing it, not realizing until later that he had made a fatal blunder. Yes. Shaver, you've been a great nuisance, a very great nuisance. You'll want to watch your step."

The lawyer was staring at him open mouthed. "But there were only thirty of those bullfinches in the country."

"Nonsense!" the sheriff retorted briskly. "Aren't there bird stores in every big city? Don't be a nut. As I told you, this was a carefully planned crime. The band with the number thirty on it was pushed over the new bullfinch's leg—you saw that the bird's leg was cut.

"Now the question is"—he laughed, with a note of triumph—"who murdered the bullfinch? Tell me that, and the case is busted, but less than that, less and easier, who ordered a bullfinch sent to that post office over there in town?"

He tapped the splinter. "This is a piece out of one of those little wooden cages that birds are shipped in."

"By mail?" Shaver objected, wrinkling his nose.

"Sure. Evidently you've never heard the baby chicks cheeping in our post office. All that stuff comes by parcel post. The thing now is to find out whether a bird was delivered over there, to whom it was sent, and who *called for it.*" He got up from his chair, placing the splinter and the two little feathers carefully in a shabby old wallet. "Now I'm going out to give those servants the once-over again and see what I can pick up. You stay right here."

He paused for a moment and looked at the lawyer thoughtfully. "The thing that's troubling me now is—why has it been so long delayed?"

"What?"

"Action. We haven't been interfered with once—not once. Somehow"—his eyes went round the room again and he lowered his voice—"ever since we've come in here I've had the sensation that we're being watched."

He strode quickly to the alcove and flung back the curtain, glancing into the bedroom before he returned. "Nothing. No one. And yet—" Then he shrugged. "This is the danger spot." He moved closer to Shaver, speaking now almost in a whisper.

"Listen. As soon as I go out slip into that alcove there and watch both rooms. Stay absolutely put until I come back. I won't be long. And we might as well get rid of some of this light." On his way to the door he switched off two lamps, and Shaver slipped into the little corridor between the rooms and settled himself as comfortably as he could, with his back against the wall, to await further developments.

CHAPTER XVI

MINUTE after minute dragged slowly by, and Shaver, leaning against the wall, began to entertain a rising and unholy longing for a cigarette, when something happened which drove all thought of such comfortable solace from his mind. Someone was in the bedroom.

He could not tell how or why the conviction came home to him; nevertheless, it was so, and holding his breath he [illegible] inch by inch nearer to the half-closed door that separated his space of darkness from the larger darkness within.

For it was only in the oval room that there was any light.

Just as he had about determined, standing motionless and listening for the slightest sound, that he had been mistaken, the bedroom door in front of him began to close, and with the lightest of sighs it settled into its frame.

Shaver felt a tingle run along his spine. It was not fear so much as a startled sense that the impossible had been accomplished before his very eyes. How could such a thing be done so surely and so noiselessly? And what was he himself to do?

After a moment's thought he made his decision. It was up to him to open the door that had just been closed and to open it as quietly as the invisible hand had pulled it shut.

Putting out his fingers, he flexed them back and forth along the wall, feeling the surface, until his hand came in contact with the edge of the closed door. Then he slid it down slowly until he found the knob. Hard and cold, it rested easily in the palm of his hand. So slowly that he was not conscious of moving locally at all, but of simply becoming one with that round handle, he turned the thing automatically to his right.

A faint release of pressure told him he was nearing the limit of the turning radius and still more slowly he released the catch and stood still. When he pulled the door toward him would it creak? A half smile flashed across his face in the darkness at the earnestness with which he put this question to himself; then again, with that scarcely recordable movement, he began to open the door, exerting a slight counter pressure with the muscles of his arm to offset a too hasty outward swing.

Light. A long thin line drawn down the blackness. The streak widened to the thickness of a pencil, to an inch-broad stripe. Now Shaver, crowded against the wall, could see the edge of the windows, now a portion of the room, the part between the bed and the terrace.

There was no one there. Whoever was busy inside was at the far end and was not facing the door. It was this last conviction that gave him courage.

In a moment he would pull the door wide and enter. And then a hinge creaked. In the fraction of a second that elapsed between the slight sound and Shaver's forward leap, a dark figure lunged across his field of vision and dashed at one of the long windows. It was the figure of a man in a heavy coat with the collar turned up about his ears and a cap pulled down over his eyes. This much Shaver could see before the quick fingers of the fugitive released the catch and the window flew open.

And then the figure stood still. Shaver stood still also, staring at the muzzle of a black automatic within a few inches of the stranger's breast, and above and behind the handy little weapon the light fell on Tilden's face.

"Now, then, it's cold out here. Back up, will you?" the sheriff requested pleasantly, and the dark figure went into reverse, followed by the pistol, which continued to point unwaveringly. "Your hands up—*if* you please. Yes. And you might remove that cap. I think, but I'm not sure—ah, yes, thank you, Plimpton."

It was the butler who stood there in the full light with the cap removed. "Now, that's fine, just fine," the sheriff continued. "Hadn't you better get rid of that coat, too? It's rather warm in here. Both hands well up. Frisk him, Shaver, will you? Nothing there? Careless of you, my young friend. Now you may sit down—and lower your hands."

Plimpton seated himself in the indicated chair and looked at his tormentor with an impassive face. Only his eyes between narrowed lids betrayed any emotion, and Shaver could have sworn it was not fear. He was certainly a cool customer.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" Tilden still kept the revolver pointed.

"I wish you'd point that gun in another direction." Plimpton spoke curtly. "You make me nervous. If you're asking me whether I poisoned Mr. Bedford, I did not —nor do I know who did. As for what I'm doing in here—well, I'm perfectly willing to answer that. I'm looking for my own property."

With a sudden movement Tilden leaned forward and pulled something out of the fellow's pocket. It was a piece of soft white cloth, old linen. He stared at it for a minute and then crossed the room with a quick step and slid back the little panel, examining the safe door.

"Careful lad—removing finger prints. Plimpton, are you as good as you are careful? Shall we search you or will you give us the straight goods?"

THE butler stared at him steadily. He had dropped his mask of cynical amusement, and there was no humor in his gaze now. He seemed to be thinking something over carefully.

"I've half a notion to tell you the truth, Mr. Sheriff."

"Obey that impulse, by all means!" Tilden retorted.

"And if I do, will you let me go?"

"That will depend entirely on what you've got to say. You've been watching us for some time, haven't you? Ever since we came here awhile ago, I felt it in my bones. That's why I came back by way of those windows."

"Quite right. I did hope to open that safe. Sometimes it wasn't even locked."

"You wanted to open that safe. And you didn't succeed. What did you want out of it? Money?"

"No. What I wanted to get out of it was a canceled check, signed with John Bedford's name and dated two years ago last January. Mr. Bedford always told me he was going to give it back to me. He wanted to keep it long enough to make sure. I swear to you that it is of no interest to anyone but myself. Do you believe me?"

The man's tone carried conviction. His jaw was hard set and he looked younger—and thinner. He was really a fine-looking fellow, with a type of face utterly unsuited to his position.

"Only fear would drive a man to an action like yours," Tilden answered, shaking his head. "What are you afraid of, Plimpton?"

The butler buried his face in his hands, and his voice was husky when he spoke again. "I'm afraid of the police—of the law—of prison. I was an employee in Mr. Bedford's New York office. It was after the war. I was—all shot to pieces. I raised a check of his from fifty to five hundred dollars. I was

caught. And the old man let me go—with conditions. He wanted to keep me under his eye. I agreed, and I myself proposed to come to him as butler. That's the story."

Instinctively both men, listening to these low hurried words, believed him. Tilden shoved the gun into his pocket. "Shake," he said, "and forget it. We will." There was more than compassion, there was a deep kindliness in the face he turned on the man in the chair.

"And when the safe *is* opened?" Plimpton asked, standing up.

"I'll guarantee you your check back and no questions asked."

"And now, Mr. Sheriff, in return for your kindness, I'll tell you something. The sooner you get that safe open, the better. I've been doing a little trailing of my own. I have some ideas—"

Shaver interrupted him. "That's why you slipped away to Mrs. Trenchard's cottage after lunch?"

"Yes. But the old man's diary is in that safe. And it ought to give you a good lead. Mr. Bedford was square with me—white. He was peculiar in a good many ways, but he gave me my chance. Anything I can do to get the person who got him, I'm going to do. Something troubled him before his death. He used to watch them—play with them like a cat with a lot of mice. He used to ask me all sorts of questions."

"Is there anything that you could tell us now?" Tilden asked.

"No." Plimpton hesitated. "Not yet. I have only the faintest line—and not much of that. There's something damned strange going on, though—if I were to tell you now, you wouldn't believe me. I'm not even sure in my own mind yet. But I'm going to make sure. As soon as I get anything I'll come straight to you."

That he had something to say was quite evident; that he did not mean to say it at that minute, equally so. Tilden, therefore, let him go without any more questions, and. followed by Shaver when they were once more alone, he returned to the oval room.

But once there he looked troubled and uneasy. "I can't get over the feeling that we're being watched," he said, sauntering to the windows and peering out. "Not even now that Plimpton's eliminated."

The ease, the suavity, the comfort of the great luxurious house seemed to be closing in on them like a trap. They had a dead man in an empty room, with no cry, no violence, no telltale marks to point a clue. And a group of polite people presenting a solid front to inquiry. And behind this cool aloofness, somewhere, the baffling industry of a clever criminal.

"Look here," the sheriff said abruptly, "I want you to keep an eye on these people while I give their rooms the once-over. After that we're going to make a little trip to that town over there and have a talk with the postmaster. I know him."

"To-night?" asked Shaver in astonishment.

"To-night," the sheriff answered firmly. "The sooner we unravel this little matter of the bullfinch, the nearer we'll be to the solution of the poisoning."

Subconsciously, as they left the room, Shaver noticed that the curtain before the alcove door was shaking in and out slightly. It impressed him so little in his excited state of mind that he thought nothing of it. But he was to remember it later.

IN THE hall outside the oval room Tilden glanced at his watch. It was a few minutes after nine. As he stood considering, there was a tap from somewhere behind them, and both men turned to find Helfant beckoning to them from the glassed enclosure at the end of the hall.

They went out and found the doctor and Mrs. Bedford walking up and down with their coats on. Beads of moisture clung to the tendrils of Claire Bedford's hair, and her face was flushed. She would have been enchantingly beautiful except for the suggestion of strain about her whole bearing which had increased astonishingly since dinner time.

"We simply had to have some air," she said to the sheriff, searching his face with her eyes.

"Where's Mr. Bedford? He out for air, too?" Tilden asked.

"Yes. He walked down to the rocks out there." She stood still. "Mr. Tilden, there's something I want to ask you. Do you think that Dr. Garrison—went down out there?" She waved a hand toward the invisible sea roaring with a steady intermittent beat on the shore below. "I mean—was drowned?"

The sheriff stared at her keenly. "Have you any reason to suppose he wasn't?"

She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder to where Helfant stood at the open end of the enclosure looking out into the storm. "The doctor's been laughing at me. But just before dinner when I was in the dining room mixing up a cocktail I saw a man's face pressed against one of the window panes.

"He moved away so quickly—and I was so frightened that I didn't—couldn't recognize him. But that was one of the reasons why I didn't think Anne should be told about that boat being smashed up on the rocks. He may be alive after all."

Helfant said from where he stood, "I'm afraid there isn't a chance. Garrison could never have got safely to shore. He wasn't much of a swimmer. The face you saw must

have been one of the men stationed around the house."

Before he could say any more a figure came blundering out of the darkness of the gardens into the subdued light of the porch lamp. It was Mark Bedford. He had been running. He halted just beyond the row of bushes and asked quickly, "Who was out there a few moments ago, out there by the terrace?"

"You mean the terrace outside your father's bedroom?" Tilden was watching the man carefully.

"Yes. I was standing down there on the rocks, and I saw a figure double past the lighted windows of the oval room. I ran up, there was no one there, but the window had been opened, because when I switched the light on there were fresh rain drops on the carpet just inside the sill."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Tilden. Shaver knew what he was getting at. He himself had entered, not through the door nearest the alcove but through the farther one. "Which window was it that had been opened?"

"The one nearest the alcove. The fellow didn't pull it tight after him, either, I tell you there was someone in that room not three minutes ago."

Then Shaver remembered the blowing curtain.

Tilden's jaws moved calmly in and out. "Let's get this straight, Mr. Bedford. All you people came out here together—how long ago?"

"About ten minutes." It was Helfant who answered, his eyes going curiously from face to face.

"About ten minutes ago. And you, Mr. Bedford, went out into the gardens immediately?"

"Yes."

"And you and Dr. Helfant remained here, Mrs. Bedford?"

"Yes, walking up and down, until you came out."

"And you saw no one running past out there—heard no sound?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Wait a minute. I'll go have a look at the window."

He returned in a minute. "Mr. Bedford is right. There was someone there. Well, there's only one thing to do: get Cox to beat up these gardens and check up on everyone. We probably won't haul in anything, but that's the best we can do. If you, Mr. Bedford—"

But Mark Bedford was gone. Without a word he had plunged back into the darkness. The sheriff looked after him with a long ruminative stare. Claire Bedford was shaking nervously, and Helfant put his hand soothingly on her arm.

"Now, don't begin to worry again. Mark's all right. Probably wants to do a little sleuthing of his own. I'll go after him."

She flashed him a grateful glance, and a second later the doctor also vanished. They turned and went indoors, and as soon as Claire Bedford had gone on into the living room the sheriff posted Shaver outside the surgery door, and, darting inside, closed it hastily behind him. He came out with an expression of satisfaction on his face.

"Got it!" He tapped his pocket with his finger. "Fitted the print to one of his shoes. That was Garrison who tracked us into the boat house this afternoon. He's no more drowned than I am. Come ahead—there's one more thing I want to do."

He led the way up the stairs and along the second-floor corridor to where a trooper dozed on a chair. Tilden knocked softly on the door he was guarding. It was opened by the housemaid Gladys, more composed now, and as Tilden and Shaver stepped into the room they saw that Anne Bedford had left her bed and was lying on a chintz-covered divan before the drawn curtains of the big window.

THERE was a tray on the table beside her, and she was feeding the white kitten with milk from a saucer. Turning a surprised glance on her two visitors, she raised herself a little higher on her cushions and invited them calmly to have chairs. Her face was pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes, but she waited with characteristic self-possession for them to announce their errand.

Tilden asked permission to light his pipe, and, slowly loading it, he said, "I've come to you for help, Miss Bedford. I take it that we are at one in the desire to find your grandfather's murderer?"

The girl inclined her head coldly. "If that's your aim you may be quite sure of it."

"Well, now, I want to get hold of a photograph album. Just a hunch of mine. Is there one with pictures in it that have been taken recently?"

The dark eyes with their heavy lids scrutinized him curiously. "Yes. My grandfather was rather fond of taking pictures. He had a Graflex, the sort experts use, that he bought in Germany. He was quite good at it. He put all the pictures into a book."

"Could you tell me where I'd find that, miss?"

"Yes, down in his room, in his bookcase. A big brown leather book—you can't miss it."

Tilden thanked her, and the two men left the room.

"Cox is a fool," he said as they went down

the stairs. "Did you notice those windows? If that girl wanted to get away she wouldn't find it very hard. There's only a drop of about twenty feet there, for the ground rises on that side of the house. However, that's his business."

"But where could she go?"

"Do you realize, man, that this island covers a good many acres? There must be a half dozen hiding holes in it. Look at the rock formation. Besides, I didn't say she'd do it—I said she could if she wanted to." He stopped suddenly and put a hand on his companion's arm.

"What?" Shaver asked in a startled whisper.

"Shh! Listen." But there was no repetition of the sound that had brought the long lean man to a standstill. "Didn't you hear it?" Tilden asked in a low voice. "It's begun. Surveillance. We're being watched." And again that atmosphere of silent, invisible, and unremitting scrutiny thickened about the two men. Someone had been watching them, for the stealthy closing of a door was what Tilden had heard.

Who was it? The girl? Claire Bedford? Mrs. Trenchard? Or some unknown person checking up each move and forestalling them as they turned and twisted in the labyrinth of this inexplicable crime.

Downstairs, the sheriff went straight to the great bookcase at the end of the oval room without a glance at the couch with its motionless burden. Precious volumes were stacked back to back in endless rows, first editions, beautiful bindings, rare copies, the old English playwrights in faded brown and red picked out with faint gold. He paid no attention to these, but ran his eye along the broader shelves at the bottom. Picking up a brown leather-bound volume, he returned with it to the lamp close to the bullfinch's cage.

Shaver looked over his shoulder as he turned the pages. It was a voluminous collection of photographs, a veritable find to anyone interested in the Bedford family. The first part of the book was full of pictures of Anne as a child and a young girl. After a cursory glance Tilden skipped these and turned rapidly to the pages filled with records of the yachting trip.

"Look here." His finger touched a photograph taken aboard ship. It was the interior of a cabin. The cage hung in front of a porthole and the bullfinch was splendidly caught, the old man standing a little to one side, watching while the bird dipped its beak into a small glass filled with food.

"That's exactly like the glass I found underneath the cage," Shaver exclaimed excitedly.

"Umm—how about the bird?" Tilden asked, holding up the book.

"This one's head is smaller, see? And look—the coloring of the breast begins higher up. Oh, undoubtedly this is not the thirtieth bullfinch."

"The thirty-first," the sheriff answered grimly. "The other one is dead. And now we've got to collect the evidence to convince a jury of all this." He turned a page. Here there were groups: the old gentleman with his granddaughter and the skipper; Claire Bedford, her skirts blowing in the wind; Mark Bedford and Anne playing deck tennis; Mark talking to a sailor.

This Tilden took ruthlessly from the album. He turned another page. Here there were smaller pictures, taken evidently after the family's return home. When he put the book back in its place on the shelf he had six good pictures of Claire Bedford and her mother, Anne, Mark, Garrison, and Helfant.

In the hall outside, everything was dark and still. There was no sign of either Bedford or the doctor. The living-room door was closed. The two men got into their coats, and the sheriff turned for a last look around. He seemed dissatisfied. Taking the small black automatic out of his pocket, he fingered it, frowning. Then with a shrug he slipped it back again, and opening the door both men plunged out into the storm.

CHAPTER XVII

HEADS bowed, they made their way around the bulk of the house and over the same path they had traversed before dinner. The rain had turned into a driving sleet which stung their faces, and the wind if anything had increased in violence.

"This can't last," Tilden shouted as they opened the boat-house door and stepped under cover. "Blow itself out to-morrow. Must be ten o'clock. Post office over there closes at eight, but I know Snellgrove, the postmaster, and we'll get hold of him. Oughtn't to take us long to cross—tide's running in."

The big enclosure was silent and empty. Beyond, in the open space, the water dashed heavily against the bulwarks, the boats rocking up and down on the dark oblong of water All the way down from the house the two men had kept a cautious lookout for any sign of the missing Garrison, but no one was to be seen. Off on top of the hill the moving lights of the police torches showed where the searching party that Cox had sent out was going through the gardens.

Shaver slid back the big door while Tilden climbed down into the launch and started the motor. In the confined space the thrum was deafening, but it was hardly likely that with the noises of the storm this sound would penetrate far.

Very slowly the sheriff eased the boat through the opening and, once out in the channel, the two men, comfortably seated in the roomy cabin where they were shielded from the stinging mist, began their journey across the tossing waters to the mainland.

There was a heavy sea running, and to Shaver, unused to the water, it seemed at times as though the boat must founder, so precipitous were the sweeping motions as the launch took the waves, the creaming surge pouring in over the decks and washing down the companionway to their very feet.

But Tilden, the wheel in his hands, never took his eyes from the dial in front of him as with his supple wrist he eased her off or turned her full tilt again into the breast of the deep-bosomed angry green surges, dark and forbidding under the lash of the insatiable wind.

They had been traveling in this way for perhaps fifteen or eighteen minutes when Shaver was startled by the taut expression on Tilden's long lean face.

"Listen," he cried, throwing up his hand, his eyes on the clock set into the dash. And Shaver, listening, could hear against the booming of the storm and the swish of the water they tore through, the soft tick-tock, tick-tock of a clock pendulum. He followed the sheriff's fixed and stony gaze. *The clock on the dash had stopped.*

For perhaps five seconds they sat facing each other, two men imprisoned in a small craft surrounded by the wind and the darkness and those terrifying leagues of swirling green water, when, with a shout the sheriff leaped.

Afterward Shaver could never tell which of them had reached the tiny deck first or which had flung himself headlong into the small boat tossing at the stern, a half of an eggshell almost indistinguishable in the darkness.

At any rate, they were both, in some fashion or other, in the rowboat at the end of the larger craft on a long line, wind and submerging water breaking over them, after a terrifying leap through space animated by a fear which Shaver did not even stop to analyze.

In fact, how or when or why they managed to reach the comparative security of the little boat was always afterwards a mystery to him. Or how Tilden managed to sever the line—for he saw nothing or heard nothing at the moment but the roaring of the gale and the frightful mounds of water mounting madly above their heads.

When suddenly, splitting the night as though a meteor had fallen, there was a terrible explosion that tore the air apart—and simultaneously, a flash of light so tremendous as to make the darkness for several seconds afterward a pall as though they had been stricken blind . . . and then when the first shock had subsided he heard Tilden's shout, diminished almost to a whisper by the noise of the wilderness: ". . . God—she's gone . . . blown up!"

A full five minutes must have elapsed before he realized what had happened. The launch had vanished. And in some fashion or other the sheriff was manipulating the boat in which they sat—for they were still afloat. Afloat in the darkness, in a cockleshell, far from the mainland.

