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FALL 1948

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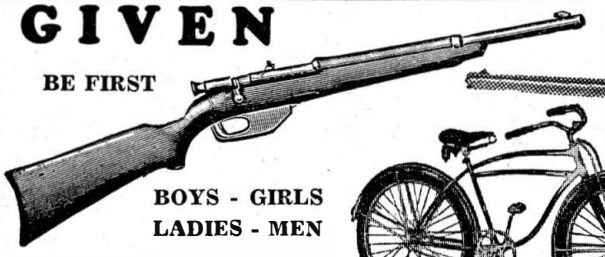

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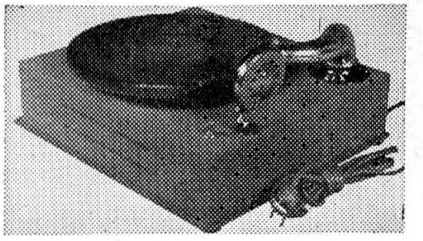

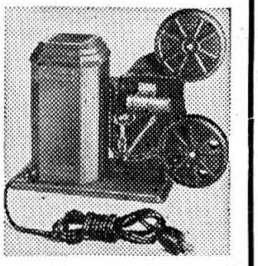

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TRIPLE DETECTIVE

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

Vol. 3, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Fall, 1948

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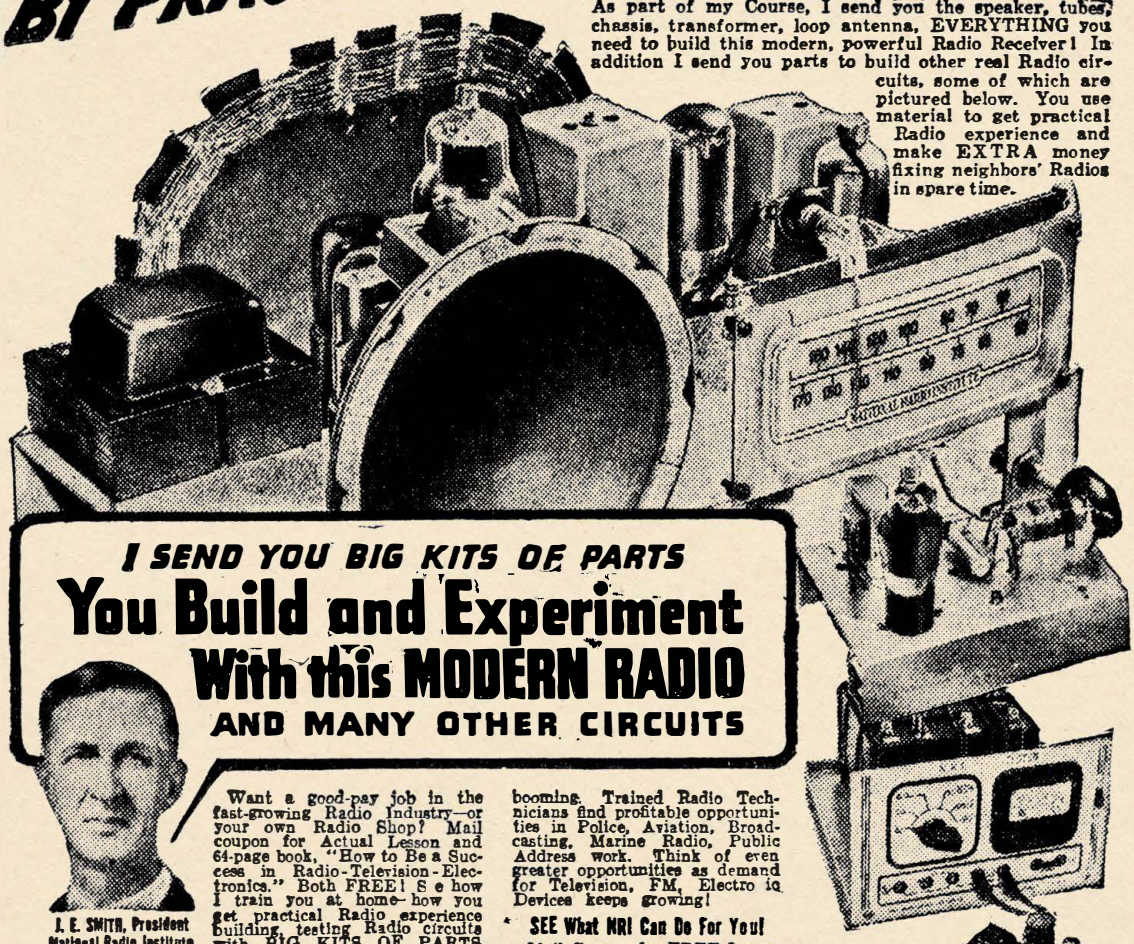

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A Panel of Authors, Mystery Fans and the Editor

MAYHEM and murder are a dirty, unpleasant business—whether they occur in fact or fiction. Like accidents and gruesome acts of violence, they are the things men are wont to shield from their womenfolk. After all, the age of chivalry is not dead (or, is it?) and if we men can spare the ladies some unpleasantness, why, it's our bounden duty to do so!

Accordingly, you will read through hundreds of mysteries, both current and out of the past, wherein the killing is solved by a police detective, a private investigator or, perhaps, the hypercurious hero—but always a male. You see, even our whodunit writers carry on the tradition. And in spite of women's suffrage and women bus drivers and doctors and dentists and women's baseball teams—yes and even women publishers—you'll find the hardy males hogging the fictional detective limelight.

However, this does not mean that the fair sex has been completely locked out of our whodunits as sleuths. On the contrary, there is a small minority of very capable gals who, for years, have been challenging the accomplishments of their male associates.

Famous Lady Detectives

One of the first of these to come to mind is pretty Nurse Sara Keate who deals so effectively with murder and peril in Mignon G. Eberhart's well-known novels, "Mystery at Hunting's End," and "From This Dark Stairway." Even better known, perhaps, is gray-haired Maud Silver, the little English lady who has been solving murders while she knits for authoress Patricia Wentworth. "The Clock Strikes Twelve," "The Case is Closed" and "Pilgrim's Inn" are a few of Maud Silver's fictional triumphs.

Then there is charming Grace Latham, who has so often turned a helping hand for Colonel Primrose in such famous Leslie Ford mysteries as "Reno Rendezvous" and "Three Bright Pebbles." There is also Sister Ursula—quite unique in detective fiction—the lovable Dominican nun who made such a hit in H. H. Holmes' "Nine Times Nine."

Finally, there are such well-known femmes as Pam North (the better half of the Mr. and Mrs. North team authored by the Lockridges), Helene Justus (of Craig Rice's Jake and Helene Justus duo), Jean Abbott (of Frances Crane's Pat and Jean Abbott sleuthing combination) and Haila Troy (one half of the Jeff and Haila Troy team created by Kelley Roos).

All of these ladies have a remarkable record of achievement in detective fiction. They are well liked and they can spot a killer almost as fast as your editor can blink an eye.

Enter—Hildegarde Withers

There's one lady we haven't mentioned. We've saved her till last because she stars in one of the three great mysteries coming up in the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. The story is "Fear Death by Water" by Stuart Palmer and the lady is none other than Hildegarde Withers.

There is no detective story fan worthy of the name who has not heard of Hildegarde (and we don't mean the gal with the curves and the voice). This Hildegarde is no chicken. She's never

(Continued on Page 8)

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THE READERS' JURY

(Continued from Page 6)

been known to sing (except maybe in the bath tub). She has a long, horse-like face, wears outlandish hats and devotes much of her time to raising tropical fish—when she isn't getting into Inspector Oscar Piper's hair in some murder mystery.

Well, fans, she really meddles this time in spite of all her golden resolutions to the contrary. The result is a tense, absorbing novel and a worthy companion to the two other great books which will appear in the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE.

A Reggie Fortune Novel

The first of these is a dramatic, fast-moving Reggie Fortune novel entitled "The Life Sentence" by H. C. Bailey. The second is an unforgettable and distinctly unusual crime novel "How Like a God" by Rex Stout, famous author of the Nero Wolfe mysteries.

It all adds up to the greatest assortment of top-ranking authors ever assembled in one issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. Just think of it! H. C. Bailey, Rex Stout and Stuart Palmer—all together at one time. It took a lot of doing, but because The Readers' Jury is entitled to try only the best cases on the criminal record, we take pleasure in bringing them to you.

Turning first to "The Life Sentence" which will be the featured yarn in our next issue, we find Reggie Fortune dragged into one of the most intriguing cases of his career. Reggie was at home taking his ease when an old friend, Dr. Isabel Cope, telephoned and asked his assistance in treating and prescribing for a pretty but lonely girl.

The girl was Rosalind Bruce, adopted child of the widowed Mrs. Bruce, living in a remote coastal cottage close to the sea. It was a rugged country, rimmed by steep, rocky headlands and continually beset by fog.

Fear of Fog

Rosalind was subject to fits of languor and depression despite her appar-

(Continued on Page 10)

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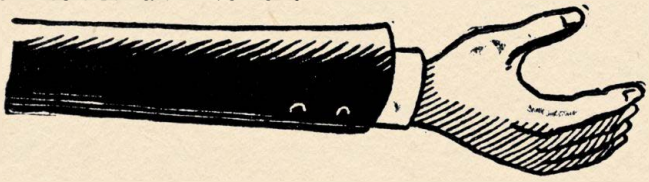
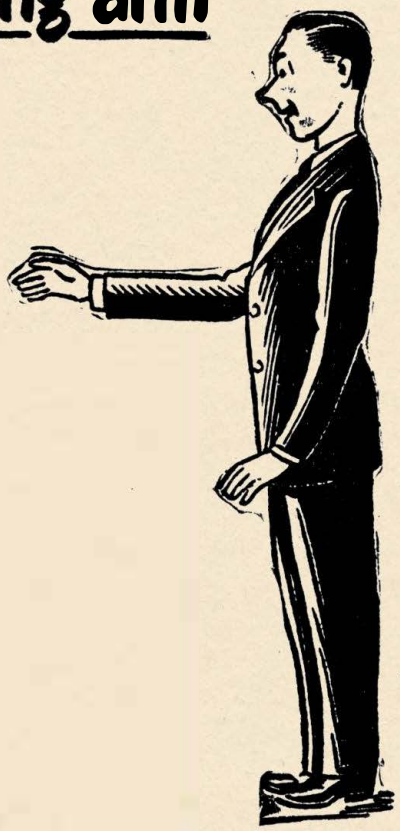
IT ISN'T even necessary to go half-way to meet Opportunity. It seeks out the man who has prepared himself for advancement.





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THE READERS' JURY

(Continued from Page 8)

ent good physical health. She avoided other girls and had an unreasoning fear of fog. Dr. Cope believed her to be in a dangerous emotional state of mind.

Reegie listened closely to Dr. Cope and hazarded the opinion that something in the girl's past or in the past of her real family was responsible for her condition. From Dr. Cope's tone he gathered that she feared for Rosalind's safety.

Reggie agreed to come to Bridcombe where the Bruces lived, but before making the journey he got Scotland Yard working on the affair. He requested they dig up all the information available on Mrs. Bruce and the girl and the possible reasons for their taking up an abode in the isolated coastal village.

He suspected some crime in the background. As for the fog, some event in her past had been associated with pain or evil. When and how should provide the key to the puzzle.

He had barely arrived in Dr. Cope's study when the telephone rang and a panic-stricken Mrs. Bruce informed the doctor that Rosalind had gone out for a walk along the sea cliffs and hadn't returned.

Reggie, experiencing a premonition of trouble, made a wild dash for his car. Dr. Cope raced along at his heels. Reggie's chauffeur drove them to the edge of the cliffs. Reggie left the car and raced along the headland for some distance, then suddenly uttered a cry and turned to make a perilous descent to the shore below.

When Dr. Cope reached the bottom Reggie was already wading waist-deep in the sea, carrying the limp body of a girl in his arms.

The girl was Rosalind Bruce and she was unconscious. They rushed her to the hospital, then returned to the scene of the accident.

It Was No Accident

It didn't take Reggie long, after studying the cliff and some footprints

(Continued on Page 169)

What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

EVERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as fundamental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a non-profit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

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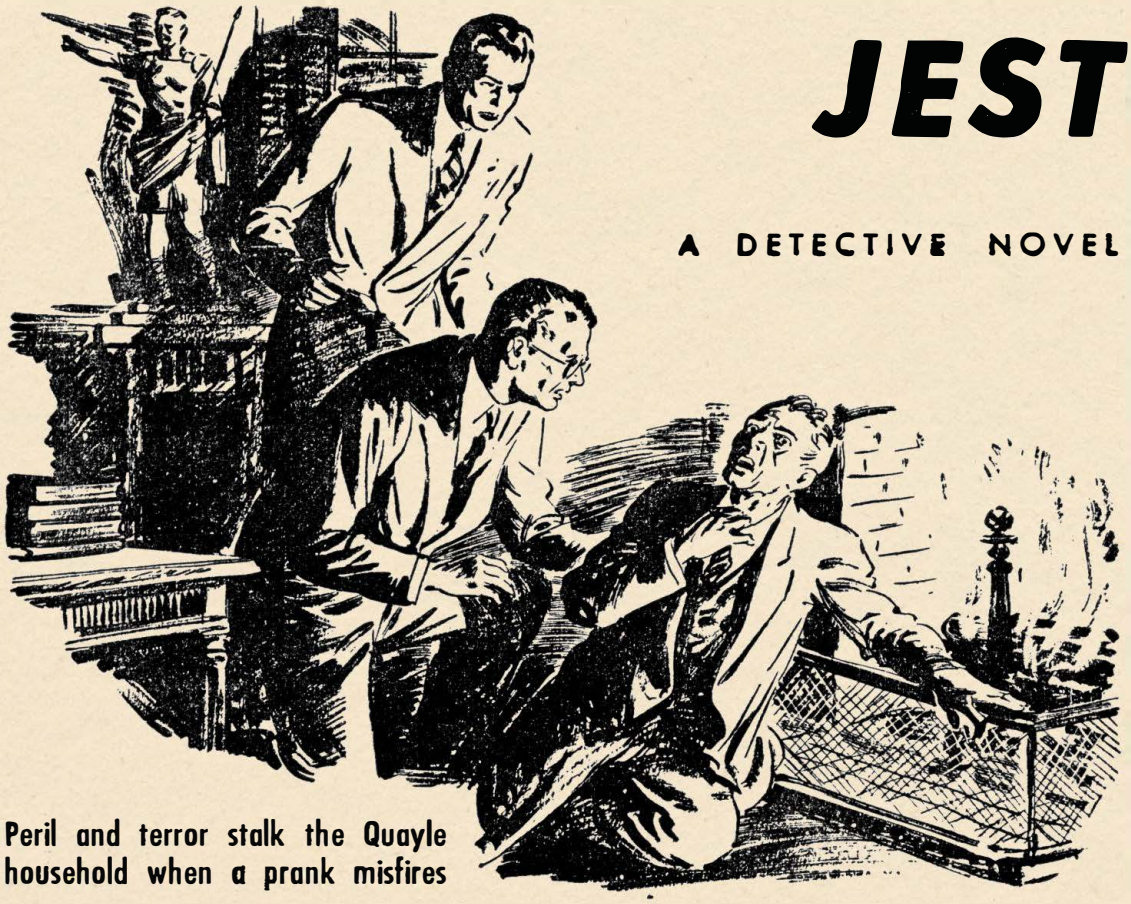
JOHN DICKSON CARR

POISON in JEST

A DETECTIVE NOVEL



Peril and terror stalk the Quayle household when a prank misfires

PROLOGUE

DUSK was coming down from the Wiener Wald, and pink sunset had already faded from the low plain where Vienna lies. There was an echo of bells in the air. They were holding the vesper service in St. Stephen's. From where we sat at the cafe called The Old Fiddle, we could see the tall fretted spire outlined against the sky. In the colored tiles of the roof gleamed the black eagle of the Hapsburg arms.

My companion sat in the shadow, so that I could see only the red gleam of his cigarette. On the marble-topped table between us stood two glasses of kummel. Within reach of his hand, a loose pile of manuscript

sheets lay. But we did not immediately speak of the book, or of other things concerned with deviltry in a snow-bound house—the tin of arsenic, the hatchet and the white marble hand.

"I was thinking," I said, "of the Strauss statue. And of another statue."

My companion made a gesture of repugnance.

"That was six months ago," I continued, "and you have never told me how you knew. There was blood on the statue. You put your hand behind it and took the murderer like a rat out of a hole."

He said: "The murderer was dead when I got there—poor devil."

"It's pretty hard to feel any sympathy."

"Oh, not for *that* one. I mean the other. Look here"—he touched the manuscript—"is that why you've written all this?"

"Yes. It's difficult for the rest of the children to be suspected. The truth needs to be told. You were the only one who saw the truth."

"What do you want me to do?"

"The story lacks an ending. You can supply it."

We were both thinking of the vast jigsaw house where the murders were committed—of gas-lights, and a brandy-bottle, and cellar stairs spotted with blood. An old house, an old town and the mountains of western Pennsylvania.

Somewhere in the city a great clock began to strike. The boom of five was dying into silence when my companion spoke.

"Let me show you that you were applying your theory to the wrong person," he said. "For instance . . ."

I

JUDGE Quayle rose out of his chair. He said:

"You asked me that question ten or twelve years ago. Why do you keep harping on it?"

The judge, sitting on the other side of the hearth, continued to regard me with a rather hostile gaze. He was a lean man, who must once have been immensely strong. His gray-black hair was thin and long, brushed straight back from his high forehead as in the engravings of old statesmen. I used to imagine, when I saw him in court, that his whole head came out of an engraving.

Judge Quayle's dark frozen eyes threw something in my direction, as literally as though he expected me to catch it. A suspicion, an accusation, a doubt, what?

"I remember when you asked it the first time," he said reflectively and stared into the fire. "You had just begun to write and you brought a manuscript to me for criticism."

"It was mere curiosity, sir," I said.

He did not seem to hear me. He muttered: "We were happy then. The family. *My* family."

I looked round the library, one of those immense rooms which have windows to the floor after the fashion of the eighteen-seventies. In an ornate chandelier there were brackets for both gas and electricity. Old style bookcases ran round the walls. There were dark, very bad oils hanging in gold frames above the bookcases. Long ago I had admired those paintings, no less than the doors of the bookcases in figured glass and enamel.

But in one corner of the room still stood the thing which had prompted my question. It was a statue of the Roman emperor Caligula in marble — toga, bulbous nose, loose mouth, standing in witless ugliness with one arm extended. But the arm ended in a stump. Ever since I could remember the statue's right hand had been missing.

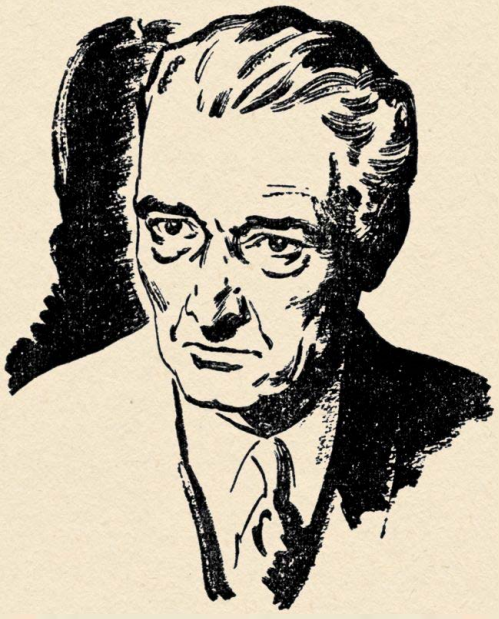
There was no reason why the judge should remember a casual question, asked a dozen years ago. I recalled the night now. It had been the year our little crowd in the town had gone away to school.

We congregated at the Quayle house then. The big place had seemed magnificent. It had great frame towers, crowned in filigree, jutting up above a veranda vast enough for a ballroom.

The lawns and gardens were luxuriant. There was a swimming-pool too, and trees where Japanese lanterns were hung at night.

On the veranda there had been swings and wicker chairs; we lounged there when mysterious dusk was coming down from the mountains.

Sometimes we would see Judge Quayle coming from town. He drove an ancient Hudson, which rattled, but



Judge Quayle

he kept the brasswork highly polished. He wore a dark slouch-hat, tipped slightly forward, and he saw few people on the street. But he wanted to be genial. He would try to be when he met us.

I knew him better than the others, for I had what are politely called literary ambitions. I used to bring my attempts to him, fearfully, for criticism.

Judge Quayle was descended from an old line—the hard-drinking, whisky-and-spittoon lawyers who did not study laws but made them. He bade me, "spend my days and nights with Addison." He quoted Lord Bacon. It was cold, classical advice, mixed with a certain patronizing air towards all novels. And yet his judgment was uncanny.

I think it did him good to talk. He had few friends. His wife was a small, unimpressive woman who smiled and hurried but seemed to do nothing else. There were five children, three girls and two boys. I had been wondering about them, for I had seen none of them in ten years.

I HAD been here only a few minutes in response to his own summons. I had spoken of old times and made an innocent remark about the Caligula statue—asking why the hand was gone. And suddenly terror had come into Judge Quayle's voice and look. Now he sat fingering the arms of the chair and blinking.

Judge Quayle had retired from the bench several years before. While I was in Europe I heard that he had had a break with the younger son, Tom, over Tom's refusal to study law. Tom had been driven out of the house. He was his mother's favourite and she had never forgiven her husband.

But I had lost touch with our adolescent group which had so solemnly discussed the future on the Quayle porch. I had been very fond of Virginia Quayle, the youngest. She had yellow-brown hair and large eyes and she did not talk much.

When I returned to town after a long absence it was to hear that Judge Quayle wanted to see me. It had occurred to me why he might want to summon me. Many times he had spoken of the book he some day intended to write. It should be the history of this soil, where young Washington fought his first battle at Fort Necessity and the redcoats buried Braddock beside the trail. It should echo the warwhoop on the red-lit river below Fort Redstone and the crack of rifles. Well, I had written books. It might be that my first mentor wanted to find a publisher.

The iron gates of the Quayle house sagged open. The house was as huge and grotesque as ever—but now there was dinginess about it.

The woman who admitted me I recognized with difficulty as Mary Quayle, the eldest daughter—a born spinster though her sleek black hair was bobbed and she wore new clothes smartly. It was not until I mentioned my name that she recognized me.

"Jeff Marle!" she cried. "Gracious, how you've changed! Do come in!"

She was backing away from me in the dimly lighted hall. She had heavy-lidded eyes and a high-bridged nose destroying beauty. Her mouth had become thin. She made several quick efforts to smile and failed. She had just been crying—not even the dim lights of the hall could disguise the reddened eyes.

"Your father," I suggested. "He asked me to come out. Er—"

"Do come in, Jeff!" she repeated. She was flustered but tried to grow arch. "Imagine seeing you! Let me take your overcoat. There! I know Papa will be delighted to see you. Pardon my being upset, won't you? Mother has been ill and we've all been in a flurry."

I hesitated. "Some other time—"

"Jeff, I insist!" A new idea brought eager relief into her eyes. "It's about the book isn't it? Of course!" Smiling, she led the way through the hall.

I do not know what hazy impulse prompted me to do what I did then. I recalled a signal Tom Quayle and I used to have. When we wanted to see the judge about anything and he was busy in his library, we always used two slow raps and three quick ones. I knocked thus at the library door then.

I was not prepered for the queer look which came to Mary's face. From beyond the door I heard the scrape of a chair pushed back and *felt* the hiss of indrawn breath, the shock and stiffening of somebody there in the library.

"Who's there?" demanded a voice.

I pushed the door open. Judge Quayle was standing with one arm hung over the edge of the mantlepiece. The white fingers twitched. Beyond him, in the corner, I saw the dusty marble statue which seemed to goggle with empty eyes. The judge's first words were:

"Never knock that way, do you hear? Never knock—that—way."

Even after the judge had calmed down, and greeted me with his rigid courtesy, I knew that he was somehow suspicious of me. We had both mumbled platitudes and then, by an unfortunate circumstance, I had made some observation about the statue.

He raised his head from contemplating the fire and looked at me. His eyes were weak. I noticed that his shoes were shabby.

With a shade of the old lordly manner, he said:

"Pray forgive me. I should not be so easily upset. But I am much alone nowadays." A faint smile showed. "I'm afraid I don't give you a very good welcome. Accept my apologies."