Somewhere or other, in sea stories, or in tales of adventure, he had heard of men bailing out water. He began it now, with his hat, stupid and dazed at first, like a man in a dream or a person playing some fantastic game, but faster and faster as they rode on, pitiful automatons, helpless, almost hopeless, although both hope and fear had vanished in the mechanical struggle for existence.

Rising and falling, the tiny craft plunged, each downward surge had a speed and a seeming certainty of destruction that suggested the end of creation—until the younger man, coming gradually to life, recognized that everything was not yet over. In front of him, Tilden, a dim bulk, worked steadily with something—oars—futile sticks, thrust out and thrown back—thrust out and thrown back again.

Once, sweat bursting from every pore, he heard a grunt from the sheriff, " . . . attaboy." Once or twice also the boat drove through a wild leap of water that covered them both from head to foot with a bitter wash of icy foam. After that, time became as nothing, for each second was an unendurable eternity. . . .

EVEN the grating of pebbles beneath the bow of the thing, even the feel of solidity as the sheriff helped him to his feet on the rocky shore could not convince him for some little time that he was alive and safe.

Then gradually the young lawyer regained his sense of reality and, lurching drunkenly, his sense of balance oddly distorted, he followed his leader through the darkness for what seemed like miles and miles—into the blessed commonplaces of a paved street and lighted shops, a drug store with a shaving soap display, a grocery store dimly illuminated from in back, a motion picture palace, blatantly emblazoned and with a sound of music curiously irrelevant to the facts of

existence—and somehow or other up a path into a lighted room.

His first full moment of consciousness come when he put down a thick white cup of steaming fluid smelling deliciously of illicit rum flavored with lemon and with a half slice of the fruit floating foolishly at the bottom. For it was then that he heard a dark, fat-faced man say, " . . . So you're on the Bedford case, are you? The whole town's talking about it. What's the dope?"

Tilden, his long lean figure disposed comfortably in an old carpet-covered rocker, shrugged. "We don't know yet, Snellgrove. In fact, we want a little information from you."

Then he outlined the business that he had come upon. A bird, in a cage, a little pine cage, done up in corrugated board, probably, but with the top left open for air, had been delivered to the post office some time within the last few days. Could the postmaster give him any information about it?

Snellgrove thought for a moment, rubbing his hand across his bald head. "No—don't know a thing about it—not while I was there, anyhow. But Espozito or Carson may know." He drew a telephone toward him.

Shaver tried to listen, but he must have dozed, overcome by the warmth and the comfort. When he woke up some time later the sheriff was shaking his arm with a smile.

"Come on, young fellow, got to get back." Too dazed even to realize that they were again to encounter that stretch of water that lay between them and their destination, he climbed obediently into a Ford, dismounted, got on board some kind of boat, and, dozing again, was wakened the second time by hearing the sheriff say, "Here we are. Watch your step." After that he stumbled along through the darkness, guided by a hand.

It was only when he found himself close to the bulk of the towering house once more that his lethargy began to seep away and some idea of what had happened came home to him.

The sheriff was standing still at the edge of the terrace, watching and listening.

"Was it—that launch—blown up on purpose?" Shaver asked.

"Yes. A time bomb of some sort. That was what warned me first—the ticking."

"Who got the bullfinch?"

"Espozito, the clerk on duty, gave it to a boy. We got the boy, all right, a dumb kid, about twelve—hangs around outside the lunch room. You slept like a log all through the inquisition. The boy said a man stopped him on the street and told him to ask for a package at the post office addressed to Mr. Bedford.

"But when I showed him the photographs he couldn't pick out any one face. All we've got positively is that the bird was delivered there, the morning of the murder, in the ten-twenty mail, eastbound, with a New York postmark. We can follow that up, of course, but it's check as far as identification goes."

"How did we get back here?"

"Bob Lazare. Life guard. Ran us over in his cabin cruiser. Some boy and some boat. We were in luck."

Shaver was rapidly coming to life. "Whoever it was that tried to get us doesn't know——"

"Exactly. Listen. We're going to turn up abruptly—see? A little surprise for someone. Watch their faces. Of course Garrison won't be on hand, but the rest of them must be somewhere about. It's worth trying, anyway."

By this time they had drawn close to the northern end of the house beyond the conservatory off the drawing room, where Shaver had concealed himself during the morning. Tilden mounted the rise and pushed open the door. The place was not lighted, and through the thin silk curtains across the inner glass they could see the great room dimly.

With a sudden motion the sheriff threw open the inner doors and stood still on the threshold. Helfant, Claire Bedford, and Mrs. Trenchard were seated facing the two men as they entered the room—Bedford, near the window, had his back toward them. What happened was this:

At the sight of their disheveled figure appearing in this abrupt fashion out of the storm and the darkness, Mrs. Trenchard screamed and fell back in her chair. Clairie Bedford whitened and sat erect. Bedford whirled with a grunt, while Helfant jumped to his feet—all four remained staring at the two men who looked back at them in silence.

The doctor was the first to speak. "Good Lord—what is it? What has happened? You're wet."

"Yes, we're wet all right," Tilden answered, looking from face to face grimly. "Your launch is gone—blown up. Out there in the channel. Luckily we got clear."

"My God!"

IT WAS a sudden exclamation—it came from Mark Bedford as he stumbled to his feet—his face flushed and heavy, his hand clenched. Tilden's leisurely gaze enveloped him for a second as he began to give the brief details of their adventure. Then, with a hand on Shaver's arm, the sheriff moved toward the door.

"Tired," he muttered with a yawn. "Turn in."

But upstairs, in Shaver's bedroom, he showed no sign of fatigue. "I should call that a draw," he said with a grin. "No decision."

And after a thoughtful pause: "I'd like to know what Bedford's concealing. I'd like to know what the trouble is between his wife and himself. Where's the kid, Charles?"

"Fast asleep in his nursery—where he ought to be. In the homes of the wealthy you don't find children rolling round under your feet."

"Umm. Well, they're all down in that living room still. Now, listen, Shaver, the person at the bottom of this is working fast. Someone tried to get us to-night, and it's not going to be the last attempt. In short, we're not wanted; we're in the way. But in the way of what? *That's* the question.

"Now the best course for us to pursue is what they do at the hospitals: keep the patients under observation. There's no better place than that porch at the back of the hall. We've got to get downstairs without being seen—and you can lie low out there. If anyone comes, beat it into the gardens. In the meantime I'll cover the front and that exit through the music room. If you come on any of Cox's men, give the high sign so that you won't get shot. Understand?"

The sheriff was already on his feet. "You all right?" he asked, staring at his young companion solicitously as they prepared to leave the room.

"All right?" Shaver answered vigorously. "I'm more than all right—I'm out for blood."

Then, with the utmost caution, the two men crept down the stairs and let themselves out at opposite ends of the hall to take up their posts.

* * * * *

Standing well back from the outer rim of light in the little enclosed porch, Shaver leaned against a pillar where he could command a good view of the living-room door, the foot of the staircase, and the entrance to the oval room. Tilden's last words had been explicit. He was not to interfere in any way with what went on inside, but if anyone attempted to leave the house he was to follow.

The fatigue and shock of that nightmare trip across the water had worn away, and Shaver was conscious of a strong sense of exhilaration. At last they were pitted against something tangible—the murderous will of their unknown antagonist.

A movement in the hall brought him sharply to attention. Claire Bedford had come out of the living room and walked down the hall, mounting the stairs slowly, as though she were tired. She was followed almost immediately by Mark Bedford. There was no sign of Helfant, who must have gone to his room some time earlier, for within a minute or two, as soon as they had vanished, Plimpton switched off the lights, and the whole floor was plunged into darkness.

For a little while Shaver remained motionless at the post he had taken. There was now very little light, certainly, and what little there was came from the windows of the oval room where the dead man lay, but anyone wanting to slip out of the house could easily do so without being seen. Ought he to remain where he was, or ought he to rejoin Tilden and find out what the sheriff wanted him to do?

While he was still hesitating, a sound close at hand brought him up short, and as he stood motionless, every nerve strained, trying to locate it, there was a second sound, faint but unmistakable—someone had opened and closed the door fifteen feet in front of him. And this someone was now standing, possibly in reach of his very hand, listening as intently as he was.

Then, against the lights of the oval room, just for a second, he saw a muffled figure move swiftly and vanish in the darkness to his left. Whoever it was, was going down into the gardens.

Stepping cautiously, Shaver instantly started in pursuit. His quarry had quite evidently turned to the right for the wide space of lawn beneath the windows was empty. Of the lay of the land surrounding the house he knew practically nothing except that the person he was following had, roughly, a wide strip of land to traverse, bordered on one side by the rocks and the sea and on the other by the bulk of the house for a distance of fifty or sixty feet.

Fortune unexpectedly favored him. A beam of light shot out for a moment and vanished, as the fugitive, some fifty yards in front, switched on an electric torch just for one instant to make sure of the path—but that instant was enough for Shaver.

The next time the thread of light made its appearance he found that he had gained considerably on the figure ahead—and not only that, but that his splendid sense of direction which had warned him that the going was northeast along the coast line had been correct. Here, bordering on the rock, the shorn grass made an excellent path, unimpeded by shrubs, and his progress was fast and noiseless.

Presently the two figures, one ahead and one trailing, rounded a wide curve. Here the water came in closer and the grass sloped up to piled rocks directly over the sea. And now the beam of light came oftener as the distance from the house increased. Whoever was abroad in the darkness of the October night on some secret errand knew the path, and used the light simply to guide his footsteps at some doubtful point.

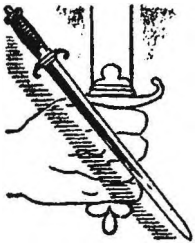
His? He was by no means sure that the figure ahead was not a woman. In fact, it

had been impossible to tell anything from that one quick glimpse against the lighted windows of the oval room. And now he saw no more tiny flashes coming at regular intervals to guide him. Instead, off to the left, in the valley, there was a steadier beam.

It went out as he stared, and Shaver stood still. So there were two people abroad at this end of the island. Could it be Cox or any of his men? No, for with the exception of those posted in the house the others had gone, after their unavailing search for Garrison, to hunt up the break in the telephone wire and were later to repair to the police launch, where they were going to sleep in shifts.

A minute later a figure moved up out of the drizzle of sleet, and Tilden laid a hand on his arm. "Two of them," he said, "making for that fishing shack at the head of the inlet. Follow me and don't make a sound."

CHAPTER XVIII



THE situation was now clearly defined. The two watchers had taken their position. In front of them bulked the gray structure of the fishing shed, and as they crouched motionless and with ears strained behind the thin clapboarding they could hear unmistakably, above the patient hiss of the softly dropping sleet, the low murmur of voices.

Two people were talking together within the enclosure, the two who had left the great house at the other end of the island to meet here in solitude. Who were they?

Shaver and Tilden were in a bad position. The ground on which they stood was well below the level of the shack (it sloped away sharply at the back), and this was one of the circumstances which made it possible for them to hear at all, the sound drifting down through the rickety flooring to the spot upon which they stood.

The rising ground on either hand was so thick with underbrush that it was impossible to make their way to a better point of vantage without betraying their presence. It was maddening. They could not tell whether the two in the shack were men or women, excited or calm, could not hear a single word of what was being said—just that low, broken and interrupted cadence, mumbling on.

One thing was sure: from time to time the voices ceased abruptly, as though the two inside were listening. Then, secure in the conviction that they were alone and unwatched, they would go on with what they had to say. But the two listeners could hear nothing above the booming of the storm.

When five minutes had passed and the low murmur from within still continued, Tilden began to worm his way cautiously round the corner of the shack and up the side. Here laurel bushes masked the ground, which was slippery with pine needles, and they had to advance foot by foot, pausing every few seconds to listen.

Suddenly they discovered that the conversation within doors had stopped. Something had startled the two lurking there in the darkness. Then they both heard the sound. It was quite distinct and separate from the noises of the storm—a crashing of branches as though someone had dashed through the underbrush at top speed.

Instantly the sheriff was on his feet—for this interruption had come from another source: someone besides themselves was taking a hand in the game. Once convinced of this, Tilden threw caution to the wind and with a single bound he dashed through the low shrubs and out into the open space in front of the shack.

Nothing was to be seen. The place was dark and deserted, the door shut. Throwing it open, he sent his torch wheeling round the interior. Emptiness met the revealing light —a row of lobster pots, a fling of nets, an earthen floor—but of the people they sought neither sight nor sound, although not three minutes before they had been closeted within the four walls. What had happened was clear. The two within the shack had been frightened off.

Turning swiftly, Tilden started at a run back over the path they had traversed a short time before. In that rapid passage, branches beating at their faces, impeding them, wind tossing the icy mist into their eyes and throats, they saw no sign of the fugitives. Would they reach the darkened house before the two they were pursuing?

Then as they topped the brow of the hill above the rock garden, involuntarily they stood still. For the great building below was no longer dark. Light streamed from all the windows, and as they neared it, running again, troopers sprayed out under the porte-cochère, some dashing one way, some another.

They found Cox standing in the middle of the long hall where all the lamps were lighted. He told them what had happened. Anne Bedford had disappeared. She was not in the house. Shaver could not repress a start. He glanced at the sheriff, but the latter was listening intently to what Cox had to say.

" . . . made her getaway through the window—must have had help from the outside. Brown was in the corridor, and he heard a noise but didn't pay any attention—thought

it was nothing—after a while he felt a draft and it seemed to be coming from the girl's room. Then when he rushed in, the room was empty and the window wide open. No telling how long she's been gone. What do you make of it, eh?" His nose seemed to have grown longer and larger and his eyes beady as he stared.

Tilden gave his characteristic shrug. "She must have been helped from the outside, of course. We'd know a lot if we knew just what that help was. What about the rest of the household—everybody present?"

"They don't know anything about this yet," the captain answered. "We'll have a check-up right now. Here"—he hailed the man Matthew, hovering in a frightened manner about the open door of the dining room—"go and tell Mr. Bedford, please, that we'd like to see him down here——"

But the man interrupted him. "Mr. Bedford is ill, sir, I brought him up an aspirin over an hour ago—and he said he wasn't to be disturbed on any account."

Cox grunted.

"Suppose I go up," Tilden proposed. As he was turning away, he stopped.

CLAIRE BEDFORD was coming down the hall toward the little group of men. Her face was white, her eyes enormous, dark, wide open, and fixed straight in front of her. She looked wild and frightened, as though this new alarm were too much for her. With one hand holding the negligee at her breast, the other hanging at her side, she halted a little way from the three men. Once or twice she opened her lips and closed them again, but she was unable to speak, staring at them.

It was Cox who told her what had happened, and as he went on talking, his stolid commonlace tones seemed to restore a little of her composure. As he finished she drew a long breath, but before she could speak or answer a single question Helfant, fastening a bath robe over his sleeping suit, strode toward them from the surgery. At his appearance a faint relief seemed to animate her.

She moved toward him, murmuring, "Anne—they can't find her. She's gone—she's not in her room. What does it mean?" As she spoke she kept looking into the doctor's face with the appealing stare of a child. Helfant laid a hand on her arm.

"Come, Mrs. Bedford. Pull yourself together. You mustn't give way like this. It can't do anyone else any good, and it may do you a lot of harm." His voice was stern, almost rough. "You'd better go back to your room. Where's Mark? Has Mr. Bedford been told of this?" He wheeled on Cox.

"No. That fellow said he was asleep—though how anyone could sleep through this racket——"

"One of his headaches," his wife murmured. And again she seemed on the edge of hysteria; indeed, she could not resist a little laugh, high pitched and bitter. Helfant gave her arm a shake and put her into a chair, while Tilden, with a nod to Cox, went down the hall and up the stairs to arouse the man who was now master of the house.

Cox, meanwhile, put a few perfunctory questions to the doctor, but Helfant knew nothing. He told the captain that he had gone to his room a little earlier than usual and had fallen asleep, to be awakened by the commotion in the hall outside. He had seen nothing of Anne Bedford since that moment in the office during the afternoon when he had been called on for his testimony in regard to the sleeping powders.

Shaver, off to one side, watched the scene with intense interest. Claire Bedford lay back in her chair, her dark eyes fixed straight in front of her in a brooding and troubled fashion. Was the story of his private movements, which Bedford was concealing, at the bottom of the tragic fear expressed by his wife? Tilden's dawdling arrival in their midst put an end to these questions.

"Not there," he said laconically, his jaws moving in and out.

"Not there?" Cox's incredulity was almost funny. There was a hubbub of questions and answers, the valet was interrogated again, and he repeated that Bedford had rung after he went upstairs and had then said that he was not to be disturbed on any account.

In the midst of all this, Tilden touched Shaver on the arm, and the young lawyer followed him down the hall. But he had not missed the convulsive shudder and the swift dropping of her eyelids with which Claire Bedford had greeted the sheriff's announcement of her husband's unaccountable absence from the house.

Upstairs, Tilden led the way straight to Mark Bedford's room. He closed the door behind him with a quiet smile. "The plot thickens, Shaver—there's more here than meets the eye."

Shaver looked at him inquiringly, but even under his companion's stare he refused to elaborate. Instead he began a desultory sauntering about the big, handsomely furnished apartment. Shaver watched him curiously for a while, then dozed a little, his eyes on the fire. He was startled awake by a sudden grunt from the sheriff.

"Look here," the latter said, holding up something he had fished out from behind a row of books on the desk. And as Shaver stared at what Tilden had in his hand, he too could not resist exclaiming aloud. It was the little glass that had disappeared from the oval room on the night of the murder.

In the short silence that followed Tilden's discovery of the incriminating bit of crystal, Shaver found his thoughts circling curiously around the figure of Mark Bedford. Instead of loathing, he felt a vague pity. The man was a curious, sullen, ingrown fellow. What more likely, after all, than that, having been kept hanging on, a pensioner upon the old man's bounty, the position had gradually eaten the balance from his mind until he was hardly sane? The cunning with which the crime had been carried out lent color to this theory—it was one of those horrible lucid nightmares that a lunatic might give birth to.

Tilden's proposal cut his reverie short. "Suppose we get out of here—back to your room. I want to think."

AS THE two men tiptoed into the hall, the sheriff went to the head of the stairs and listened; then he rejoined Shaver, and they entered the latter's room.

The kitten was curled up on the hearth, and when Shaver had put fresh logs on the fire it climbed on his knee, and he stroked it idly as Tilden brooded, his eyes on the flames.

Where was Mark Bedford, and why had he gone out into the storm? What was the *sense* of it? This last point seemed to bother the sheriff a good deal, for he kept muttering, "It doesn't fit—it doesn't fit"—as he reached for the will again and turned over the pages.

They were still discussing this when there was a knock at the door and, to his surprise when he opened it, Shaver found Mrs. Trenchard standing outside. She was fully dressed, and she held a silver tray in her hands. In spite of the lateness of the hour and the strangeness of the situation, she seemed to have armed herself with a sort of stony composure. It was now long after one o'clock.

"We thought you might like a hot drink," she said, smiling, as she handed the tray to Shaver, but behind the smile her eyes were watchful, as though she had seized this opportunity of seeeing what the two men were doing; and Shaver, when she had turned away, continued to stare after her thoughtfully as she passed down the hall and out of sight.

The kitten jumped back on Shaver's knee as, after handing the sheriff a cup of the bouillon, he sat down with his own before the fire.

Tilden was going over the matter of the will again—thinking aloud rather than talking. Then he switched to Mark Bedford. Was he one of the occupants of the fishing shed? And if so, where did Garrison come in? And where the girl?

Shaver thought this over, pouring some of the hot soup into his saucer for the cat. "At any rate," he said soberly, "whoever tried to get us to-night in that boat knows that we're alive."

Tilden smiled grimly. "Drink your soup," he said. "We'll need nourishment before this night is out, or I'm a Dutchman."

But the kitten had forestalled Shaver. Settled daintily on his knee, she had dipped her little pink nose into the cooling fluid in the saucer and was lapping it up. The lawyer watched her indulgently. She was so warm and soft.

Immersed in his own thoughts, the sheriff stared into the fire and forgot his own bouillon, beating his spoon mechanically against the side of the cup.

"What are they all doing down there now?" he asked suddenly. "Watching each other? There's some deviltry afoot. I've had a feeling ever since I touched this case that there was danger in it—danger and evil. Something's going to happen."

He had, with his long neck and his weather-beaten wrinkled face, somber eyed now and almost tragic, the fanatical air of an old witch doctor spelling charms. Shaver shivered a little. He could not put from his mind the staring eyes of the dead man as he had found him in his chair twenty-four hours earlier.

The kitten had finished all the bouillon in the saucer and lay back now, on his knee, a heavy spot of comfort, purring loudly. With his mind darting this way and that up varied avenues of conjecture, Shaver lifted the cup absently to his lips.

There was a sudden leap and Tilden knocked it out of his hand, dropping his own on the hearth as he did so and sending Shaver's crashing to the rug, where the brown liquid made a long stain as the sheriff snatched at the kitten and lifted it in his hands.

There was something wrong with the animal. It had stiffened curiously and it was opening and shutting its mouth rapidly without making a sound. Even while Tilden held it, it grew rigid, a bloody froth foamed at its lips, its sides palpitated in and out, and two minutes later it was dead.

For long the two men stood transfixed, with the full meaning of the tragedy growing in their minds. Then, slowly, the sheriff put the kitten's white body upon the floor. He stepped back, his eyes seeking Shaver's, and then a cold shudder went through the young lawyer who had miraculously missed death.

Turning, Shaver crossed the room, opened the door and looked out. He came back, shaking his head. He got down on his knees to examine the kitten, as if he still refused to believe what had happened.

Tilden dropped into a chair, his face hard.

CHAPTER XIX

FOR some moments neither man spoke. It was very late, on toward two o'clock, and the fearful danger they had been in pressed like an impalpable weight on spirits already worn by constant alarms.

Tilden sat slouched in his chair, his half-closed eyes fixed on the little white body of the kitten stretched out stiffly beneath the light, and Shaver, his elbows on his knees, his head buried in his hands, struggled with a faint feeling of nausea as he thought of their narrow escape.

To contemplate the body of John Bedford, poisoned by an unknown murderer, had been gruesome enough, but Shaver's horror had been more or less academic and had been mingled with a thrill of interest.

But to have been himself the intended victim of the nameless murderer was something else again, so that his fortitude was almost overcome by this last deliberate manifestation of the malevolent will that had deliberately planned two attempts upon his own and Tilden's life in one night. Where was it going to end?

He started violently as Tilden's cool tone cut across his thoughts. "I think we'll have Plimpton up and try to trace this thing. We won't get anywhere, probably, but we can try." He rang the bell and a few moments later the butler himself entered the room.

"Sit down, Plimpton." The sheriff dispensed with formality. For a second the man hesitated, and a slight quiver passed across his expressionless face, but the intelligent eyes flitted from one face to another, and he sat down suddenly. "Now we can talk." Tilden switched about in his chair.

"Look at that over there on the table—the kitten dead. It drank from Mr. Shaver's cup of bouillon—the stuff was poisoned."

Plimpton's watchful gaze narrowed, but he expressed neither shock nor surprise. His attitude was not unlike the sheriff's own: a grim, considering, silent attitude.

"What do you know about that stuff? Who prepared it? All we have is that Mrs. Trenchard knocked at the door a little while ago and handed it in to us."

"I prepared it, sir, after you gentlemen had gone upstairs. I thought everyone seemed upset and that something hot would be in order, so I went back into the pantry and got out a bottle of a heavy beef extract prepared with vegetables."

"Wait. Had the bottle been opened before?"

"No. I took a fresh one. There was only about an inch in the other and I knew I'd need a large quantity. When it was mixed I poured it into the big silver chocolate pitcher which has a lid and carried it into the dining room.

"But everyone was out in the hall, so I carried the tray out there and put it down on the chest. When I saw the crowd, there were three or four troopers at the back of the hall, besides Mrs. Bedford, Dr. Helfant, and Captain Cox at the front, I decided that they might like a little something more substantial than the salted crackers I had served with the bouillon, so I went back into the pantry to prepare a few sandwiches."

"Leaving the tray with the bouillon on it on the chest?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Well, when I came back into the hall I found that they had all served themselves."

"I see. Now, Plimpton, just when did Mrs. Trenchard enter the house?—I know that she went back again after she came up here with Mrs. Bedford."

"She and Mr. Bedford came in together, sir, just after you came upstairs."

Tilden raised his eyebrows. "So Mark Bedford returned, did he? I suppose Cox told him of his daughter's escape. Too bad we weren't there."

"I was," Plimpton returned promptly. "It was before I went to get the bouillon at all."

"And how did he take the news?"

The butler considered, his eyes on the fire. "If he was startled—or—or upset it was just for a minute. He didn't seem—interested."

To Shaver this last word was a complete characterization of Belford.

The man's real self was buried beneath a curious apathy.

"Umm—then they were all there—in the vicinity of that tray—except Miss Anne."

"And Garrison," interjected the butler.

"Yes, yes, I see what you mean. On the other hand," the sheriff went on thoughtfully, "that chest is very near the front door. Where were the others when you arrived in the hall for the second time?"

"The troopers had all gone with Captain Cox into the telephone room at the back, and the other four were in the living room with their cups in front of the fire."

"You see"—Tilden shrugged—"the same baffling problem. We can't even eliminate those two outside. What would be easier, for instance, when that hall was empty, than to slip through that door and drop something into the pot? There are those narrow windows each side of it, commanding a view of the whole place. I tell you, we can't afford to go wrong at this stage of the game. Garrison so far has not conducted himself like

an innocent person, and that goes for Miss Anne."

HE JUMPED up restlessly from his chair and scrutinized the kitten for a moment; then he took from his pocket the left-hand glove, the cigarette tip that Garrison had flung aside on the night of the murder, the pine splinter, and the handful of feathers. Ranging them neatly in a row, he pondered heavily, his long face grim.

". . . and the telephone wire cut," he said softly. "So that we're completely isolated. We might as well be on another planet."

It was at that moment, through the hush of the small hours, that a pistol shot rang out above the low accustomed noises of the storm. It had come from somewhere outside the house.

Tilden was first out of the room, Shaver and the butler running at his heels. They had already reached the front door when the crowd of troopers began pounding down the hall behind them.

Outside, while the captain blew his whistle and more men came dashing up through the rain and the blackness, the sheriff stopped and stared about him to get his bearings. He was trying to locate the spot from which the sound had come. Then, doubling back under the porte-cochère, he plunged into the shrubbery to the right, his torch on, swinging from side to side as he loped along at an easy pace, with Shaver close behind.

There was no sign of any figure on the wide stretch of lawn beyond the bushes, and after a while, as Tilden and Shaver moved away from the other running figures and the curtain of the mist and the darkness came down, closing them into a strange isolated world, that sense of nightmare, of battling with impish, non-human forces, took possession of the young lawyer again. A shot, reverberating through the silence of the small hours of the morning—corporeal evidence of violence—and nothing to show for it! Were they all mad?

Back in the great house, aglow with lights, the occupants had disappeared—at least no one was visible—you saw them and you didn't; they were in their rooms, going about the ordinary routine of life, normal three-dimension people who kept their nails in order and their teeth brushed—yet it was one of these who had foully murdered a helpless old man and had twice attempted his life and Tilden's.

Unconsciously Shaver had looked for some open sign of the brand of Cain after each of these vile deeds—he had got nothing but a handful of shadowy facts, odd expressions, equivocal answers—certainly no murderer had revealed himself; and yet it was one of these men and women.

The sheriff, who was still in the lead, pulled up with such abruptness that he all but knocked Shaver down. Directly in the glare of the flashlight he saw a huddled mass. Giving the torch to the lawyer, Tilden knelt down.

It was Anne Bedford who was stretched on the soaked grass, her face white, her eyes closed. She was unconscious, and from a wound in her shoulder, staining the thick material with a grotesque futuristic pattern, blood seeped vividly over the pale pink broadcloth of the coat she wore.

Shaver raced back toward the house to get assistance, for the girl was still alive, and they were afraid to move her; and as he went, Tilden began sending his light over the ground in search of footprints.

Twenty minutes later the girl was carried up through the silent house on an improvised stretcher, for, strangely, no other member of the household except Helfant had heard the shot, and he, in company with Dr. Branch, was busy over the senseless girl.

Shaver and Tilden, following in the wake of the little procession, left it in the hall and went into the living room to wait for news before the fire, for it was now cold with that long chill that precedes the dawn.

As they entered they saw that a man was standing peering out through the long windows at the front. He swung abruptly at the sound of the door, and with a start of surprise Shaver saw that it was Mark Bedford. For a moment he wondered why he had not recognized him at once. He looked—different.

There was an odd air of exhilaration about him, his figure had straightened. He carried his head up and easily, and as the two men settled themselves in chairs before the fire without saying a word of the thing that had just taken place in the gardens, and of which he was apparently in ignorance, he threw himself into a corner of the big divan and faced them boldly.

Shaver, lighting a cigarette, watched him with a puzzled air. The man's glance was frank and straightforward, his eyes bright, his composure solid—at three o'clock in the morning after a day of frightful strain.

It wasn't liquor—there was nothing forced or hectic about his demeanor—and Shaver glanced at Tilden. For he had been almost sure at that first moment that his companion had registered his own strong impression, that Bedford did not know that Anne had been found. But Tilden was looking straight ahead of him into the flames.

He was evidently up to some sort of game, or why didn't he tell the man at once that his daughter had been wounded? Was it possible that tragedy had not yet done with this house on the island? There had been

something strange and horrible in the sight of the young girl lying on the ground in the fragile and dainty coat, with a bullet wound through her. Was she going to die—and whose hand had pointed the weapon and pulled the trigger?

Involuntarily Shaver glanced at the windows, dim black squares on the unlighted spaces of the room, and he shivered slightly. These people—*these people*. . . . He turned his eyes again on Mark Bedford lounging in his seat, his hand along the arm, tranquil and assured at this moment of frightful strain, and the fog that was beginning to wrap the house in its tenuous veils seemed to have crept into the lawyer's brain. He was completely baffled by this last astounding phenomenon.

The sudden crash of a log in the fireplace broke the long pause.

CHAPTER XX

FOR a moment no one spoke; then the sheriff yawned widely, stretching his long legs toward the blaze and puffing concentratedly on his slow-drawing pipe.

"Been — in here —very long, Mr. Bedford? See or — ah — hear anything odd?"

Bedford laughed suddenly, an absolutely genuine laugh, but chilling Shaver's blood nevertheless.

"Always the lidy," he mocked. "Always the policeman, eh, Mr. Sheriff?—even at—what's the song?—three o'clock in the morning?" He whistled a bar and the vagrant tune hung for a moment on the air with an effect of shock as though the shadowy room refused to receive it.

Tilden grinned. "Yes, you're right—about all I can bring to the job—ah—concentration. I'm afraid this case is going to be a hard nut to crack. We've got so little to go on. We'd like your help—about to-night, I mean. You see, Mr. Shaver and I were out following up a little thing and when we got back here the house was in an uproar. Miss Anne had disappeared, and you yourself couldn't be found."

At the mention of his daughter's name a shadow dimmed the confidence of the man's expression—but it was gone in a second.

"I?" he said, raising his brows. "Oh—you want me to explain my absence. Sorry to disappoint your expectations, but my errand was a perfectly innocent one. Claire—my wife—got worrying about her mother. The old lady had insisted on going back to the cottage. I walked down there to see how she was and brought her back with me."

The sheriff nodded. "Yet Mrs. Bedford knew nothing of your—errand?"

"No, it was a little surprise."

"Yes—quite—I see. You weren't—" Tilden looked up, holding Bedford's eyes with his own as he threw a match into the fireplace—"you weren't down at that cottage by any chance *last* night when they were looking for you to break the news of your father's murder?"

"At the cottage last night? No, not inside. I think I did stroll in that direction—I felt I couldn't sleep unless I had a little air. Is it very important?" His words were ordinary enough, but his tone was full of ridicule. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "If it is, you ought not to take my word. Why not ask Mrs. Trenchard? She's a truthful woman—hard for her to conceal anything."

"Good idea," Tilden agreed. "But I scarcely like to disturb her at this hour."

"Oh, that's quite all right," Bedford answered, ringing the bell, and when Plimpton appeared, as alert and tireless as though it were mid-morning, he gave his order. "Just ask Mrs. Trenchard to step down here, will you? Say that we will only keep her for a moment."

Very deliberately, while they waited, the sheriff took from his pocket the brown kid glove and sat turning it over in his hands, without saying a single word or even glancing at the man, who was looking at him speculatively. This little tableau was interrupted by the opening of the door.

Mrs. Trenchard had come in and was standing close to the three men, one hand resting on the table for support, the other holding her heavy robe of padded silk at her throat. Her face was pale but collected, and she glanced from one man to another. Tilden, who had risen, still held the glove in his hand.

"We are just trying to place everybody with respect to the time of Mr. Bedford's death last night. All these things have to be settled definitely, although some of it's pure form," he explained carefully. "Mr. Bedford tells us, Mrs. Trenchard, that although he did leave the house last night after he had retired for the evening, and although he did, he thinks, walk in the direction of the cottage, he did not enter it. That is so, is it not? Are you willing to testify you were alone in the house all evening?"

"Yes." A monosyllable. Mrs. Trenchard answered carefully, not looking at Tilden but past him at her son-in-law. Shaver, skilled in observation, thought that there was an air of subtle satisfaction about Bedford's scrutiny of the older woman; his glance was at once bright and stealthy.

THE sheriff slapped the glove lightly against the palm of his hand as he spoke again. "The only thing I'd like to know now is, who owns this glove. You see, Mrs. Trenchard, the back of it, here across the knuckles, has been wet recently—it is stiff, and there is a decided stain. I place the time that it was left in your living room as well after eight o'clock last night."

The woman's eyes moved from Bedford, to Tilden, to the glove and back to Bedford again. The hand with which she grasped the edge of the table had grown taut, the knuckles whitening with the force of her sudden effort to support herself.

"I do not know to whom the glove belongs. I haven't the slightest—idea." There was a pause, then she said in a low, almost inaudible tone, "If that is all . . ."

The sheriff nodded, and without another word she turned and made her way from the room. Bedford held out his hand. "May I look at that?" he asked, taking the glove and turning it over. "Very interesting. So you found this in the cottage down there?"

"It isn't yours?"

"No."

"And you don't know whose it is?"

"No." Bedford handed it back and sat down on the arm of a big chair. The man's confident manner had not left him, but some of his assurance had seeped away. He was fidgety, ill at ease, and from moment to moment he kept turning his head toward the windows as though he were listening.

Tilden, who was again seated in comfort before the fire, began to light his pipe. It was giving him more than the usual amount of trouble. He struck a fresh match. "Well, that's all clear then, your movements of last night. Now let's take this evening. You went down to the cottage and brought Mrs. Trenchard back up here."

"Yes."

"And then you all had something to eat in this room. What happened after that?"

"My wife and her mother went upstairs to bed, and Dr. Helfant to his room."

"I see. Then you were alone in here—in this room—you stayed here from the time the others left until we came in? Well, then, you must have heard that shot—"

"Shot?" In spite of the ingenuousness of the man's gaze, caution had crept into it. He wrinkled his brows. "Oh, yes, yes. I know what you mean now. About half an hour ago, wasn't it? But nothing happened. Some trooper shooting his head off, I suppose, potting at some shadow or other. Don't tell me that our worthy captain, for instance—?"

His eyes, bold and direct, were fastened on Tilden, but there was more urgency in his tone than his careless words seemed to warrant. The sheriff laughed soundlessly. "No—no—nothing like that."

Then Shaver knew that his imagination had not deceived him. Tilden was deliberately leading Mark Bedford on, his idle questions, his easy manner masking a trap. For he did not tell the man what they had found on that patch of rain-soaked grass a hundred feet beyond the windows. Once again Shaver could see with shocking clearness that crumpled figure lying in a huddle, the telltale blood seeping darkly across the shoulders.

About the three men, in spite of the warmth of the fire, the chill seemed to draw in closer. It was not more than two hours until dawn—the darkest hours.

Shaver sat with his back to the door, Tilden sideways, and Bedford faced it obliquely but in such a manner that he must be the first to see anyone coming into the room. This position placed Shaver so that he could watch the man without seeming to do so, and a fearful interest had kept his eyes riveted on Bedford's face during the entire interview.

There was a short pause filled with nothing but silence. The house seemed to be dozing in a sluggish coma after its night of turbulence, and yet both Shaver and Tilden were listening intently for the arrival of one of the doctors with news. Was it possible that Bedford was listening also? And yet Tilden had made no mention of the deed which had been committed in the dark gardens.

"So that," the sheriff continued easily after another moment, "you were in here all the time since that butler fellow served that bouillon."

AND then it happened—the explosion for which Shaver had been somehow waiting all the time—an explosion in flesh and blood, almost soundless but none the less terrific. Mark Bedford's eyes fastened themselves on the darkness behind Shaver, widened, stared, bloodshot and bulging, the blood receding from his face as he gasped without a sound, and lurched to his feet.

Hanging on unsteadily to the arm of the chair, he stared, stared with his mouth hanging open and his whole body drawing back as from a blow while Claire Bedford, her low voice preceding her, came down the room and stopped just within the circle of light.

"It's not fatal," she announced. "They've got the bullet. It was a glancing shot and didn't pierce the lung. Dr. Branch says she had a narrow escape." She spoke to Tilden, who had also risen, and then looked at her husband.

"Mark!" Her frightened cry sent Tilden's gaze (Shaver had never removed his) to-

ward the swaying, almost idiotic, figure of the master of the house. Reason had completely left the man's face. He stood there like a great clumsy doll, a fleshly marionette, tottering on his feet, his lower lip pendulous like the rim of a pitcher. He tried, ineffectually, to say something; tried again, a dreadful eager light in his blazing eyes, fixed unwaveringly on his wife's terrified face.

". . . What . . . What . . .?" These words were gasped rather than spoken.

"Anne," Claire Bedford cried hurriedly. "Didn't you know? She got out of her room somehow—the doctor told you—don't you remember?—and then—she was shot out there in the garden, a little while ago. I didn't hear the sound of the bullet, but I heard the men bringing her upstairs."

A groan burst from the lips of the man who had followed each word with breathless suspense, before he lurched with a drunken and inadequate movement toward his wife. But his strength left him utterly. He crashed against an intervening chair and fell limply across the arm, his eyes closed, bubbles of froth on his lips.

For a second no one moved. With a face that was no more than a blank mask of horror and fear, Claire Bedford swayed above the prostrate figure, her eyes on space. Then Shaver lifted the unconscious man into a more comfortable position. Tilden remained absolutely still, looking from the husband to the wife with a curious and intent stare.

Until at last his very silence recalled Claire Bedford to her surroundings and slowly she looked back at the sheriff, her head coming up and up, her lips parted, the dark pupils within the hazel rim of her eyes widening and darkening, the breath dying in her throat. For an appreciable moment she stood there like a bird hypnotized by a horror of immediate destruction which it was impossible to escape.

With a gasp she put her handkerchief to her lips and turned away.

CHAPTER XXI

SHAVER followed the slim figure with his eyes until it passed through the doorway and out of sight. When he turned he found Tilden standing in front of Mark Bedford, watching him intently. The man was lying sprawled in the chair, his arms outflung, his head thrown back, breathing stertorously through his mouth. His face was a deep red; now and then his limbs twitched convulsively. He was still unconscious.

"A fit of some kind," the sheriff said. "I don't think it's dangerous. We'll just let him stay there a few minutes until one of those doctors is through upstairs. Now—" he threw back his shoulders—"I want help. Here, switch that light for me. Come over here by these windows—yes—tilt the shade, that's right—a little more—I want a good look at the floor here. . . . No, nothing here; let's try that music room."

He darted through the half-open glass door, sending the blue drapery flying. "Now the light again. That's right." From the music room another set of long French windows opened out on a small brick terrace. It was the floor in the vicinity of these windows that the sheriff was intently examining on his knees. Suddenly he beckoned Shaver with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Bedford said he was in that room all the time until after the shot was fired. Well, he wasn't; he was lying. Look at that." He pointed to four tiny marks on the shining wood just beyond the rug. "Dirt mold He wiped his feet before coming in, but the stuff clung in the holes of the rubber heels. Come, we'll make sure."

They went quickly back into the living room. The stricken man was still in the same position, his feet thrust stiffly out in front of him, and just as Tilden had prophesied, his black oxfords were rubber heeled, the little indentations filled level with the dark earth.

The sheriff bent over him again and ran his hand lightly down the man's left side, feeling his pockets. "Coat's damp," he said. "Oh, yes, he was out in those gardens, all right." His touch was light, but the unconscious man seemed to feel it—he stirred and moaned hoarsely, his heavy breathing becoming more natural as he struggled up and slowly opened his eyes.

Both men stood back. For a moment he blinked stupidly, his eyes fixed in a vacant stare; then his head dropped and he seemed to be dozing again.

At this moment the door of the room opened and Helfant and Branch came in together, the latter still arranging his dress, buttoning a cuff with one hand and talking earnestly. They stopped when they saw the sheriff, and in a low tone Helfant told him about the condition of the young girl in the room above.

"Shot with a thirty-two. Branch got the bullet. It grazed the corner of the left lung, passing diagonally across the heart but not coming too near it. There is a slight tear in the muscle—a week in bed will mend that. But she had an extremely narrow escape. The bullet was fired from the rear, as you know, and took a sharp upward course."

"That would argue?"

"That the person firing was on a lower level or was kneeling down."

"And the distance at which her assailant fired?"

"Problematical. I should say not less than ten or twelve feet."

"Could I see the bullet?"

"By all means." Helfant turned toward the door. "It's in my surgery." All four men moved out of the room into the hall. As they stepped across the threshold, Bedford, from the depths of his chair in the shadows, groaned aloud. Helfant stood still.

In a few words Tilden described the seizure that had preceded the sick man's collapse, the doctor listening thoughtfully. "Sounds almost like an epileptic fit," he said, "and yet there's no history."

Then, as the others started down the hall, he turned back. "I'd better have a look at him," he said. In the surgery Branch produced the bullet. "An inch deeper and we should have had a dead girl on our hands."

"Is she conscious?" Tilden asked.

"She came to while I was probing and fainted again. But I had to get it out—there was no time for anything but a local. The bleeding was profuse. She's sleeping now. I think by to-morrow morning she'll be able to talk—unless we get a temperature. But I don't look for that. It's a clean wound, and she's young and healthy. But, Mr. Tilden, what do you make of it, eh?" The young doctor dropped his professional tone and stared curiously at the sheriff.

INSTEAD of answering this question Tilden asked another: "Where's Cox?"

"Gone out again. He's hell bent on getting that wire fixed up—wants to get into communication with headquarters—wants more men out here. I think he's rattled, and I must say I don't wonder. What time is it now?" He pulled out his watch. "Five minutes of four. Another hour'll see us through —Good God! What was that?"

He was standing nearest the door, which was still ajar, and at his cry all three stood listening. Then with a leap they were out of the room and running down the hall.

Helfant's voice reached them faintly from the living room. "Branch—Branch—get the needle."

The doctor doubled back and Tilden and Shaver burst into the room. At the far end two figures were struggling, Mark Bedford and Helfant, and although the latter was bigger and more powerful it seemed as though Bedford would get the better of him.