"There's nothing to apologize for," I said. "Mary told me that Mrs.Quayle was ill."

He frowned. "Oh, it's nothing serious. The doctor is with her now. As a matter of fact, she hasn't been well for some time. Dr. Twills is a good man to have around the house."

"Twills?"

"My son-in-law," replied the judge. "He married Clarissa."

SO CLARISSA, the beauty of the family, was married. In response to my murmur of congratulation the judge waved a deprecating hand.

"Oh, they've been married three years now. I have the highest respect for Dr. Twills' abilities. I believe," said the judge deliberately, "he has money of his own. He doesn't practise. He has had Mrs. Quayle under observation for some time. She has been depressed, out of sorts."

"And the rest of the family?"

Judge Quayle tried to assume a fatherly heartiness but it was a failure.

"Well, let me see—Matthew is a lawyer now, you know. Doing very well. Virginia is out of college, looking for something to do. And Mary helps about the house."

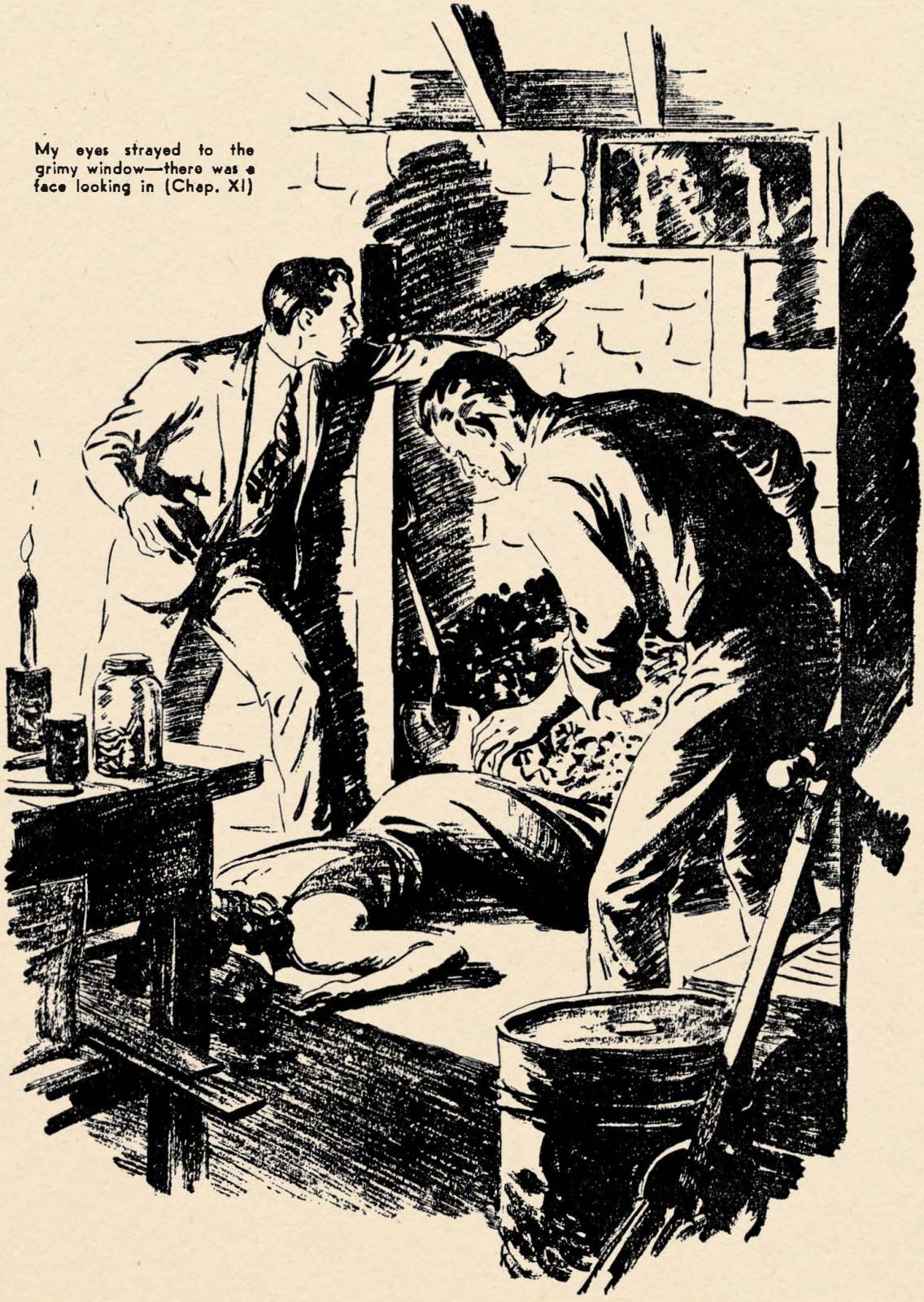
I did not dare ask about Tom. But I could see that he was thinking of Tom. It was as though some hurt brought out the wrinkles on his forehead.

I said: "When I heard you wanted to see me, sir, I hoped it was about the book. The book you have always been promising to write."

"Eh? Oh, yes! The book of course."

"You've finished it?"

He sat up straight. "Why yes. I have prepared a manuscript, which may or may not be suitable for publication. I am not familiar with contemporary



My eyes strayed to the grimy window—there was a face looking in (Chap. XI)

'literature' but certain books of Virginia's which I have chanced to pick up—" Quite suddenly, his cold calm left him. Blood suffused his face. "By God, sir, it is not that they anger so much as—as they bewilder me! I wish I could understand?"

"Understand?"

"Everything. Whatever I read seems to turn every standard upside down. Nothing is believed to be true any longer. I don't mean sexual morality. I have been on the bench long enough to have known every sordid side of that long before your clever adolescent novelists were born. I mean—"

He rose to his feet.

"There used to be values. My family—I don't understand my family."

It was a lonely cry. It came from the loneliness of this room, where an old man puzzled out his days. There was nothing I could say. He was only talking *at* me. Finally he turned with a crooked smile.

"I still neglect my duties as host," he observed.

Unlocking an old-fashioned bookcase-desk, Judge Quayle took out a squat bottles and two glasses.

"This," he told me, "is real brandy. Do you see the seal over the cork? My grandfather put it there. They can't tamper with *this* anyhow."

He made the last remark grimly and turned over the dusty bottle to examine it with great care. He poured brandy into the glasses and said:

"There was another thing I wanted to ask you."

"About the book?"

"No. It's been only a kind of—solace. I am given to understand" he lowered his head, studying me, "that you have gone in for police work."

I laughed. "Just as a spectator, sir."

"With this man—what was his name?"

"Bencolin?"

"The head of the Paris Police," Judge Quayle said slowly. He stared at his glass for a moment. Then his eyes began to wander about the room. They encountered the statue and a fishy glaze crept into them.

"Well, sir?"

"I should like to meet him. I—" He took a deep drink. "I—they are trying to scare me to death. But they won't. Listen!"

He drank shakily. The lean figure in black appeared to waver. I had a ghastly feeling that he was disintegrating before me.

"Judge Quayle!" I said. "Judge, for heaven's sake!"

He huddled into his chair.

"I am afraid you do not understand. They are all against me. They—they are not like any children I ever thought of." His voice was that of a querulous old man. "I had pictured how I would grow old with my children—big table, spread for guests. Everyone laughing. As my father used to have it. Grandchildren. The boys coming to me for advice. They—they don't think much of their old dad, I guess."

HE HAD just lifted his glass again when there was a knock at the door.

The man who hurried in was small, rather harassed-looking. He wore a baggy grey suit and no collar. His mild blue eyes were magnified behind big double-lensed spectacles but his forehead was intelligent, the fair hair clipped close above it.

"She'll be all right, father, I think," he said.

Rising, the judge interposed:

"Walter, shake hands with Mr. Marle. Mr. Marle, Dr. Twills."

Twills started as he turned to face me. Then his abstracted eyes awoke, and he grew even more nervous.

"Oh," he said. "Er—how d'ye do? I didn't know there was anybody here."

"Well, Walter?"

"I wonder," said the doctor apologetically, "whether I could see you a minute in private, sir? About Mrs. Quayle. If you will pardon us, Mr. Marle?"

The judge looked at him heavily.

"She's not worse?"

"It isn't that! It's—well—"

Judge Quayle followed him out into the hall. The lovely Clarissa's husband, this rabbitlike, middle-aged man with the nervous hands? I wondered whether these outbursts represented an ordinary evening at the Quayle home. I was just lifting my glass when I heard the judge's snarling voice beyond the door.

"You're lying! She never said anything of the kind."

Twills murmured something.

"You're lying," the judge repeated. "It's a damned plot and you're in it!"

He came banging back into the library. Twills followed him.

"You've got to listen, sir!" cried Twills.

On the hearth-rug again the judge whirled. His hand was raised.

"Get out of here!"

He had taken a step forward, but stopped, and in a toneless voice said: "Oh, my God."

The pupils of his eyes were strangely dilated. His hand darted to his collar. Through his teeth blew a sort of hideous gurgling.

Twills cried, "Judge!"

Judge Quayle slid down to his knees, gasping. He struck his head against the brass fender and lay motionless with one arm almost in the fire.

Twills sprang past me. He bent over his father-in-law. When he turned again he was efficient and cool.

"He drank from that glass?" the doctor demanded.

"Yes."

"You drank from the same bottle?"

"No. That is, I hadn't begun to drink."

"Help me get him into my surgery. He's been poisoned!"

II

WE CARRIED the judge to the surgery. A shaded lamp burned on a table, where many books lay open. There was a smell of disinfectant. When we had Judge Quayle on an examination table Twills turned swiftly to me.

"I think I know just what it is. God forgive me, I think I'm responsible! Take care of those two glasses, will you, and see that nobody gets them?"

He was stripping off his coat and rolling up his sleeves.

I said: "Sure you don't want any help here?"

"You might telephone the hospital and tell them to send out a trained nurse."

"Bad as that?"

"For his wife. I still wonder—"

"If that's poison too?"

" 'Fraid so. Look here, you might see if you can find the supper tray she used tonight."

"Where are the rest of the family?"

"Mary's in the kitchen, I think. Matt's upstairs with his mother. Jinny and my wife are out. But don't pay any attention to anybody else, get me?" The mild eyes behind those thick glasses stared at me rather fiercely.

I said: "Look here, Doctor. What the devil's going on in this house?"

"Crazy work. You walked in on the climax of it. Hurry!"

When I had phoned the hospital I went back slowly to the library.

Crazy work. A kind of ghastly private theatrical, such as Tom Quayle, I could not help thinking, would have enjoyed putting on. Tom had always been one of the best tellers of ghost stories I ever heard. All the puzzling events of this night paraded past me.

The library was filled with a hard brightness. It was all very stolid. The bookcases as respectable as matrons—the bad portraits as sturdy as beef on a dinner-table. Then I saw my glass of brandy and I felt a little sick. I had almost drunk that brandy.

The fire had almost died. That mantelpiece had a dusty, knitted cover with red tassels. Beside the clock stood the judge's glass, almost empty.

What was the poison? I picked up the dusty bottle. It was a Ferlac cherry, 1870. I sniffed at the bottle, remembering that the bitter-almonds odour of cyanide could be concealed by cherry brandy. But cyanide was much quicker in its effect—almost instantaneous.

If someone had wanted to murder—oh, nonsense! I took up the bottle, along with the judge's glass and mine, locked them in the cabinet and put the key in my pocket.

Now to see about that supper-tray. I had better go upstairs—the tray was probably still there. And how to approach this mission? Well, better say nothing about poison as yet.

The steps were covered with thick red-flowered carpet but they creaked on every tread. I felt, somehow, furtive. It was now a question of meeting Matthew Quayle Junior, a prospect I did not relish. I wondered whether he was the same. Matt had been the perennial college undergrad, even before he got to college. You felt that you could sympathize with his misfortunes if only you did not have to put up with his enthusiasms.

Mrs. Quayle's room was at the front of the house and the door was open. A dim lamp lit the blue-flowered wallpaper.

In the bed, with untidy gray hair, lay Mrs. Quayle. Her face was flabby and drawn, with bluish lips, and there were dark pouches under the closed eyelids. Even in sleep she looked tired, baffled, worn out.

Somebody got up hurriedly from a squeaky chair beside the bed, peering at me uncomprehendingly. It was young Matthew Quayle but I did not immediately look at him. I felt a lump in my throat. Mrs. Quayle had been—well, everybody had liked her.

I beckoned Matt out into the hall. He was tall, with brown hair, which had begun to thin considerably, parted in the middle, a rather bulbous blue eye and a reddish face. I knew exactly what he would say. He did.

"What in the world," said Matt Quayle, with low-voiced heartiness, "brings you up here?" He thumped my shoulder. "Come on down to my room. Mother's a little upset, but she'll be all right. Haven't seen you in years!"

"I came to see your father," I explained. "He isn't feeling well and Dr. Twills asked me if I'd step up here and see about—"

HE LOOKED at me in surprise. "About Mother?"

"He said something she ate upset her and he wanted to know where the things she'd eaten had been taken to, so he could find out what disagreed with her."

"Oh! Sure. Well, Joanna—that's the maid—took the tray downstairs a long time ago. You can probably find it in the kitchen."

"How is she?"

Matthew Quayle looked at me curiously. He dropped his assumed heartiness. A shaft of light from the room caught his worried eyes.

"Look here, Jeff," he said, trying to be whimsical, "you haven't—you haven't let things—go to your head and—turned private detective or something, have you?"

"Good Lord, no! Why should I?"

"Well, you can't tell. These writers." He grinned.

"That isn't the real reason, is it, Matt?"

His eyes narrowed. "How much do you know?"

"Enough to keep quiet. And I may be able to help."

For a long time we looked at each other. At length he answered softly:

"It's worth a try! We're all at our wits' end, Jeff. All right. You go see about that tray and come back here. I'll wait."

"Where are the rest of them?"

"Clarissa's out at her bridge club. Jinny has a date. They won't be in for some time."

I descended the stairs and went to the kitchen. There was a muffled scream as I pushed open the squeaky door. Mary Quayle let fall a long-handled spoon. Very white, she stared at me. Then she sat down and said: "I can't stand this!"

I put my arm around her shoulder, felt her trembling. She clung to my hand. Her face was smeared over with fear.

"I've got to watch that oatmeal," she told me hurriedly.

"You'd better tell me," I suggested. "You'll feel better. And there's no reason why an old friend shouldn't help."

"I can't tell you, Jeff!" she cried desperately. "I mean, about—but something frightened me. I was so scared I didn't dare leave the kitchen, because the hall's dark."

"What did you see, Mary?"

"It was—Jeff, as God's my judge, this is true!—it was something white."

"Not seeing ghosts, Mary?"

"No, no! This was small. About the size of your hand."

In spite of myself, my smile froze. "Well, Mary?" I said casually.

"You see there, through the door of the pantry? You can just see the ledge of the cabinet from here—see? Well, something white ran along the ledge there and back again. It looked as though it had legs."

I stepped towards the pantry door, snapped on the hanging light in the small pantry. A window above the sink was open. I latched it and returned.

"There's some wrapping paper," I told Mary, "on the ledge and a breeze from that window. That's what you saw."

"I—I hope so," she said. She was regarding me with great black unwavering eyes. "Yes! Yes, Jeff, that must have been what it was!"

"Suppose you go upstairs with your mother and Matt. She may need attention." She rose quickly. "But first—

is your mother's supper tray still here? Dr. Twills wants to see which dish upset her."

"There it is in the pantry. Didn't you see?"

"In the pantry!"

"Yes, on the chair. I was going to wash dishes. This is Joanna's night off. It hasn't been touched."

I went into the pantry again, saw a covered tray. It looked as though some hand had recently plucked aside the covering.

"Did she have the same food as the rest of you tonight?"

"Oh, no, Jeff. She had some milk-toast and tea. I can't understand why any of that would upset her."

"Who prepared it—Joanna?"

"No. I did."

"Did you take it up yourself?"

"No, Jeff. Matt did." All of a sudden her eyes clouded and she spoke fast. "Jeff, there isn't anything *wrong.* is there?"

"No, of course not, Mary! Come along now and go upstairs."

"Matt's so *careless*!" she fretted. "But, Jeff! What on earth are you doing, wandering around like this! I left you with—where's Papa?"

"He's looking over his manuscript before I take it with me."

She sighed. "I typed it for him. Oh, Jeff, it's wonderful! And they won't let Papa have any peace! I get so mad sometimes I could kill Clarissa and Jinny—but they don't mean any harm, of course!"

I WATCHED her ascend the staircase, then took the tray to the surgery.

Dr. Twills turned. He rolled down his sleeves slowly, still pale.

"He'll live," said the doctor. "That was a close call."

"Was it—" I began.

"Yes. Poison. Fortunately what I thought. It's not a common poison and it's a damned dangerous one, Mr. Marle. If I hadn't been right—" He gestured and the pleasant eyes behind his spectacles crinkled up in a smile.

"The poison? Hydrobromide of hyoscin. A quarter to a half a grain is a fatal dose. You get a little delirium and excitement at first. Then the pupils of the eyes become paralyzed, the mouth and throat dry. Next drowsiness, unconsciousness, and complete paralysis—death in a few hours."

"Never heard of it."

"You wouldn't have. Hyoscin is never given by the mouth when it is used legitimately. You inject it hypodermically—in very small doses—as a powerful sedative for mania or meningitis or delirium tremens. Never more than two hundredths of a grain."

I demanded, "Then how—"

"How did any member of this household have access to it? Well, I own five or six grains myself."

It now seemed to me surprising that this was the same vague, timid, weak-chinned man who had scurried in to speak to Judge Quayle.

"Not guilty, of course, Mr. Marle," he murmured, "else I shouldn't have been quite so quick to revive him, should I? I only meant that the stuff belonged to me."

"And your supply?"

"Gone. I found it out this evening. I was afraid of this." He drew a long breath.

"So," I observed, "it looks like attempted murder."

"Yes. But I see no reason why we shouldn't deal with it ourselves."

"The surgery is never locked?"

"No." He suddenly spoke with bitterness. "I don't practise. It's just a laboratory. Somebody took a bottle of deadly poision. In addition to that there are two other poisons floating around this place. I suspected what was wrong with the old lady tonight. I treated her for it without letting the rest know. I'm positive somebody's been giving her arsenic."

"But a *third* poison?"

"That," Dr. Twills responded, "isn't something I want to discuss. I've got to be sure first! There mustn't be any scandal!"

He started to pace about.

"Maybe I'm morbid or something. But I can't get along with that gang! They scare hell out of me. They all look at me as though they were saying, 'What good are you?' I can't play golf and I can't play bridge and I don't dance, either. D'you know Clarissa?"

"She's the beauty." I nodded.

Twills said bitterly: "Yes. I'm telling you this because I'll respect your discretion. Because you can do all the things I want to do. I studied in Vienna.

I want to go back there and specialize. I want to eat rolls and coffee in the morning and work all day in a laboratory and drink a glass of beer at night before I go home and work some more."

"But can't you?" I prompted. "Since you're not—impecunious—"

He shook his head, slowly. "Off my nut for a minute, eh? Sorry. We'll talk later. I'm going to get the judge to bed on a couch here. I wish you'd break the news to the rest of them. He's out of serious danger now."

"Just a minute," I put in. "There are a couple of things I'd like to ask. Should you say that anybody was anxious to—to get rid of the judge or his wife?"

Twills started to answer but paused. "I've got my own ideas."

"Well then—did anybody here know that the judge invited me here this evening?"

"You think—he had a purpose?"

"No, not exactly. Did he always stay in his library in the evenings?"

"Always," said Twills. "Wrote every night, regular as clockwork."

"Usually have a drink?"

"A glass or two. It didn't hurt him."

"The same stuff—brandy?"

"Brandy or whisky. Where are those glasses?"

I told him, still wondering how the poison had been introduced into the brandy. I recalled that Judge Quayle had commented on the unbroken seal of the bottle and his grim words, "They can't tamper with *this*!" He suspected poision, then? Or did he merely mean that nobody could sample his stock without his knowledge?

I went upstairs after Mary and Matt and I brought them down to the library. Explaining that there had been an accident, I assured them that their father was entirely out of danger. The moment I mentioned that Twills was taking care of him in the surgery Mary bolted out of the room. I heard her wailing, "Walter! Walter!"

THROUGHOUT, Matt had not moved. His lips were pressed together. After a long time he remarked:

"Not so very frank, were you, Jeff?"

"There was no need for telling," I said, "until the danger was over."

"Oh, come on, now, Jeff!" He looked injured. "Look, old fellow, we've been friends since we were kids!"

"Can you get it through your head," I interposed, "how serious this is?"

He sat down. "Look here, this poison business doesn't concern Mother, does it? I mean—*she* hasn't been poisoned?"

"You'll have to ask Twills that."

"Listen, Jeff!" He had become terribly earnest and rather piteous. "You *know* nobody would try what you're talking about!"

"Please quiet down. You promised to talk this thing over a while ago."

"But what is there to talk over?"

"Well, the domestic atmosphere, for instance. All relations cordial?"

"I stay out of all that. I'm on good terms with everybody. Jinny fights dad. So does Clarissa, and especially Mother. But if he says, 'Come on into the library, Matt, and let's have a chat,' I just say, 'Sorry Dad. Got to go out.' He looks kind of funny sometimes," said Matt reflectively. "But what have I got to talk about to him? Why, he never even went to law school!"

Matt made his remark earnestly, and I heard him strike the arm of his chair.

"By the Lord!" he muttered. "Poison—I believe I've got something! I wish I could remember who said it. We were talking about poisons not a week ago."

"Who?"

"All of us. At the dinner table. I'd forgotten all about it." He scowled. "Somebody told a story about some Roman guy. It seems that somebody's relative wanted to poison this guy but he was pretty cagey. He had a taster. And one day they brought him some soup that was hotter than hell. The taster said it was all right but to put some water in it from a cooler they had there. So they did and it seems the relative had put poison in the water-cooler—so it killed this fellow after all."

"Who told the story?"

"That's what I can't remember. I think it was one of the girls. Probably Jinny. She's reading all the time."

He paused as we heard a motor in the drive and saw the lights of a car flash past the front windows.

"That's Jinny or Clarissa coming home," he said. "They'll have to be told. I'd better do it myself. They might get excited."

He bustled out as steps sounded on the veranda.

III

ONE OF the girls had been reading Suetonius, the tale of the soup with which Agrippina slew the elder brother of Nero. Caligula's statue, over there in the corner, had drawn back its flabby lips in a chuckle.

I stared at the Roman statue, then whirled back to the table. I had been asking myself how the *brandy* could have been poisoned. On the table were still scattered pieces of the seal which had been over the cork. The wax was clearly too old to have been tampered with. Besides, the poisoner could not have known which bottle the judge would select. No. The poisoner wanted to be sure that his victim drank the hyoscin *no matter what liquor* was used. And Judge Quayle never drank without soda-water.

Somebody had listened too well to that story of the deadly water-cooler. Somebody had introduced hydrobromide of hyoscin into the syphon.

The door opened. I started guiltily, my hand on the syphon.

I turned and saw Virginia Quayle looking at me from the door.

"Are they all *right,* Jeff?" she said breathlessly.

Her eyes were wide and greenish and long-lashed. Her heavy bobbed hair—of that tawny richness—was pushed back from a high forehead. Her mouth was twitching at one side as though for a crooked smile.

I took her cold hand. She was trembling.

"They're all right, Jinny," I said. "Entirely!"

"It's—pretty awful, isn't it? What are we going to do?"

"There's nothing to do, Jinny. I suppose Matt's told you?"

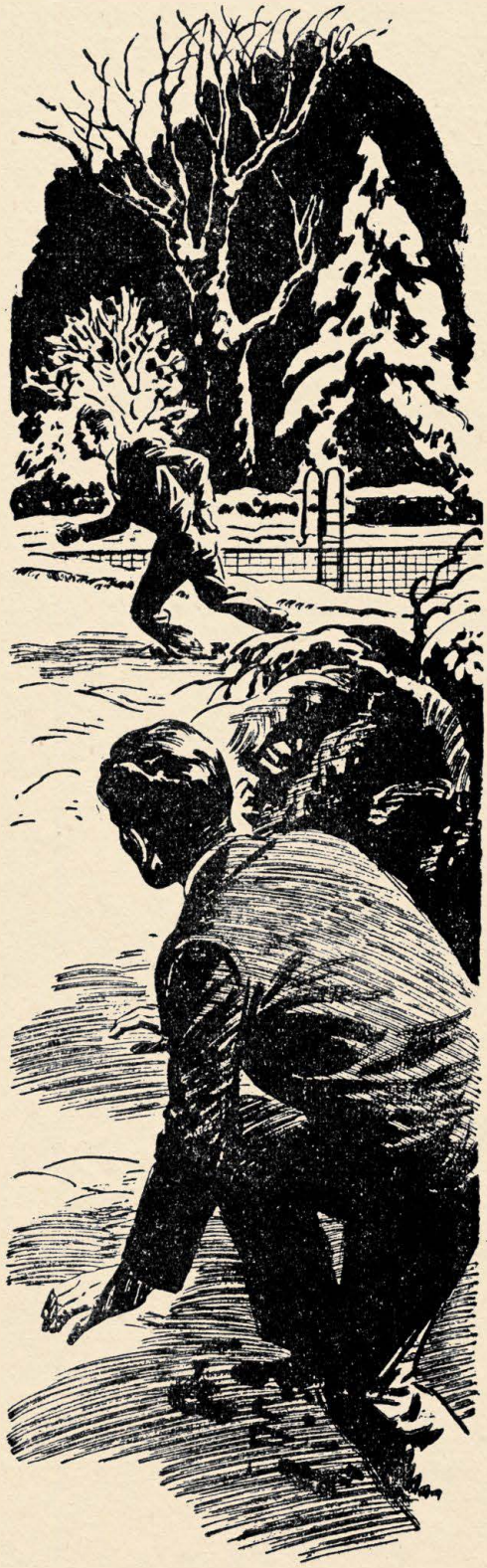
She let out a little attempt at a laugh. "Yes. He's told me—what to say and what not to say. It *was* a shock. Can I see him, Jeff? I care a lot about him in spite of what they say."

"Better you don't, for a while. He's in good hands."

"Yes. Walter's a good egg, Jeff. The only sane person in the place if you ask me."

She went over slowly to sit down on the arm of a chair. Staring at the floor, she said in a muffled voice:

"Matt—ugh! Acting like a dirty little



Streaking off towards the swimming pool, I saw a running figure (Chap. XI)

shyster. All he could say was, 'Now you mustn't answer any questions.' About his own father. Jeff, will you let me ask *you* a question?"

"Naturally. If I can answer it."

"Well, then." She seemed to be straining forward. "Well, then—did he do it himself—I mean, did he try to—commit—suicide?"

"I don't think so Jinny."

She said in a whisper: "I knew something was going to happen. Every time I come into the house I'm in a cold sweat, expecting it. And when Matt was talking I suddenly thought—

"Listen, Jinny. You've got to brace up."

"You'd brood too ," she said viciously, "if you had to live in this place long. Oh, well!"

She drew a long breath, kicked off her overshoes, slipped out of the coat and tossed her scarf over the back of the chair.

"After all, I haven't even said howdy, have I? And all these years. Give me a cigarette. You look a lot older."

"So do you. And beautiful."

A pause. She was taking a cigarette from my case and she looked up steadily. Watching the reflective green eyes, I felt somehow I had always been wanting to talk to Jinny Quayle. She was at once a stranger and an old friend. The tingle of stimulation with a new, eager girl—the druglike charm of relaxing with an old friend

"Penny?" she said.

I dragged my thoughts back. "It's this place. The way people have been acting tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what do you know about 'something white,' which runs along pantry shelves or window ledges?"

SHE gasped. Then she began to laugh, hysterically.

"So it's out! The lurid secret's out!"

"You *know about* it, Jinny?"

"Know about it? Well, I ought to. It started all the trouble." She glared at me. "It's given Mother melancholia, so badly she hardly ever speaks, and made Father a wild man. It's—"

"But what is it?"

"I don't know. Father say it's a white marble hand. At least," she amended, speaking fast, "I know he *thinks* that's what it is. But he never mentions it. It would be better if he did."

She saw me looking over at Caligula's statue. She nodded and went on fiercely:

"Yes. I know. It's crazy, isn't it? If he imagines he sees a white marble hand crawling about we're the ones who suffer."

"Jinny," I interrupted, "are you certain it's all imagination?"

She seemed to shrink within herself. Only her eyes were enormous.

"Because," I said, "it wasn't your father who told me. It was Mary. She saw it."

She spoke in a curious way and stared at the cigarette. "But that would make it much worse, wouldn't it?"

"Worse?"

"I mean, if he really has seen it, somebody is patently scaring him. I'd much rather believe Father was seeing things than that somebody here was . . ." She shuddered.

I said: "Now, look here. Your father is the most practical man in the world. Why should he be frightened by—"

"I don't know," she answered despondently.

"Well, then!"

She said in a flat voice: "There's no use arguing, Jeff. He's been like this ever since Tom went away."

"Suppose you tell me the whole thing."

"All right, all right." She flung her cigarette towards the fireplace. "Well, you know how we used to be. We did anything we liked and Father was too absorbed to pay much attention to us. Mother just smiled. Tom was the only one she cared about. 'Her baby' she'd always call him. It used to humiliate him to death.

"He had a nasty tongue," Jinny murmured thoughtfully. "Even when he was a kid the other kids used to hate him. But anyway! You went abroad. The rest of our crowd just vegetated." Her face looked bitter. She added: "But Tom had only one interest."

"He used to want to be an actor."

"That's it. And Father was determined on his studying law. Tom hated it. Even then it wouldn't have been so bad if Tom hadn't kept insulting Father's household gods. Booth and Barrett and Irving were all ranting hams. Shakespeare was drivel. And so on.

"Honestly, Jeff, I didn't know how bad it was until the last night. I was upstairs, and I heard the most awful row in the library. I think Dad hit Tom. All I know is that, when I came running downstairs, Tom rushed out of the library with blood coming out of his mouth. He was screaming, 'I'll kill the old devil!' Mother was crying and she threw her arms around his neck, and shrieked at Dad 'You'd strike a child, would you?' They were all screaming something frightful.

"Tom was quieted but he *did* leave. Mother was trying to hang to Tom's coattails when he went out the door. He said to Dad, 'Well, I told you. It's going to get you in the middle of the night.' Then he went out and we've never seen him since."

Jinny swallowed hard and fumbled for a cigarette.

"Dad was frantic. Mother just gave him a look and walked up to her room. That night she tried to kill herself with veronal but there wasn't enough."

"Where did Tom go?"

"We don't know. I knew he wouldn't come back. He was too hard. He never forgave anybody anything."

I held out a match for her cigarette. Over its flame she gave me an oblique glance.

"The rest sounds like a nightmare. In the middle of the night—"

"The same one?"

"Yes. We were late getting to bed because we had caught Mother—" She shuddered. "Anyhow, in the middle of the night we heard a scream. I thought it was Mother again but she was asleep. I ran out into the hall. I saw Dad in the middle of the hall in his nightshirt. Matt came out of his room, and Mary. By that time he said he was all right—Dad, I mean—but he was trembling."

I cut in: "Where had he been sleeping?"

"Downstairs, in the library. Jeff, I've got to tell you. All he could talk about was *'something white, with fingers,'* that had run across the library table in the moonlight."

THE emotion in that room was strung so high that nobody could have failed to notice it. Matt Quayle, entering, could not fail to understand.

"Jinny," he snapped "you've been talking."

She asked leisurely, "Business of yours?"

"I told you not to do it. I suppose you want this spread all over town?"

Jinny put her hand on my arm and advised: "Don't, Jeff. It would be like hitting a tub of butter."

Matt regarded us stupidly for a moment. Then he sat down and, grotesquely, began to sob.

"Don't pay any attention," he muttered jerkily. "I'm afraid I'm going to be the next one. I've just been talking to Twills. There was a load of arsenic in mother's milk-toast and if she'd eaten it all—"

Jinny looked embarrassed. "Oh, well," she said, "buck up, Matt."

She patted his back awkwardly.

"Do you know what Twills said to me?" Matt burst out. "He said, 'I'm in charge here for once. Your lives depend on me.' And he showed me some milky stuff in a test tube. He said, 'That's arsenic,' he said, 'and I know who put it in the milk-toast. I know who put the hyo-something in the syphon.' You take charge and *do* something, Jeff!"

So Twills also suspected the syphon!

"Very well," I said. "Jinny was telling me something—about a change in the household after Tom left."

"There isn't much that's definite," Jinny explained. "Dad used to shut himself up in the library and drink and pace up and down. Mother began to get fits of moodiness. I thought it would blow over. The first intimation I had that there was a horrible change was one night when I was sitting with a chap named Dal under the library window, in the swing, smoking.

"All of a sudden Dad came out with the fiercest kind of expression in his eyes. He roared, 'Take that cigarette out of your mouth!' Then he pitched into Dal. He ordered me in the house. Then I got the first of the lectures. I had no respect for my parents or God or anything. Too much liberty had ruined my brother Tom.

"That was only the beginning. He had a fiendish row with Clarissa. He retired from the bench that autumn, to work on his book and keep an eye on us, he said."

"Say, listen!" Matt thrust forward a truculent jaw. "You're making him out—a—a tyrant. He wasn't, Jeff."

"Oh, I suppose he wasn't," Jinny shrugged. "Not according to his code anyhow. But it never bothered you, Matt. You were always the little white-haired boy."

"I never made a freak of myself, if that's what you mean," said Matt. "Like Tom. Or like that fool Englishman you were so crazy about."

"Oh, cut it *out!*" Jinny walked to the window.

Matt appealed to me.

"Fellow's name was Rossiter. He'd been kicked out of every job he ever had. Worked up at the Summit as a bellhop or something."

"He went away," cried Jinny, whirling. "Dad sent *him* away. They all go away. Except me."

"Nobody's stopping you," Matt pointed out.

"Oh, I admit it. I'm a Quayle. I'm spineless." Jinny closed her eyes. "I don't go away because I don't care. I'm afraid to strike out for myself. We'll all be here until Father—"

"Gets poisoned, for instance?" demanded Matt.

A voice from the doorway cried:

"What on earth is all this fuss about?"

The voice was drawling and petulant. Somehow you knew that it was the voice of a beauty whose charms have long since ceased to be fully appreciated, and knows it. Clarissa Quayle stood with her head thrown back and her eyebrows raised. It was an Entrance. It would have been comical had she not retained vestiges of her charm.

"What on earth!" she repeated.

She was stripping off long white gloves. Her glazed, incurious eyes moved over us.

"Listen, Clarissa," said Matt. She was obviously his favourite of them all. "It's—it's terrible but—somebody tried to poison Dad."

Then Mary ran in and both Mary and Matt began talking excitedly at once. Clarissa was obviously alarmed, yet she spoke in that same time:

"Poison Father! But that's dreadful, isn't it!"

"Oh, Lord!" said Jinny. Clarissa gave her a nasty look.

"So sorry if I've offended you, dear," she observed, with viciousness.

"Not at all," said Jinny.

"Let her alone!" growled Matt. He took Clarissa's hands with a kind of elephantine gentleness. "Now it's all right, dear. Walter pulled him through."

"Why, of course, Matt! He—he drank something by mistake, I suppose?"

Jinny replied clearly:

"It looks very much like attempted murder with a poison one doesn't take by mistake."

The word "murder" jarred. It was the first time one of the Quayles had used it and everyone flinched.

"Don't—say that, will you?" Matt rasped querulously.

"I don't feel any better about it than you do," responded Jinny in a monotonous voice. "But we've got to admit it. If this keeps on we'll all go crazy."

"If it was anybody," said Matt, "it was Joanna. Or somebody who sneaked in the house."

"Nonsense," said Jinny clearly.

Clarissa had remained motionless, her eyes wide. Now she blurted out an extraordinary thing, for which nobody was prepared.

"It wasn't—it wasn't the morphine, was it?" she asked.

Matt whirled on her. "What morphine?"

"Why—why," she stammered, "you said something that wasn't taken by mistake. I knew Walter had been giving Mother morphine to quiet her and naturally I thought he might have given Daddy some." She uttered a nervous laugh. "Oh, come, darling! You can't scare me. Why, the minute you began telling me about it I knew it *wasn't* serious."

Three poisons, Twills had said. And now, in addition to hyoscin and arsenic, we heard of morphine. Clarissa's explanation was a lie, of course. She was looking at us deprecatingly. Matt spoke with an effort.

"What do you mean," he said, "you knew it wasn't serious?"

"Why, I saw him! I saw Daddy standing at the window when I came in just now."

IV

CLARISSA'S forehead wrinkled angrily. She cried: "I saw him—really. It was dark in the room, but I could see him in the moonlight when I took the car to the garage."

"What window?"

"The surgery window."

"He must have got up," Mary wailed. "Oh, Matt, please go and see about it, *please!*"

Matt hurried out.

"You see, my dears," Clarissa remarked, "you can't scare me, no matter how hard you try. I knew there wasn't much wrong with him."

She stalked across the room and sat down.

"Do you know," she exclaimed, looking at me, "there's something familiar about your face.

I explained the familiarity.

"But of course!" Clarissa cried. "How *do* you do?" She smiled brightly and extended an arm with a curving gesture of the wrist. I restrained an impulse to bow over it. "How delightful to see you!"

Clarissa was interrupted by Dr. Twills, who came hurrying in with Matt at his elbow.

"We—oh, hello, dear," said the doctor, checking himself.

His wife took one look at his baggy suit and rumpled short hair.

"Oh—hello, Walter," she replied.

The doctor's face was sardonic as he went on:

"There must be some mistake about what you saw. Judge Quayle is asleep in my room. Are you sure you didn't see anybody else, my dear?"

Clarissa shrugged.

"I think, Walter, that I am acquainted with my own father."

"Wait a moment, please," the doctor said in a hard voice. "It seems to me it's about time for a showdown. Personally, I've put up with the parlor tricks around this house for just about long enough. If anybody can get any fun out of acting the fool with a white hand, all right! But—"

Everybody stiffened. Clarissa said with low-voiced fury: "Walter, if you have no better sense than to speak before strangers—"

"That's exactly why I'm speaking before a stranger, my dear," Twills told her coldly. "So that somebody will be able to look at it calmly. You'd rather pretend you don't know anything about it and have your father scared out of his wits."

Matt said heavily: "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes you do! This matter has got to be thrashed out now. If it were only a question of a person playing a joke —why, keep your attitude if you like and be damned to you. But this is *murder,* do you hear? They send you to the electric chair for it. If there's somebody like that among us we want to know it."

In the enormous silence Mary whispered:

"But what are we going to do?"

"Well, I think it's agreed that we don't want to call in the police?"

"Oh, my God, no!" exclaimed Matt.

"Very well. Then let's put it in the hands of a stranger, who will be unprejudiced. Mr. Marle, will you see what you can do with it?"

"You mean," Matt said heavily, "to be questioned as though we—"

"Yes."

"But I tell you, that *maid*—Joanna—!"

Twills regarded him with wrinkled brows. "She's been here only a couple of months. She came considerably after the marble hand got to work. Will you go ahead, Mr. Marle?"

[*Turn page*]

I LOOKED round at the circle of faces, all trying to appear unconcerned and yet, I thought, all shakily relieved that some expected catastrophe at last had happened.

"First," I said, "is there any arsenic in the house?"

"Oh, yes!" Mary cried. "Lots of it, Jeff. For the rats."

"Who bought it?"

"Well," said Twills, smiling, "I did. Mary asked me to."

"Where," I asked, "is it kept?"

"In the pantry. But nobody could get it by mistake. It has a big skull and crossbones on the tin, and 'poison' written on it."

"However, anybody could get at it deliberately?"

"If," Mary replied stiffly, "anybody wanted to, yes."

After that little outburst, everybody looked at everybody else.

"Well, I'm certain *I* didn't know there was any such dangerous junk lying around," Jinny observed.

"Who buys the household supplies?" I asked.

They all looked at Mary, who seemed again uncomfortable at being in the limelight.

"I do, Jeff. I order them from town and the delivery wagon brings them out. But since yesterday—"

"What about since yesterday?"

"Why, the delivery wagon from Sayles'—that's where we deal—has been out of order. Clarissa went in and brought them out."

Clarissa squashed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

"I got them, yes," she informed us. "Like a silly errand-girl! And I was all dressed to go out to tea."

"You went late in the afternoon?"

"Yes. So I could get there before the stores closed."

"Did you get this syphon?"

"Syphon?" She looked at me blankly. "Oh! You mean the soda-water? Yes, I remember, because I had to take a lot of empty ones back."

"You're sure it was this particular one you bought?"

"Yes, I suppose so. Wasn't it, Mary?"

Mary nodded. "Yes. As soon as you gave it to me I took it in and put it on the table here, because Papa had been wanting it and he won't drink anything without soda."

"Wait a minute, please!" I said. "You brought the syphon in here, Mary. Did he take a drink then?"

"Yes. I saw him pour it out and drink it. He seemed in an awfully good humor, and said he didn't know how he'd get along without me."

"And at what time was this?"

"It was about a quarter after five when Clarissa came back. I took the soda-water in right away, and stayed till about half-past five." She was pathetically eager to help.

The poison, then—if my surmise were correct—had been introduced into the syphon between half-past five and about eight o'clock, the time I arrived.

I continued: "Did he stay in the library after that?"

"No, he didn't," Matt answered. "I was coming home from the office about half-past five and I saw him go in the direction of the kitchen."

"He went to the cellar," supplemented Mary.

"To bring up a bottle of brandy?"

They all said they didn't know.

"Just one more thing, then. Would all of you mind telling me where you were between about half-past five and, say, eight o'clock?"

There was a chorus of protest. Then Matt, nodding profoundly, said: "That's all right. They always want to know it. You want me to begin?"

"Please."

"I got back from the office about five-thirty, went upstairs and looked in on Mother. After that I went to my room and washed up and had a look at the paper. The gong rang for supper at six o'clock."

"Just a minute, please. I understood Mary to tell me you were in the kitchen, and that you carried up your mother's supper-tray."

Matt snapped his fingers and laughed in a confused way. "Judas, that's *right!* Yes, I did go down, just before the supper-gong. The tray was prepared and I took it up."

"Did you pass anybody?"

"Nobody but Father. He lifted the cover and looked at what I was carrying."

"So you were the only one—"

Quite abruptly the significance of it entered Matt's mind. His eyes protruded. "I did not! You're trying to tell me I poisoned my mother and—"

I said: "Not at all! Did you stay while she ate?"

"No! I opened the door, and she was dozing. I didn't want to wake her, so I put down the tray on the table and left. I knew she wouldn't sleep long."

"Why, Matt!" Mary protested. "That nice hot milk-toast! You let it get cold!"

MATT turned to her and announced gently: "Listen, dear. Somebody went in that room while Mother was asleep and filled your nice hot milk-toast with arsenic. I don't see that it matters a damn whether it was hot or cold or medium, do you?"

"So anybody could have gone in there after you without waking your mother?"

"Uh-huh. We didn't start to eat for ten minutes or so because Jinny was out. Where were you, Mary?"

"Why, I went up to see Mother—quite a while after you'd taken the tray up. She'd just wakened up. I watched her start to eat, then came down to the dining-room. Jinny had just come in and Clarissa was there, so we started to eat."

"I also," interposed Dr. Twills smoothly, "was there."

Mary jumped. "Why, of course, Walter! You were late getting there."

"I was in my office, working all afternoon. That was when I discovered—never mind. The rest of you?"

"I've already told you I went after the groceries," answered Clarissa. "After I came back Jinny borrowed the car to go into town. I went upstairs and lay down. I didn't leave my room until I came down to the dining-room."

"I went to the lending library to get a book," Jinny said.

Dr. Twills said: "Let me tell the rest of it. After dinner the judge went to his study. The hyoscin had been put in before that time and the arsenic had been put in the milk-toast before that time. So I didn't think our subsequent movements count for anything. Mrs. Quayle was taken ill about seven-thirty."

"Does arsenic act so rapidly, Doctor?"

"The dose given *her* does," he responded. "It would have killed her if I hadn't suspected it and treated her for arsenic poisoning instead of peripheral neuritis."

"You knew about this?" demanded Jinny.

"Yes. What it amounts to is this—considering that the judge went to the library immediately after dinner, at about six-forty-five, we know that the hyoscin was put into the syphon at some time between five-thirty and six-forty-five. A little over an hour.

"What we want to know is *when* during that time the judge was out of the library, so that the—the person had access to it. Mary heard him go to the cellar at five-thirty and Matt saw him coming downstairs shortly after six—but did anybody see him in the meantime?"

I saw blankness on all their faces.

"We shall have to wait and ask him what happened during that half-hour," I said.

"The point being," murmured Twills, "that anybody had access to the library before we ate dinner."

"Except me," said Jinny. "I was in town."

"Except you then. Now, about the tray. In that ten-minute interval after Matt took up the tray and left it in Mrs. Quayle's room, anybody had access to it. Any of us."

Matt drew a deep breath.

"You're forgetting, Walter, that I came downstairs just after I'd left the tray on the table. And Father will testify to my being in the dining-room before we ate."

Jinny stood, hands on hips, watching her brother with eyes of amusement.

"What a lawyer! You were the one who carried the tray. You were the one with the real opportunity to put the poison in. So you say now, 'I must be innocent. I have a perfect alibi *after* the thing was done.' "

Matt was aghast and helpless.

"Do you think I'd poison my own mother?" he shouted.

"Well, do you think any of the rest of us would?"

"Wait a minute!" Dr. Twills shrilled. "Quiet!"

They moved back under the furious blinking of his eyes. The babble died. Twills was stern.

"That sort of business won't get you anywhere," he said. "This is a problem for Mr. Marle and me and we're going to solve it. That is, unless you want the police in."

"I'm sorry, Matt," Jinny muttered. "I didn't mean it. But, Walter, it's so ghastly!"

"Well," Twills mumbled, "your mother and father are safe. The nurse is with your mother, and your father's locked in the surgery. Now get this, all of you! You're going to bed. Mr. Marle and I will take care of this."

They protested. Clarissa was haughty and vehement. She said, "Walter you're positively too masterful!" ironically. But he just glared at her and she shut up.

Somehow, the room was cleared. It had been decided that I should stay the night, though I insisted on a couch in the library. It seemed that there would probably be little enough sleep that night anyway. . . .

DARKNESS, and things of darkness came to take possession of the house when the lights were extinguished. I do not know why I shivered, standing in the middle of the hallway, except that from minds that decay there may be some chemical exhalation which shrivels with dust and mould the furnishings that surround them.

Suddenly, over my shoulder, quick and sharp and rattling, there was a knock at the front door.

Twills popped out of the library, almost as though he had been expecting that knock. He opened the door and we saw a messenger-boy holding out a yellow envelope.

Twills scribbled on the receipt and gave the boy a dollar. After he had shut the door he beckoned me to the library.

"It's for Jinny," he announced, and coolly tore it open.

"Look here!" I said, "what are you doing?"

"Good reason, rest assured. H'm. That's what she did this afternoon when she said she went to town to get a book. She sent a telegram. Here's the answer. It says: 'Will come at once what do you mean all our troubles will be over in a few days has the old man given in all love.' It's signed 'Pat.'"

"Who's Pat?"

"Pat Rossiter. I'm going to take care of this myself." He took the yellow sheet and thrust it into the flames. "I was afraid the young fool was going to send a wire like that and I knew she'd get a crazy reply."

"Doctor," I said, "I still don't understand your mental processes. But go ahead."

Twills sat down, smiling obscurely, and took out a pipe, which he began to fill.

"There are points," he mused, "that I want to discuss. Or one point in particular. The strangest feature of the whole affair."

"That hand?"

"Nonsense! That's stage-play. But don't you see the oddest angle of all? Why, man, it's the attitude of the family. Families fight—they may be at swords' points. But in a real crisis they stick together. And that's precisely what this gang isn't doing."

"Remember," I pointed out, "that they've all been living in fear of an outburst. They know somebody is behind this white-marble-hand business, and, when the threatened break came, the family alliance had grown strained."

"Poisoning, though! Poisoning is different from play-acting with a hand. They might be willing to think that one of their number had tried to scare the old man—but hyoscin! No, no, Mr. Marle. When you understand why they're acting as they do, you'll have the whole truth."

"Do you know it now?"

He took a reflective draw at his pipe. "I think so. Tonight, maybe, somebody may see me voluntarily and tell me the truth. My door is always open."

"You've let the—person know you suspect?"