The latter's face—what the two men could see of it as they closed in—was flushed a grayish purple. Helfant's cry warned them back. In his right hand Mark Bedford grasped a pistol, and it was for this that the two men were struggling.

Back and forth the two figures swayed, Helfant's hand holding Bedford's wrist as each man tried to gain possession of the weapon. Shaver and Tilden were forced to stand helplessly to one side. A single false move might have precipitated a catastrophe.

The doctor got a clutch on his antagonist's arm so that he could only use his elbow, but the man's fury and speed were terrific. Beads of sweat poured down Helfant's face, and he grunted once as Bedford lunged with his head and drove forward.

Behind them Branch came panting, maneuvering in such a way as to place himself back of Bedford. Helfant saw what he was doing, and with a last effort drove his man back, step by step. Branch squared himself, leaned forward—there was bright flash—a single cry from Bedford as the police surgeon hung on, pressing something into the former's side; then, after a long moment, the pistol clattered to the floor and Mark Bedford straightened.

He stood erect, raised his head with a dazed, contemptuous look, and began turning it from side to side before he dropped, trembling, into a chair, helped by Branch; his eyes closing, a broken mutter coming from between his teeth, before he sank again into unconsciousness under the influence of the hypodermic.

Helfant, meanwhile, was shaking himself together, rearranging his clothes, wiping his face with his handkerchief as he explained what had happened: Bedford's sudden and surprising attack on him as he stooped over —the pistol in his hand—his own cry. He was evidently a man of great strength and courage, for he threw off the effect of the horrible encounter almost immediately and began to consider what had better be done.

Plimpton was sent for, and leaving Shaver beside the fire the four men took Mark Bedford up to his bedroom. Helfant prophesied that he would wake in the morning, after the morphine had worn off, with scarcely any remembrance of what had happened.

When he was alone Shaver got up and began to move about restlessly. He was half dazed with fatigue and strain. The room seemed bigger, emptier, darker. He picked up the pistol and looked at it. It was a .32. He put it on the table, straightened a chair, kicked a rug flat with his foot, as he tried wearily to fit the proceedings of the last hour into the puzzle of John Bedford's death.

But it was useless—his brain refused to function—and all the time the stillness grew and grew. After four o'clock, now; even the noise of the storm had died to a whisper, as though the very elements had hushed

themselves to prepare for—what? There seemed to be a vague and nameless stir at the heart of the silence, a multitude of tiny movements like the first slow gyrations of a hive of bees about to swarm.

There was something pink lying on the seat of Mark Bedford's chair. He picked it up and looked at it. He was still staring at it with a blank expression when Tilden re-entered the room softly. He held it out.

It was a cloth-covered button. The sheriff in turn scrutinized it curiously, his light eyes gleaming.

"Ah!" he said slowly. "She's beginning to come now. A little patience—a little time. Tell you what you do, Shaver: go upstairs to that girl's room—don't worry, the maid's sitting with her, and she's asleep anyway, so you won't have any bother—and bring me down that coat she was wearing, will you?"

LIKE a mechanical man, Shaver did what he was told, and returned in a minute or two with the coat on his arm. He had not even gone into the girl's room; the woman had handed it to him through the door.

But it was not at the huge blood stain across the shoulders that the sheriff wished to look: it was at the front, where a single large button hole fastened the garment off to one side. And the button was missing. Tilden smiled with satisfaction as he fitted the button in his hand to the coat. It matched perfectly.

Then he picked up the pistol from the table and, breaking it, he examined the load. "One gone," he muttered, and from his pocket he produced the bullet that had been taken from Anne Bedford's breast. It slipped home into the vacant chamber.

Shaver gasped. "Then——?"

"Exactly," Tilden nodded. "Yes, Mark Bedford shot his daughter out there in those gardens, coming back through the music room and settling himself in here to do away with suspicion."

"The beast!"

"I wonder," the sheriff answered softly, and he stood frowning at the distance for a moment; then he looked again at the button on the table. "Want to come upstairs with me, Shaver? We won't be long."

In the upper hall he came to a stop outside Claire Bedford's room and knocked. The door was opened by Mrs. Trenchard. She had proceeded no farther with the business of retiring for the night and still wore the robe of heavy-padded violet silk. She stiffened when she saw the two men, and if it had been possible would have retreated.

Tilden stepped quickly past her into the room, and Shaver, following, got the impression that the dressing-room door had just been closed, as though Claire Bedford had slipped away at their approach. Small wonder. As for the older woman, she stood just inside the door, waiting for the sheriff to announce his errand.

"I beg your pardon for disturbing you again at this hour," he said, "but something new has turned up. I think you told me, Mrs. Trenchard, that no one entered that cottage of your last evening between the hours of half-past ten and midnight?"

There was an appreciable pause before she answered. She seemed to be searching the sheriff's words for some hidden meaning.

"I—I—last night I went to bed—I don't know——" Her expression cleared a little. "I'm afraid I cannot tell you anything pertinent—I didn't even know Mr. Bedford was dead until to-day—so you see——"

The sheriff nodded patiently. "I quite understand that." His tone was gentle. "But I'm not concerned now with Mr. Bedford's death. Mrs. Trenchard, someone—was in that room of yours down there last night, someone who left a glove behind." She was watching him feverishly, opening and closing her fingers, which were clasped in front of her.

"And something else." He took the pink button from his pocket and held it out. It was a shot in the dark, but its effect was amazing.

She began to tremble, her dry lips compressing themselves, her breasts heaving until at last she shook from head to foot, her eyes fixed on Tilden's with a terrified stare. And at last, without speaking, she groped her way blindly to a chair and sat down, her head bent. It was quite evident that Tilden was not to have an answer. He said a word of apology, to which she made no reply, and both men left the room.

The wide corridor was dark and silent; only the lamp near the back staircase off to one end was lighted. Across the way, behind her closed door, the wounded girl lay propped up on pillows, and in his own room behind them Mark Bedford slept—still sunk, no doubt, in the oblivion of the drug that had been administered to him by Branch.

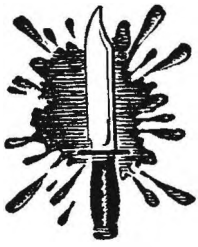
And yet that almost impalpable motion, as though subtle forces were moving behind all these doors, persisted in Shaver's mind. Perhaps it was only the lateness of the hour and the diminishing of his own vitality that made him uneasy, made him shiver as he followed Tilden down the hall. Then both men stood still. They were facing the stairs, and someone was coming up.

It was Claire Bedford. She held a tray in her hands as she walked toward them, a tray containing a siphon and a bottle and a glass. In the satin negligee, falling in long folds to her feet, she looked more than ever

like a goddess. She did not stop, but gave them a little nod as she passed them and entered her room. She had not, then, been with her mother. In that case, who was it who had left the room hastily as they entered it? Tilden stood still.

"Wait here," he said in a low tone. "I'm going to get Plimpton." And he ran rapidly down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXII



WHETHER or not something of Shaver's uneasiness had impregnated Tilden, it was impossible to say, but at any rate, his nonchalance and ease of manner had vanished when he came back along the corridor with Plimpton. The three men stood in a huddle close to the sick man's door, and as they talked they kept glancing about to see that they were unobserved. But nothing moved, the dim light fell blandly on the white paneling, their own low whispers scarcely making a mark on the stillness.

"Remember," the sheriff finished, putting his hand on the butler's arm as he turned away, "don't move from this door for any reason under the sun. And if you need help fire two shots from that revolver in the air. That's all. It can't be long now. Stick to it."

Downstairs, Tilden halted outside the surgery door, and Shaver thought for a moment that he was about to wake Helfant; but after a moment's consideration he proceeded on down the hall and into the living room. He threw himself into a chair and began working with a pencil and a scrap of paper. His manner was brusque.

Tight lipped and keen, he seemed to be preparing for a climax of some sort, as though all the time he had been waiting, observing, testing, sorting, gathering threads here and there, and now the hour had come for the decisive move to be played. Presently he threw the sheet of paper on the table.

Shaver, picking it up, saw that it was a plan of the bedrooms, and indicated the location of all the members of the family: Mark Bedford in his room, Claire and Mrs. Trenchard just beyond, Helfant on the first floor in the back, the servants in the far wing, and Anne across from her father. Near the front door there was a small cross, and at the door leading from the servants' quarters into the gardens a little check.

"Man there," Tilden explained laconically. "Otherwise, anyone from those upstairs rooms could slip out that way."

"And this?" Shaver asked, putting his finger on the cross.

Tilden shook his head with a smile. "Wait and see."

He had turned his chair so that he could command a view of the hall outside; there was nothing between him and it—the door was wide open—and anyone entering the house from the front and only unguarded spot would have to pass this opening to get at the rest of the house. Tilden sat with his gaze fastened on it—motionless for the most part, except for an occasional glance at the clock on the mantel.

There was little or no conversation. Once the sheriff spoke briefly of Judge Bascom, and for the first time Shaver heard that on that terrible trip to the mainland Tilden had called the Judge and that the latter was coming up to the house on the island as fast as he could make it. After that there was silence again.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the vast house, and yet, after a while, to Shaver's fixed and unhappy gaze the very chairs and tables seemed to be subtly moving. He looked up at the sheriff, who was sitting bolt upright in his chair, his finger at his lips. The clock struck half-past four.

The man must have had ears more like an animal's than those of a human being, for he was out of his chair and close to the door before the sound of the chime had died away. There was a pause, and then Tilden leaped. A second later, gun in hand, he prodded a man in front of him into the living room. It was the missing Garrison.

"Right on over there by the fire, Doctor. Yes, thanks, take a chair. I'll just . . ." His gun still pointed, he ran his hands over the sodden clothes that draped the lean figure. "Nothing. Good! Now we know where we are."

Dropping into another chair, he looked at the white-faced man, who sat in a dazed huddle, staring straight in front of him.

"Will you talk?" Tilden asked, much as he might have asked, "Will you have a cigar?"

THE young doctor looked at him out of inscrutable eyes, haggard and dark with circles of fatigue and strain beneath. They were the single live features in his gaunt face. His laugh, a harsh grating noise of derision, jarred through the room.

"Nevertheless, I think," the sheriff said quietly, "that it will be better for all concerned if you will tell us the truth. Do you know that Miss Anne Bedford is again in her room and that this time she will not leave it so easily?"

The young doctor sat still for a moment; then his whole figure slumped, and he bowed his head and put his hand over his eyes. He

was very nearly at the end of his physical endurance.

"Listen!" Tilden said softly. "I'll tell your story for you. You left your room last night and went out into the vestibule for a smoke. You had just lighted your cigarette when you looked in through the glass door and saw Miss Anne coming down the stairs, although some time before she had gone to bed.

"You threw your cigarette away and were about to step forward and announce your presence, when you saw her try the surgery door with extreme caution, open it, and go in. Before you could move she came out again, walked down the hall and into the dining room. Her air of secrecy was what probably even then kept you from moving. Well, in a moment or two she came hurriedly back, went up the stairs and disappeared.

"You stood there in a—state. You were astonished and upset. And as soon as the coast was clear you slipped down the hall and went into the dining room yourself. Now see what happened. Miss Anne had dropped the string of beads which she wore round her neck on that first trip. She hurried back down the stairs to retrieve it and saw you just as you were in the act of closing the dining-room door on your way out."

Garrison was now looking at the sheriff steadily. His color had come back. "Then you don't—don't think Anne had anything to do with her grandfather's death?" he burst out suddenly.

Tilden's smile was answer enough. In a moment he was on his feet, shaking the sheriff's hand with an air of wild relief.

"Thank God!" he said and then he dropped back shakily into his chair. "You don't know what it's been—to think that she was even suspected of such a thing. Now I can do anything—tell you anything you want to know. Oh, what a relief, what a blessed relief!"

"And of course to-night," Tilden resumed, "after you hung about all day, you helped Miss Anne to escape from her room."

"Yes. I threw a note into her bedroom window as soon as it was dark, telling her the whole story of my seeing her and what had happened. Then I got a ladder, and she climbed out the window. We planned to get away from the island in the launch and lie low until we could get help.

"But we didn't know where the troopers were, and we thought that I ought to go on down to the boat house and make sure that the way was all clear. She was to wait among those bushes until I came for her. Well, when I got to the boat house the launch was gone."

Shaver and Tilden glanced at one another. "And then?" prompted the sheriff.

"Well, I figured out it might be anchored off that little dock farther along, and I went to see. But it was slow work—I was afraid every minute of stumbling over one of those policemen. But the launch wasn't there, either. By this time it was getting late, and I was afraid that Anne would be upset, waiting there in the wind and rain.

"So I hurried back. But when I got to the place where I had left her, she wasn't there. I—I almost lost my head then. But after a while I figured that she might have been alarmed by something—might have slipped back into the house and be waiting for me in her room.

"It was a long while before I could get close enough to her window to do any good. There was a good deal of noise and confusion. But the window was shut and the blinds drawn down, and I could see from shadows passing to and fro that there were people with her. At last I decided to wait until late and then get in here through the front and that—"

Tilden sat up abruptly in his chair. "Now, Doctor," he said sternly, "you have been wrong and foolish from the beginning. But if you'll answer some questions I'm going to put to you you can wipe out most of the mischief you've done. It's not too late yet."

All during Garrison's narrative, Tilden had been listening for something—some sound. It was at this moment that it came: a tap on the window. The sheriff jumped to his feet.

CHAPTER XXIII

"DR. GARRISON, just remain where you are, will you?" Tilden commanded in a low voice. "You, Shaver, look and see whether that hall is all clear. . . . Yes? Good."

He went to the window and opened it with the utmost caution, whispering for a moment to the person outside, then turned away in the direction of the music room, motioning the other two men to remain seated. He was gone for two or three minutes. Then the blue draperies parted and, preceding Tilden, the light shining on his massive white head, Judge Bascom stepped into the room.

He gripped Shaver's hand, acknowledged Garrison with a brief nod, and after Tilden had explored the corridor again all four men went noiselessly down the hall and into the oval room. By common consent the others turned their backs and went toward the windows as the Judge walked forward alone to the great couch where the body of his old friend lay, faintly outlined beneath the shimmering piece of brocade.

He did not attempt to lift this, but stood

still for a moment before he turned abruptly and joined the others at the far end of the room close to the bullfinch's cage.

Shaver, who had seen the Judge at his greatest moments in court, had never been so much impressed as now by the strength —almost the majesty—that the man possessed.

Bascom lifted his eyes slowly to the sheriff's face. "Who killed him, Tilden?"

The long, lean man considered this, his jaws moving in and out mechanically. Then he turned on his heel without speaking and led the way into the bedroom. Close to the bed on the far side he put out his hand and shot the panel back, disclosing the little black door of the safe. Tapping it with one bony forefinger, he said, "If we could get behind this, I might be able to tell you."

"The combination?"

"Lost—no one knows it."

Something seemed to irritate the Judge. He and Tilden stood staring at each other in a peculiar fixed way. "It can be opened, I suppose—blown?"

Tilden shook his head. "No time."

These two words, simple as they were, deepened the menace of the silent house, brought the dead man before their eyes. In his cage the bullfinch sounded a single mournful note, that muted cry that animals give in the hush before the dawn. Tilden was still staring questioningly at Bascom, although he had not spoken again after that brief phrase, and the Judge, a frown on his face, his head bent, considered whatever unvoiced request had been put to him silently.

Not for the first time, Shaver speculated on the bond between these two men. The Judge spoke. "All right," he said in a low voice, "go ahead."

With a brisk movement. Tilden turned and walked into the other room. He came back in less than a minute carrying in his hand a white paper funnel, hastily cut and pasted. Placing the large end of this on the door of the safe, in a spot that he selected with care, he put the small end to his ear and, bending forward, he put his hand on the combination.

Slowly, lovingly he turned it, first from left to right and then back, back, from right to left. His face vacant, his eyes empty of light, all his force was concentrated in those long, nervous delicate fingers and in his supersensitive ear.

So eloquent was his attitude that, uninstructed as he was, Shaver knew, by the sudden gleam of triumph in the man's eye, the instant the first tumbler fell, although not a single sound penetrated the stillness. And now making a mental note of the number, the marvelous fingers paused for a second. Was the second number to the right or to the left?

With that same care, the dial was moved again, slowly, slowly to the right, then back infinitesimally—almost imperceptibly. Not to the right evidently; the long fingers swept the dial to zero, picked up the first number and then moved slowly to the left. Ah, he had it! The second tumbler, evidently. And now there were two numbers to carry.

AGAIN that pantomime of unspeakable dexterity, of uncanny deftness took place beneath their eyes, and, half mesmerized, they stood motionless, completely absorbed in watching those tiny expert gestures into which the man had temporarily poured all his life and intelligence.

The paper funnel dropped to the floor, Tilden straightened, spun the dial, once, twice, three times, turned the handle quickly, and the solid, immovable door swung open.

With a grunt of satisfaction the sheriff leaned forward and flashed his torch about the interior. A moment later he brought out a fat leather-enclosed sheaf of papers and carried it to the table under the lamp.

It was John Bedford's diary. Opening it hastily he skimmed through the pages until he came to the part for which he was searching; then, pulling out a chair, he dropped into it and began to read.

From where Shaver stood, the paper was upside down, but he made out the date—August 14th. For a few moments there was no sound but the rustling of paper as Tilden turned a leaf. Bascom, his arms folded on the back of a chair, watched him intently. Garrison had turned away, his face gray and tired, and was lost in dreams.

Suddenly Tilden looked up. "What was that?" he called sharply. The urgency of his tone set them all listening, but the silence remained unbroken. There was nothing, no faintest stir, no creaking, no rustle of a curtain, in fact no tomb could have been emptier of all evidence of life—but Tilden was not satisfied. He glanced at the door, at the windows, finally at Shaver, considering for a moment.

"Suppose," he said in a low tone, "you go up there, Shaver, and see how Plimpton's getting along. A minute ago I thought I heard something. I'll be a little while over this—sort of stick around with him, will you? I'll relieve you soon."

The young lawyer nodded and turned away. The oval room when he stepped into it was empty and still. And yet such was the condition of his nerves that he glanced involuntarily at the dead man outlined beneath the light covering to see whether the figure had moved. Disgusted at this aberration, he advanced more resolutely into the big shadowy hall and peered down its length. Nothing. No one. No motion, no

sound. The stillness was really almost disgusting. Why was he walking so softly? What was there to be afraid of? It was absurd.

He squared his shoulders and began to mount the stairs. He would have been relieved to hear the sound of his own footsteps, but the thick pile of the carpet swallowed them up. Plimpton was damned still. . . . Shaver cleared his throat defiantly and continued to mount.

Why the devil didn't the dawn come? It must be close to five o'clock. He took the last few steps at a run, rounded the stairhead, and faced the corridor. It was empty. Plimpton was gone. Shaver put out his hand and steadied himself against the rail. Mechanically as he stood there he repeated over and over to himself, "Wait—wait a minute—its all right . . . it's just—"

Of course. What more reasonable? Mark Bedford had called, and Plimpton had gone into his room. Yet Tilden's instructions had been that on no account was Plimpton to leave the corridor. Oh, well, it was pretty late, everyone was asleep. . . . Plimpton would open the door in a minute and step outside where he belonged. That was it, yes, certainly. Shaver, steadied a little, abandoned the rail and advanced down the hall. Only now he didn't cough or clear his throat, and he walked slowly and warily, watching and listening. He came to a full stop outside Mark Bedford's door.

It was awfully still. He looked at the spot where the butler had been standing just before they went downstairs, then he put his ear to the panel. Ah—movement! Someone was walking around inside. Bedford had recovered consciousness and was ill, and Plimpton was doing something for him. He raised his hand and tapped gently.

The sound inside stopped. Then the knob began to turn, and the door was opened, very slowly, by someone inside the room. With a movement of impatience Shaver stepped across the threshold. Instantly the room was plunged into darkness, and someone put a hand across his mouth. He flinched back to find his arms pinioned in an iron grip. A voice whispered, "Don't speak—don't attempt to shout," and something hard and small was pressed against his right side.

HANDS were busy all about him. Good God—a woman's hands, what were they doing? Ah, tying his wrists. The grip on his arms loosened, but the pistol was still digging unpleasantly into his side. A breath—someone near him in the darkness had drawn a long breath—a sigh of relief. A little wave of perfume hit his nostrils. Where had he smelled that before? Then he remembered—green spangles wrapped around a slender form, white arms, lustrous copper-colored hair—Claire Bedford. The light was snapped on.

In front of Shaver, his top coat on, a cap pulled low over his eyes, stood Dr. Helfant, and in a chair, stretched out in a queer stiff position, Plimpton lay with something white stuffed into his mouth. His hands were tied behind his back, and his eyes were closed, but they hadn't finished him, because he was still breathing. There was no sign of Mark Bedford.

And to his right muffled in a light tan coat, a little hat pulled over her hair, Claire Bedford was holding a steel blue automatic against his side. Her face was curiously set, her eyes blazing with excitement. She was not looking at him but at Helfant.

"Hurry!" she cried in a low voice. "I can't stand much more of this. How do we know who will be up here next? And it's getting late."

Helfant smiled. "Don't crack now, like a good child," he answered in a caressing voice. "If necessary I can handle them all in turn. It reminds me of the fairy tale—was it Hans Andersen or Grimm?—where they send one messenger after another. Don't you remember?" He ran his hand lightly down her arm, and she quivered beneath his touch. This exhibition of his influence sickened Shaver. Helfant whirled on him. His left hand shot out and gripped one of the lawyer's arms. There was a tiny flash, and Shaver felt a deep burning sting, much like what you got in the war, only this was through his coat. He drew back, and the revolver muzzle followed him.