"Yes."

"Pretty dangerous, isn't it,"

Again he smiled. "I doubt it. Anyway, I'll take the risk." Yawning, he rose. "Got to turn in now."

He went over and took the syphon from the table.

"Well," I said, "look sharp tonight!"

"Oh—*that?*" He waved his hand. "I don't mind that. I was thinking about getting up in the morning. In Vienna, I used to be waked up by a grind-organ. The grinder would take off his cap and play that song out of *The Pink Lady,* because he knew I liked it."

He tried to whistle "Beautiful Lady." One eye, dreamily pleased, was cocked at the ceiling. "That's what I dream

about. Listening to the grind-organ. Well—can't stand here gassing all night, can I? G'night, Mr. Marle. Sleep well."

V

LEFT to myself, I lighted a cigarette and settled down before the fire. Yes, Twills would dream of that. Then why didn't he go? In some baffling manner it seemed to be connected with these events. Clarissa must be willing to preen her hats on the Ringstrasse.

A nostalgia for more gracious streets was stealing over me too in this cold house by the mountains. But I must not think of that.

I looked up at the portraits above the bookcases. There was Judge Quayle's father, in a high collar and string tie. There was Judge Quayle's mother, with a flat face and a lace cap like Queen Victoria. Beside them was another portrait which had always intrigued my interest, for I had heard legends of this Jane McGregor. She was a fierce old Scotswoman, a nurse who had become one of the family when the judge's parents lived here. She had ruled tyrannically.

Jane McGregor was reputed to have known more terrifying ghost stories than any woman in western Pennsylvania. Not a pleasant person to have been Judge Quayle's nurse and to have ruled him even after his marriage.

Jane had a half-cracked brother who had made that statue of Caligula. He had ambitions of being a sculptor, and Judge Quayle's father had indulged him. He had a studio in an abandoned smoke-house, where Jane used to shriek at him for making heathen images.

And then cracked Duncan stuck a feather in his hat, joined the Ringgold Cavalry and got a rifle ball through his heart at Antietam. So he became deified to Jane. She insisted on bringing Caligula into the parlor of the old stone house and he had remained the library of the new. Tom Quayle used to tell me how Jane McGregor had pictured Duncan's ghost, still at work on moonlight nights. Ghost stories—some queer strain—from the nurse to the father, then to Tom Quayle.

What was that noise?

I listened. There were the usual night-creakings. There was the wind. A brand stirred uneasily in the fireplace and fell. But it had sounded like slow, cautious, shuffling footfalls upstairs.

Was the crazy work to begin again? I went over to the library door, slid through into the hall and closed it again.

Then a creak. The hall was very cold. Somebody *was* shuffling upstairs. I waited and the shuffling upstairs ceased. A door clicked shut somewhere.

It was insane to suppose that the poisoner would be up to any tricks this night. I would go back to the library, leave the door open and the lights on and keep the radio playing softly. Anybody would be mad to venture out with somebody on watch all night.

The library was dim, washed only by that weird yellow-blue light from the gas. It threw a big shadow of Caligula on the farther wall. I drew up a chair beside the radio and sat down facing that statue. It was not pleasant to think of its arm extended behind me.

The radio stirred with faint music, far from this bleak house by the mountains.

"To thee, beautiful lady, I raise my eyes—"

By what caprice was the radio thinly swelling that song of which Twills had spoken?

* * * * *

"Jeff!" said the voice of Mary Quayle.

I did not know that I had been asleep. I started up to a cold room. Murky daylight was in the library.

"But why on earth," she was saying, "didn't you go to *bed?* Come out and have some coffee."

"Aren't you up early?" I asked.

"Oh, I've been up all night," she explained. "Sitting with Mother and the nurse. It's nearly eight o'clock." She looked haggard and weary though her eyes were bright.

Getting up stiffly, I said:

"Is everything—"

"All right? Oh, yes! Mother's much stronger. I was in to see Dad just a minute ago. He's still sleeping but his colour's all right and his pulse is normal. Come on!"

I CROSSED the hall to the dining-room. In the long and dusky dining-room, Jinny was seated at the table, staring moodily at a cup of coffee. She only said:

"It's so cold in this damn' place! Haven't you got the furnace on, Mary?"

"Joanna just fixed it up, dear," Mary answered soothingly. "Where is Matt?"

"Gone out for a walk. H'lo, Jeff. See anything last night?"

There was a sudden bang of footsteps on the front steps and the front door was thrown open. Matt appeared there.

He said: "Is Walter down yet?"

Mary shook her head.

"Well," Matt said, "the light's still burning in his room."

I felt a hot terror rising in my throat. "He might have turned it on to dress," I remarked.

"I knocked at his door when I came down," Jinny said slowly. "He didn't answer. I thought he was still asleep."

In a shrill voice Matt said:

"Come on upstairs, Jeff."

By the time we reached the top of the stairs we were almost at a run My knocking at the door rattled unanswered. I opened the door. Every light was burning brightly.

Matt called, "Walter!" but there was no answer in a quiet whose sinister suggestion was emphasized by the bright lights. Then, in the tilted mirror, I caught sight of a red-and-white-striped pajama leg.

Twills lay doubled up on the floor at the other side of the bed. When I touched the little figure in the red-and-white pajamas I found that it was cold.

This ghastly morning, up until the time the police arrived, remains in my memory as one of the worst times I have ever spent. Clarissa had hysterics. In her patronizing fashion I think she was as genuinely fond of her husband as it was possible for her to be fond of anyone—though she dramatized the thing until it was almost unbearable.

Mary was little better, though less voluble, and Matt kept wandering from room to room, appearing suddenly at doors, saying, "I'm sorry," and wandering out again.

That Twills had died of hyoscin poisoning I did not doubt from the first. The face was cyanosed, the pupils of the eyes dilated, and there were indications of convulsions preceding the coma in which he had died. He lay on the floor with his head partly under the bed.

The bedclothes were much crumpled. Among them lay a copy of the poems of Heinrich Heine. On the bedside table a lamp was still burning. Beside it stood a tin of tobacco and a glass ash-tray into which ashes had been spilled from a pipe.

It was clear that he had been reading and smoking in bed when the poison caught him. He had felt the poison overcoming him. He had made a desperate effort to get to the bathroom and he had been no more able to cry out than Judge Quayle had been.

There was only one receptacle from which poison could have been drunk. A tumbler, containing the dregs of a bromide, stood on the glass shelf in the bathroom. Beside it I saw a bottle containing white bromide powder, a smaller bottle of aromatic spirits of ammonia and a spoon with traces of the powder clinging to it. A large blue bottle of eyewash leaned against one of the faucets. Everything else was in its place.

Twills had come in here, put the syphon on the upper shelf of the closet (where it stood now) and undressed. He had gone into the bathroom, bathed his eyes with the lotion and mixed himself that bromide. Then—death.

NOTHING cried out a clue, nothing gave a lead. One fact alone was manifest. It was physically possible for this death to be suicide. It might be argued that Twills had attempted to kill the judge and Mrs. Quale, that he had the poison and knew how to use it and, failing, had killed himself.

It might even be said that a belated attack of remorse caused him to save the judge's life after he had poisoned the syphon. Then despair and the hyoscin cup for himself. But this, in the whole history of crime, has never been the way of poisoners.

Nevertheless, it offered a plausible enough way out of scandal for the family, if only they had possessed sense enough to realize it. But, as usual, the very thing they wanted to avoid was the very thing they blundered into.

Before I knew where she was, Mary had run wildly to the telephone and called their old family physician, Dr. Reed, who was also, unfortunately, the county coroner. She had blurted out something about "murder," and "you

must get the police," before Matt yanked the phone out of her hands.

I was still upstairs when I heard the front doorbell ring and I hurried down to see Matt admitting Dr. Reed and the county detective.

I knew he was more than ordinarily shrewd.

It is this official's business, generally, to make a dignified show of maintaining the public peace. Joe Sargent, who wore the badge now, was a hearty, well-meaning soul with a conscience. Also, he was intelligent. Dr. Reed was small, wearing whiskers and glasses, and he barked like a terrier.

The four of us went into the library. Matt, faced with the situation at last, was surprisingly calm. He urged on them that an accident had occurred but nothing more.

Dr Reed said, "Bosh! Don't try any such song and dance on me, young man. I know your father too well and I know you too well. Who's sick or who's dead or what is it?"

"You see, Mr. Quayle," Sargent interposed, "we only want to help. Doc tells me your sister was a little upset, but I thought I'd come on out just in case—eh?"

Matt looked from one to the other. "I guess," he muttered, "it'll have to come out. Oh, go on, Jeff! You tell them!"

When I began my story Sargent's big wrinkled face wore an expression of mild attention and the doctor looked impatient. As I continued the county detective began nervously to jingle coins in his pocket.

It sounded incredible as I was well aware.

The doctor snorted at the conslusion. He started to say, "Stuff and—" but looked from Matt's face to mine and was suddenly silent.

"You might as well go up and look at him," I said. "It's possible, even probable, that he committed suicide." Dr. Reed pursed his lips. "If so, Doctor, I think you're an old enough friend of the family to spare them any unpleasantness."

"H'm," said the doctor. "Hyoscin. By God!"

When they had gone Jinny came in and sat down with her back to us. We were all trembling.

Presently there was a noise of steps descending the stairs and Reed came in hurriedly with Sargent following at a slower pace.

"Tell them what we thought," said Reed.

"It's this way," Sargent explained. "We're not a bit satisfied, Doc and I. Now, I know the judge and I respect him and I want to help all I can. So you can give it out as suicide if you want to. But it won't go down as that, I'm afraid. I'm afraid I'll have to ask you all a lot of questions."

"I suppose," observed Matt, "you'll want to know where we were last night. Well, I never left my room after I'd gone upstairs. We all went up together, didn't we, Jinny?"

VI

JINNY looked at Matt curiously. In a monotonous voice she replied:

"Yes, Matt. You were very exemplary. You went right into your room and closed the door. I saw you."

"Both your rooms are on the second floor, are they?"

"Matt's is," Jinny answered in the same indifferent voice. "Right opposite Mother's. Mine is on the third floor in the tower."

Sargent inquired: "Was Mrs. Quayle's door open?"

"Yes, it was!" said Matt. "And the nurse was sitting so she could look out in the hall and she'll tell you I didn't leave."

"And, Miss Quayle, how do you get up to the third floor?"

"Little staircase. It's beside the door to Matt's room."

"Then it can be seen from Mrs. Quayle's room?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't leave your room?"

"Yes, I did. Twice."

Her indifference seemed to rouse him.

"When did you do that, Miss Quayle?"

"Why, the first time was just after I'd gone to my room. I remember—" She paused. "It's so funny!" she cried. "They always go downstairs for a book in the detective stories. And that's just what I did. Clarissa had taken my *Aphrodite*—pinched it before I was halfway through. I knew I couldn't sleep so I went down after it."

"Clarissa—that is Mrs. Twills"

"That's right, Mr. Sargent." Matt nodded.

Sargent looked sternly upon Jinny. "And Mrs. Twills' room connects with the doctor's by way of that bath. H'm, I see. How long did you stay there?"

"Only a few minute."

"Had Dr. Twills come upstairs yet?"

"No."

"Where was Mrs. Twills when you left?"

Jinny stared straight across at the window and did not reply.

"Pardon me, Miss Quayle." Sargent raised his voice slightly. "I asked you —where was she when you left?"

Jinny said in a low voice:

"She was mixing herself a bromide in the bathroom."

"H'm," said Sargeant. The breath whistled through his nostrils. "You mean—for herself?"

"Naturally."

The county detective's voice was unnaturally loud. "Was she mixing it when you went in?"

"No. It was when I was just about to leave. She was still talking to me."

"But did you see her drink it?"

"No—I tell you I was just leaving."

Sargent ran a hand through his grey pompadour. "Wait now! Miss Quayle, are you sure it was the same bottle Dr. Twills used?"

"I don't know. I haven't even looked in the room." Jinny shuddered. "But there's only one bromide-bottle there, as far as I know."

"And it didnt' affect *her,*" Sargent mused.

"That—that's crazy!" Matt suddenly boomed out.

"You people," I said, "seem to be very much put out because Clarissa wasn't poisoned. Why not ask her?"

"Everything in order now," muttered Sargent, scowling. "Oh, yes. I almost forgot. Miss Quayle, you said you came down from your room twice last night. When was the second time?"

Jinny raised her head in a rather dazed fashion.

"That was around one o'clock." She hesitated. "I was a little afraid to go down because I had turned off the light in the second-floor hall when I left Clarissa and it was dark."

"Why did you go down?"

"There is no bathroom on the third floor."

Sargent looked a little discomfited. "Oh! Is the bath between Mrs. Twills' and the doctor's rooms the only one in the house?"

"Naturally not. There is one at the rear of the hall and one between mother and father's rooms."

"Did the nurse hear or see you at this time?"

"I don't know. Probably." She lifted her shoulders. "Every board in the hall squeaks."

This, then, must have been what I had heard last night.

"I see. Had Dr. Twills come upstairs yet?"

"Yes, I think he had. There was a light through the transom of his door and it had been dark before. And I heard somebody talking in the room, not very loud."

"Somebody talking!" repeated Sargent. "H'm! That sounds important, Miss Quayle. Who was it?"

"I couldn't tell. I didn't catch any words."

Dr. Reed bustled in again.

"Well!" he said. "The judge is awake. He'll talk to us before long. That fellow Twills knew his business. H'mf. Damned shame. Virginia! Suppose you run out to the kitchen and get the judge something to eat. Chicken soup if you've got any—but make it with water, not milk. A little weak tea."

SARGENT was obviously bursting with his news. But he teetered back and forth, frowning, until Jinny had left. Then he recounted it with the modest air of one who has made great discoveries, and wishes to deprecate them.

"Don't like this a little bit," Reed growled. "Where is Mrs. Twills now?"

"In bed in Jinny's room," Matt volunteered. "She wouldn't stay in her own. Mary's with her."

"Let's go up and see her. Matt, you stay here." He looked me over and added: "Maybe you'd like to come along, Mr. Marle? Help us some."

The three of us went out into the hall. Reed carefully closed the door to the library.

"Now then," he said, "straight out! Who's doing all this? Have you any idea?"

I shook my head. "But Mr. Sargent's original idea seems to be right. The poison must have been put into the bromide-bottle early last night, and not after the members of the household had gone to bed. If Clarissa had gone to bed as soon as she went upstairs somebody might have gone into the bathroom and done the work unobserved. But, according to Jinny, she didn't."

"But she was mixing that bromide!" interrupted Sargent.

"Well, we've just got to ask her," the doctor said impatiently. "Look here. What strikes you right away about this business? I'll tell you. It's the hit-or-miss methods of whoever it is. It looks as though this fellow is taking a crack at everybody in the house. Or else—" He paused.

"Suicide! That's the only other explanation. H'm. Mrs. Twills drinks a bromide—or mixes one anyway—and she's all right. Her husband drinks out of the same bottle and dies. Suicide. How about letting it go at that, Joe?"

I looked at the little doctor in some surprise. Obviously his brief conversation with the judge had changed his attitude if not his mind. Earlier, Sargent would in all likelihood have assented. But something was revolving in Sargent's brain.

"We'll see," he promised. "Let's go and talk to Mrs. Twills."

The third floor was reached by a narrow enclosed staircase going up between Clarissa's room and Matt's room. There were several finished rooms in the tower. Reed knocked at Clarissa's door.

The tower room was octagonal, with narrow windows on every side except that by which we entered. Under the windows were low bookcases painted white. A couple of good etchings hung on blue walls and the furniture was wicker, covered with chintz. A gas fire was burning and Mary Quayle sat huddled before the low grate. Propped up in a brass bed Clarissa stared at us. A couple of tears trickled down plump cheeks.

"Dr. Reed!" she cried. "I don't need you. I'm all right."

The doctor went over and took her hand.

"Hah!" he said. "Feel better now? Ah, that's good. You know how I feel, my dear. You're strong enough to talk, aren't you? Want you to meet Mr. Sargent. He's the county detective, and—"

Clarissa threw out an arm. "That's dreadful! Oh, Doctor, I won't see any detective!"

"Bosh!" said the doctor genially. "Not going to hurt you, my dear."

Sargent had a soft heart. He had come up here grimly determined to be the great detective. I think he had more than half suspected Clarissa of poisoning her husband. Now he mumbled something to the effect that they didn't *need* to question Mrs. Twills now.

"Bosh!" chirped the doctor. "I'll do it myself, then."

"No!" Sargent interposed hurriedly. "If it's got to be done I'll attend to it. You see, Mrs. Twills, I won't be hard on you. Honest!"

Clarissa's terror of him was obviously fading.

"You know, ma'am," said Sargent, "how your husband came to—pass on?"

"No. I know they poisoned him. That's all."

"Mrs. Twills, suppose you just tell us everything that happened from the time you went to your room last night until this morning."

"Very well. If you wish it. I saw Walter when he came upstairs—"

"Before that, my dear!" put in the doctor. "What happened before that?"

"Oh, please!" She opened her eyes, and looked appealingly at the detective. "I don't know what you mean!"

"Just tell us everything, ma'am. Start at the time you went upstairs. You had a talk with Miss Quayle—the little one. Didn't you?"

FROM piteousness, Clarissa's eyes took on a hard, suspicious glaze.

"Jinny?" she demanded. "Has that little devil been saying anything against—"

"It was about a book," said the doctor.

"Oh," said Clarissa, letting her eyelids droop. "I do not understand what her fondness for erotic literature has to do with this but if she *must* mention books of that sort even when her own father and mother and brother-in-law—" She shrugged.

Sargent was still patient. "That wasn't the point, Mrs. Twills. Miss

Quayle came down to see you. What happened then?"

"Why, we talked, that's all," said Clarissa. "What on earth has this to do with my husband?"

"When did she leave?"

"I don't know. She didn't stay long."

"What happened then?"

"I knew, Mr. Sargent, how utterly impossible it was for me to sleep." She was clenching her hands and staring at us earnestly. "If you could only *conceive* of the torture! Then I remembered poor Walter's bromides."

"Was he accustomed to taking them, Mrs. Twill?"

"Almost every night. He was so high-strung, and nervous! Poor Walter! He didn't like it here, Mr. Sargent."

"Go on, Mrs. Twills!" urged Sargent. "You remember the bromides. Then what?"

"I thought one would ease me, so—"

"So you took a bromide?"

She caught the strange expression in his voice, and drew herself up to look at him suddenly. "Why, no, Mr. Sargent, I didn't. I mixed one. And then I couldn't remember how much you put into the glass. I was afraid I might have put too much, so I poured it out in the wash-bowl. But why on earth do you want to know all this?"

My heart was beating heavily. Death had brushed past Clarissa as it had brushed past me.

She cried, "Oh, my God, it wasn't the bromide, was it?"

Dr. Reed strode forward and seized her wrist. It took some time to quiet her down. At length she leaned back among the pillows.

"I see now why you asked me. I—well, let me go on. I thought I would wait for Walter to come up, and ask him to mix the bromide for me. So I left the light on in the bathroom and my door open."

"Nobody could have got in and poisoned the bottle then?" demanded Reed.

"Oh, no! Walter came upstairs. He was astonished to see me up. I told him and he laughed and said, 'That won't make you sleep. I'll get you something.' He went into his room and got me some sort of pill. He sat down by my bed and said, 'Don't be afraid. Go to sleep. I'll sit here for a while.' Well, gradually I dozed off. He was sitting there making some marks in a book and he seemed worried. That was the last I saw of him."

Making some marks in a book! Was it, then, Heine's poems, the book he had been reading before his death? A suicide note? Or an outline of his theories on this case?

"H'm," Reed muttered. "Worried, hey? Now don't you think, seriously, my dear, that he might have—eh?"

"Oh, *no*. You didn't know Walter, or you wouldn't even think that!" Tears had gathered in her eyes again. "As good as he was to everybody, and as hateful as—we've been—oh, no! Why, he wanted us to go away from here. But I knew we had to stay, because he was practically supporting the whole lot of us!"

In a scared way she glanced across at Mary.

"What's that?" said Sargent. "Supporting the family, you say? I thought the judge—"

MARY came bristling out of her chair then in a sort of dry fury.

"Clarissa," she said, "I hope you live to regret what you've just said!" She whirled on the rest of us. "Isn't it enough, with poor papa suffering the way he is?"

"You're not going to run down Walter," Clarissa informed her coldly. "He'll get credit for what he's done, even if he is dead. I'll tell them what everybody in the house knows."

"Clarissa Quayle, I hope God will strike you dead!"

Mary stalked out of the room, banging the door. She was so furious, so sincere, that she spoke exactly in the style of the old-time melodrama. Then Clarissa began to blubber.

"I'm just as proud as she is. But I won't have her saying things about Walter, now that he's dead and gone. Everybody knows it except maybe Mother. Father *was* wealthy. But he lost all his money in coal and Walter's been supporting us all and we were to pretend we didn't know anything about it and believe it was Father's money. Now that Walter's dead they shan't talk like that about him!"

"L-let's get out of here," said the county detective, mopping his forehead.

Even Reed was ill at ease. "All right,"

he growled. "Clarissa! Shut up, will you? We'll take care of everything."

We made clumsy farewells, and left her sniffling into a pillow.

So that was why Twills could never have his dream? They had made him a nonentity in his own house, had his money and his skill and his poisons and then, one windy morning, they had killed him.

"Poor little devil," the doctor growled.

We tramped in silence down the creaking stairs.

"Now, then," said Reed when we stood again in the dead man's room, "there's a lot to be done. We'll have the body taken in for an autopsy. We can't swear even yet that he died from hyoscin poisoning. Everything's guesswork so far."

They had laid Twills' body on the bed and covered it with a sheet. On the table lay that volume of Heine's poems.

"Doc," said the county detective, "I'm getting farther away from the suicide idea every minute. According to Mr. Marle this fellow had some idea of what was going on. And Mrs. Twills said he was writing in a book before he died. Is that the book?"

He pointed at the Heine. Reed brushed past him and opened the book. We looked over his shoulder as he ruffled the pages. On the flyleaf there was writing.

Twills had been musing. His pencil had run aimlessly, then he had drawn a number of thick "O's" and some crude figures. Next appeared the date of last night. He had written "Questions I must Answer." Just below it the handwriting became firm.

Am I sure I know poisoner?
What was burned in the fireplace, and why? (O.K.)
Could personality have made such impression? Medically possible? Psychologically? (Yes. See Lambert, Grafenstein.)
Was it hope of money or growing canker?
What about $C_{17}H_{19}NO_3 + H_2O$? Influence?

The pencil trailed off, drew aimless lines, and then:

To hell with it—
Ship me somewhere east of Suez
. . . . . Helen, thy beauty is to me
Clarissa Twills, Walter Willesden Twills, Jr.
12/10/31.

VII

SARGENT raised a puzzled face, and automatically looked at the sheet where Twills lay. "Am I sure I know poisoner?" That, in the dead man's own hand, disposed of suicide. But more revealing yet were those idle lines scribbled at the end. I could imagine Twills sitting beside the bed of his wife, and brooding over a devilish problem.

"To hell with it," said his rambling pencil. "Let me drift in warmer climes, where there are no worries. The road to Mandalay, a symbol for those irkingly confined. But no, I can't. She's beautiful—I love her—my wife. Helen, queen of the wine-dark sea. 'Walter Willesden Twills, Jr.' If I only had a son!"

From a great distance drifted the county detective's voice.

"This wasn't suicide. That's clear."

"I suppose so," Reed said gloomily. He put down the book with an irritated gesture. "Well, I warn you, Joe, you'll have a job on your hands. What does all that gibberish mean, anyway?"

For some reason, what he read seemed to have upset the coroner more than he was willing to admit.

"What was burned in the fireplace? H'mf. Do you know anything about this, Mr. Marle?"

"Nothing," I said. I caught myself in time. There was no use in dragging in more complications.

"What about that C-seventeen something, Doc?" asked Sargent. "Here it is. C-seventeen H-nineteen NO-three plus H-two-O. Looks like a chemical formula."

"It is," said the doctor. "It's the formula for morphine. Isn't there anything but dope in this house?" He broke off in exasperation.

"Morphine? But that isn't the same stuff—"

"No, no. Hyoscin. And it was arsenic they were giving Mrs. Quayle. Morphine hasn't been used to poison anybody."

"Doc," Sargent said "you're not holding out on us, are you?"

"Holding out on you?" yelped Reed. "Joe Sargent, you've got a nerve! Think I don't know my business. Eh?"

"I didn't say that, Doc. I only asked—"

"You would. Listen. Here's your

last chance, Joe. If you dig into this thing, I'm telling you, you may dig up more than you can handle."

"Well, Doc, that's my business. Let's go down and talk to the judge."

Reed stared at him for a moment, then nodded curtly. "All right. Wait! Does Mrs. Quayle know?" he asked me.

"I don't think so. There was a terrific row this morning but I think she was in a stupor."

Miss Herries, the nurse, confirmed this when we knocked at Mrs. Quayle's door.

"I'd better look in on her," said Reed. "Don't worry. I won't say anything. She'll think I've been called in to help Twills."

When he had slipped into the room and closed the door Sargent said:

"Miss Herries, you were up all night, weren't you?"

"Of course. Why?"

"I just wondered if you heard anything—a fall or a cry from the direction of Dr. Twills' room?"

The nurse hesitated, then answered:

"I didn't hear any fall or cry, Mr. Sargent. But there was something—I wonder whether I ought to mention it."

"Go on, please!"

"I heard someone laughing," said Miss Herries.

Perhaps it was the matter-of-fact way she spoke but my flesh shrank in a crawling chill. With her white costume and expressionless face the nurse looked horribly like Caligula's statue.

"When did you hear it?" Sargent asked.

"It was at precisely five minutes past three," she replied. "I know because I intended to administer ether hypodermically at three-fifteen. I had sent Miss Mary Quayle downstairs to sterilize the needle and the door was partly open. That was when I heard someone laughing. It wasn't a pleasant sound. I supposed it was somebody talking in his sleep, so I shut the door."

I fancied that laughter, bubbling up in a quiet house. Perhaps the poisoner had come to gloat.

"Did you see anybody?" Sargent inquired.

"No."

"Or hear anything?"

"I may have heard footsteps," the nurse admitted. "But I couldn't swear to it."

"Three o'clock. That," Sargent said, "was about the time Dr. Twills died."

Dr. Reed rejoined us, nodding his satisfaction at the condition of the patient. The nurse went rustling back to the sick-room and we continued on downstairs.

Matt joined us when we went to the surgery. Judge Quayle sat in an easy chair, a blanket round his shoulders and a pillow behind his head, holding a cup of chicken-broth to his lips. He was unshaven, gaunt. Mary, standing behind his chair, retreated to the other side of the room when we entered.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he rasped.

"You be careful, Papa!" said Mary, looking at us malevolently. "They've been driving us all crazy and I won't have you upset!"

The judge turned in a lordly way.

"Go out, Mary. Leave me." Go!"

HE glared after her as she hurried out. Then his wandering eye moved back to us.

"You must tell me everything, gentlemen. I know they tried to poison me. If I were stronger, by God, sir, I would strangle the truth out of somebody!"

"They killed Twills, Judge," said the doctor. "And they tried to kill Mrs. Quayle."

"Yes. I didn't believe that, Doctor. Walter told me so last night, just before I was—stricken. And now Walter is dead. I can't realize it."

"Judge," the coroner said casually, "who did it? Joe says he'll find out. Why not tell us?"

The judge stared at me. He spoke with sudden harshness. "You did not tell? No, no. You didn't know. But my family couldn't know it either."

"Looks like they knew everything, Judge," observed Sargent.

"Sir, when I want your opinions, I'll ask for them." He looked contemptuously at the county detective.

"Just the same they do," said the coroner. "Damn it, Matt Quayle, don't play Shakespeare in front of me! If you're afraid of somebody dressed up in a sheet, if you're afraid of this white marble hand—"

The judge stared.

"Who said anything about a—"

"White marble hand," repeated the coroner. "Can't you even say it? Why, just about the whole family, that's all."

The judge said hurriedly: "Then they're all in it. But I'll show them!"

He was breathing hard and I feared he might collapse again.

"Listen to me," Judge Quayle went on. "There has been murder here—yes, and attempted murder. I will spare no energies towards running down the person who did it. If you have any questions to ask me, gentlemen, I am ready. But understand me now. I will not have *that other subject* mentioned again."

It was time to interfere. I said:

"Yes, Judge, that other subject is off the track entirely. But there are a few things in connection with the poisonings Mr. Sargent would like to know."

He regarded me with cold courtesy. "Go ahead."

"I suppose you know what poison was used in the attack on you?"

"Yes. It was hyoscin hydrobromide. An unusual poison." He spoke without emotion. "Crippen used hyoscin. I believe it is almost the only case on record."

Reed glanced up sharply at this mention of the little Anglo-American physician who had killed his wife.

"Are you familiar with such things, sir?' '

"I am familiar with the literature of the subject. I frequently had talks with Dr. Twills on that subject."

"Did you ever discuss such matters before other people?"

"To my knowledge, never. Though our talk was never a secret."

"So that anybody could have overheard you?"

"It seems obvious that someone did. In point of fact he was explaining the properties of hyoscin to me not more than two weeks ago."

"Do you recall the circumstances?"

Judge Quayle seemed annoyed, but replied equably:

"As I remember it we were discussing the Marquise de Brinvilliers."

"Excuse me, Judge," broke in Sargent, "but who was he?"

Judge Quayle showed a sour impatience.

"The Marquise de Brinvilliers, Mr. Sargent," he said, "was probably the most celebrated poisoner of the seventeenth century, along with her paramour, St.-Croix. That naturally led to a discussion of the Borgia and Dr. Twills was ridiculing the magical qualities ascribed to the poisons they are said to have brewed. He informed me that the Borgia in all probability used nothing but white arsenic, the most painful but least dangerous of all toxics."

Judge Quayle was the jurist now, speaking coldly and without haste.

"He also informed me that, if he were to employ an effective toxic agent, he would use conine or hyoscin. Conine is the active principle of hemlock. Its crystals are odourless, almost tasteless and soluble in water but it is slower in taking effect than hyoscin. Dr. Twills showed me the hyoscin he possessed." Slowly the judge inclined his head. "Does that answer your question, Mr. Marle?"

"Admirably, sir," I said.

Sargent observed suddenly: "You had a mighty lucky escape, Judge."

A warning jabbed me. These two had antagonized each other. Sargent resented the judge's contempt and, the more he showed his resentment, the more contemptuous the judge became.

"I dare say," he said curtly.

I said: "I believe you told us, sir, that there was nobody else in the room when this conversation took place."

"That is not what I said. I said merely that I was not in the habit of discussing these things in general conversation. I believe there was somebody here at one time during our talk—possibly before or after mention of the hyoscin had been made. My son Matthew came in."

A bleat came from behind us. Matt cried:

"I was only in here a second and you know it!'

"You will speak when you are spoken to, sir," said the judge.

MATT muttered sulkily: "Nobody said anything about hyoscin when *I* was here."

"Of course," I put in, "anybody could have overheard that conversation I suppose. The door to the hall was open?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Can you fix the date of that conversation, sir?"

"It was Friday, the twenty-eighth of November."

"Judge," said Sargent, "how do you happen to remember that so exactly?"

"It was my birthday, Mr. Sargent. If you were acquainted with my habits you would know that, except on special occasions, I always write in my library from six-thirty to ten. I ventured to consider this a special occasion."

I risked a shot.

"Isn't it ture, sir, that you're rather *relieved* at this attempt on your life?"

A smile now, but fierce eyes. "Not bad, young man! Yes, I am. If that is the best they can do—"

Sargent was determined to take over leadership.

"Judge," he said, "I've got to ask some questions. You keep talking about 'they' and you won't answer straight out. Do you suspect anybody?"

"I do not."

"Well then, does this mean anything to you?" The detective drew from his pocket the copy of Heine's poems. "Dr. Twills wrote this before he died. He had an idea. Will you please look at it?"

I thought the judge was a little hesitant as he stretched out his hand. He took the book and ran his eyes slowly down the flyleaf, sat impassively scanning the last writing of the man who had saved him.

"I can make nothing of it," he said.

As he handed the book back I felt a shock like a blow over the heart. For his sleeve had fallen aside and I saw that his lower arm was scored all over by the punctures of a hypodermic needle.

Our interview of the judge broke up at an impasse. It was past eleven o'clock and high time I was getting home.

"But you'd better come out here this afternoon," Reed said. "You can get them to talk."

Sargent was silent and dogged. It was plain that he was determined to carry through his investigation. His first step, he said, would be to make the Quayles go over everything they had told me the night before. He walked out under the porte-cochère with me.

"Maybe I'm not much good at this detective stuff," he remarked, "but I'm no dumber than the next one."

I did not like the look of his jaw, the determination in his eyes as I drove away.

When I returned at one-thirty in the afternoon the snow had ceased but a thin wind sent powder scurrying.

I ran the car through the iron gates, swung round the house towards the garage, which was part of the old carriage-house. But there was no place to shelter the car against freezing. I threw a rug over the hood, staring at the big shingled place with the cupola, the boarded windows and the crooked weather-vane. A decrepit door by which you entered the paddocks, where Judge Quayle had kept good trotters in the old days, swung and creaked open.

I heard, from the interior, a muffled splintering noise, a series of thuds and a crash. They were followed by an outburst of the most picturesque profanity I had ever heard.

I pulled the door open and peered inside. Grimy light filtered through a high window. Past a line of ghostly stalls a man sat on the floor, talking to a stairway. In one hand he held an ancient bucket, in the other what appeared to be a decomposed stocking. A carriage-rug hung across his shoulder.

"Excellent!" I said. "Why don't you get up?"

"Eh?" said the man, twisting his head round. "Oh, righto."

He sighed and began to haul himself to a rather surprising height, slapping dust from his coat with the stocking. A disreputable hat was stuck on the back of his head and from his lower lip dangled a burnt-out cigarette.

"Well," he said, contemplating bucket and stocking, "I got these anyhow."

"What the devil," I demanded, "were you doing up there?"

"Investigating a crime," he answered, with the utmost seriousness. "These are clues."

I CONTEMPLATED the bucket, the stocking and the lunatic.

"Clues?" I said. "What crime are you investigating?"

"Well," he admitted, "I really don't know. That's the difficulty."

"Oh!' I said with commendable restraint. "But don't you think it would assist your investigation somewhat if you knew what it was you were investigating?"

"This had paint in it," he confided,

Folding up the bucket. "Though of course it may not mean anything. The point is, what sort of paint was it? What I really need is some data about the snow."

"Look here," I said. "Who are you, anyhow?"

"It's all in the mind's eye," he assured me. "Chap in India showed me; Yogi fella. You close your eyes, concentrate on the truth and— Oh, I say! I'm sorry." He appeared to remember my question and looked contrite. "My name's Rossiter. I'm a detective."

Then I remembered. That telegram last night and Matt's talk of a loony Englishman. The stranger was about my own age with a sleepy, genial, homely face, rather fine eyes and a perpetual air of naïve interest. His lean height was wrapped in a nondescript coat of faded and dusty green and he wore a dingy tie—with Harrow colours. The colours of that famous public school hardly seemed to fit into the picture Matt had drawn.

"It's a theory of mine," he was continuing earnestly. "All in the mind's eye. You concentrate on the truth, you close your eyes and walk blindly forward. And what happens?"

"Why," I said, "you fall downstairs apparently."

"Righto!" he cried triumphantly and beamed on me. "You fall—boppo!—right into the center of truth. People don't understand the pure ether of your conversation, of course, and so it's difficult to hold jobs." He frowned. "But anyway I'd always wanted to be a detective. So, after I'd got the sack from every other job in New York, I became a detective."

"How?" I said.

"I went to the Police Commissioner," Rossiter said gloomily.

This was going a little too far, but Rossiter's face was serious.

"He made me one," the young man continued. "I'd show you my badge but I lost it somewhere. Got my papers though."

He produced papers and tobacco and regarded them proudly.

"Good American," he announced. "I roll my own. Chap in Mexico taught me. Watch."

He proceeded to construct the most ungodly cigarette ever beheld. It resembled an undersized cornucopia and flared out like a torch when he lighted it. Puffing at it with the utmost good humour he went on:

"I should have called at the house but I wanted to investigate here first and I didn't want to get chucked out. It's no good trying to be diplomatic. I can't do it. The old boy in there"—he gestured—regards me as pure poison." Suddenly he looked up in consternation. "Look here, you're not a Quayle, are you?"

"No. Just a friend of the family. You mean you haven't *heard*?"

"Heard what?"

"Listen," I said, "I'm a friend of the family and a good friend of Jinny Quayle, so don't think this is just inquisitiveness. But she sent you a telegram, didn't she, asking you to come on here and saying something about 'our troubles will soon be over'? Didn't she?"

"Yes. Rather! Why?"

"Dr. Twills was poisoned last night and an attempt was made on the lives of both Mrs.Quayle and the judge."

[*Turn page*]

"Oh, my God," Rossiter said. "Tell me."

VIII

BRIEFTLY I sketched an outline. When I had finished, Rossiter only trod on his cigarette.

"That's bad."

"She didn't get your wire. Twills burned it. I think Jinny had had some quarrel with her father and Twills was trying to protect her. I haven't mentioned it to anybody, not even to Jinny. She doesn't know you intended to come. I don't suppose you know the circumstances?"

"Decent of you. Look here—I mean to say, thanks. No, I don't."

He got up and began to pace with enormous strides. Momentarily his fogginess and Buddha grin had disappeared.

"Old man," he said, turning suddenly, "I'll tell you something. I know you think I'm potty. But I really am in the Detective Bureau, though I don't belong there, and the Police Commissioner really did give me the job. I can't tell you why. Jinny doesn't know it. It would have been a confession of failure, do you see?"

I didn't see but I nodded.

"Her letters have been pretty hysterical lately. When I got that telegram, why, naturally I hopped off immediately. Do you think you could tell her to come out and see me here? Without any of the others knowing?"

I nodded. All his seriousness disappeared. Again he sprawled his great length on the staircase. His thoughts seemed to be occupied with something else. I left him, went to the house and rang the bell. Sargent anewered. He looked depressed

"Come in," he invited in guarded tones, "and help me out."

"What's up?"

"I've got Doc's report. It was hyoscin, all right. He'd swallowed about a quarter of a grain. There was at least a grain in the bromide-bottle and traces in the glass he drank from. The syphon, the one Judge Quayle used, was loaded with it. Nearly two grains."

"Then there'll be an inquest?"

"Yes. But not for a couple of days. Doc's still hoping something will break to save the family trouble. Where are you going?"

"I've got to see Jinny," I said.

"Oh, the little one?" Sargent said. "She's been acting kind of funny. She shut herself up in the parlor and won't talk to anybody. She had a spat with the old one—Mary—and Mary called her a cold little vixen."

I made an evasive reply, hung up my coat and hat and went down to the parlor, just behind the library. They rarely used it. I opened the door on a room that was as cold as a graveyard, dim and ghostly white. In the embrasure of a high window, curled up on the seat, Jinny stared out at the mountains.

"Oh, it's you, Jeff! What on earth are you doing, standing there?"

"Admiring you," I said. "You're like something out of Lafcadio Hearn." I went over and sat down beside her. "Listen, Jinny. Rossiter's here."

She did not move or speak, but her eyes suddenly grew bright. Keeping my voice down, I explained everything. At the conclusion she was half laughing.

"That's exactly what he *would* do!" she said. "What do you think of him?"

"Good sort."

"Of course he is. But he talks such nonsense and you can imagine how he'd get along with Father and Matt. He says he's a great musician and once he was trying to show me how to make musical-glasses and he broke eleven of Mother's best goblets."

"Where did you meet him?"

She looked out at the trees with a little smile.

"He answered an advertisement for house detective at the Summit. Came clear from San Francisco to do it. I think he believed 'house detective' meant something like Scotland Yard. That's his firmest hallucination—that he's a great detective."

I pictured the earnest stranger falling downstairs and seriously talking nonsense—and I knew how impossible he was to fit into the Quayle household.

She rose hurriedly.

"I'll go on out now. I do want to see the old fool so much!'

I heard her footsteps hurrying down the hall and I was left in the dusty room, remembering all the questions I should have asked. Blessed are the lunatics, for it is they whom women love.

I WENT slowly to the library, where a frightened Slav girl stood waiting. Sargent sat behind the center table, his notebook ready. He glowered upon Joanna. She was a strong, heavy girl with braids of hair across the top of her head.

"Now then, Joanna," Sargent said sternly, "you know who I am, don't you?"

"Ya, I know you," she answered rapidly. "I got bru'ter Mike, he know you too. You put him in lockup for he make whisky. He no make whisky. I no make whisky either."

"Never mind that, Joanna. I want to ask you about something else."

"You ask me!" she challenged. "I tell you what you wan' know."

Sargent nodded. "Last night was your night out, wasn't it?""

"Ya."

"Where did you go?"

"I go home, like I do every night out. I good girl. I take eight-clock car, stay wit' my mud'er. I not come back till morning."

"Now, listen! Were—you—in—the—kitchen—here—all—day—yesterday?"

"Me? In kitchen?" she repeated, dully, "No. I make beds, dust, sweep—"

"Were you in the kitchen all afternoon?"

She thought hard. "Ya. After lunch. All time."

"Joanna, you know the tin of rat-poison in the pantry?"

"For kill rats? Ya, I know. Ya! I look for it yes' aft'noon. I hear more rats. It not there."

Sargent got excited.

"Are you sure about that, Joanna? The rat-poison wasn't there early in the afternoon?"

"Ya! I say, 'Miss Mary, what you do with white stuff for kill rats?' She say, 'You no bother for rats. You tend your cooking.' "

Sargent looked at me. "It was gone early in the afternoon," he said, "and it's still gone. Joanna, who was in the kitchen besides you that afternoon?"

"Nobody."

"And you're *sure* you didn't see anybody take the rat-poison?"

She flapped her arms. "If I see who take it—why I ask her who take it? Please, I got go now. I got pie—"

"Just a minute, Joanna." Sargent assumed a confidential air. "Listen. You know this family pretty well, don't you?"

"Oh, ya. I guess."

"Tell me—Joanna—how do they get along? They fight, eh?"

This was getting into the realm of gossip, and Joanna grew expansive. She lowered her voice.

"Oh, ya. All time they fight. Judge, he fight pretty one. They all have a big fight two, three, four week 'go."

"What was the big fight about?"

Joanna concentrated on "judge" and "pretty one." "Pretty one," I assumed, must mean Jinny.

"She like sit in parlor. Cold in there too. She like play piano. Sometime' Judge he go in—I see when I dust—he not speak loud. He say, 'Why you no play t'ings I like?' And maybe she play t'ings he like and he sit and look funny. I like t'em tunes. I sit on stairs and listen.

"She ask him somet'ing and they go argue. And first she try play again, then she get mad and he get mad too and she say, 'I will marry him! I *will*, when he has job.' And he say, 'But who he *is*,—you know? Then he get mad and say, 'Don' you talk to me!'—and she start bawl."

Sargent glanced over at me, his eyebrows raised.

"That's all right," I said. "Fellow she's in love with. Arrived today. He's a detective."

"A detective, eh? Where's he from?"

"He's an Englishman. And," I continued, "he's a special friend of the Police Commissioner in New York."

"Mmf!" Sargent grunted. He wanted nobody horning in, especially somebody who sounded impressive. I resolved to lie up hill and down dale.

"He's a little eccentric," I explained. "But sheer genius. That's why they've got him as a special investigator. And he never wants any credit, Mr. Sargent. He could give you a lot of help without apearing in the case at all."

Sargent was not displeased. "I didn't know Miss Quayle knew such people. Now, then, Joanna. Tell us about this 'big fight'."

"Was at din'r-table," she explained. "They not say much when I come in with plates."

"What was the fight about?"

"Was 'bout money, I t'ink. They talk 'bout somebody call Tom. And Judge

say soup too hot—make me take it back to kitchen and—"

SHE paused, frightened. Mary Quayle had come stalking in, her nose carried high like her shoulders.

"Joanna," she said coldly, "go back to the kitchen."

"It's all right, Joanna," the detective told her, with repressed anger. "Go ahead. Miss Quayle will answer the questions I was going to ask you."

"Well, I never!" cried Mary.

"Now, Miss Quayle," Sargent said. "You people don't have to answer questions yet. But if you do, I can save you a lot of trouble at the inquest."

Mary pulled herself up. "Goodness knows, Mr. Sargent, *I'm* not trying to interfere with you," she snapped. "But I won't have servants discussing our business in public."

"All right, Miss Quayle. Then suppose you tell me—what was this quarrel at the dinner-table about money and somebody called Tom."

"Well, if you've got to know *everything*, it was about my brother Tom."

"Yes?"

"He's a waster and a failure and he's driven Papa nearly insane. Then he had the nerve to write us and try to beg money. Mind you, the first line we'd heard from him in years! Jinny always sides with him and so did Clarissa, sometimes—and of course Mother, only she didn't dare stand up to Papa."

"And they were urging him to send Tom money?"

"Jinny was, yes. It wasn't a fight, really. That Joanna is a spiteful little—"

"Waite a minute, Miss Quayle! Did the judge refuse?"

"Matt certainly told Tom off!" Mary announced. "Matt sided with me and said let Tom go straight to the devil, where he'd always be headed. I said it would be shameful!"

Mary found it easy to be severe at a distance. But when she saw somebody in difficulties before her eyes—particularly sickness—she would kill herself with ministrations. She pitied a person only when the person was helpless.

"But that wasn't what I was asking you, Miss Quayle," Sargent said patiently. "I wanted to know whether the Judge refused to send Tom money."

"Oh! He just got up and left the table. He wouldn't discuss it."

And suddenly I saw why. He must have walked from the table, tightening his pride like a belt. He wouldn't send money because he had none to send.

"We were all upset and Mother was crying but we knew better than to cross Papa," Mary went on. "I'm not sure but I think maybe Walter did send the money anyway and signed Papa's name to a letter. Walter was soft like that."

At Sargent's elbow lay the yellow-bound Heine in which Twills had written those inexplicable statements. He picked it up.

"Mr. Marle," he said, "I've asked everybody here about the things the doctor wrote. And nobody has any idea what they mean." He looked sharply at Mary. "Are you *sure*, now, Miss Quayle, you don't know? 'Burned in the fireplace'—h'm."

"I've already told you I don't! Walter was probably just dreaming as usual."

Sargent opened the book. " 'Was it hope of money, or growing canker?' " he read slowly. "Whose money? Twills'? Do you know whether he made a will, Miss Quayle?"

"How on earth should I know?" demanded Mary, stiffening. "And if you're thinking about asking Papa I'm sure he wouldn't know either."

"All right, Miss Quayle. Thank you."

A remark of Joanna's had made me remember something Matt had told me. At the dinner during which this disturbance had taken place, Joanna said, the soup had been too hot, and the judge had ordered it sent to the kitchen for cooling.

And, according to Matt, it had been at dinner that "one of the girls" had told that Roman story of the poisoned water-cooler—which had been, in all likelihood, the murderer's inspiration. It seemed probable that the hot soup had suggested the story to somebody. Which one?

"I've got a statement from everybody," Sargent broke out suddenly. "But it doesn't help much. Trouble is, my hands are tied until we get a murder verdict. I'd kind of like to talk to this detective friend of your's."

"Did you learn anything new?"

"Only about the judge's movements," Sargent replied. "At half-past five, just after Clarissa brought home the sy-

phon, Mary took it to her father in here. The judge went down into the cellar. Nobody saw him until shortly after six when Matt met him on the front stairs.

"Well, the judge has a workshop in the front part of the cellar. For the last few days he's been making shelves for some preserves. So late yesterday afternoon he went down and worked for a little less than half an hour. Then he got a bottle of brandy, came up the back stairs, put the bottle in the library, went up to his room to wash his hands and met Matt when he was coming down.

"Matt was carrying up Mrs. Quayle's tray. You don't have to go through the kitchen in order to go down the cellar stairs. That's why nobody saw him during the time. You know the rest."

"Who's guilty?" I said.

"I don't know," Sargent muttered. He glanced at Caligula's statue in the corner by one window, where the light fell bluish across its side. "With one exception, I could make out a case against anybody. The only one I'm sure isn't guilty is Virginia. She was out of the house between five-thirty and six-ten. I—"

He paused, with a little jerk in his throat.

I was looking at Caligula's statue, its smirk visible in the blue-grey light. A moment before the rectangle of the window, framed in its draperies, had been empty. Now a hand was pressed against the pane.