"Steady!" the doctor called in a low tone of command, his eyes sparkling with a cold savagery. There was no threat in it, it was simply the voice of one reasonable human being to another. "All right, Claire." Helfant said after a moment. "Our young friend will do very nicely now."

What happened after that was a confused jumble. He could see and hear perfectly for a little while only—nothing seemed to matter, and it was all quite simple—nothing to make a fuss about. Claire Bedford and Dr. Helfant were going somewhere together, the woman was very strung up and excited, and they were in a tremendous hurry.

Helfant was a calm egg—only deadly with his easy smiling face. The young lawyer kept getting drowsier and drowsier. Where was Plimpton? Plimpton was gone too, like Bedford. He was alone with the girl. She was staring at him, biting her scarlet lips, her eyes flitting, coming back, flitting, as she listened at the door, paced the room. . . . Helfant again, with a large silk handkerchief, wiping his forehead. Shaver closed his eyes.

Suddenly he was lifted from the chair in

which he had been placed—it was a marvelous feeling: his body was being pushed along, none too gently, but that didn't matter. Motion, air on his face—pause—he sank into a deep and profound slumber.

CHAPTER XXIV

COMING through. . . . The tunnel had been very black and intolerably long but . . . they were coming through now. Good old locomotive, pounding away out there in front. By Jove—the stars were out in the paling sky, and look!—the dawn had come. Glorious. A faint purple. ". . . and the Lord said, 'Let there be light,' and light was made." Shaver, frightfully drowsy, exulted in the light, a sort of eerie joyous twilight. He stirred, and pins and needles shot through the leg he had incautiously tried to move. He lay still again, resting.

Two voices, a sort of duet, quite close against that throbbing of the locomotive. No, not a locomotive . . . too near, too fast . . . an airplane? A sting of froth hit his face, rousing him again. A boat—he was in a boat. And then, slowly, under the influence of the keen morning air, Shaver began to come back to reality. He lay very still in the huddle into which he had been flung, trying to piece things together.

But as his senses began to function he had become wary, and he was careful to remain motionless with his eyes closed while he tried to get an approximate idea of where he was and what was going to happen. In that room of Bedford's Helfant had given him a jab of something—morphine, most likely—and he had passed out. Plimpton must have had the same treatment. Where was Plimpton?

Then he discovered that the cushion against which his head was resting was soft and warm. He was lying against another man. And now discomfort began to wake in him as his system threw off the effects of the drug. His hands were still tied behind his back and his wrists were badly chafed, not to speak of the frightful cramps in his arms and legs from his stiff and unnatural position, one leg doubled under him, his body twisted round and his head sideways.

He opened his eyes again cautiously and found himself staring at the sky. Dare he move his head ever so slightly? He tried it, the tiniest fraction, and saw a pair of legs in water-splashed black, protruding to one side. Plimpton, for sure. Venturing still further, he turned the other way, and out of the corner of his eye on the off side he saw a man's hand flung laxly on the rep of the cushioned seat.

Did the hand belong to Plimpton or were they three? Three victims. That meant that they had been carried to the boat by Helfant. Then Helfant . . . it was only at that moment that a very real notion of his danger came home to Cliff Shaver.

There had been a murderer abroad in that house on the island, a man who had not scrupled to take one life and to plant attempts on two others. It was a simple matter of logic that if Helfant was to live he, Shaver, had to die. That was—if Helfant were the murderer.

But where was Bedford? Mightn't he in some way . . . ? Then a deep irrevocable conviction that it *was* Helfant came home to him as he struggled and memory returned. That cold face—utterly ruthless—that calm precision of movement, the evident understanding between Claire Bedford and the man.

Understanding? More—he fumbled in his mind, and the truth came home to him in a revealing flash as he remembered her great brilliantly blazing eyes, the scarlet of her lips, the life and fire he had seen in her face—all former glimpses faded before that final picture. Beautiful—yes, with the distorted dreadful beauty of a dream of evil—those two were lovers.

That was the explanation of Mark Bedford's conduct. The man knew! Light kept coming. Mark had shot his daughter in mistake for his wife in those dark gardens.

Then he began to listen to the voices somewhere ahead. If he could only move! But he dared not stir, although the strain of his position was becoming unbearable. He might rouse Plimpton, who might groan or in some way attract Helfant's attention—and there was nothing at that moment that Shaver desired more desperately to avoid.

As the grayish purple of the coming day broadened into a sweet, chill, colorless effulgence, the sense of his peril and the peril of the man or men beneath and behind him grew stronger with every moment. Desperately now he concentrated all his faculties in an attempt to overhear what those two out in front were saying.

Of the words themselves he caught only one here and there, but after a while he thought that the doctor was encouraging his companion, attempting to soothe her. His low persuasive voice reiterated the words—". . . safe . . . if . . . you see . . . perfectly safe . . . you must . . . *Come*"— and on this last plea the overpowering throb that had become almost like the beating of his own heart stopped. Helfant had switched off the engine.

The sudden silence was terrific—a shock; and then Shaver, every sense abnormally sharpened by the instinct of self-preservation, began to plan. His body, stiff and unwieldy in its unnatural position, had lurched as the speed of the boat slackened abruptly.

Now, keeping himself limp, he threw his weight forward so that he fell suddenly, like a stuffed sack, on his face and down into the bottom of the thing—but a clear three feet from the position in which he had first found himself, and three feet nearer to those two who were still conferring in low, toneless words. With his face scraping the floor and his eyes closed in an effort to concentrate more fully, he lay still and listened.

"This"—it was Helfant's thoughtful, unruffled voice—"ought to be a good place. Look around—we're completely out of sight of land and off the edge of that long shallow ledge—there's even a chance that a body would never be recovered here."

"And if it should be?"

"If it should be, its condition would simply verify our story—it will be so battered and disfigured by the waves. Come, you must have more courage." For a low moan had burst from the woman's lips.

"I never thought—it would be so—dreadful," she whispered.

FOR a moment Helfant's iron nerve seemed about to go.

"And did I?" he demanded hoarsely. Then, "But you know they're drugged. Those two won't feel a thing. It will be an easy death. Don't think of it. We mustn't fail now. Our story is foolproof. Mark attacked Plimpton with the hypo he had stolen—you heard the noise and ran for me. Mark overpowered us both—then carried all of us to the boat.

"When he got us out here—he finished Shaver off first, then Plimpton. After that I managed to get my arms free, and being the last of his victims the drug had partially worn off me, so that I was able to tackle him. Remember this: he was bending over you—we will put some of his hair in your hands—and you were trying to hold him off when I jumped on him.

"There was a struggle, and when he saw the game was up, before either of us could stop him, he leaped over the side into the sea. You see, it will be quite simple. Come, my darling. One little step more and we're free. We can go away and forget. The world is wide, and time wipes out everything. Besides, it's too late to go back now—there is no going back."

There was a fierce exultation in these last words. The man was a brute, but an intellectual brute, and beyond the reach of all compunction. As well look for pity from the sea upon whose breast the boat was gently rising and falling in a long pause before the final action.

Desperately and almost with a feeling of suffocation—not from the pressure of his face against the airless floor boards but from a conviction that a door was closing on him, slowly and relentlessly—Shaver tried to figure a way out of the trap.

His hands were tied behind his back. He had no weapon. At his first movement those strong capable hands of Helfant's would be at his throat. And they were utterly isolated, surrounded by nothing but desolate wastes of water where a cry for help would be heard only by a solitary tern or sea gull, flapping its wings high above in the chill morning air.

The conversation in front of him stopped abruptly, and Shaver felt that he was being watched. Had he made an incautious movement, or had Helfant simply turned to look over the field before proceeding to action?

Shaver held his breath and felt that first preliminary chill of the green water, fathoms deep, through which his body would presently glide, bait for dim sliding bodies, to lie motionless at last in dark pits of slime. A hand grasped his shoulder. He was lifted, turned over; he kept his eyes shut, let his mouth roll open, enduring, for what seemed an eternity, the penetrating stare of Helfant's keen eyes.

Then the hand removed itself, he sagged sideways with a roll, and, fighting his catching breath which threatened to burst from his lungs, he lay still, his face against the side, listening, groping in his mind, trying to hear what was happening above him.

A foot came down heavily on his legs and remained there as Helfant balanced himself and leaned forward to scrutinize those other two, sprawling where they had been flung at the back of the enclosed space. Shaver bit his lip to keep down the involuntary cry of pain and felt the blood trickling over his chin. No coherent thought now . . . only agony . . . hold on . . . keep your grip . . . don't make a sound . . . a sound. . . . Gone. He breathed again.

And then—it happened so suddenly that the sensation of being dragged and lifted from his position at the bottom of the boat almost coincided with the dreadful downward plunge of his body through tons of icy water . . . down . . . down . . . his lungs were bursting . . . now up, an endless impossible journey . . . he would never reach the surface in time . . . never . . . his head emerged into a boundless universe of sweet air, his breath released itself in a long tearing stream, and he drew in another and another, struggling frantically to get his hands free, treading water frantically.

A report echoed above the tumult in his brain, and a bullet went singing past his ear with a fraction of an inch to spare. He dived under, kicked himself aloft, swung up on the long crest of a wave, plunged face downward, rose again, his head clear, and now he saw that the long slim body of the boat was under way again—he heard the sharp throb of its motor and saw the cleft spray rising in a cloud behind. And treading water as best he could, as the throbs lessened and gradually faded to a high, thin reverberation, he fought the dull despair that tempted him to make each dreadful plunge his last.

In a dim delirium of terror that had no place in time Shaver struggled for life, all his senses fused in that one unending effort to keep his head free of the green swirl of water endowed with a fiendish cunning. The mocking echo of the boat's exhaust had completely died. He was very weak. And the deadly calm of inertia was already settling on him, so that his faculties, engaged beyond thought while life was still sweet, returned to him in that long pause before the end. It was then that he heard—yes, distinctly and very close at hand—the rapid firing of an engine.

But so terribly had his powers of endurance been taxed that at first he was angry, like a child, and tears rushed to his eyes as he determined to feel no hope. This yielded in a moment to a mad burst of energy. Shouting, screaming, throwing every ounce of his strength into the effort to keep afloat, he searched the great white-fringed crests for a sign of life. It came so suddenly that it was almost his undoing. Straight at him, up in the air, a shining prow cut the water.

Shaver threw himself up, shouted again. The black shape swept on, missing him by a few feet.

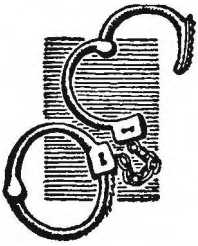
The wash of the boat went over him, filling his mouth with sickening salt water, and it seemed that a current clutched at his ankles to drag him under into blinding darkness.

He knew he was through this time. Rescue was near in distance but too far in time for him. He was gone. It was all over. There was no more fight in him.

But the mysterious current made by the passing boat brought him up to the surface again, and he heard the boat once more. It was approaching slowly.

Then the engine died—they *must* have seen him—and yet it seemed an incredible time before a voice cried, "Hold on!" and he was lifted clear, to find himself lying in the bottom of a boat, staring up into Tilden's anxious face. Someone put a flask to his lips; the burning liquor gurgled into his throat, but he was too tired to swallow. Under the shock and relief of his rescue he closed his eyes and fainted.

CHAPTER XXV



THE sun was over the horizon. It sparkled on the waves and lighted up the faces of the men in the boat. What a crew of scarecrows they looked after that long night! Shaver had recovered his senses some time before; now he stirred and tried to raise his head, and Plimpton turned at his movement and gave him a friendly hand.

"How's that, sir? More comfortable? Take a little of this and you'll feel all right."

The young lawyer drank, too dazed to speak. He was in a long black police boat that was cutting through the water at a tremendous speed. Out in front of him Tilden crouched over the wheel, the Judge, just behind, swept the horizon with a pair of glasses he held fixed to his eyes. About both men there was an air of savage concentration.

Plimpton's voice rose above the roar of the exhaust and the hissing of the spray. "We're after them, sir. Think they're making for an island 'way out. I heard them talking. I was in their boat—you were lying half on top of me. When he stopped his engine to throw you overboard I managed to jump and make a swim for it. Thought I heard another exhaust behind—wasn't sure—but it was worth trying. In the water I got my hands free just in time. Then the sheriff came along. After that we got you."

At this moment the Judge strained forward with a sudden cry and held the glasses steady on something he had picked up. They all saw it a moment later, that minute speck of land for which they were searching, a barren point of rock used occasionally by fishermen, in the waste of waters far from the mainland. Tilden switched off the engine, the boat slackened speed, and the four men—Tilden, the Judge, Plimpton, and Shaver—went into a huddle.

The question was—ought they to wait for Cox, who was coming up with more men, or ought they to proceed on alone?

Plimpton again described the lonely island for which it was presumed the fugitives were making; he had been there once with Mark Bedford, angling for swordfish. It was the farthest point of land on this part of the seaboard, in extent about a mile long a half-mile across, and except on the ocean side was completely surrounded by cliffs and jagged rocks.

At the eastern end, where the sea rolled in, there was a strip of beach that would make an excellent landing place, but the shack in which the two had most likely

taken shelter commanded a view of the beach, and it would be impossible to approach from this angle without being seen.

To guard against this possibility Tilden proposed to head the police boat in and to come at the place from the rear. Helfant had no reason to imagine himself pursued, for, although Plimpton had heard the police boat's exhaust, his wits were sharpened by desperation and the doctor was busy at the time. Besides, the sound was very faint.

Helfant probably figured that both Shaver and Plimpton were at the bottom of the sea —yet he was a desperate man—and Mark Bedford might still be alive. They decided to proceed.

In grim silence Tilden took the wheel again, and the chase was resumed. Sitting in the stern of the flying craft, Plimpton told the lawyer the story of what had happened to him in that upstairs corridor of the house on the island just before dawn.

He had been standing at his post outside Mark Bedford's door when another door down the hall had opened and Claire Bedford had stepped out. Just for an instant he turned, to tell her that she must go back into her room, and as he did so the door at his back opened and Helfant attacked him from behind. The thrust of a hypodermic needle, a hand clapped over his mouth—and he was helpless.

He was taken into the room, where he saw Mark Bedford, drugged and bound, lying across the bed. Before his senses left him he saw the doctor pick Bedford up—the man's strength was enormous—and carry him from the room.

He figured later that the route must have been down the service stairs and around the glass porch. For the doctor had anchored the speed boat off the deep ledge of rock beyond the windows of the oval room.

From what Plimpton could gather—listening to the talk of those two when he recovered his senses in the speed boat—the plan had been that the three were to leave the house together secretly, Bedford, Claire, and Helfant, but the lovers would have returned—alone. Mark was to have played the part of murderer, madman, and suicide, who had finally been overcome by the doctor in an attempt to save Claire Bedford's life and had then drowned himself.

This jibed with what Shaver had overheard. It was neat in its way, and the only man who could have denied the truth of the story would have been lying at the bottom of the sea. Tilden's cleverness in placing Plimpton outside the door had necessitated a change of plan, and of course the butler's escape had made subterfuge impossible.

Their only resort now was flight.

IN THE cool morning air Shaver shuddered as he realized Helfant's ruthlessness and how narrow had been his escape. They were drawing closer to the island now; it loomed up dead ahead, a tawny mound on the deep blue water, the only interruption in the vast solitude—for the mainland lay far behind.

As they drew in closer Tilden shut off the engine and the Judge raked every crevice, every portion of the serrated cliffs and rocky spurs for some sign of life. But there was none. Nothing moved or stirred except a solitary gull high up over the scrub pines on the plateau above the outer barrier.

For fear that the sound of the exhaust might be heard, oars were fitted to the police boat, and Plimpton rowed the narrow craft in while the others kept their eyes fastened on the scene in front.

Ten minutes later they were standing on a rocky ledge that ran up into a perpendicular cliff. There was, however, a natural path cutting diagonally up its face, and along this narrow but fairly safe foothold the three men scrambled—for the Judge had been left behind in the boat to await the arrival of Cox.

Once on top of the steep rise, they found themselves on an irregular sandy floor pitted with rocks and boulders and thinly covered with pines and coarse sedge grass.

Plimpton was in the lead, Tilden and Shaver behind. They went carefully, watching and listening at each step. All about them lay the brilliant sunshine, blazing back from the maize-colored sand—and it was unbelievably quiet. Up here even the sound of the sea was stilled.

When they had been walking for about five minutes they came to a downward slope, and here Tilden paused. "They must be fairly close," he muttered. "How far is that shack from here, Plimpton?"

The butler stopped, and with a stick he drew a pattern on the sand.

"See, sir," he explained. "The island's kind of heart shaped. We're at the big end —about halfway down. The beach is at the bottom. There's a lot of rock now, and then a flat place below the cliffs. The shack backs against the cliffs and faces the sea."

Tilden thought for a moment. "We may surprise them. Cox ought to be along any time now." Taking out his revolver he examined it carefully, and the little procession started forward again. About five hundred yards farther on they came to a fissure in the sandstone. Plimpton motioned, and as they drew level they saw through the opening a wedge of the Atlantic Ocean and a strip of dazzling sand. But at their very feet, far down, there was something else: the weather-beaten roof of the shack itself.

The back of the place was still in shadow. The cliff was very steep and not more than ten feet from the gray clapboarding of the rear wall; the three men therefore approached the house as might visitants from the skies. Only the low roar of the waves on the beach broke the silence.

The three men descended slowly, hands on their pistols, faces strained, fearful of sending a loose stone crashing down to give the alarm. But they got to the bottom in safety and moved noiselessly across the strip of shingle to a back window. The pane was dirty, and it was dark in the room inside—a small rude bedroom.

Shaver tried the sash and it gave. A moment later they were over the sill—it was not more than four feet from the ground—standing motionless in the musty confined space.

Shaver stood looking vaguely at the cheap pine dresser with a broken water pitcher on it, the camp bed in the corner, as Tilden moved across to the door and examined the catch. Evidently the main room was beyond.

Suddenly out of the dimness that surrounded them a noise sprang up. It was so loud and violent that it was difficult to believe it was not in the same room—a harsh bumping and thrashing, interspersed with groans and cries horrible to hear. After enduring for perhaps ten seconds it died away as suddenly as it had begun, and in the stillness that followed, a woman gasped: "For God's sake—stop him—stop—him!"

It was Claire Bedford who spoke. The young lawyer shuddered. The silence was so sinister, for in that silence if they could not see they could *feel* Helfant. Then they heard his step. On it came right past the door behind which they crouched. In the flimsy, tinder box of a place they heard the opening of another door.

Someone was being menaced. Still Tilden did not move. Then another sound came—a savage grunt of pain that rose into a long monotonous scream that had lost all identification of either age or sex—indeed of humanity.

Shaver gritted his teeth and stirred. Tilden threw up a warning hand as he slipped the latch. They heard Claire Bedford whisper, "Don't let him do that again." And Helfant's cool answer, "Nerves, my dear. It will soon be over. You'd better go and wait on the beach."

Still Tilden hesitated, holding Shaver back with one hand, which the sheriff soon removed in order to draw his gun. He gave a low warning signal. He was evidently waiting for the sound of a footfall, and when it came Tilden tensed.

Then Tilden sent the door flying open and the three men leaped forward.

CHAPTER XXVI

IN THE big, barn-like room, lighted by windows from the east, Claire Bedford sat huddled in an old wicker chair, facing the intruders. On his feet, and enveloped in a heavy coat also, stood Helfant, a cap pulled over his eyes, his hands in his pockets.

Helfant swung, staring, and the girl lifted her head.

"Put 'em up, Doctor, put 'em up," Tilden said coolly. "You haven't a chance. The place is surrounded."

For a second Helfant stared at him without moving or making the slightest response, then his glance slid to the windows and back again to the sheriff's face. "A sensational entry," he drawled. "Why don't you finish it in authentic fashion?"

"Take your hands out of your pockets and put 'em up," Tilden growled, covering the big man more closely.

With a shrug the doctor moved his elbows. The explosion was deafening, but a second before the bullet hit the wall back of where the sheriff had been standing, the long lean man had jerked to one side. In taking his hands from his pockets in response to that succinct order, Helfant had fired.

Quicker than thought another shot rang out. It was Plimpton. He pinked Helfant neatly in the arm, and the pistol fell clattering to the floor. At the sound of the doctor's groan, Claire Bedford, who had been sitting absolutely motionless, gave a single cry—high and instantly muted.

The silence hung for a moment to erupt into a scene of wild activity. The door of the cabin was thrust open and Cox, with Judge Bascom just behind, burst into the room, followed by a crowd of troopers, guns out.

Tilden waved them back. "Just cover him, boys." He turned and faced Helfant, who was watching him out of narrowed eyes. "David Helfant, I arrest you for the murder of John Bedford."

"And you, madame," he swung and confronted the woman cowering in the chair, "I arrest you as an accessory to the crime."

These words lingered on the air, calm, decisive, final, the climax of a tale of ruthless cruelty and horror, plucking these two people from the common ranks of humanity and branding the man as a poisoner and the woman as his accomplice. No one moved for a second in the pause that followed this grim pronouncement. They were all waiting to see what the doctor would do, brought at last to his account.

Helfant, too, waited an appreciable moment before speaking, as though he were turning over curiously in his mind this abrupt aspect of his position, and his nerve was tremendous, for beyond a whitening of his face and the tensing of his jaw where a tiny muscle flickered in and out, he gave no sign of discomfiture.

Then he looked beyond Bascom and Cox toward the woman lying motionless in her chair, staring at him with a face that might have been made of carved ivory except for the wide-open, fixed eyes.

"Claire," he said slowly, "say nothing. This charge is preposterous. But under all circumstances, no matter what they may tell you, say nothing. Remember."

It was at this moment, before anyone could move, that a sudden interruption took place. The door next to Shaver, behind the woman and facing him, was pushed open, and Mark Bedford staggered into the room. His clothes were torn and disheveled, his face harrowed almost beyond the power of recognition, his hair standing on end, and his hands torn and bleeding as though he had been tearing at something.

He was so close to Shaver that the latter could have put his hand on him—and didn't. Shaver always thought of it afterward with a feeling of wonder and relief, relief that he had not stirred.

For no one moved. Here was a tragedy from which they all instinctively stood aloof. This man had rights which no one wished to deny. It was his moment. And just as the troopers, as Cox and Bascom and Tilden, turned to him naturally, waiting for what his lips should pronounce, so also did those others veer, the doctor lifting his eyes with an evil smile which his soul could not deny him as he stared steadily into the wild and disordered face of the man he had ruined.

Claire Bedford turned her head without moving any other part of her body, her eyes drawn as by a magnet to her husband, but now the blank terror, the despair, were wiped out of that small face and another expression took its place—an expression of rigid intensity, almost of savage exultation.

WHAT happened then happened so swiftly that it was only afterward that Shaver was able to coördinate the various threads. His pistol was snatched from his hand by Mark Bedford, and at the same instant, like a flash, the woman was out of her chair and across the room and had flung herself on Helfant.

A shot rang out, the third between those dingy unplastered walls within the last few minutes, as Bedford fired.

The smoke drifted—rose. The figure of the woman, her arms lifted above her head in the act of embracing Helfant, began to droop, slowly—queerly. As though she were acting a part and had decided to try another attitude, her arms fell, her body sagged as she collapsed into a huddle at the feet of the man she had given her life to save.

There was a dreadful cry from Mark Bedford as he lunged, a rush of bodies between the two men as the troopers closed in, with Cox barking sharp orders as the final dark and terrible scene pushed on to its conclusion.

* * * * *

Two hours later Shaver waited alone in the great living room of the house on the island for the arrival of Judge Bascom with news of the dead man's son. They had taken him to a hospital on the mainland after his collapse.

Claire Bedford had been carried back to the island, and her body lay in that soft and luxurious bedroom on the floor above, where her mother, who had known all along that certain tragedy lay in wait for that passionate and fatal creature, had received the body of her daughter with a blend of stony composure and restrained despair that had touched even the unimaginative Cox. Helfant had been taken away under a strong guard.

In the boat coming back Tilden had elucidated the gaps in the long narrative for the young lawyer. As to the whereabouts of Bedford on the night of his father's death, he had slipped out of the house in pursuit of his wife, who had gone forth secretly to meet Helfant at the cottage after the others had all gone to bed. It was Helfant's glove that poor Mrs. Trenchard, who suspected, without knowing, the truth, had tried to conceal. The rest Shaver knew or was able to surmise.

The young lawyer glanced restlessly at his coat lying on a chair with the brief case beside it. He wanted to go—to leave the house on the island forever—never to see it again or to hear of any of its occupants. He turned to find Anne Bedford coming down the room, her hand on Garrison's arm.

She was still very weak and she walked awkwardly, but something in the lift of her little head, in the quiet serenity of her bearing, in the subdued boldness with which she claimed the gaunt young man at her side, put new heart into Shaver.

"They're waiting for you outside, Mr. Shaver, the sheriff and Judge Bascom. I want to thank—"

She got no further. Her eyes filled with tears as Shaver took her hand and wrung it. With a muttered word of farewell that included them both, he picked up his brief case and left them alone.

The end was not long delayed, for the

court calendar was not crowded in the manufacturing city in whose jurisdiction the crime had been committed, and a month later both trials took place. Mark Bedford's was first. Shaver and the Judge were both called upon to testify, but to the astonishment of everyone, Beckers, the brilliant young district attorney, did not even cross-examine when Mark Bedford took the stand, and without leaving the box the jury gave their verdict. Claire Bedford had come to her death by accident.

Helfant's trial took place a week later. It ran on for five days. The whole dreadful story was uncovered. Helfant had met the Bedfords in Paris, where Claire had fallen hopelessly in love with him. His record was produced in court, and it was very black. Among other things he had been evicted from two hospitals in the course of his career, and was in doubtful odor with the medical profession.

From the very first Helfant had meant mischief, but it was not until the return to the island and the appearance of Garrison on the scene that the actual plan had matured. The part that Claire Bedford had played throughout was truly infamous. She had urged the young lovers, Anne and Garrison, on, encouraging them at the same time that she had worked to prejudice John Bedford against them, inflaming the old man's jealousy.

They had had to hurry at the end because of the old gentleman's change of heart. That Claire Bedford's conduct was animated by her passion for Helfant was amply proved, but Helfant, although he had loved her, had planned and executed the cold-blooded murder of John Bedford, which was to have been followed by that of Mark, for one purpose—to get hold of the Bedford millions.

Shaver was in court when the verdict was brought in: murder in the first degree. Helfant was sentenced to die, and the tale was told.

Yet good was to come out of this tangle of evil. Mark Bedford had recovered and he had his son, and time, that profound and cynical element, quietly smothering protestation, would wipe out all but the faint memory of the guilty love and the insatiable greed which had brought death and destruction to the house on the island.

"You heard me," Ghost says, pointing a roscoe

Highpockets Flegheimer saw the murder car, but he forgot to remember!

Get The License Number!

By JOHN L. BENTON

I AM ankling down Ocean Parkway, which is in Brooklyn, listening to the birds singing in the Washington Cemetery which is just the other side of that patch of ragweed. Everything is peaceful in the twilight when this big jalopy scoots past me, slaps on the brakes and out of the open door tumbles a bunch of old rags.

I got no more time than to say "huh?" when I am goggling at the rear end of the cement mixer as the driver whips up the horses and it is halfway to Coney Island and picking up speed all the way.

Suspicious, I take a gander at the bunch of old clothes, and as I half suspect, there is a corpus delicti inside, much the worse for wear. Something that ain't ketchup is leaking all over the asphalt.

Quicker than you can say "Dem bums," a crowd collects.

"He's shot," says a voice.

"I seen it," says another. "This guy did it!"

"You're nuts," says a kid. "They dumped the stiff out of a car."

I am very grateful for this support, especially since someone has sent for the gendarmes and they presently arrive sirens whooping.

"You seen it?" says a cop with a busted nose and bushy eyebrows. He has introduced himself as Detective Lieutenant Andrews, so I know I've got to be polite.

I tell him what I saw.

"What was the license number?" he snaps.

Now that he mentions it, I have a memory of numbers swimming around on a license plate. I close my eyes and try to concentrate.

"This is no time for sleeping!" Andrews says, nudging me.

"Quiet," I say. "I am concentrating. Lemme see—Gravesend two three four—no, that's Estelle's telephone—Highlife twenty-to-one on a double—gosh no."

It seems all I can think of is telephone numbers, racing odds and similar useful, but

you might say, irrelevant figures. Andrews gets very peevish at me.

"A stiff is dumped right in your lap!" he barks, "and you ain't got enough gravy between them cauliflower ears to take a gander at the license plate!"

"Omit the remarks about me ears," I says with dignity. "I did see the license plate. But all this noise and confusion, not to mention the low company, has druv it clean out of my memory. It'll come back to me."

"Yeh," snaps Andrews, "and we'll give you plenty of peace and quiet to think about it. I'm gonna take you down and jug you as a material witness!"

I am putting up a howl about this Gestapo stuff, when there is a welcome interruption. The police lab truck has meanwhile pulled up and a couple of snoopers with microscopes and calipers is taking the corpse's pedigree. One of them comes over.

"Lieutenant," he says, "do you know who this stiff is?"

"No," says Andrews gruff. "Do you?"

"Betcha life. He's Pearson, regional head of the OPA. He's the guy who has been cracking down on the black market meatleggers."

ANDREW'S eyebrows climb up the one inch necessary to get lost in his hair.

"And another thing," says the cop from the lab truck. "I wouldn't toss this guy in the clink, Lieutenant. There are more scientific ways of restoring his memory."

"None of that rubber hose for me," I yelp. "I ain't done nothing. I stand on my constitutional rights—"

"Quiet," says the cop. "You can't beat something out of a man that he's forgotten. I was speaking of memory association experiments—maybe even hypnosis."

"I'm going home," I announce. "I seen one of them hypnosis acts at Loew's once. I ain't gonna crawl around like no dog and bark—"

"Shut up!" Andrews says, shaking me till my teeth rattle like cascarets. "You're barking now. It's a good idea," he says. "Take him down to the lab."

They shove me into the truck, which is fitted up like a traveling hospital and smells like a drugstore, and we get a fast ride down to the greenlight club. Then they take me into the lab and they start to work.

I am a little groggy from the way things have been speeded up in my career, and you'll pardon me if I can't give you too good a description of the shenanigans that went on.

The cop sits himself down in front of me and starts giving me word association tests.

"I'll read a word and you give me the first response that comes into your mind," he says. Then he starts reading.

"Doll."

"Estelle," I say.

He looks baffled, but writes it down.

"Eat."

"Thanks, let's go!" I say, getting up.

They shove me down. The cop frowns, bites his pencil, but goes on.

"Swim."

"Garbage," I tell him.

"Huh," he says.

"I was thinking of Coney Island," I say.

He wipes his forehead, glances at Andrews, who is standing by, and goes on.

"Automobile."

"Repair bill."

"Tire."

"Blowout."

"License."

"Dog."

"Numbers."

"Policy."

Andrews explodes.

"This is no good!" he yaps. "You're wasting your time!"

"Okay, says the copper. "We'll try hypnosis."

He turns out all the lights except one little bright one. He tells me to look at it steadily. Then he starts talking to me in a low, monotonous voice. I have made up my mind that nobody is going to hypnotize me, so I pay him no never mind. But it is quite restful after all the yelling and shoving, so pretty soon I am fast asleep. How was I to know I'd talk in my sleep?

When I wake up I am still sitting in the chair, but the lights are on and Andrews and the lab cop have got their noggins together over a hunk of paper which is covered with numbers. Andrews is mumbling like a dog with a bone.

"Batting averages of every Dodger for the last ten years," he gripes. "Record of every race horse that ever shook a hoof at Jamaica or Belmont. Policy numbers, roulette numbers, telephone numbers, dice numbers—but NO LICENSE NUMBERS!"

His voice rises to a roar and I decide it is time for me to go home. "Pardon me," I says, getting out of the chair.

"Go home!" Andrews bellows. "But keep in touch with us and don't take any trips! And if you should happen to think of that license number—" at this point his language becomes something the Johnston office would shudder at, so I blushes and beats a hasty retreat.

OUTSIDE I run into reporters who ask dopy questions and photographers who dazzle me with flashlight bulbs. Being shy and retiring by nature I scram, as they say, shunning the light of publicity.

But next morning I discover I am no more retiring. The papers have my picture and I am famous. It seems that this Pearson who gets himself knocked off is a very important gee indeed. He practically decides whether you eat meat in New York or not, and the boys who run in the meat without them little red points have took a violent dislike to the way he interferes with their trade.

So they liquidate him. But being as he is a Federal officer, the G-Men get very irritated about such business methods and they team up with the New York cops.

I can see myself being the guinea pig for more policemen with a lot of curiosity, which don't make me very happy. I am the shy and retiring type. So I decide not to hang around my room where I can be located so easy. Especially since the paper embarrasses me by printing my picture with a lot of big type underneath, which reads—

MURDER MYSTERY LOCKED IN WITNESS' MEMORY

Identity of the gang killers of Walter Pearson, regional OPA head, are sealed within the forgetful brain of Morton (Highpockets) Flegheimer, well known character of Ebbets' Field and Belmont Race Track, it was revealed today by the police.

Flegheimer actually saw the killers dump Pearson's body from the murder car and caught a glimpse of the license plate, but so far has been unable to reproduce the numbers for the police. Questioning and even hypnosis have so far failed.

Sgt. Andrews of Homicide is confident, however, that Flegheimer's elusive memory will yet disgorge the fatal numbers. Meanwhile the FBI has offered its services to the Police Department. . . .

All this is getting too public for me. Besides, I suddenly get a brilliant idea. What the lab cop said about "association" comes back to me. Suppose I take a stroll down Ocean Parkway to the scene of the crime just like I did yesterday—maybe it will come back to me!

It is still early morning when I stroll down the walk, inhaling the sweet scent of the nasturtiums and listening to some little bird gargling his throat in a rose bush over the iron fence. There are no houses on this side of the Parkway and nobody is around, it being so early.

I saunter down, almost forgetting my troubles, and am about to pass a car parked at the curb when a voice speaks to me.

"Come here, Highpockets," it says.

I turn around and there is a character sitting on the front seat of this car. He is a very uncouth individual known as Ghost Kipney because he looks more like a corpse than a living human.

"Was you spooking to me?" I ask, dignified.

"You heard me," Ghost says. "Get over here." And he shows me a roscoe which is pointing carelessly at my stomach.

This naturally distresses me very much.

"Put that thing down!" I yelp, coming in sideways. "You want somebody to get hurt?"

"Don't worry," he says. "It would only be you."

"That's why I'm worried," I answer, trying to become invisible.

"Get in here," Ghost Kipney says.

The back door opens and two more uncouth characters pop out and shove me in the back seat. Kipney starts the motor and we are off.

"This is very nice of you boys," I says, trying to keep my teeth from making too much noise clicking together. "What with tires still so scarce—"

"Shut up!" says a lug, batting me backhand across the mouth.

"You talk too much," Ghost says. "And you got too good a memory—especially for license numbers."

NOW I know I am in trouble. Kipney is part of the gang that killed Pearson. And since, according to the papers, which they must read, I am the only person alive who can put the finger on them if I happen to remember the license number, it is very obvious that they are going to put that memory out of business.

"Look, boys," I say, holding my knees to keep them from banging each other that way, "I've got a very bad memory. Very bad. Especially for numbers."

"It'll be much worse when we get through with you," Ghost says, grinning like a skull.

"You ain't got nothin' to worry about,

honest," I squawk.

"I know it," Ghost says. "Shut him up, boys."

One of the mugs wraps his fingers around my throat and squeezes until my eyes pop out and I get black in the face. Then he throws me down on the floor and puts his feet in my face.

We have a very pleasant ride this way clear down to Gerritsen Beach. When they drag me out of the car I recognize where I am. There are some fishing shacks on stilts out in the bay and just across the marsh is Floyd Bennett field, which the Navy took over during the war.

They drag me out of the car because my knees have give up the struggle and lug me through the sand, over the boardwalk and into the shack. It smells from fish and stale water. They toss me into a corner.

"You know what to do," Ghost says. There's a tub. The concrete is in the back of the car. The boat's tied under the house. Better wait till dark."

So they are going to make a one-way submarine out of me. I am commencing to get mad. Enough is enough. I didn't ask to be a witness when they knocked off this OPA gee anyway. I don't want nothing to do with it.

Live and let live, is my motto. Why do I got to be pushed around like this when all I want is out? And to wind up at the bottom of Jamaica Bay in a tub of concrete ain't my idea of a happy ending.

I go berserk. On the table is a cracked pitcher of water. I pick it up and heave it at Ghost Kipney. It bounces on his noggin and flies into a million pieces. I think it would have knocked him out, but the water spills down on him and revives him. He sits down hard on a rickety old sofa and it collapses with a jar that shakes the shack. A picture on the wall falls down and the frame fits neatly around his neck.

The other two mugs leap into the fight. One throws a number twelve shoe with his foot still in it at me. I fall under the table and his hoof catches the edge. The table goes over with a crash and a window falls out of the sash with that lovely sound of breaking glass.

Kipney is fighting the frame and yelling, "Take it off! Take it off!"

I yank a leg off the table and smack one of the crooks in the shins. He lets out a scream like a fire siren and starts hopping around on one leg, holding the other tenderly in his hands.

The other crook hauls out his roscoe and starts blazing away at the table. There is so much noise and confusion that I can't hear myself think. I am scared silly, but I figure I am dead anyway so it don't matter. I get up, carrying the table and push it at this Annie Oakley.

Splinters fly off the table, then it hits him in the bread-basket and he staggers back and trips over his hopping pal and they both fall on Kipney. A big hunk of ceiling comes down and the whole shack takes a list to starboard like it was caving in.

I am throwing pieces of the table and chair as fast as I can heave them and the three mugs are scrambling around trying to find their roscoes and duck the flying furniture. All the time they are slipping downhill and getting splinters in their pants.

But it was too good to last. Kipney gets the frame off his neck and yells at them.

"Stop shooting, you dopes! Want to get everybody at Floyd Bennett over here!"

So they crawl up the incline and jump me from three sides. So far I have been dishing it out, now I take it. Fists and feet and gun butts. I see stars, then I have hallucinations. I think I see the door bust open and Detective Andrews and a lot of cops bulge into the room. The shack can't take it and falls apart at the seams and floppo! we are all in Jamaica Bay.

So I am drowning. They have made a concrete submarine out of me after all.

"It's okay," I murmur. "Drowning is the most peaceful way to die, they tell me. I gotta live my whole life over again in these last moments."

AND what do you think I see? That so-and-so license plate that got me into all this trouble! I see the back of the car as it pulled away on Ocean Parkway after dumping Pearson, big as life and twice as natural. I can read every number on it.

"Hey!" I try to yell. "Andrews!"

I choke and splutter.

"He's coming around," says a voice. "Got the water out of his lungs."

I snap out of it and I am horses de combat, flat on my face on the sand, with a rubber cup over my nose and mouth. A rescue squad from Floyd Bennett has fished us out of the drink and give me the business with a pulmotor.

"Lemme up!" I yelp. "I got important stuff for Lieutenant Andrews!"

"I'm here," Andrew says, coming up and dripping water all over me as I scramble to my shaky pins.

"I got it!" I gasp. "I got it!"

"Got what?"

"The License number! Its fourKtwo—"

And that's as far as I got. Andrews gives me a withering look.

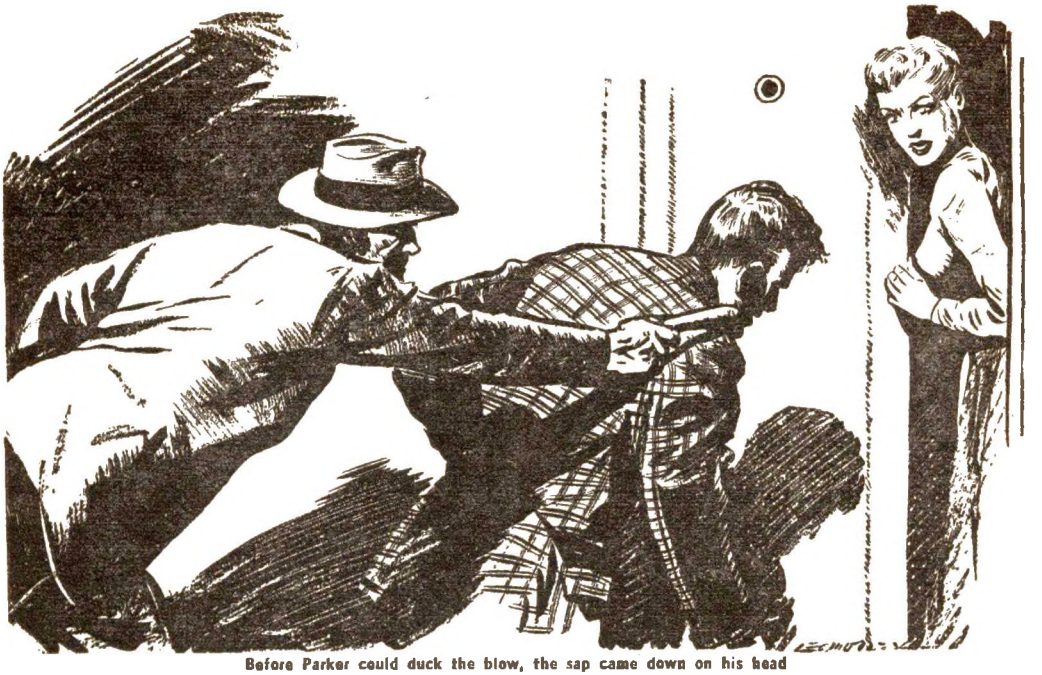
"You dummy!" he snaps. "What do we need the license number now for when we got the whole gang!"

My mouth stays open. I forgot about Ghost Kipney and his hoods.

"And not only have we got them," Andrews snarls, looking as if he is chewing on something very bitter indeed, "but you get the credit and maybe a reward for catching them!" He raises both clenched fists to the sky. "Thirty years a cop," he moans, "and this has to happen to me!"

He turns away like he can't stand no more, pushing his way through the other dripping cops and the squad from the flying field.

Me, I can only stand there and drip.



Before Parker could duck the blow, the sap came down on his head

MURDER WITH MICE

By C. K. M. SCANLON

Jim Parker of Homicide has his own way of solving a crime!

THE dead man could hardly be termed a pretty sight. Someone had bashed his head in with a heavy weapon and it wasn't nice. The men of the Homicide Squad were not happy about the case, but it was all in the day's work.

"Who found him?" Lieutenant Jim Parker asked.

His gaze swept around the living room of the expensive Park Avenue apartment. Then he glanced at the two patrol car officers who had been the first to arrive on the scene.

"What have you got on this, Cassidy?" he demanded of one of them.

"The stiff is Langston Bradley," Cassidy said, and glanced at his book. "Retired millionaire. No close relatives. Lived here alone with two servants—a cook and butler. Norton, the butler, claims he found Bradley like that and phoned the police. We picked up the call on the radio and got here first."

"Any suspects?" asked the lieutenant.

"Bradley had two visitors this evening," Cassidy said. "A man and a woman. Norton couldn't remember their names."

The police photographer was making flashlight shots of the corpse, and of the walls, floor and ceiling. The dead man was sprawled face downward on the floor. Evidently he had been sitting in the big chair near him and had risen to his feet just before he was killed. A book was lying on the floor beside the chair.