Its fingers were flat, palm towards us, an unhealthy white. Then the fingers began to scratch and drum on the pane.

For a moment the hot fear in my throat prevented an outcry. Then terror was lost in a gust of relief and anger. Muffled but distinct, a familiar voice cried querulously:

"I say, open the window, won't you? I can't hang to the side of the house all afternoon!"

IX

I UNLOCKED the window, and pushed it up angrily. Up over the sill appeared Rossiter's face.

"It's quite all right," he assured me. "I was only trying to find out how much of the room I could see. I walked around a ledge here and I rather think I've broken some wires or something."

I explained, briefly but violently, what I thought of him and requested without gentleness that he come in and close the window.

"Do you mind," he said, "if I swing up to the roof and crawl about a bit?"

"Come *in* here, damn it!" I said.

"Oh, righto," he agreed sadly. There was a series of bangs and thumps, then he unfolded his great height on the floor as I slammed down the window. That ominous statement, "I rather think I've broken some wires or something," came back to me, and I went over to test the electric lights. The lights refused to work. He had probably blown out every fuse in the house.

Sargent, who had regained his composure, glared at Rossiter. It was scarcely an auspicious time to introduce my Great Detective but it had to be done. Sargent's suspicious gaze intimated that somebody was joking.

"Where is Jinny?" I asked.

Rossiter was removing his hat and green topcoat to display a grey worsted suit of good cut but in an appalling state of disrepair. His tie was skewered under one ear.

"She went up to pacify the old man," he said. "I don't want to get chucked out, you know." Then he beamed on Sargent. "Oh, I say! You'll want to see my credentials, won't you?"

He began taking things out of his pockets and found an ancient leather wallet, which he handed to Sargent. Then he sat down like a collapsing clothes-horse, and blinked.

"Why," said Sargent hesitating, "this seems to be a certificate signed by—well, it says 'High Commissioner, Metropolitan Police, New Scotland Yar—' "

"Oh, God!" said Rossiter. "Wrong place. Other flap. Got the thing?"

Turning over the wallet, after another bewildered glance, Sargent nodded. Rossiter relaxed with a sigh when the wallet was returned to him.

"Well," said Sargent, "of course, we're mighty glad, mighty pleased—"

"Not at all," said Rossiter absently. "Look here, Mr. Sargent, if *you're* satisfied—I mean to say, do you mind not mentioning it to the others? Thanks awfully. I should be very much obliged to you if you'd give me the facts in this affair."

Sargent lost a little of his dubiousness, sat down with his notebook and

began a painstaking recital. Rossiter stalked up and down the room, his jaw poked forward and on his face the rapt expression of an intoxicated crystal-gazer. He had long hair, of a dark grimy yellow, which kept flopping into his eyes. When all the evidence had been reviewed, he turned uncertainly.

"You didn't need to tell me much," he said. "You see, I know quite a lot already, probably more than you do yourselves. Jinny's letters—when a woman has something on her mind she always writes a long letter about something else and that's how you get to know." He drummed on the edge of the table. "But you made that suggestion about a will for instance."

"I've got to find out about that," said the county detective. "Do you think Twills made one?"

Rossiter looked at him vaguely. "Twills? Oh! I don't know. I wasn't thinking about Twills."

Sargent was staring at the empty fireplace and moving his head in a curious way.

"You act kind of crazy," he said flatly. "But I see something. I've been thinking about it all day and it scares me. Dr. Twills *did* make a will, I'll bet you my last dollar. There are fasteners for legal documents on the table. And the judge would have drawn it for him. 'What was burned in the fireplace, and why?' And then: 'Was it love of money?' "

"Wait a minute!" I said. "You don't know to whom Twills might have left his money."

"That's just it." Sargent nodded, and lifted cold eyes. "He mightn't have left it to the Quayles."

Rossiter woke up.

"I say!" He looked at us anxiously. "There's something very important we've been neglecting and we've got to do it now."

"What's that?" demanded Sargent.

"It's all in the mind's eye," he explained carefully. "Here—pencils and paper. Do you mind? Sit down and concentrate."

"Say!" protested Sargent, backing away.

I found a pencil in my hand and myself pushed down into a chair. One arm waving, Rossiter stood before us.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Well, go ahead," growled the county detective. "What do you want us to do?"

"Draw a picture," said Rossiter triumphantly.

"What?"

ROSSITER grew earnest. "Man, man, don't you perceive the profound psychological bearing it will have on the solution of this case when you draw a picture?"

"I'll be damned if I do," said the county detective. "What picture?"

"Any picture," said Rossiter.

The county detective snorted and flung down his pencil.

"But look here," I suggested, "what's the sense of this? I can't draw and I don't think Sargent can either."

'Oh! But that's the whole point. If you could draw I shouldn't be asking you—should I?"

Sargent's sense of humour was gone. There was a malevolent look in his eye. So I said:

"All right. Let's try it. I suppose this is a psychological test?"

"Lord, no!" said Rossiter. "All I know about these things is that they always come out the way the examiner wants them to, no matter how you answer the questions. No, no! This isn't a test. It's a clue."

Sargent blurted: "Shoot. I'll draw you some pictures. Was there anything in particular?"

Rossiter beamed on him. "Excellent. The only specification is that you do it rapidly—just rough sketches. Draw me a house and a man and a woman and a dog or anything else that occurs to you."

Sargent went to work with a sour expression and I applied myself solemnly to the task. I drew a very drunken-looking house with smoke coming out of the chimney, then a man whose face got all out of proportion, a woman with luxuriant hair like the excelsior out of a packing-case and a saw-horse dog.

Rossiter stood over us like a benevolent schoolmaster. When I was just adding large rabbit's ears to the dog I became aware of sounds in the hall. Dr. Reed came bustling in, followed by Jinny.

"I just dropped in," sniffed the coroner, "to tell you—what the devil are you people doing?"

"Sh-h-h!" Rossiter admonished. "They're drawing pictures."

Sargent's face had turned pink and he was making strange noises. Reed stuck out his neck.

"They're—what?"

"Drawing pictures," said Rossiter cheerfully.

"Well, well," said the coroner. "Have a good time, Joe. Shall I get you some nice blocks? Or a popgun, maybe? What the hell is this—a playroom?"

"It's a clue," explained Rossiter. "Good of you to come in and help, sir. Here's another sheet of paper. *You* draw a dog."

"I will not draw a dog!" howled Reed. "Young man, who in—"

"Oh, all right," said Rossiter. "*Don't* draw a dog, then. You're only obstructing justice, you know." He took the papers from our hands and examined them. "Good. This is exactly what I want."

"Obstructing—" Reed began with a kind of terrifying calm. Then he whirled on Jinny. "Virginia Quayle, will you be good enough to tell me who that young fool is?"

Jinny was half angry and half tearful. Rossiter had begun to look uncomfortable, as though he had been caught stealing jam.

"Pat Rossiter," she said, "I should have enough consideration for all of us at a time like this! Please don't mind him, Doctor. He's a friend of mine and I've just been to all the trouble of calming papa down!"

"He's a detective," Sargent contrived to say. "For heaven's sake, Doc, don't fly off the handle. He's got cards from Scotland Yard and—"

"Oh, my hat," said Rossiter dejectedly. "That tears it."

The next few minutes were chaotic, with Reed exclaiming "Stuff and nonsense!" and Jinny, still angry, convinced that Rossiter was off on another piece of nonsense.

"I don't care *who* he is," snapped Reed, "or why he's here. If you people want to sit around drawing dogs go to it. I've got more important things to do. This thing is all over town and it's a murder case straight out. There will be an inquest tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock. Have you got all the testimony for me, Joe?"

"Yes. I've seen everybody but Mrs. Quayle. Is she in shape to talk?"

"H'm. Well, we'll go in for a few minutes now."

The county detective glanced over at Rossiter in a dubious way.

"Do you want to come along, young fellow?"

"Do you mind if I join you later?" asked Rossiter, blinking at us. He looked at Jinny. "It takes me such a long time to explain things somehow," he added apologetically.

"Oh, yes," I said. "It's all in the mind's eye. All right. We'll see you later."

Reed, Sargent and I went out into the hall.

"I don't know what this is all coming to," Reed snapped, "when you let crazy people smack into the middle of everything you're doing and sit around drawing dogs and—drawing dogs, indeed!"

A voice, just behind the coroner's ear, suddenly hissed:

"I say!"

"Gurk!" said Dr. Reed, jumping involuntarily. Rossiter was standing in the door of the library, looking mysterious. "Look here, young man," said the coroner heatedly, "I've had about enough of this!"

"I say, I'm sorry," said Rossiter after a cautious look over his shoulder. "I forgot something. There's a question I wanted to ask you, Mr. Marle. You knew him pretty well—"

"Knew who pretty well?" I demanded.

"Tom Quayle. Jinny's brother."

"Yes. What did you want to ask?"

Rossiter bent forward and questioned in a tense whisper:

"Was he fond of walking?"

I answered solemnly:

"Why, no. He would never walk any distance if he could avoid it."

"Ah," said Rossiter in a tone of profound satisfaction, "that's what I thought."

He slid mysteriously back into the library and closed the door.

IN MRS. Quayle's room the shades were half drawn and the whole room seemed as tired as the dull winter afternoon. There was a stuffy smell of medicine.

Mrs. Quayle looked very small in the large walnut bed. Her gray wool night-

gown was buttoned up around the throat. Grayish hair tumbled about her face. Faded, the face was, but it still retained traces of a bright, sparrow-like quality.

"Come in," she croaked, fumbling for eyeglasses among the covers.

"She's much better now, Doctor," Miss Herries told us. "Here's the chart if you'd like to look at it."

Mrs. Quayle had fumbled with the rimless glasses until she got them on her nose. Her eyes were vague and frightened. She made an effort to cry out.

"Miss Herries! Miss Herries! I don't know these men! What are they doing in my bedroom?"

"Have you told her?" Reed asked the nurse.

"About Dr. Twills only," said Miss Herries. "She kept asking for him."

"Dr. Reed!" squeaked the woman in the bed. "Oh, I'm glad you're here. Did you hear about Walter?" She began to whimper. "Walter was my friend. Who are these other men?"

"Now, now, ma'am, be quiet!" Reed urged. "You knew he was killed, didn't you?"

"Killed?"

"Somebody gave him poison."

"And I can't see anything," she mumbled. "If they give me something I just have to drink it."

"Excuse me, ma'am," put in Sargent. "Do you mean you're near-sighted? You can't see across the room?"

"I can see *you,*" she said defensively. We were all standing near the head of the bed.

"Well," insisted the county detective, "can you see the door from here? Could you recognize somebody who came in?"

"I'm old! You couldn't expect me to—"

Sargent indicated a marble-topped table by the door. "That's where Matt Quayle said he left the supper-tray. And she was sitting by the window. I was in hopes she might have seen something. Ma'am, do you remember eating your supper last night? Did you see your son Matt bring up the tray?"

"I—I don't know who brought it up. I didn't know it was here until Mary touched me on the shoulder and told me to eat. Doctor, please tell me!—who *are* these men?"

"Now, ma'am, won't you wait a minute?" urged the county detective. "Did you see anybody before Mary woke you up?"

Mrs. Quayle fumbled at her lip. "No. but one of the girls was here before that. I heard her walking. I called out but she didn't answer."

Sargent tried to keep his voice steady. "Now, ma'am! That's what we want to know. How do you know it was one of the girls?"

"Why—wasn't it?" she asked. "I thought it was. It was light and quick steps," Her forehead wrinkled. "Maybe I was wrong."

"Mrs. Quayle," the county detective insisted, "what did you do when you heard this person walking around in here?"

"Why, nothing. I pulled up the quilt around me and it got nice and quiet again. If they wanted to hurt me I didn't care. I felt so tired." She shivered. "I'm going to die," she added, without any emotion. "I know it. I dreamed the other night that—"

"Rubbish!" said the doctor. "You won't die. You must know by now that somebody tried to poison you, but you didn't die; and somebody tried to poison the judge and *he* didn't die."

Mrs. Quayle's voice crept out eerily:

"Tried to—poison *him?"* She was growing breathless, beseeching Reed. "Yes, I—I knew it. I dreamed that too. I dreamed he was dead and Tom was standing by the coffin. But he's all *right?"* The voice rose fretfully. "Nobody ever tells me anything.

"They just let me sit in here and rock and worry my heart out!" She added, in those queer, far-away tones, "And then I dreamed Tom was standing at the foot of my bed and smiling at me. He's all I've got to live for. My little baby. . . ."

It had become a yearning, drowsy murmur. She seemed to be watching the window and the mountains beyond.

The nurse said gently:

"Don't you think, Doctor—"

"Oh, all right," growled Reed. "We'll go. Give her her medicine and let her get some sleep."

"There's just one other thing," said the county detective. "Mrs. Quayle, listen, please!"

A tremulous glance as she peered up.

"Mrs. Quayle, this person you heard in here—could it have been a man

walking on tiptoe instead of a woman?"

"Eh? What person? I—I thought you'd gone. Nurse, make them go, won't you? Read me a story out of one of his books. I feel so tired."

We went out softly.

Out in the hall again we shivered in the cold. We had started downstairs when Mary called: "Jeff!" There was urgency in that whisper and I stopped. "Jeff, may I see you alone a moment?"

I dropped behind. She waited until the others had reached the lower floor, then put her hand on my arm.

"Jeff, you've got to do something. Clarissa's drunk."

"Drunk?"

"Yes. She's still up in Jinny's room and I'm afraid she'll go out and Papa will see her. She's talking wildly and she's hid the key so I can't lock her in and she's drunk enough so she wants more. I'm afraid she'll go down in the cellar after some of Papa's liquor, and he'll meet her. That would be worse. Won't you go up and see what you can do?"

There was nothing I could do, of course. But I remembered a certain well-known Latin proverb, and thought that some truth might be stimulated out of the stately Clarissa. So I followed Mary upstairs.

X

FOR some reason it is impossible to define, I shall always regard that walk up the attic staircase as the real prelude to the horrors in this house.

My knocking rattled on the door of Jinny's room. Mary remained outside, as I went in.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" Clarissa greeted me. "Come in, great detective. Come right in! Ha-ha."

Her négligé somewhat disordered, she was sitting in a wicker chair before the gas grate. Her eyes were bright and her mouth somewhat loose—but she was even more the Great Lady and blinked upon me with slightly amused patronage.

"Have a chair," she invited, indicating one with a queenly gesture. "I'd offer you a drink only there's just a drop left."

"Feeling better?"

"And I shall stay the way I am because I do not give a damn," she said. "Walter's dead but what of it? I don't feel it at all now. I liked Walter."

"Yes, of course."

"I liked him," said Clarissa, staring at the fire, "but he wasn't any dashing Don Juan. I like Don Juans." She turned loftily. "But they'll do what *I* say around here from now on. Walter left everything to me. They'll be no more complaining and fighting when I want to take a little drink like a civilized person. *I'm* the head of this house now!"

Her eyes were suddenly full of tears.

"But they won't talk about Walter. If Mother and Father had been dead we could've gone away. But while they're alive—I couldn't. Only I wouldn't like to travel with Walter. He makes me ashamed of him."

"Steady!" I said, as the whining voice rose higher and higher.

"That's why I was afraid they'd think *I* did it," she went on. "Because I've often thought if Father and Mother and Walter were all dead I could go away and I thought everybody was reading my thoughts."

"Pull yourself together! Do you hear?"

At my snappish command she tried to recover her poise. She groped beside her chair, brought up a tumbler half full of whisky and water and drained it.

"Well," she said, with a kind of grim bravado, "I won't be as easy as Walter was. *I* know Matt's been faking Walter's accounts. I won't be cheated. And there won't be any more fancy dresses for Jinny—little numbers that cost one and two hundred dollars."

I soothed her down presently. Trying to extract information from her was useless.

"What's more," she whirled to say as I was going towards the door, "I've been thinking a lot and I have a good idea who *is* doing all this."

I stopped.

"No, I'm not telling," she snapped. "All in good time maybe. But just remember I was in the room next door to the bathroom when somebody poisoned that bromide-bottle. It was in the afternoon and I was there all right!"

"If you know anything, Clarissa—"

Her face grew sullen. Tact and browbeating were both unavailing to make her talk. She would just contemplate

her glass and mutter. I left her huddled before the fire.

Mary was waiting anxiously in the hall outside. But she agreed that the only possible course was to leave Clarissa to her tipsy meditations.

Mary went to the kitchen and I descended to the library. Voices were upraised as I opened the door. Reed and Sargent were arguing.

"Shut that door," Reed ordered and glowered at me through his gold-rimmed glasses. "Where have you been?"

"Seeing Mrs. Twill."

"Well?" demanded Reed.

"She knows something," I said. "Or else she's just drunk and thinks she does. But just when she got to the edge of being talkative she shut up again."

"H'm," said Reed. "Joe and I have been talking. And it strikes me that it's time to put the cards on the table. Can anybody overhear us now?"

"I don't think so."

REED spoke with great intensity. "All right. You say you've been talking to Clarissa. What do you want to bet *she* isn't the poisoner."

"That won't work!" protested Sargent. "It won't work, I tell you, Doc."

"Prejudice aside, Doctor, what have you got against her?" I asked.

"'Mf," Reed snapped. "Now, Joe, listen to me. That woman's a dangerous case. She's got Queen Elizabeth ideas. Well, she had a husband who wasn't like a movie hero and parents who didn't treat her like a movie heroine and she got sick of it . . .

"Wait!" he ordered, waving his hand irritably at Sargent. "You're going to ask me why she didn't just go away? Well, that's the hellish part of it. I've known these cases before. Girls who want to go to the big city. As long as their parents were alive they'd rage and storm but feel duty-bound to stick by 'em—work till they dropped to help support their families.

"And here's the funny part—they'd rather kill their parents than refuse to help support 'em! If they were dead the girl would kid herself it was the judgment of God and decide she was free. It's the *ties* that count. They don't want to run away, for they'd still feel the ties. And conscience wouldn't bother them half as much if the parents were dead."

"You mean," said Sargent, "you honestly think Mrs. Twills would be capable of doing a thing like that, loving her husband and her parents?"

"Bosh! She doesn't love anybody. But they've been brought up with family ties drilled into 'em. They wouldn't think of doubting their duties to their relatives but all of a sudden they'd go crazy and just wipe them out. And *this* woman stood to get a fortune all her own. What do you think, Mr. Marle?"

It followed so uncannily what Clarissa herself had been telling me, admitting her secret wish to have her parents and her husband dead, that I grew uneasy.

"It's possible," I said. "But you'd have to prove it."

"Right. But who had the best opportunity? She could have poisoned the bromide-bottle without anybody knowing. Nobody saw her all yesterday afternoon from half-past five to six o'clock. She was supposed to be in her room but who saw her? She could have put the arsenic in her mother's tray before she came down to dinner. And her mother heard 'one of the girls' in that room.

"Who could have pumped Dr. Twills about poisons without his knowing? Who knew that Twills was in the habit of taking a bromide every night of his life? Who knew that there was a fresh syphon of soda-water in the library, right handy and convenient?"

"Hold on a minute!" Sargent protested. "Mary knew about that syphon too. She took it in to the judge and was there while he took a drink."

Reed snorted. "Bosh! Next to Virginia, Mary has the most complete alibi of anybody here. She was in the kitchen with the maid from half-past five to six o'clock. Now, then. Who stood to gain from Twills' death? Clarissa did. Eh?"

"Don't forget, Doc," Sargent retorted, "that she almost drank from that bromide-bottle herself."

"Joe Sargent, sometimes I think you're a moron!" squeaked Reed. "The woman's not an utter fool. That's the kind of cunning she *would* use. She lets somebody see her about to drink a bromide—but she doesn't drink it. She

knew there wasn't any danger from an ordinary dose. But she poured it out all the same."

Sargent picked up the copy of Heine.

"All very good, Doc," he said bitterly. "Now suppose you explain what's written here."

"Hmf. Well, look here. 'Am I sure I know poisoner?' He's sitting by his wife's bed while he writes that. He's looking at her and wondering and not positive. 'What was burned in the fireplace, and why?' I'll tell you. It was the doctor's will. If he died intestate she got everything. *Eh?*"

"That will has something to do with it, I'll admit. But—"

"Look here," I said, "why are you people assuming there *was* a will? We haven't heard of any. But just as soon as we heard of something being burned in the fireplace, everybody jumped to the conclusion that it was a will. What reason have we got for thinking so?"

SARGENT replied in a quieter tone: "Well, for one thing, that fireplace over there is the only one in the house where anything *can* be burn d. The others are gas. Whatever was burned must have been paper. For another thing, that young Rossiter had a good suggestion. The brass fasteners on the table are used for clipping sheets of legal paper together. And they might have been used for the doctor's will right here in this room."

"Oh, I say!" a voice protested suddenly, in very distressed tones. "It won't do, you know. I never said anything of the kind."

Reed whirled and glared in the direction of the voice. None of us had heard Rossiter come in. He was perched on the back of a chair like a large-boned goblin, blinking at us.

"I can't let myself be misquoted." He smiled vaguely. "I'm certain something was burned. And I did mention a will. But I never said anything about Dr. Twills. Really I didn't."

"Well, who else would make a will?" demanded Sargent. "Judge Quayle? There wouldn't be any point in burning *that.*"

Rossiter looked thoughtful. "Quite. But you can use those little brass thingummies to clip other things besides legal documents."

"Well?"

"Chapters," said Rossiter.

There was a pause, then Rossiter continued:

"I really think there are too many of those little brass thingummies. If you were merely going to clip one document together, you wouldn't need so many, would you?" He rumpled his hair. "I say, Mr. Marle, you came out here to have a look at the judge's manuscript, didn't you? I wonder where it is?"

Sargent pulled open the table drawer.

"It's in a devilish mess, isn't it?" asked Rossiter. "I looked there. Somebody seems to have been through it before us. But there isn't any manuscript. I rather think it's been burned."

"Well?" Reed cried. "Why should anybody burn his manuscript? You mean it hasn't got anything to do with the will?"

"It has quite a lot to do with the will, I'm afraid," said Rossiter. "You might ask Judge Quayle."

"I'll get him," Sargent said. "Wait here."

When he had gone Rossiter slid down into the chair. He produced his cigarette-papers and constructed another of those weird cigarettes. Behind that fiery beacon he smoked with evident enjoyment.

"Young man," Reed said with asperity, "I don't get you. Come on, now! Out with it! What have you been up to?"

"Getting information about Judge Quayle's parents," said Rossiter. "And his nurse. Especially his nurse—the one he had when he was a child. Of course I didn't know he had one until Mrs. Quayle told me.' '

"You've been disturbing Mrs. Quayle?"

"Oh, I say! I'm the only one she *will* see. We get on famously. I showed her some new card tricks.

"Card tricks?"

"I'm tremendously good at it. Chap in a medicine-show taught me. I used to do them for Mrs. Quayle hours on end." An experimental gleam crept into his eye. "I wish you'd let me try some on you. You mustn't mind if they don't come out right the first three or four times. Mrs. Quayle never did."

"I don't want to see any card tricks! What I was asking you—I suppose you

heard everything I said about Mrs. Twills."

"Oh, well," said Rossiter, "if you insist in talking about the dashed case—I overheard you." He shook his head sadly. "It's all eyewash, sir. I'm terribly sorry to have to tell you but that's what it is. Eyewash."

The door opened and Rossiter got up, looking very uncomfortable when he saw Judge Quayle.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," said the judge. "Ah. Good afternoon, Mr. Rossiter. My daughter told me you were here."

He spoke with a sort of grim affability. There was about him a sort of brittle brightness, a sense of repressed mirth.

He was freshly shaven, his long hair was brushed stiffly and he wore his best black clothes with a black bow tie and an enoromously high collar. He went over and sat down behind the table.

"Now then, gentlemen." He looked from one to the other of us. "Mr. Sargent tells me you have some further questions to ask me. I am entirely at your service."

"What we really wanted to ask you, Judge," said Sargent, coming forward, "is this—Did Dr. Twills make a will?"

"He did. I drew it myself."

"Where is the will now?"

"In the possession of my son Matthew at his office in the safe."

"Do you mind telling us what the provisions of the will were?"

Judge Quayle's eyelids drooped slightly.

"Dr. Twills never made a secret of its contents." He lifted his shoulder a trifle. "Aside from a few small bequests, the bulk of the estate was left unreservedly to my daughter Clarissa. He had no surviving relatives with the exception of two aunts in Florida who are wealthy in their own right."

"None of the other bequests were large, you say?"

"Certainly not large enough to have inspired murder, Mr. Sargent. There were no bequests to members of this family."

"Dr. Twills was wealthy?"

"I am not in a position to state accurately. My son Matthew will undoubtedly be able to tell you. He handled the doctor's financial affairs. My son-in-law had inherited his money. It did not interest him in particular."

"Then your son had his power of attorney?"

"Yes." The judge showed no annoyance. "I have been occupying myself with literary work for so long that I have lost my touch."

"Speaking of literary work, Judge," Sargent said casually, "I understand you had a manuscript you wanted to show Mr. Marle. Is that right?"

"That is true. But I fail to see how it could possibly interest you, Mr. Sargent."

THE REPLY infuriated the county detective. Sargent waited a moment until he could speak smoothly.

"Well, it does interest me, Judge. I read books occasionally."

Judge Quayle answered, with ironical amusement, "If you are interested, Mr. Sargent, let me show it to you."

He pulled open the drawer of the table.

We were all bending forward and the judge must have felt the tensity. But he did not look up and we could hear his hands moving mechanically, shifting papers, long after he had ceased to search.

Sargent's voice sounded crude in the hush when he said:

"It might have got misplaced, Judge."

Reed snapped, "You can write it again!"

Suddenly Judge Quayle got to his feet. That gaunt figure slowly walked over to the door, turned there.

"I am afraid you do not understand, gentlemen," he said, in a steady, husky voice. "I am not concerned about the loss of the manuscript."

He laid his hand on the knob of the door.

"But they must—*hate me*—very much."

The door closed. We heard the footfalls of an old man going slowly, blindly down the hall.

The echo of those strange words hung in the twilight, shaking the nerves of all of us.

"Well—" the coroner said at last. "Well!"

The county detective raised his head, muttered irrelevantly: "I've got two boys. One of them's at Annapolis. I—Will you drive me in town, Doc?"

Rossiter did not move when I accompanied Reed and Sargent out to the door. Reed went hurrying out to race the motor of his car viciously. Sargent assured me that he would return before long, shook hands vacantly several times.

The coroner's old sedan went grinding and bumping down the drive. I paced up and down the porch. Darkness, pressing closer, reminded me—the lights had not worked in the library when I tried them some time ago. Rossiter had probably blown out the fuse. We must have them repaired or the women would get hysterical.

I had grown numb with the cold and I found myself shivering. I went back into the house. Fumbling for the light-switch on the off-chance, I pressed it. There was no response. For some reason, I abruptly felt that we needed light. We had to thrust away these shadows. On the wall just by the library door there was an ancient gas-bracket. It seemed to take a great while to find matches in my pocket. The match rasped and spurted up—a fluttering yellow-blue glow trembled out in the hallway.

Then I heard the scream.

It did not seem to come from anywhere. It seemed to rise, shrill but muffled, from somewhere behind me. All the hall was full of it. I whirled.

The hall was still empty, dingy and feebly lighted. I started to run toward the stairs, then realized I did not know from which direction the scream had come. Turning back, I saw Rossiter standing in the doorway of the library. His face was white.

"What—" he said, "what was—"

Somewhere in the house there were footsteps. Heavy, echoing and hollow footsteps. They seemed to move, disembodied, in the hall itself. Then they grew louder and I knew that they had come from the cellar. They began to ascend the stairs.

Rossiter jumped forward, then halted with his hand lifted. The door to the cellar stairs was being slowly opened. We could see the outline of a figure grow huge there, the pale glimmer of a face. The footsteps began to creak on the floor of the hall, coming nearer.

His face bloodless and his eyes red, Judge Quayle loomed up. He seemed to be walking in his sleep.

"Judge!" I shouted.

Rossiter jerked my arm. The big figure came nearer at its stumbling walk, staring at the light with blind eyes, passing us, speaking no word. I felt Rossiter's finger grow crushing on my arm and I looked where he pointed.

Then I saw the judge's feet had left a trail of small dark smears on the grey rug. With a ghastly half-smile, he lifted his hand to wipe it down the front of his coat—I saw that it was stained with blood.

XI

ROSSITER made the first move. I felt the thud of his big shoulder as he bumped past me. Then I was racing after him towards the cellar door. We were through the door almost together, crashing down a wooden staircase into darkness.

But far ahead I could see a gleam of light. It flickered and I thought I could see blood on the floor.

The front of the cellar was in a depression and reached by three steps. At the front was a heavy workbench with shelves along the wall. Beside these shelves the wall of the coal-bin threw dense shadow. A candle in a tin holder was burning on the workbench. It illuminated the dusty pane of a high window.

For an instant we stared at the candle-flame. Then our eyes were attracted by a shining dark fluid which was crawling along the stone floor.

Some horror was breathing in the very flame of the candle. A little rivulet of blood seemed to dart towards us.

Rossiter went blundering down the three steps into the dark shadows near the coal-bin. I could do nothing but follow him.

"There's the handle of something here,' 'he said. "It feels like a hatchet." Looking ashy-green, he said, "It *is* a hatchet! It's been driven—in her head. It's Twills' wife. It's Clarissa!"

I heard Rossiter's words but I didn't believe them. It was too monstrous. Desperately I kept trying to wrench away fear.

Then Rossiter struck a match. After the first shock of the sight, it was easier.

Clarissa dead. She lay spread-eagled in the black négligé, limp as a sack. Her legs, in black silk stockings, were

sprawled and beside her lay a smashed bottle. There was a heavy odor of whisky.

The hatchet had gone into the brain just above the right ear and it was still wedged there, its handle resting against the floor.

I heard my own voice speaking—eerie and unnatural.

"She wanted more whisky," I said. "She was drunk. So she came down here and—"

"Lock that door," said Rossiter. "Don't let them come down here. Hurry!"

I stumbled along the cellar, and up the stairs. Somebody up in the house was screaming hysterically and there was movement in the hall. In the dim gaslight I saw somebody running towards me. I snatched the key from the outside of the door, locked it, then leaned against the wall to wipe cold sweat from my forehead. On shrinking legs I went back.

I could not think of Clarissa with a cloven skull—dead—knowing the answer to all the riddles now. But there she lay with her black hair stiff-matted in blood.

My eyes had strayed to the grimy window. I cried, "Rossiter!"

There was a face looking in at the window!

"The window—look!" I yelled.

Rossiter glanced up stupidly. Then I had run past him, jumped on top of the workbench and begun to wrench frantically at the fastenings of the window. It jerked out with a hideous screech. I swung up to the top of the shelves and wriggled blindly through the cellar window.

My hands were raked by gravel as I pulled myself up. Streaking off towards the swimming pool, I saw a running figure. I had just started to run when Rossiter was beside me.

"Head him off!" I yelled. "To the left! I'll take the right!"

The figure ahead was running erratically, zigzagging. I shouted, but he did not pause. Then I saw Rossiter sweep round ahead of me. Never have I seen a man travel as he did then. There was a sobbing gasp, then a thud and silence.

"I've got him," called Rossiter.

I brushed away a dead branch and saw a figure lying on the ground, sobbing and mumbling incoherent words. Painfully it pushed itself up on one knee and I saw that it was Tom Quayle.

I stared, stupefied. Tom Quayle, with sickening fright in his eyes; pale, and thin, and ill.

I said his name aloud.

"Who—who's there?" he cried. Then his voice broke. "Oh, my God!" he kept repeating, and rocked himself backwards and forwards. "I can't stand it!"

Rossiter's voice snapped out of the gloom.

"Is this the chap who ran away?"

"Yes," I said. "Tom! Brace up! It's Jeff Marle, Tom. Steady now!"

"Help me up," he said. "I'm sick. I shouldn't have run. I just got out of the hospital." He was gasping and he staggered as I extended my hand. "I was afraid to go in," he continued in a whisper. "I—I'm cold. I haven't any overcoat."

"Oh, dash it," Rossiter said uncomfortably. "Here, take it easy. Let's go inside."

WE SUPPORTED the small, thin figure across the lawn. Rossiter took off his own jacket and put it over Tom's shoulders.

When we rang at the front door footsteps came running. Jinny, pale and wild-eyed, flung the door open. When she saw the man between us her lips shook.

"There's no time to talk," I said. "He's come back. Never mind how. Where are the rest?"

"I'll get back through that cellar window," said Rossiter. "You try to explain things."

He had gone when I closed the door.

"Father—" Jinny whispered. "Father!"

"Where is he?"

"Who is it, Jeff? Is it Clarissa?" She paused.

Another shrill cry came from upstairs and Mary appeared at the head of the stairs. She screamed:

"He's all over blood! He's hurt!"

"Jinny," I said desperately, "if you ever did anything in your life do it now. Go up and quiet her. Can you?"

With an unsteady hand she pushed the bronze hair back.

"I'll try. I'll try.' '

"All right. Go up there, then come in the library."

I hustled Tom into the library, stumbled across the room and lighted the three mantles in the chandelier. Tom slowly sat down.

His jauntiness was gone. His sullenness and fire were gone. Sitting there clasping his hands together, his narrow shoulders trembling. The dark curling hair spilled out from under a greasy cap. He had a wool muffler wound round his throat under the coat of a loud-striped shabby suit. His dark face was as handsome as ever but pinched with illness and prematurely old.

"I've got no guts," he said suddenly, staring blankly across the room. "No guts—here I am again."

The keys of the bookcase desk, where the brandy was kept, were still in my pocket. The brandy was harmless, we had discovered. I unlocked the cabinet, took out the bottle and handed it to him. He drank greedily.

"Go easy," I said. "When did you eat last?"

"Yesterday afternoon." His voice was husky but the warmth of the brandy eased him; he relaxed. "I feel—much better. It's been pretty bad. Jeff, what's happened?"

"What were you doing, looking in that window?"

His laboured breathing was loud. "Listen! Tell me something now. Am I light-headed? I mean, did I just think I saw something—down there? Oh, my God, I may be losing my mind!" Suddenly he covered his eyes with his hands.

"What did you think you saw?"

He took away his hands. The eyes were glassy.

"Yes. I just imagined it. Low vitality. I thought I saw somebody—Clarissa; my sister Clarissa—hit with—something. I saw *blood*."

"Did you see who hit her?"

"No. That's why I know I must have imagined—and yet I even heard talking. Listen. I've got to tell it. I only got here this afternoon. I was afraid to go to the front door, so I walked around the house. But the house was all dark except a light in the cellar window. I looked down in there as I went past—"

"Well?"

"There was a candle on that workbench. I saw Clarissa come over from the other side of the cellar. She had a bottle under her arm. I heard her say, 'Who's there?' and look in the direction of the coal-bin. She seemed—well, as though she was drunk."

He swallowed hard, lifting his thin shoulders. "She went over and looked in the coal-bin. I couldn't see what was on the other side of the partition. But I heard Clarissa say, 'Oh, my God, *you*?' "

Tom threw out his arms. "Then there was a sort of scuffling, and something went *plunk* on the floor. It was a can of some kind."

(The can of rat-poison, knocked from the murderer's hand behind that partition where Clarissa was looking upon the face of the poisoner at last.)

"I heard it roll on the floor," Tom rushed on. "There was some more scuffling, when I saw Clarissa run out from behind the partition. I *heard* the hatchet *hit*!" he said wildly. "It *was* a hatchet. I saw it. And blood spurted so far it sizzled in the candle-flame. Maybe I'm seeing things. But I never saw anything so horrible! I didn't see anybody but I saw her body being pulled back. That finished me!"

"Did you scream?" I demanded.

"No. I was too scared. I started to run. But I couldn't get any farther than a tree, and I just lay there shaking. I saw people come out on the porch and two men get in a car and drive away. Then I saw somebody walking up and down on the porch." He shuddered. "I got to thinking I was crazy. I thought maybe I might die there on the lawn."

A FIT of coughing struck him, and there were tears in his eyes. He looked even more childish than in the old days.

"I thought I'd just imagined it. So at last I thought I'd go back and look in again and, if I didn't see anything, then I must have been seeing things the first time. You chased me when I looked in." He shook his head despondently. "Everything's crazy."

Tom jerked round nervously as Jinny entered. She took in the frayed clothes, the hangdog air, the pleading. Then she came over to put her arm around him.

"You look bad, old boy!" she said. "Dear old—I can't welcome you, much, Tom. It's too awful here. But everything's all right for you now." Her smile brimmed into tears as she looked at me. "We've got him back now, Jeff. We'll keep him. Now tell me—*what's*

happened? I've got to know. How did you find Tom? What's—down there? Don't be afraid. I can stand it."

"Clarissa is dead," I said slowly. "It's murder again."

"Clarissa—" Tom mumbled, "Clarissa—then I'm *not* crazy! What are you talking about? What do you mean, 'again'?"

"But why?" Jinny demanded abruptly. "Why kill Clarissa?"

I only said: "It's difficult to face, Jinny. There may be any number of reasons."

"Well?"

Still I hesitated. The obvious conclusion was there from Tom's story. Every indication seemed to point inexorably to one person.

"It might have been," I said, "because the murderer was recognized by Clarissa. She said she had an idea who it was. And also the murder of both Clarissa and Walter Twills may have been part of a prearranged plan. Twills had the money and died. Clarissa would have had the money to do with as she wished."

"You're still holding back something, Jeff."

"I hate to say it. But you saw who came upstairs from the cellar with blood on his hands, didn't you?"

"You don't mean," Jinny whispered, "that Father—"

"I don't believe it either. But Sargent is suspicious already. Where is your father now?"

"Upstairs. I saw him—washing his hands. And the water in the bowl was—"

"Steady!" I commanded as her voice grew hysterical. "You'd better take Tom out in the kitchen and get him something to eat. He hasn't had any food since yesterday."

Tom was sunk into a half stupor. She led him out unresisting.

I hammered my knuckles against my head. It was narrowing down, but to what? There now showed a ghastly bestiality, worse by far than the sly cowardice of the poisoner. Something much more savage and relentless than anything we had imagined—to have wielded a hatchet in that fashion. In this house there was literally an evil spirit. Drag the devil out from behind its kindly face! But how to find the devil?

Where had the members of tne household been when the killer struck? Judge Quayle—it was inconceivable.

So entangled in my brain was the vision of the murderer with the thought of a beast that I jumped involuntarily when the door opened and Rossiter entered.

"I've locked the cellar again," Rossiter said, closing the library door after him. "Where is Tom?"

"Getting something to eat. He'll be back shortly. What did you find out?"

I offered him my cigarette-case because his hands were not calm enough to roll a cigarette of his own.

"Not much more," he answered and drew smoke into his lungs with relief. "There were some crates split for kindling-wood just behind that partition. The hatchet must have been lying against them. The murderer must have been hiding there and picked up the hatchet on the spur of the moment. What did Tom Quayle say?"

I NARRATED the conversation.

"The wine-bins," he said, "are over on the opposite side of the cellar. About that candle—was Clarissa carrying it?"

"No. Tom said it was on the workbench when he first saw Clarissa."

"I found the tin of arsenic," he said. "Buried in the coal-pile."

"You think it had been there all the time?"

"No. Anybody shoveling coal couldn't have failed to see it if it had been there before. No. I rather suspect the murderer just shoved it into the coal after Clarissa had been killed. But there wasn't any hysocin bottle. I'm afraid the murderer isn't through."

Though I had been expecting this the words struck me with a chill.

"And why isn't he through?" demanded Rossiter. "That's the hellish part of it. It's so obvious—and so ghastly—I'm tempted to wash my hands of the whole business. I'm tempted to take Jinny and get out of here."

"Why?"

"Because if I stay," Rossiter said in a queer voice, "I shall have to tell them the truth."

I stared at him. The expression of the intoxicated crystal-gazer had come back. But there was something in his

hushed nervousness which made my throat dry and tight.

"You—you think you know?"

"I'm afraid so. Good Lord, why doesn't somebody else see it? Except me? It's so infernally obvious!"

"It looks bad," I said, "for Judge Quayle."

"Yes," he replied. "Yes. Very bad."

"And if Sargent can prove he did all this—"

Rossiter jumped as though he had been stung. "Judge Quayle? Who said anything about *him* being guilty?"

"Didn't you?"

"Hang it, why has everybody got to get me wrong? I never in the world thought the old boy did it."

I mopped my forehead. "Why, I thought you—"

"You mean," Rossiter interupted, "you think he deliberately poisoned himself to avert suspicion?"

"I'm not telling you *I* think it," I said sharply. "It's what Sargent probably has in his mind. Suppose the whole plot was directed at Twills and Clarissa? The poisoning of Mrs. Quayle, and the poisoning of himself constituted a blind.

"He gave Mrs. Quayle arsenic, knowing that Twills would detect it and prevent her death. He took hyoscin himself when he knew Twills would be at hand, instantly suspect hyoscin and save him. Remember he only sipped, sparingly, that drink he poured for himself—and left almost all of it untouched on the mantelpiece."

"Wait a minute!" begged Rossiter, waving his hand. "How did he poison Mrs. Quayle's milk-toast?"

"Have you forgotten," I said, "that when Matt was carrying the tray upstairs, Judge Quayle stopped Matt, lifted the cover of the tray?"

XII

EVERY small point began to dovetail in my brain with damning significance.

"If," I went on, "we concede that Twills *suspected this plot* everything that Twills said and wrote grows clearer. Did you know that the judge has been using morphine?"

"I don't know how you knew that," Rossiter said dully. "Jinny told me she suspected it."

"It brings dreams and fancies and a distorted outlook. Suppose the judge imagined that somebody was trying to scare him to death with a white marble hand? An hallucination so strong he refused to discuss the hand at all. He conceives that the whole house is leagued against him. He told us as much.

"Twills must have known about the morphine. Twills may have suspected that the judge, in a kind of insane drug-induced revenge, wanted to kill everybody in the house. And he had told the judge all about hyoscin. You know the judge's personality—his stiffness, his conception of family duties, his whole outlook. The breaking-down of that personality by his family may have driven him to striking out with murder."

I took up the copy of Heine's poems from the table.

I said, "It answers each of the questions Twills wrote down."

Am I sure I know poisoner?
What was burned in the fireplace, and why?
Could personality have made such an impression? Medically possible? Psychologically? (Yes. See Lambert, Grafenstein)
Was it hope of money, or growing canker?
What about $C_{17}H_{19}NO_3 + H_2O$? Influence?

I put the book down slowly. "And Question Number Three, the motive," I said, "is the only one answered with a 'yes'—by the authority of two famous psychologists."

THERE was a long silence. Rossiter ruffled his hair.

"You don't believe all that, do you?" he asked.

"I didn't say I believed it. I said Sargent probably did. Yes, and Reed." I hesitated. "Reed probably noticed the hypodermic marks on the judge's arm. I think he jumped to the conclusion that the judge might have gone crazy with drugs and done all this. He was certainly trying to shield the judge and he worked like the devil to make everybody think Twills' death was suicide. That was what made Sargent suspicious in the first place."

We heard somebody descending the stairs and fell silent. There was the protesting murmur of a woman's voice, then Judge Quayle's gruff tones. Rossiter stamped over to the window. He

was staring out blankly when the judge entered.

Old and hollow Judge Quayle looked now. He shook off Mary's hand and said:

"I'm all right. Let go, do you hear! Gentlemen"—he peered at us—"I fear I was indisposed a while ago. Allow me to sit down."

He groped over after a chair.

"The nerves will stand just so much. It is not given to many people to see what I saw."

"Don't talk about it, Papa!" cried Mary.

The judge said in a far-away voice: "I presume, gentlemen, you have been to the cellar?"

I nodded.

"The strange part is," he went on, "that I cannot remember how I got there. I recall leaving this room. I wandered into the dining-room. The next thing I recall"—his hand was pressed hard to his forehead—"I had started down the cellar stairs. I felt that if I could work with my hands—"

Mary gripped his shoulder as he half rose.

"No matter," he muttered. "I went forward. There was a light ahead of me. A candle. Then I stumbled on something on the floor and put my hands down to feel it."

"Was it you who cried out?" I asked hurriedly.

Blood had begun to fill the big veins in his forehead.

"Eh? I don know. I may have."

My theories were being swamped out. He never once thought he ought to be suspected. He never once protested his innocence. It never occurred to him. Might these horrors have come during blank spots in his brain?

"When did you go down there, Judge?" I asked. "Just before Mr. Rossiter and I saw you in the hall?"

"It must have been. I believe I was there only a moment."

"And you saw nobody while you were in the cellar?"

"I have an impression"—he wrinkled up his forehead—"that somebody passed me just as I was going down. But I cannot be sure."

"You know what's happened, don't you, Mary?" I asked.

She nodded, dumb and miserable.

"Did you hear the scream?"

"Yes. Oh, God yes!"

"Where were you then?"

"In the pantry."

"The pantry door," I said, "communicates with the landing of the cellar stairs, doesn't it. Did you go and look?"

"No! I didn't dare. And—and I couldn't tell *where* it came from."

"Had you been in the pantry long?"

"Twenty minutes, anyhow. Oh, Jeff—"

"And did you hear anybody go down?"

"Y-yes. I heard Father, because I know his step. And two other people before him. But I didn't see them, Jeff. One went down a long time before Father and another just a few minutes before Father. They must have been Clarissa—"

"Where was Joanna?"

"Cleaning the silver on the storm porch. But she was in and out a lot. She may have seen somebody."

"Mary," I said, "will you please ask Joanna to step in here?"

There was a difficult task ahead of me now. Judge Quayle was sitting impassive.

I crossed the room and stood before him.

"I have some news for you, sir," I said. "Your son Tom is here. Steady now!"

His hands had gripped the chair-arms. Slowly his eyes moved to me.

"I am somewhat glad," he said.

It had been a mere whisper. But the iron stiffness seemed suddenly to have gone out of his joints and he had the appearance of one who, after a night of horrors, drifts into cool rest.

WITH his eyes closed, he spoke:

"I trust my son is well?"

"He has been in the hospital, sir. But he is better now."

"Yes. He wrote us. I was glad to send him what money he needed."

(A little, pathetic, defiant lie, Judge Quayle. Twills sent the money and you pretended to disapprove because you would not admit you were penniless. And now I can see why you cried out in anguish when *I* rapped on the library door as Tom used to rap. You were thinking you had driven him away, thinking of him ill and broken, and he thought you hated him. And you could not bear that, Judge Quayle.)

"He will soon be back on his feet, sir," I said. "I think he intends to remain."

The old man nodded and the door opened to admit Joanna and Jinny. The judge glanced round. He had wanted to see Tom.

Jinny's glance asked, "Did you tell him?" and I nodded.

Joanna huddled back against the door.

"I want to talk to you, Joanna," I said sternly, trying to imitate Sargent's manner."

"Ya. I not do nothing?"

Miss Quayle says you were cleaning silver on the storm-porch late this afternoon. Is that right?"

"Ya! That right. I no leave."

"Did you go out in the front hall at any time?"

"I go once. I think I hear someone at front door, and I look out. You in hall. So I go back."

"Did you see anybody near the door to the cellar stairs?"

"Ya! I see somebody stick head out."

My voice sounded unnaturally loud in the hush.

"You saw somebody? Who was it?" I asked.

"That one," said Joanna, and nodded at Jinny.

The first sound I can remember after that startling announcement was Rossiter making a scornful noise. He stepped over from the window, looking distressed.

"I thought I could keep out of it," he said sadly. "But, this is going a bit too far. I've got to explain things, after all." He looked at Jinny. "My dear young idiot, I was congratulating myself that you had kept away from suspicion. Did you actually make the silly-ass mistake of going near those stairs?"

Jinny regarded me steadily, her pale lips pressed together.

"I did," she said in a clear voice. "Jeff, that's the first thing I've omitted telling yet. And it's the first thing I get tripped up on."

"Nobody's accusing you," I said. "What did you do precisely?"

"I didn't go down in the cellar. I thought Clarissa had gone after whisky. So I went down the back stairs to see. I got to the top of the cellar stairs and I couldn't go any farther. I don't know why—*I couldn't!* I just stood there, frightened. It was all dark down in the cellar." She made a vague gesture. "That's all there is to it. I just hurried up the rear stairs again to my room."

"But why didn't you tell us this in the first place?"

Her lips twisted and she nodded at Rossiter.

"There's the cause. I thought things were coming out all right for *us*. Does it sound awful of me to say that now? Well, I don't care. That's what I thought. And I didn't want to get implicated and it would be hellish to have them think I did it. Do you understand?"