Lieutenant Parker moved over to the nearest window. The lower sash was open and cold air blew against his face and ruffled his thick gray hair. He was a thin, tall man, and right now looked like a tired whippet dog. He never looked much like a headquarters detective was supposed to look, and appeared still less like one now, in the smart overcoat and pulled-down soft hat he wore.

Snow was piled on the window sill, but he noticed—a little idly—that at one spot it seemed to have been disturbed. Sounds of traffic on Park Avenue, ten stories below, came faintly to his ears, muffled by the night.

"Okay," the photographer called, as he finished. "Chalk him up."

One of the men carefully outlined the posi-

tion of the body on the floor with a piece of chalk. As he completed the job the medical examiner arrived. He looked across the room at the corpse, grunted, then walked over and began examining the dead man.

LIEUTENANT PARKER turned away from the window and wandered out of the room, looking for the servants. He wanted to know more about Langston Bradley's two visitors. He found the butler and the cook in the kitchen of the six-room apartment—a middle-aged couple. The butler appeared to be British, but his wife was obviously Irish, and temperamental.

"I'm Lieutenant Parker of Homicide," the officer said. "Like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

"We'd hardly dare object, sir," said the man. "I'm Norton, the butler, and cook here is my wife Agnes."

"You found Mr. Bradley after he had been murdered?" asked Parker.

"Yes, sir," Norton shuddered. "And a horrible shock it was, finding him like that. I phoned the police at once."

"Any idea who might have done it?"

"Not the slightest." Norton shook his head. "I wish I did. Mr. Bradley was good to us."

"Tell him about the mice, Henry," suggested the cook.

"What mice?" Parker demanded.

"Two white mice," said Norton. "Mr. Bradley kept them as pets. He was fond of them, and now they are missing."

"Missing? You mean they ran away?"

"Oh, no, sir. They couldn't do that. They were kept in a cage in the living room. The mice and the cage have both disappeared since the murder—or rather since Mr. Bradley's two visitors were here."

"Who were the visitors?" asked Parker. "Do you recall their names, Norton?"

"I didn't when those first policemen arrived," said the butler. "But I remember now. The first visitor was a Mr. Victor Quinn. He came to see Mr. Bradley on some sort of private business. He left without my seeing him go, for when I showed Miss Jennie Justin into the living room a little later, Mr. Quinn was no longer with Mr. Bradley."

"Who is Miss Jennie Justin?"

"She is what I believe is referred to as a show girl," Norton said. "A quite beautiful girl—tall, red-headed. A good friend of Mr. Bradley's."

"Henry—how you do go on!" snapped Mrs. Norton. "But it's not that one who'd be stealing mice, though I wouldn't put it past her to murder the master. Got a temper, she has."

"How do you know?" asked the lieutenant.

"She's been here enough times before." The cook simpered. "She was Mr. Bradley's girl friend, you might say, though they were always quarreling. He played jokes on her and she didn't like it."

"Agnes!" Norton said disapprovingly. "You talk too much."

"Oh, I do, do I?" snapped the cook. "You're a fine one to say that. Let me tell you—"

"That's all I want to ask you now," Parker said, hastily interrupting what appeared the start of a family quarrel. "But you both had better remain here for the present."

"Very good, sir," Norton said, instantly his prim self again.

The lieutenant wandered back into the living room, discovering that the morgue men were taking the body away in a basket. Parker wondered what arrangements Langston Bradley had made in the event of his death. Norton might know about that, but Parker did not intend to question the butler about it now.

The lieutenant walked over and stared at the place where the snow had been disturbed. That could have been at any time within something over an hour. It had stopped snowing then.

"Death from a blow that cracked his skull," the medical examiner told Parker as the lieutenant turned from the window. "I've filled in my report. You want the technical terms for it?"

"Never mind, Doctor," Parker said hastily. "I believe you."

The M. E. nodded and departed. He was a busy man, wanting to finish his professional duties here, and had no interest in who murdered Langston Bradley or why it had been done. He signaled some men, and the body was carried out of the apartment in the basket that looked like a wicker coffin.

Lieutenant Parker walked over and picked up the book that the man now dead had evidently dropped. It was "The Golden Treasury," a book of verse. Parker idly turned the pages, stopping to read on a fly-leaf, written with a pen:

> For Jennie:
> On her birthday. Turn these pages slowly, for they contain wealth and beauty to make you happy.
>
> Langston Bradley.

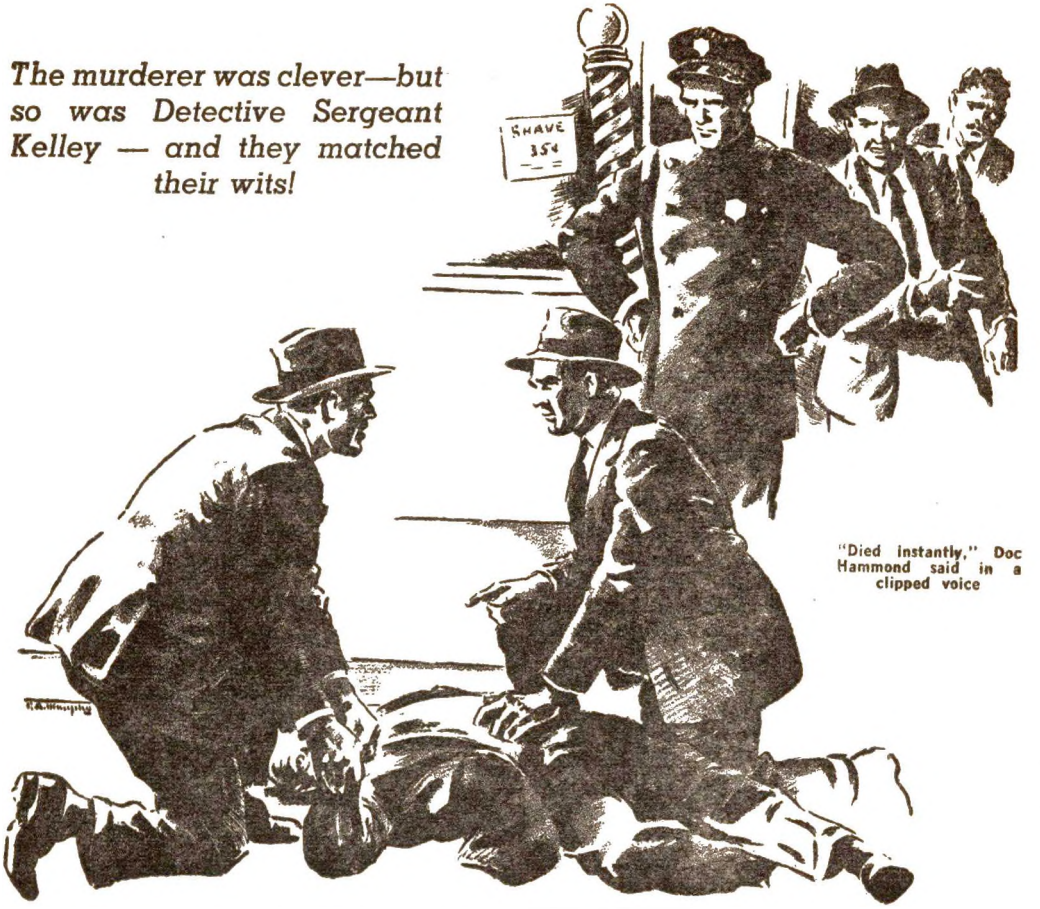
Parker studied the writing for a moment, then placed the book on a table. As he glanced around, he saw that one of the detectives was looking through the dead man's bank book. The detective glanced up at Parker.

"Here's something, Lieutenant," he said. "This shows that Bradley drew ten thousand dollars out of the bank this morning."

"Interesting," said Parker. He looked around at the rest of the Homicide Squad

(Continued on page 107)

The murderer was clever—but so was Detective Sergeant Kelley — and they matched their wits!



"Died instantly," Doc Hammond said in a clipped voice

KILLERS DON'T LAST!

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

CHIEF of Detectives Paul Fallon spread the newspaper flat on his desk, studied a page intently for a moment, then reached out a hand and pressed one of six call buttons. A few moments later Detective Sergeant Kelley stuck his head in the door, and cocked an inquiring eyebrow.

"Me, Chief?" he asked.

"You," the other grunted, and crooked a finger.

Kelley walked over to the desk, and leaned on the edge with both hands. It was then he noticed the newspaper. A half smile tugged at one corner of his mouth.

"Uh-huh," he murmured.

"You've seen it?" Fallon asked.

"Yes," Kelly nodded. "Today's list of our fair city's discharged veterans. Four days old, as a matter of fact. I bumped into him the day before yesterday."

Fallon dropped his eyes to the news page and read one of the names.

"Private Frank Bates," he said in a hard voice. "Not even First Class. Know if he went overseas?"

"He didn't," was the instant reply. "Spent most of his eighteen months in one army jug, or another. Why they didn't give him a dishonorable, I wouldn't know."

"Too smooth to get himself tripped up," Fallon said in the same hard voice. "Just like he was before the draft grabbed him. What did he have to say?"

"Nothing," Kelley said, with a shake of his head. "He didn't see me. He has a place on Vine, near Parsons. Quite a flashy place, too."

The Chief of Detectives grunted absently, and for a moment drummed his fingers on the newspaper covering the desk.

"What do you think, Kelley?" he suddenly asked.

"About what, Chief?"

"Bates, of course!" the other said with an edge. "Think he learned anything in the Army? Or is he going to give us more trouble?"

The Detective Sergeant frowned faintly and studied his well kept finger nails before he replied.

"Trouble," he finally said. "Bates was born a killer, even if we haven't been able to hang one on him. He always hated Jake Meadows' insides, so its a cinch he still does."

"Meaning?" Fallon probed when Kelley didn't continue. "He'll go after him, eh?"

"When he's figured all the angles," Kelley replied with a grim nod. "When Meadows, and his boys, trimmed him on that warehouse liquor thing, Bates was set for murder then. The draft grabbed him, though, before he could get started. He hasn't forgotten."

"And the fact, that cheap chisler Meadows, pulled strings to keep out of the draft has helped him to remember, I guess," the Chief of Detectives murmured.

"It makes you wonder about life sometimes," Kelley said tight lipped, and stared unseeing at the opposite wall.

"What?" Fallon echoed and looked at him.

Kelley sighed and gestured with one hand.

"Scum like Bates, Meadows, and his bunch, still with us," he said, "while so many, who deserved so much, got killed."

"I see what you mean," Fallon grunted. "Doesn't seem to make much sense, does it? But—"

He checked himself as there was a knock on the door, and it pushed open to reveal the ruddy, weather lined face, and huge body of Hendricks, the desk sergeant.

"Thought you might want to know, sir," he said without being invited to speak. "Prowl Ten just called in. A killing over on Bickford."

"Well?" Fallon snapped, when the other stopped and seemed to wait.

"Guess who, Chief?" Hendricks said with a grin.

"Stop playing games!" Fallon rapped out. "Speak up."

"Bingo Wallace, sir," the desk sergeant replied instantly, his ruddy face blooming even brighter. "Prowl said, right through the head. Dead as they come."

At the mention of the name both Fallon and Kelley had stiffened, and looked at each other. Then Kelley let out lung-locked air slowly.

"Well, well, it begins so soon!" he said softly. "Bingo Wallace. Number one heel under Meadows. Coming, Chief?"

Kelley spoke the last over his shoulder as he turned and started toward the door.

"Yes, I think I will this time," Fallon said, and quickly pushed himself up from his chair.

WHEN Fallon and Kelley reached the scene of the killing they practically had to fight their way through a crowd of morbid sightseers. The body was where it had fallen, and Bingo Wallace, who had been homely enough in life, was positively hideous in death. The whole left side of his face had been torn away, and he was spattered with gore down to his shoe tops.

As Kelley stepped forward for a closer look, a ham hand grabbed his arm and started to yank him away.

"Listen you, back, I said!" a voice roared in his ears. "Get back, or I'll—"

The last ended on a choke as the owner of the ham hand got a look at Kelley's face.

"Geez, Sarge, I—"

"Okay," Kelley said. "What's the story, Adams?"

The prowl car cop gulped when he saw Fallon, and looked back at Kelley with a puzzled frown on his big face.

"A funny thing, sir," he said. "Faber and me were just cruising by. We both saw him spin around, and go down like he is now."

"What was funny about it?" Kelley wanted to know.

"Well, nothing exactly, I guess," the prowl cop replied. "Except that neither Faber nor me heard a sound. There wasn't no shot!"

"You asked around?" Kelley said and gave a half nod toward the goggling crowd.

"We asked a million of them, sir," Adams

[Turn to page 96]

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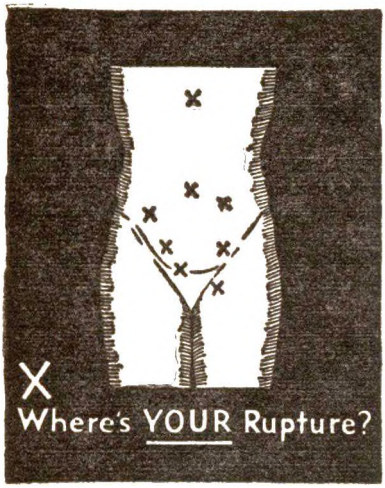

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said with a vigorous nod. "Nobody heard a thing."

Kelley looked down at the dead man, and grunted.

"Probably a silencer on the rifle," he said more to himself.

"What was that?" Fallon picked him up quickly. "A rifle, did you say?"

Kelley nodded and pointed.

"A forty-five close up could have done that to his face," he said. "But there wasn't any shot, and—"

The detective cut himself off short, and looked at Adams.

"Anybody near him?" he demanded. "Anybody who could have used a silencer."

"No, sir!" Faber spoke up before Adams could open his mouth. "There wasn't anybody within twenty five feet of him. I'd swear to that!"

"So it had to be a rifle," Kelley said looking at Fallon. "That, or I don't know what one of those slugs will do."

At that moment a police car sirened to a stop at the fringe of the crowd, and Doc Hammond shouldered his way through, and bent down to make his examination. At the end of a couple of minutes he straightened up, brushed dust off one pant knee, and looked at Fallon.

"Died instantly," he said in a clipped voice. "A rifle bullet, looks like. Got the killer?"

"Not yet," the Chief of Detectives said, and let it go at that.

The medic grunted and stepped back to allow the police photographer to do his stuff.

"Have the slug for you in an hour," he said, and snapped his black bag shut. "Bingo Wallace, isn't he?"

"Yeah, Wallace," Kelley said, and started to push his way through the crowd. Fallon followed him but didn't speak until they had reached the car. Then he spoke only one word.

"So?"

Kelley opened the car door, but made no move to get in himself.

"Bates' alibi will be cast iron, as usual," he said in a toneless voice. "But I'm going to call on him just the same."

The Chief of Detectives started to speak but suddenly stopped himself and snapped his fingers.

"Oh-oh, just realized," he said. "Vine Street is just two blocks up, isn't it?"

"Right," Kelley replied, and pointed at a brownstone building, two buildings down

[Turn to page 98]

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from where they stood. "And that is where Meadows and his bunch have their offices."

"Well I'll be—!" Fallon exploded. "Just two blocks away."

"Bates always was fussy about the spots where he lived," Kelley said. "I'll let you know about his alibi later."

"Do that," the other said getting behind the wheel. "And, luck!"

"Thanks, sir," Kelley murmured and turned away.

The apartment house where ex-Private Frank Bates had taken up residence was not one of those towering skyscraper affairs. But what it lacked in height it more than made up for in ginger bread trimmings. It shouted money from the gold braid door-admiral on the sidewalk to the roof terrace six stories up. As he walked toward it rage burned in Kelley, aware that Bates unquestionably had the money required, for long before the draft threw him into uniform Bates had his fingers in plenty of well paying pies.

Those and other thoughts smouldered in Kelley's mind as he marched past the door-admiral, inside to the lobby switchboard.

"What's the number of Frank Bates' apartment?" he asked the girl at the board.

"Who's calling please?" she returned pertly.

"Just the number," Kelley said evenly, and let her have a quick look at his badge.

"Oh! Why it's apartment Four A, sir."

"Thanks," Kelley grunted. "He's in, I suppose?"

A voice in back of Kelley answered.

"Yes, sir! Mr. Bates has not left his apartment this morning."

KELLEY swung around to give the door-admiral a hard stare.

"Thanks," he said shortly. Then swinging back to the girl, "You can skip announcing me."

The elevator was self operating. Kelley got off at four, walked the few steps to apartment A, and jabbed the bell. The door was opened almost before he had released finger pressure on the button. Frank Bates, dressed in sport slacks, and a sport shirt of four different colors, scowled at him for the barest part of a second, then grinned broadly, and opened the door wide.

"Well, well, the cops check up before I've hardly unpacked," he greeted with a touch of scorn in his voice. "Come in, Kelley. You're one cop I don't mind buying a drink."

"Some other time, maybe," Kelley said and walked into the apartmeht. "H-m-m-m! Nice place!"

"Should be, after them army barracks!" Bates grated and walked toward a small liquor table. "Sure you won't?"

Kelley shook his head, dropped into chair facing the street windows, and shoved back his hat with a thumb.

"No thanks," he said. Then casually, "Hear about Bingo Wallace?"

Bates finished pouring himself a drink, and dropped into another chair. He took a sip first.

"Nope," he finally said. "Bad, I hope."

"For him, yes," Kelley replied still looking at the windows. "Gunned a couple of hours ago. With a rifle."

"Good!" was Bates' comment. "Whoever did it is another guy I'd buy a drink for! A full quart if he should get Meadows!"

Kelley took his gaze off the front windows and looked at the pre-draft racketeer. Bates grinned broadly, and nodded.

"You got brains, Kelley," he said, "so I wouldn't try to kid you. By-gones ain't by-gones with me. Nothing better I'd like than to see Meadows, and his stinkers, ten feet under. But I got brains, too!"

"Maybe," the detective grunted.

"Maybe, rats!" Bates snarled. "Sure, nothing better I'd like than that. But I'm no dope. I'm not risking frying to even up with that heel."

Kelley shrugged, took off his hat, and brushed away a few specks of dust that didn't exist.

"You're a good rifle shot, aren't you, Bates?" he suddenly asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Not too bad." The other broadened his grin.

Kelley left his hat alone to stare at the ceiling.

"Seems I remember reading a bit in the paper, how you won the sharp shooter's medal in the Army," he said.

"Right," was the instant reply. "Expert marksman's hunk of tin, too. Only things worthwhile I got out of the Army."

"Too bad you didn't get the chance to try out your skill on the Nazis," Kelley murmured.

A faint flush stained Bates' cheeks for an instant, but he refused to rise to the needling.

"I said I had brains!" he grunted. "Only suckers want to be heroes!"

"Depends how one looks at it," Kelley said

[*Turn page*]

flat voiced. Then as an after thought, "I told you Bingo got it from a rifle, didn't I?"

Bates nodded, and then laughed loudly.

"And that was all you told me, pal!" he chuckled. "No dice. I didn't know he'd got it, 'til you told me. And I still don't know where!"

The detective sighed inwardly. Bates did have brains.

"On Bickford," he said. "Half way down the block from Meadows' offices. A good shot could nail a man with a rifle two blocks away. An expert marksman, easy."

"Okay, okay!" Bates boomed. "I can prove I was here in my place all the time. But you want the story, eh?"

"That's right," Kelley said evenly. "The story."

"Well, it was this way," Bates said between chuckles. "I wanted a little practice, and Wallace would make a swell target. So I stood there in that window and let him have it as he walked to Meadows' place. Okay! You want to take me down and book me?"

"No, not yet," Kelley said wearily and put his hat on.

"Yeah, it would be a laugh, wouldn't it?" Bates snorted and jerked a thumb toward the window. "Trying to prove I could shoot around them buildings across the street, and hit a man on the sidewalk two blocks away, huh?"

Kelly stood up. "Stay in town, Bates," he said quietly. "I might want you."

"Horses couldn't drag me away, now I'm back," Bates told him.

THE rifle bullet taken from Bingo Wallace's head lay on a piece of white paper on Fallon's desk. The Chief of Detectives poked at it with a forefinger, and glanced at Kelley slumped down in a near by chair.

"But no way to prove it, eh?" he murmured.

Kelley ran fingers through his thinning hair, let his hand come to rest on the back of his neck, and sighed heavily.

"None!" he said almost savagely. "I talked to half a dozen who swore he was in his apartment all the time. The doorman even said he was sitting by the window at the time the shot was fired. He said he saw Bates' four alarm shirt through the window curtains."

"But from his window—?" Fallon began but stopped as Kelley shook his head.

"Impossible," Kelley said. "Two blocks

of stone and steel buildings. You can't even see Bickford Street from his apartment!"

"Still, your money's on Bates?" Fallon persisted.

"All of it!" Kelley grunted. Then suddenly he sat up straight in the chair. "Unless—" he said softly.

"Unless what?" Fallon wanted to know.

The detective sergeant didn't answer for a moment. He sat stiff, staring squint eyed at the opposite wall.

"Unless Bates has picked up a pal, since he got out of the Army," he said slowly. "Maybe, some rat who was in the Army jug with him—who'd be willing to gun a bit for the kind of money Bates has to pay out."

"That's a possibility," Fallon said, after a moment's thought. "But how are you going to find out? Watch his place for visitors?"

Kelley shook his head. He didn't know himself. But he had a feeling that he was on the right track.

Kelley parked his police car at the Parsons Street end of the Bickford block. For a moment or two he stood on the sidewalk beside it looking down the street. The usual crowd of gogglers was gathered in front of Meadows' offices, where the funeral services were to be held. And parked at the curb in front was a glossy black hearse with shiny silver trim, and a long line of equally glossy black cars, two of which were piled high with flowers.

Whether for publicity, or in an effort to revive the funerals of prohibition era gangsters, Jake Meadows was certainly sparing no expense.

Kelley eyed the scene in disgust, checked himself in half wishing that it was Meadows instead of Wallace, and started walking slowly along the sidewalk. On impulse, or for some reason not even plain to himself, he stopped at the spot where about twenty-four hours ago he had seen Wallace's dead body stretched out in the gutter.

For a long moment he stared down at the spot, almost as though he were waiting for the spot to speak and give him the proof he needed. Then with a shake of his head and a sigh, he lifted his gaze and looked across the street. Almost automatically he let his gaze wander upward along the opposite building's corner line. He was about to turn away when suddenly he stiffened, and stood there like a man completely paralyzed from head to foot.

"Fat head!" he choked out. "A dumb, nit wit, fat head!"

[Turn page]

Even as the words rushed from his lips he spun around and ran back to his car. But when he reached it another lightning thought joined the others that were now spinning furiously in his brain. He jerked his hand from the door handle, spun around once more and ran toward the brown stone steps leading up into Meadows' place.

Those of the crowd who were in his way cursed and complained loudly as he went through them shoulders bunched. Two of the men he had posted there recognized him instantly and sprang forward, puzzlement stamped on their faces.

He shouldered them aside as he had the others and bounded up the brown stone steps. When he had reached the top he turned on one foot, and as the crowd below stared in befuddled amazement he walked down the steps with studied slowness, as though he were leading the funeral procession, himself!

Five steps from the bottom he stopped, and as the crowd continued to gawk at him, and wonder, he stood there motionless staring flint-eyed out over their heads and across the street. Then, suddenly, as though coiled springs had been released within him, he leaped down the remaining steps, barged through the crowd once more and sprinted for his parked car. One of his men sprinted after him, and caught up.

"Something wrong, Sarge?" the plain clothes man panted out.

Kelley shook his head and leaped in behind the wheel, yanking the door shut.

"No!" he snapped and stepped on the starter. "Everything's right now—please, Allah!"

"Huh?" the plain clothes man gulped. "What was—?"

THE clash of gears and the car spinning away from the curb drowned out the rest. Besides, Kelley hadn't heard, anyway. Face a grim mask he bent over the wheel and sent the police car rocketing to the next intersection. He turned north and sped two blocks. There he swung into the curb, slammed on the brakes and hopped out almost before the car had come to a full stop.

He had stopped at the corner of the Vine block, and he had taken but a couple of hurried steps before one of his men posted on watch came up to him.

"He came out about an hour ago," the man reported. "But only to buy himself a paper at the corner. Went right back in, and he's

been there ever since."

"Okay," Kelley grunted, and quickened his pace. "Keep your eyes open."

"I'll do—" the man began and stopped as Kelley swung around to him. "Yeah, Sarge?" he grunted.

"He may come out again," the detective said evenly. "If he does, grab him and hold him. And use your gun if you have to."

"Sure, sure!" the other said as his eyes widened.

"Just do as I told you, if he comes out again," Kelley ripped out.

Before the man could acknowledge the order a second time, Kelley walked away from him, heading straight for the lobby entrance of Bates' apartment house. The door admiral recognized him, and lifted a respectful finger to his gold trimmed cap. Kelley ignored the salute, took the door man by the arm, and led him part way into the lobby. The detective's jaw muscles were bunched, and there was a danger glint in his eye.

"Ever been taken down to Police Headquarters?" he snapped at the man.

The door admiral's eyes blinked, and his mouth fell open.

"Huh?" he gulped. Then rallying, "No. I never done nothing. What do you mean, Captain?"

"Just sergeant," Kelley corrected him. "And I mean this! Give me the truth straight, or I'm taking you down, booking you as a murder accomplice!"

The door admiral could hardly believe his ears, and when he was forced to he almost fainted.

"M-murder accomplice?" he managed to gag out. "Hey! Look! I don't know nothing about any murder!"

"Did Bates tell you to tell anybody who asked that he'd been in his apartment all yesterday morning?" Kelley shot at him.

The other blinked again.

"Spit it out!" Kelley barked. "Yes, or no."

"Well—well, no, not exactly," the other said in a troubled voice.

"Meaning what?" Kelley bit off. "Why'd you tell me, without my asking?"

"Well, I heard you speak to the switchboard girl," the door admiral replied instantly, speaking fast. "Mr. Bates had come out once, for a paper, and he went back in again. Then he called down for me, later, to go across the street for some cigars for him. And he asked me to look up at his

[Turn page

apartment front windows to see if the awnings were hauled up flush. Seemed kind of fussy about knowing that. So I did, and they were."

"And you saw Bates in the window?" Kelley asked quickly.

"Yeah, I did," the doorman replied. "I could see that loud shirt he wears through the curtains. Hey! It's a funny thing!"

"What is?" Kelley demanded.

"Just a couple of minutes ago," the other said blinking his eyes, "he called down again, and told me to take another look at the window awnings. I was just about to step into the street when you—"

"Skip it!" Kelly cut him off in a tight voice. "Get me a pass key. Fast!"

"Pass key?" the other echoed in a dubious voice.

Exasperated rage blazed in Kelley's eyes. He unconsciously bunched his right hand into a rock hard fist but he didn't use it. Instead he shoved the doorman further into the lobby.

"A pass key, yes!" he barked. "Get one, and now!"

"The switchboard girl!" the doorman panted, and ran over that way.

Kelley was right at his heels, and the switchboard girl knew better than to argue. She handed over a pass key at once. Kelley fairly snatched it from her fingers and leaped toward the self operated elevator.

"Stay right where you are, both of you!" he snapped back over his shoulder. "Don't make any apartment calls, or answer any!"

With a look that warned them of the consequences the detective leaped into the car, slammed the doors shut, and shot it up to the fourth floor. When he reached it he hesitated for an instant, his finger held poised in front of the row of floor buttons. Then with a savage shake of his head he opened the door, leaped out, and ran along the corridor to Apartment 4A. In nothing flat he had the pass key in the lock, and the door open.

ONE swift look inside brought a sharp curse to his lips. An instant later he was racing back toward the elevator, his service gun out and in his hand. As he reached it fate laughed in his face.

Before he could reach out and slide the door open the car slid down toward the lobby floor. Hot words of rage rushed to his lips, but he didn't waste breath spilling them out. In four leaping strides he made the fire exit

door, shouldered it open and went up the stairs two at a time.

The stairs ended on the sixth floor, but at the rear end of the hallway there was an iron ladder leading up to a small skylight door that opened onto the roof. Racing along the hallway Kelley went up the ladder monkey style, slammed open the sky light door and leaped out onto the tarred and graveled roof.

Hardly had his feet touched the roof than he spotted the figure of Frank Bates crouched down, back to him, behind the left front corner of the two foot coping that ran all the way around the roof.

"Drop it, and reach, Bates!" Kelley roared and leveled his service gun.

His answer was the dull flat sound of a silencer deadened rifle shot. Recoil made Bates' shoulder jerk backward, and as though he had heard Kelley's order he half spun around on one knee.

"Drop it!" the detective barked and started forward. "Drop it, or I'll drill you."

White heat rage blazed up in the racketeer's face. He straightened up in a flash but he did not drop the sniper's rifle clutched in his hands. Instead he started to swing it up to his shoulder and bring it to bear on the advancing Kelley. Still advancing Kelley fired his service gun. The bullet knocked the rifle from Bates' hands; actually slammed it against his chest. Bates grabbed wildly as blood spurted from one hand. He staggered back.

"Look out! Hold it!"

The words burst from Kelley's lips instinctively, but their warning didn't do any good. Bates went back a step too fast. The edge of the coping caught him just above the backs of his knees, and the momentum of his weight did the rest. For a fleeting instant the racketeer clawed wildly at thin air, a blood curdling scream burst from his opened mouth as he toppled backwards over the roof coping and disappeared from view.

An hour later Kelley sat across the desk from Fallon in the chief's office.

"It wasn't Bates' alibi that he was in his apartment at the time Wallace was shot, that fooled me," Kelley was saying. "It was that building across the street from his place. I thought it blocked off Bickford Street completely."

"But it didn't, eh?" Fallon murmured.

"No," Kelley said with a shake of his head. "When I went to see Meadows I happened to

[*Turn page*]

stop at the spot where Wallace caught it. Then I saw that there was a sixth floor setback that just barely revealed a corner of the roof of Bates' apartment house. The angle gave me another idea. I beat it down to Meadows' place and up the steps. It was the same there. I could just see the other front corner of the roof. Bates certainly picked his place to live. . . ."

"And his alibi about being in his apartment?" the Chief of Detectives asked.

"Up in smoke when I talked with that dumb doorman," Kelley growled. "Oh, he saw Bates' four alarm shirt all right. Only Bates wasn't in it. It was stuffed with a pillow and propped up in a chair so the man would just barely see it through the window curtains."

The detective finished the last with a grunt, and stared moodily down at his hands.

"Something still bothering you?" Fallon asked quietly.

"A little," Kelley replied without looking up. "If I hadn't wasted time with that pass key to his apartment I might have reached the roof in time to stop him from firing the shot that killed Meadows as he followed Wallace's coffin down those steps."

"Maybe," Fallon said with a shrug. "But the city won't miss the three of them. So does it matter?"

Kelley tugged down one corner of his mouth and got to his feet.

"I guess it doesn't," he said. "Bates wouldn't have lasted long, anyway. He had a date with the hot seat coming to him for the Wallace killing. No, I guess it doesn't matter, at that."

MURDER WITH MICE

(Continued from page 92)

members. "You can go now, men," he said, then nodded to a detective he singled out. "Kelly, you stick around here and see if you can pick up anything on the murderer."

WHEN the others left, Parker went with them. In front of the apartment building he got into his own car and drove away, but he had no intention of returning to Headquarters, or of going far, for he had decided to do a bit of investigating himself.

He drove a few blocks, then swung over into Madison Avenue and stopped at a drugstore.

In the Manhattan directory he found beside the phone booths, he looked up the addresses of Victor Quinn and Jennie Justin, and jotted them down.

As Parker went out to his car he decided to visit the girl first. She lived on Riverside Drive in the Seventies, so Parker drove to her address. He found it to be one of the older apartment houses along the drive. When he parked his car and went in he found Jennie Justin's name on a bell button in the foyer, pushed it, and the door buzzed.

It was a walk-up, and he climbed the stairs to apartment 2B on the second floor. A tall redhead in green lounging pajamas answered his ring.

"Well?" she said in a husky voice. "What do you want?"

"You're Miss Jennie Justin?" Parker asked, though he was sure of that. "I'm Lieutenant Parker, Police."

Parker heard a door open behind him, but didn't pay any attention. He was watching the girl's face. Judging from Jennie's expression she didn't care much for police officers.

"What do you want, Lieutenant?" she demanded.

"To talk to you about a murder," Parker said. "Mind if I come in?"

"Why, no." She glanced over his shoulder and her green eyes widened. "No!"

Parker whirled—too late. He caught one glimpse of a heavy-faced man with a blackjack upraised. But before he could get set to duck the blow the sap came down on his head with such force that it knocked him unconscious. . . .

When Parker finally opened his eyes his head was throbbing, and his first thought was to wonder how long he had been out cold. Groaning a little, he sat up and found he was on the floor of a vacant apartment. It was fairly dark, but some light from a street lamp gleamed in through the curtainless window.

"Now why knock me out and leave me

[*Turn page*]

here?" he muttered as he got painfully to his feet. "Doesn't make much sense."

He tried the front door of the apartment. It was locked, but because of the type of lock it was he had no trouble in unlocking the door to get out, though no one could get in.

Outside, in the hall, he went through his pockets. Nothing was missing. His wallet and personal belongings were all in place—and his gun still rested in the shoulder holster. He was two doors away from apartment 2B. He stalked over to the door and rang the bell.

The door opened, and a gray-haired old woman peered out at him.

"Don't want any," she snapped before Parker could say anything. "You peddlers are a nuisance. Go away."

"I'm looking for Miss Jennie Justin," said Parker. "Isn't this her apartment?"

"No. Never heard of her—and I've lived in this house for five years." The old woman slammed the door in his face.

The lieutenant scowled at the door. He thought of ringing and demanding that the old woman let him in so that he could search the apartment for the red-headed girl, but decided against it.

He went slowly down the stairs and looked at the names on the bells and mail-boxes in the lobby and foyer. There was no Jennie Justin among those names now. The name of Mrs. J. Murphy was in the slot over the bell of 2B.

"So I'm crazy," muttered Parker. "I dreamed the whole thing. There never was a girl named Jennie Justin. She's an hallucination. And I just imagine I was bopped over the head and knocked out, too. Like blazes I do!"

Lieutenant Parker was good and mad, and when he was he usually got results in a hurry, the way he went into action He barged out of the apartment house in a rush, made tracks for the nearest phone and called his precinct station.

"Lieutenant Parker speaking," he snapped. "I want a man named Victor Quinn picked up as fast as possible and brought to Langston Bradley's apartment. Here's Quinn's address." He repeated it over the wire. "And pick up a Mrs. J. Murphy at this address." He gave that also. "Have her brought to Bradley's place right away. I'll be there waiting."

HE DROVE back to Langston Bradley's Park Avenue apartment and took the elevator to the tenth floor. Bill Kelly was still on duty there. Norton, the Bradley butler, let Parker in.

"That ten grand Bradley drew out of the bank in cash this morning is the motive," Kelly said promptly, without being asked for

an opinion by his superior. He must have still had it this evening when his two visitors showed up. One of them killed him for that money, Lieutenant."

"And I found the missing white mice, sir," the butler put in. "They were still in their cage, hidden under the bed in one of the guest rooms. Now why would anyone do that?"

"Maybe somebody couldn't stand the sight of mice," remarked Parker, with a faint smile, just as the doorbell rang.

Norton answered it, and ushered in two detectives who had a big man in tow.

Parker grinned broadly. He recognized that man all right—the big fellow who had knocked him out.

"So we meet again, Mr. Quinn," drawled Parker. "You played a little too rough the last time I saw you. My head is still aching from that blow of yours."

Scowling, Quinn protested heatedly that he had never seen Parker before. Angrily the Lieutenant ordered him to shut up.

Ignoring the man then, Parker asked Norton to get the white mice. The butler had just brought the cage into the living room when two more police officers arrived with the old lady who had shut the door of Apartment 2B on Riverside Drive, in Parker's face. She was sullen, and not saying anything.

"It's all right now, Miss Justin," Parker said to her suavely. "You can take off that disguise. I know Quinn made you put it on after he knocked me out. But he's through now. Your life is no longer in danger."

"What a relief that is!" cried Jennie Justin, as one hand flew up to tug off the gray wig. "I've been scared to death of that man."

"Is today your birthday?" Parker asked her, with apparent irrelevance.

"Why, yes." She looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. "How on earth did you know? And what can that have to do with all this?"

Parker did not answer—merely shrugged and smiled faintly.

"Mr. Bradley said he was going to give me a book, and he was most mysterious about it," Jennie rushed on. "Said I must look through it carefully. He told me to go out into the hall while he got my present ready, and those horrible white mice were running around out there. He knew I always had been afraid of them, so I thought it was another of his jokes, and I got mad." She sighed. "I'll never forgive myself now, but I left without seeing him again. . . Do you know why he wanted me to look through the book so carefully?"

"Yes." Parker picked up the "Golden Treasury" that still lay on the table. "When I saw the title, and what he had written on the fly leaf, I knew that he had planned to put ten thousand dollars in this book for you to find, Miss Justin. Putting money in gifts like that is often done." [*Turn page*]

"Ten thousand dollars!" exclaimed Jennie dazedly. "Is it still there?"

"No." Parker shook his head, and his lips tightened. "I've a good idea that Quinn saw Bradley draw that ten thousand out of the bank and decided he wanted that money. So he came here after it. Probably Bradley asked Quinn to take the cage of mice out of the room, knowing that you, Miss Justin, were expected any moment, and that you were afraid of them. Something in Quinn's manner must have given Bradley a hint that something was wrong, so as soon as Quinn was out of the room, Langston Bradley hid the money.

"Outside in the hall, Quinn promptly let the white mice loose, to scare you away, and also to give him a chance to look the cage over. As soon as you rushed away, angry, Quinn who hadn't found the ten thousand, went back to Bradley and demanded the money. Bradley refused to give it to him—so Quinn killed Langston Bradley.

"Then Quinn couldn't find the money. It was not in Bradley's wallet, or anywhere Quinn searched, so for fear of being found with the body of the man he had killed, he had to leave without the money. But he meant to come back to search again—you can bank on that."

"Nonsense!" protested Quinn. "Why, Bradley was my friend." He forced a smile. "He told me he was going to give Miss Justin a gift hidden in a strange place, and that it would be quite a joke."

PARKER'S eyes bored into the man accusingly.

"So you thought you had guessed the hiding place when you got that cage of mice in your hands," he said grimly. "You thought he had hidden the money in the cage—which could be quite a joke, seeing how Miss Justin felt about Bradley's mice. After you let the mice loose to scare her away, you searched the cage, as I said, but didn't find the money. You captured the mice after she left, and hid the cage in the guest bedroom. They were so tame it was easy to catch them."

"But where was the money you're talking about?" growled Quinn. "Funny it hasn't shown up—and Miss Justin was with Bradley after I left him."

"Yes, you thought she had it, didn't you?" snapped Parker. "So you had just reached her apartment to force her to give it to you when I arrived. You knocked me out to get rid of me. Then you threatened her with death if she didn't disguise herself as an old woman and pretend Jennie Justin had never lived there. I could have found out, of course, but you wanted time—to get the money and get away from town. But the minute I noticed the hands of the woman who opened the door for me I knew she was no old woman."

"But where's the money?" repeated Quinn, his voice rising. "You haven't got anything on me! Bradley never hid any money from me!"

Parker's eyebrows lifted. "Oh, yes, he did," the Lieutenant said. "Under the snow on the window sill. I noticed the snow had been disturbed a little, and Bradley wouldn't have left the window open on a cold night without a reason."

He went over to the window and scooped up a package wrapped in a white handkerchief, from under the snow. As he opened it, greenbacks fluttered out.

"Here it is, Quinn. You're under arrest. The charge is murder!"

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933 of Thrilling Mystery Novel Magazine, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1945. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Thrilling Mystery Novel Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, Harvey Burns, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Standard Magazines, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1945. Eugene Wechsler Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1946.

THE LINE-UP

(Concluded from page 10)

sensitive novels of moods and manners, and perfectly plotted detective stories."

Well, you get the idea. Everybody liked it, and take our word for it, you'll like it, too. And, as usual, the next issue will contain a fine assortment of exciting short stories in addition to this featured novel.

From Our Readers

ONCE again we were very popular with Uncle Sam's mailman. You folks had him beating a path to our door. One of the first letters to win our attention comes from Dave Wicker of Toledo.

You fellows really tried something new and different in the November issue of THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL MAGAZINE when you gave us Margaret Millar's WALL OF EYES. To tell you the truth, I didn't think I was going to like it. But once I got started on it, I just had to keep on. It was really something special and you can publish another novel of hers anytime you feel like it.

Well, Dave, we thought the yarn was something special, too. That's why we ran it. Thanks for your letter and for giving us your views. Now here's a flash from Joe Elias of Corona, L. I.

Brother, I want to tell you that CELLINI SMITH: DETECTIVE, was just about the roughest, toughest mystery I've ever read. There isn't any recent novel that can come anywhere near it. I liked the way Cellini handled the hoboes. And were they tough cookies! And Cellini also did all right with everyone else to turn in, as far as I am concerned, an all-star performance.

Thank you, Joe. We'll pass the word along to author Robert Reeves. We know he'll be glad to hear how you and all our other readers felt about Cellini Smith.

The above letters are typical of hundreds of missives received. We're sorry we can't print them all, but don't let that stop you from writing. Send all communications to The Editor, THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL MAGAZINE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And, remember—a postcard is as good as a sealed letter. All comments, suggestions and criticisms are more than welcome! So long until next time.

—THE EDITOR.

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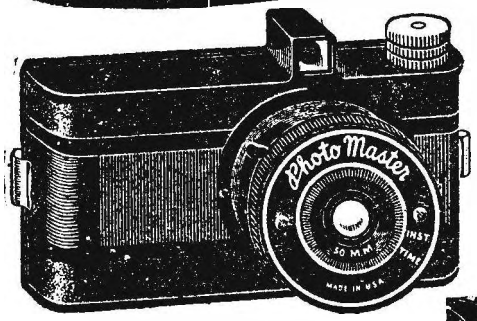

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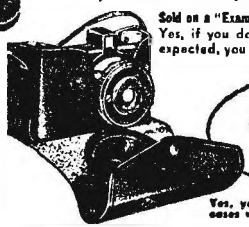

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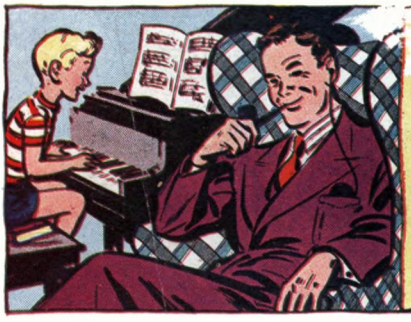

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SIZED LIKE A CIGARETTE CASE, this radio is easily carried. Personal earphone permits listening without bothering others. Strong, day-long reception, thanks to the tiny, powerful "Mini-Max" battery, already available at dealers.

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For longer life, insist on "Eveready" batteries—dated to assure freshness. And fresh batteries last longer!

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