"I've generally discovered," Rossiter said gloomily, "that it's the innocent people who feel most guilty. That was a bit idiotic, my dear. You didn't hear anything or see anything, did you? In the cellar, I mean."

"I think I heard something," Jinny answered. "A sound like somebody giggling. I wasn't sure but I think that's what terrified me. Laughing."

She was trembling, perilously close to a breaking-point. She said hurriedly, "The whole thing's like a joke—a joke without any sense."

Judge Quayle spoke as though against his will, in two voices, like an old actor:

" 'Have you heard the argument: is there no offence in't?'—'No, no, they do but jest, poison in jest; no offence i' the world.' "

Rossiter hit the table a blow with his fist.

"Look here," he said, "this has got to stop. I'm going to stop it before we're all potty. I'll show you what the real joke was. The real joke was that it started as a joke."

Jinny turned on him fiercely. "If you start any of your foolery now," she cried, "I'll kill you!"

"Go out in the kitchen," Rossiter said to Joanna, "and tell that chap to come in here."

He was as close to wrath as his easy-going nature would permit. Joanna scuttled out of the room.

"Maybe you'll say," he told Jinny slowly, "that it takes a fool to expose

a fool. Righto! But the person who's responsible for all this is your brother Tom."

XIII

JUDGE Quayle's eyes flashed open.

"I don't say he committed the murders," Rossiter went on, "but he's responsible for the white marble hand."

Mary let out a squeal. Rossiter clumped over and seized her by the shoulders, towering huge over her.

"I want you to be quiet," he said. "Not a peep. I want all of you quiet. Sit down now."

Then Tom appeared.

Pale, dark-haired, sharp-featured, in loud and shabby clothes. Something of the gangster there, something of John Wilkes Booth. Arrogant and cringing, François Villon in loud and shabby clothes.

"There's your father," said Rossiter. "Go and apologize to him for what you did on the night he chucked you out."

"I'm sick," said Tom shrilly. "I can talk to my own father without you butting in."

Rossiter took him by the collar. "There was a snowstorm that night," he said. "A bad snowstorm. Jinny told me so. You wouldn't walk two miles to town in the middle of that and you didn't. I rather think you slept in the carriage-house."

Tom let out a cry as Rossiter picked him up like a ventriloquist's doll and deposited him before Judge Quayle's chair.

"Look here, sir," the big Englishman went on, "I don't know why you were so afraid of the hand you broke off that statue but this son of yours knew you *were* afraid of it. I'm afraid he's got rather an unpleasant disposition and he's fond of ghost stories—or he was. And while he was out there in the carriage-house, weeping over the way you'd handled him, I fancy he got the notion of scaring you once before he left town."

Judge Quayle was sitting bolt upright. Rossiter released Tom. He plopped to the carpet in a sitting position, ludicrous and foolish.

"You know, sir," Rossiter told the judge, confidentially. "I'm a wizard, really. Watch me cast out a devil. I just dropped him on the floor. And there's what's been frightening you for years."

His broad, homely grin expanded.

"He's like most devils, sir. He looks foolish when you pick him up by the collar or the seat of the pants and drop him out in the light. But as long as you kept him inside and never talked about him he was bad."

Judge Quayle seemed to be incapable of motion. He looked at Tom. Tom's eyes were defiant.

"You mean—" said Judge Quayle.

"It's mostly supposition, of course," interposed Rossiter. "But I think he tried to get in that window over there." Rossiter jerked his thumb towards the window through which he himself had made his entrance. "Jinny told me there was moonlight, and that you were sleeping on a couch in here. I tried the effect of my own hand at that window, and it gave Mr. Marle and the county detective rather a turn.

"In the middle of the night, by moonlight, I expect the effect would be rather better. Particularly if he'd painted a glove white and used it, with maybe an old black stocking to conceal the rest of his arm. If you were lying down, you would probably have thought it was crawling across the table."

Rossiter was rambling on with a sympathetic smile. He turned to me apologetically.

"I say, Mr. Marle, you must have thought I was off my chump when you saw me prowling about in the carriage-house. I rather suspected what had happened and I'd found a bucket that had white paint in it, and an old black stocking and the carriage-robe he must have used to keep himself warm and so—"

Tom started to get up but Rossiter forced him down on the floor. Jinny began to laugh hysterically.

"Then," I said heavily, "there never has been any appearance of the hand except that?"

"What puzzles me," muttered Rossiter, rumpling up his hair, "is why you, sir," he looked sympathetically at the judge, "ever were afraid of *a* white marble hand to begin with. I knew you were because this cheerful little actor here on the floor made some remark about it on the night you threw him out. Nobody else seemed to know. I

think it would do you good if you told us."

The judge looked as dazed as though bright lights were in his eyes.

"My son," he said, with an effort, "did that?"

"Let me up!" Tom complained. Rossiter stepped back. "I don't see why you make all this fuss over it! I did it. But what of it? I'd forgotten all about the thing. I thought you were talking about something important." He looked round, appealing to all of us. "For God's sake, don't look at me like that! I haven't done anything. That was just a joke."

"It's all right," said the judge. "It's all right."

He stretched out his hand, patted Tom on the back. Then he drew himself up.

"I cannot explain," he said dully. "I cannot tell you anything." He clenched his fists. "All of you are staring. All of you would be glad if I were dead. But you won't have the satisfaction. Get out, all of you."

Rossiter seemed suddenly weary.

"All right, sir," he said. "We'll go. But I warn you—"

"Thank you, young man, I don't need your advice," rasped the judge. But if the pack of you won't get out of here—"

MARY stepped forward to plead with him but he shook her off. I joined Rossiter in urging the two women to make an end of it. Tom had already bolted out of the room.

In the hallway outside I could see the knifelike looks in the eyes of Jinny and Mary. Tom turned to regard them in a way which was pitiful.

"We'll talk to *you,*" Jinny said, taking his arm.

Tom said: "You haven't got any right to kick me out of here. He said I could stay. Let go of me."

Mary was blubbering now but Jinny just smiled tightly at Tom.

"Come into the parlor, little darling," she said. "We won't be disturbed there."

Rossiter shepherded us into the parlor and lighted the gas-globes there. Tom burst out sobbing.

Then Jinny said: "You're responsible. You made this place a crazy-house. Now you're going to tell us all about it."

"Tell you—what?"

"Why you did that. Why Father was frightened."

From sobbing, Tom began to laugh hysterically. He looked ill and blue and silly. He was shivering.

"But," he whispered, "that's the crazy part of it. There isn't any cause. Father wrecked himself by brooding over something he did when he was a kid."

"If you don't tell the truth—"

"I am telling the truth! That's what he was like. Fear inside him. He could keep it from most people. But I knew."

"Fear of what?" Jinny demanded.

"Of anything. Oh, my God, I see you don't know what I'm talking about! He had to have something to worry about always. Everything worried him, a speech or a decision or even a casual word on the street. He's as neurotic as an old woman."

Jinny started after him, her fingers suspiciously like claws. Rossiter caught her.

"He was brought up that way," Tom said. "He could have helped himself if he'd only have talked. But he regarded merely *nervous worries* as womanish. It's what his father taught him."

"I rather think it is the truth, you know," the Englishman said. "I know the type pretty well. *I* have an old man, too."

"He broke the hand off that Caligula statue when he was a kid," Tom went on huskily. "And that's all there is to it. He had a Scotch nurse—"

"Yes," Rossiter said. "Mrs. Quayle told me something about that nurse. Look here." He turned to us, somewhat fiercely. "I dare say you expected this to turn into something melodramatic like a man he'd killed or a murderer he'd condemned who had sworn to get him. Well, it's much more personal and terrible than that. The things that really drive a man mad are fears of nothing at all—little fears that grow and grow until he sees his fear in the smallest shadow. It may be money or it may be jealousy or it may be just a phantom."

"And in this case?" asked Jinny.

Rossiter stared at the floor.

"He'd just lost all his money. His family was getting out of hand. I think something popped into his mind

that had been worrying him all his life. He'd laughed at it but it never does any good to laugh at devils. And," Rossiter muttered, "you say he had broken the hand off that statue?"

"You're no fool," Tom said.

"That nurse," Jinny said, "died before I was born. But I've heard of her. You mean—a bogey. She was the hell-fire type."

"She had him under her thumb until he was ready to go away to school," Tom said. "I've talked with old Marlowe, who was a kid with Dad. Marlowe said she scared him with every horror threat she knew. And I knew because I've seen him when I used to tell ghost stories.

"I know where I get my love for that stuff!" Tom almost screeched. "He's not a lawyer. He's an actor. Like me. It was a ghost story that first put me on to what was scaring him. It was a story called 'The Beast With Five Fingers.' I asked him what was wrong. For he'd turned all white and sweaty."

Beyond this white room I was looking at that portrait of the nurse, hung in the library.

"He was only a kid when he did it," Tom said vacantly. "He had a fit of temper and smashed that statue's hand with a hatchet."

"With a hatchet?"

Tom nodded.

"And she told him it would come back some night and get him."

"But listen!" Jinny cried desperately. "A thing that occurred when he was a kid—"

"He didn't think of it much until the devils began piling up," Rossiter said. "But it had always been there—the nurse saw to that. And then he lost his money and began to take morphine and the old-time hobgoblins started coming back. Then he had this quarrel with Tom and that finished him."

ROSSITER moved across the chill bright room, his head down.

"I wish I'd never pried into this," he muttered.

Jinny said in a queer voice: "Then—that night Tom played the fool was the only night a hand ever—"

"Yes. The rest was all his damned imagination and the morphine."

"But Mary saw—"

"No, I didn't," Mary said huskily. "I was half-crazy and I'd heard about Jeff doing police-work and I was afraid he'd been brought out here to play detective and I wanted to see what he thought of it, without telling him anything more than I had to. The minute I saw you that night, Jeff, I thought Papa had sent for you and I was afraid of scandal."

I remembered her frightened face in the hall when she had let me in.

"Then," Jinny cried, "these murders have nothing to do with the hand at all?"

"I'm afraid not." Rossiter's face was rather pale. "I've got to tell you. The motive was money."

A suspicion, a ghastly idea, stirred at the back of my brain. Then, from an immense silence, Jinny spoke.

"Where—is—Matt?"

Mary let out a cry. Rossiter had taken a heavy step forward, causing the light-globes to tinkle.

Then I realized that a voice was crying out in the house. Springing past me, Rossiter flung open the door. We saw the nurse at the head of the stairs.

"Will someone please come up here? Mrs. Quayle's gone into the bathroom and I can't rouse her. We may have to break open the door."

For a moment Rossiter stood motionless, staring up. With his wild hair and great shoulders he looked like a Norseman. His voice fell, vacant and hollow, into the hall:

"The murderer's loose!"

A crash and a cry. I whirled. Rossiter plunged towards the library as though he meant to carry the door off its hinges. I was just behind him.

Only one low burner was aflame with pale yellow-white. Judge Quayle, with blood on his face, stood behind the table. He looked at us once, uncomprehendingly; then his eyes were obscured in a gush of blood, he half twitched, and pointed into the shadows just before he fell. He was pointing at Calagula's statue.

With a steady step Rossiter walked over towards it. My feet crunched in pieces of the broken brandy-bottle which had been used as a weapon.

Rossiter shot his hand into the dark pocket of shadow.

"You had better come out, Mrs. Quayle," he said. "Your work is finished."

EPILOGUE

EIGHT, sounded the clock. The echoes fell away, settling softly into the quiet Vienna streets. Through my mind twisted the evil images which were contained in the pages which lay under Rossiter's hand.

". . . for instance," said Rossiter, drawing deeply on his cigarette, "when you spoke of Judge Quayle and the possibility that he might have poisoned himself to divert suspicion, you should have realized that hyoscin's effects are almost instantaneous.

"Nobody would swallow hyoscin and trust to luck that somebody would discover it and pull him through. Nobody would poison that syphon and run the risk of killing an innocent outsider. The murderer would have refrained because he would need somebody to give the alarm and save him from his self-inflicted dose.

"But," he continued, "it is probable that a woman might give herself arsenic to divert suspicion. It is fairly slow, its symptoms are unmistakable and, since Twills was constantly in attendance on her anyway, she would run no real risk. But she took no chances. She told Twills she was being poisoned."

He took a sip of his kümmel. "Let's look at the question of arsenic and hyoscin from the poisoner's viewpoint! When you've got six grains of a swift, almost certain poison, hard to spot and as deadly as anything in the drug line, why do you want to mess about with an uncertain thing like arsenic?

"The murderer must have got all this knowledge from overhearing the conversation between Judge Quayle and Twills. Well, Twills said that arsenic was 'the most painful but least dangerous' of all toxics. So what was the murderer's idea in using it *if the murderer really intended to kill the one to whom the arsenic was given?*

"Furthermore, after you've pinched enough hyoscin to kill everybody in the house, why run the risk of being seen pinching a tin of arsenic—hard to hide and not half so effective as what you've got—from the pantry, where there was somebody nearly all day?" I could not see Rossiter's face but I could sense the wrinkle between his brows.

"And not only that, why act so inconsistently as to give two people hyoscin and one person arsenic? If poisoners have one distinguishing characteristic it's this—they always use the same poison. So the business looked fishy from the start.

"But let's look at another angle of the thing. Mrs. Quayle was dangerous. I rather suspect she was a necrophile. You might consult Krafft-Ebing. I'd sooner drink castor oil than read the chap's stuff myself but sometimes he's extraordinarily revealing. By necrophile I mean a being who's fascinated by death and the dead.

"Necrophiles love to be in sick-rooms, to prepare the dead for burial and delight in the tasks normal people shudder at. A number of famous women poisoners have been in this category, like the cheerful lady they called The Angel of Allegheny. It's a gland or nervous disease.

"In Mrs. Quayle's case, it may have been accentuated by her neuritis—melancholia, depression and hatred of her husband and by having been exposed to Jane McGregor. Her thoughts always kept running on death. Even her dreams dealt with it. Her first thought, when her husband kicked Tom out of the house, was to poison herself. She disguised this tendency when she spoke to you by pretending she was in fear for her own life—but she wasn't.

"The motive was the clearest thing of all. Who had a poisonous hatred for Judge Quayle? Everybody knew she had never forgiven him for what he did to Tom. She could think of nothing but Tom. Without this tinge of madness she mightn't have gone so far as murder. But it grew and grew until she conceived the idea of poisoning her husband. Good Lord, man! It's so dashed plain!"

He picked up the copy of Heine's poems with those strange words on the flyleaf. He went on:

"How else can you explain these words: *'Could personality have made so deep an impression?'* Well, it couldn't have been anybody else but Tom, could it? Twills knew, of course. I fancy he suspected she had pinched the hyoscin out of his surgery. That was why he knew instantly, when he saw the Judge fall, what the poison was.

"Twills failed to suspect that she

might already have planted hyoscin where he, Twills, could take it. But he thought that, due to the arsenic, she couldn't act for a day or so. He still wasn't sure—witness the first question he wrote. But she had put hyoscin into the bromide-bottle at the same time she poisoned the syphon."

"When was that?"

"While the rest of them were having dinner. She had a clear field for over half an hour. I suspect Twills must have dropped a pretty strong hint to her to return the poison voluntarily—and that must have been why he was waiting up."

"But the motive!" I interposed. "You said it was money."

Rossiter slumped back in his chair.

"Yes," he said. "That was the dead give-away. Where all of you went astray was in jumping to the conclusion it was *Twills'* money and Twills' will. Twills didn't figure in Mrs. Quayle's plans at all except that he had to be eliminated because he was suspicious. It wasn't *his* fortune. It was Judge Quayle's fortune, to be given to the disinherited son Tom."

"But Judge Quayle," I said, "didn't have any fortune."

"Righto! *And Mrs. Quayle was the only one in the house who didn't know that.*"

LAMPS were coming out on the street. In the café behind us we heard fiddles being tuned. Rossiter began to roll another of those unholy cigarettes.

"I'm sorry," he said after a pause. "I tried to tell you. Clarissa made special point of mentioning that fact. Of all the people there only Mrs. Quayle hadn't been told that the judge was on his uppers. That was why Twills wrote, 'Was it hope of money, or growing canker?' When they got this pleading letter from Tom asking for money, she must have gone a bit mad. She destroyed the judge's will because she was afraid it might contain a clause against Tom. *She* would inherit and she could bring Tom back."

"And she did destroy the will?"

"Probably we shall never know. But she searched for it and naïvely looked in the drawer of his writing-table. That was where she found his manuscript. And she hated him so much she burned it. Perhaps she thought she was destroying what he loved most. But it was a lead. She was the only one who disliked him enough to burn his manuscript. Maybe she burned both of them. Twills was wondering about it.

"You tried to work out some fantastic theory of the judge directing a plot against Twills and against Twills' money. I say, excuse me!—but it was ridiculous, you know. Twills wasn't thinking about any attempt on his own life when he wrote 'Was it hope of money, or growing canker?' Was, *was,* WAS—that's the word he used, referring to the poisoning of Judge Quayle, referring to what had happened in the past. And who on earth would poison Judge Quayle for money except the one who didn't know he was bankrupt?

"You've only got to interpret those questions written in the copy of Heine and you have the whole truth. She was determined to kill the judge."

"Clarissa's murder," I said, "was committed while she—apparently—was in bed with the nurse in the room."

He grinned wryly. "Damn the luck. If I had been with you and Sargent and Reed when you interviewed the old lady I believe I could have prevented Clarissa's death. Mrs. Quayle didn't know she hadn't killed the judge until you told her! She immediately shifted to her favourite topic of death.

"The first thing which jumps into her head is—Tom. She has failed Tom. So she begins mumbling about Tom, growing so incoherent that you had to leave her. Previously, she had made an effort to throw suspicion on one of the girls by that incredible story about somebody sneaking into her room and not replying to her question."

"Why 'incredible?' "

"It ties up with why she really wasn't afraid of an attempt on her life despite what she said. I think she was vaguely trying to throw suspicion on Mary. She disliked Mary because Mary had always been so bitter against Tom. Besides, Mary had the most opportunity."

"There were times," I said, "when I felt more than a little suspicious of Mary myself."

He nodded. "Well, Mrs. Quayle says she is terribly afraid she may be poisoned. They bring her dinner up. Mary comes in and urges her to eat it. Do you think that, if she had really

been afraid of poison, she would have touched that meal? Do you think that, if she really thought she had heard somebody in the room bent on mischief, she wouldn't have alarmed the whole household?

"No, no. She poisoned her own milk-toast. Then you came in the next day and brought her universe down by telling her she hadn't poisoned the judge after all. She immediately began figuring out ways and means of getting the judge. She'd hidden the poison in the cellar. Now she had to go get it again.

"The nurse told you that she was going to give Mrs. Quayle a sleeping-pill, then lie down to sleep herself. Her nap would be pretty sound. It isn't difficult to palm a sleeping-pill and only pretend to take it. I'm a good amateur magician myself," Rossiter said complacently, "and I know.

"She was desperate, almost mad. She had to do this poisoning all over again. It's the hideous determination of the woman which is so appalling. When the nurse was napping she slid out quietly and went down the back stairs. Clarissa caught her—probably with the arsenic and the hyoscin both in her hands. Clarissa was ready to scream in alarm—and the old lady would not be balked."

All the lights in the café were on. There was laughter, the swishing of feet and flickers of white from women's dresses among the trees. My companion stared vacantly at his glass.

"And," he said in a low voice, "I dare say you, as a novelist, would appreciate what happened. The son for whom she was doing these things was looking on at the cellar window—if he had known it.

"She was stark mad now, of course. She was opening the throttle wide and tearing straight for destruction. She got back to her room somehow. I rather fancy there was blood on her too and she hid it under the bedclothes. When she made her attempt on the judge she just went into the bath between the communicating rooms, locked one door and went out the other."

I SHUDDERED. Rossiter looked at me with a somber expression.

"I'm sorry, old boy. You asked for the gory details. There was blood on her when I found her dead body behind that statue. The exertion, probably, was too much for her heart. It was a blessing, anyhow. And the judge didn't die from being cracked over the skull with that bottle."

He hesitated.

"Look here. I've been trying to keep all this from Jinny's thoughts as much as I can. We shall be going to the hotel to see her soon and I know you won't mention—eh? After all, this is our wedding-trip. She wouldn't like to be reminded of what happened."

"Of course not," I said. "And I haven't offered my congratulations." I looked at his reasonably neat clothes. He no longer had quite so apparent a look of being blown through the world by a tipsy wind. "You're looking domesticated already. Are you still in the detective business?"

He shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, dash it. After seeing all that unpleasant business at the Quayles', my own old man—well!" He threw out his hands. "I knew I should probably give in when I took that job in the Police Department. My old man learned where I was, naturally, and he got in touch with me. He's a good sort and I only got him humped when I tried to mess things up at Scotland Yard.

"You see, the governor is High Commissioner of the dashed place. That was why they did me a favor in New York. We had a row, you see. My well-meant efforts to help him paralyzed English justice, *he* said. But after all, he wants somebody to keep his damned old baronetcy going and I'm it."

He gestured plaintively.

"Let's go along to the hotel," he said, "and pick up Jinny and make a night of it. She's fine and blooming. She'd enjoy a bit of a tear."

"You have a certain Mr. Joseph Sargent believing you're the greatest detective in the history of the world," I said. "He didn't believe it when you had us drawing pictures. Wait a minute! Why the pictures?"

Rossiter grinned. "I'm a student of scribblography," he replied with relish. "I couldn't tell you why I wanted to do that or it would have spoiled things. You remember, I asked you to draw a house, a man, a woman, a dog? Well, when you drew a woman you made a

rather funny-looking face with spirally blobs for hair."

"Well?"

"So did Twills," said Rossiter.

He pushed across the yellow book. "Look at it! There's a great deal of truth in the apparently meaningless sketches a person will scribble. Twills was thinking of Mrs. Quayle. Look at that sour face. Look at the ringlets. But even if I could demonstrate that *a woman* was what he had drawn it would be enough to confirm my explanation of what he wrote.

"We *must* all go out and get drunk, what? The place at home, where my old man has us living with him, is a cheerful little birdcage with fifty-four rooms and I'm not exactly suited for the gentle life, you know. Yes, I think we'd better get tight."

I think he was staring out somewhat wistfully at the wide lands he had tramped over in a dusty green topcoat and a battered hat.

"There are just two more things," I said, "that I'd like to ask."

"Oh, carry on! I'll answer 'em, if I can."

"Well, then—that question in Twills' book about the morphine."

"Here's the explanation, I think. Twills really believed somebody was continuing to scare the judge all those years with an imitation of a white marble hand. Twills likely suspected that it was Mrs. Quayle and what he wrote had reference to how frightened the judge might be because of the morphine."

"The last thing," I said, "and what seemed to me the horrible part . . ."

"Well?"

"It was the laughter. The nurse hearing laughter in Twills' room. And the way Judge Quayle suddenly came out with those lines about 'poison in jest.' But the nurse swore Mrs. Quayle was safely in bed when the laughter was heard."

"She was," he replied.

Rossiter rose to his great height, towering over the hedge.

"Twills loved this city," he said suddenly. "He wanted to come back here and realize his dreams. . . . Did it never seem strange to you," he broke off, staring into the warm, lamplit dusk, "that Twills didn't save himself? He felt the poison getting him. There was still a little time for an attempt to combat its effects. But he didn't. He was just tired. He just didn't care. It was Twills they heard laughing. He was laughing at his own destiny when he lay there and waited for death."

We walked out into the shadowy street. The orchestra-leader lifted his baton. The surge of a waltz rolled out above the clatter of glasses and the low hum:

"To thee, beautiful lady, I raise my eyes . . ."

PETERMAN GENIUS

The strange true story of the King of Bank Robbers and how he finally had his checks cashed!

by MILLS HOPKINS

IT WAS a beautiful June morning, and Mounted Patrolman Johnstone of the New York Police fought to keep himself from breaking out in a song. But he did unbend enough to hum a tune, to lean over and pat his horse's neck. After all, he reasoned, there was no one around this wild section of New York-Westchester County border to witness his slightly undignified behavior, which probably would be excusable for anyone but a member of New York's Finest.

Cantering along thus, Patrolman Johnstone's eye was caught by a big rock, which in itself was nothing unusual. Rocks, out-croppings of the Berkshire Hills which began in Westchester, were a common sight here.

This rock, however, was different. You don't see drunks lolling around most rocks.

Johnstone Finds Corpse

Patrolman Johnstone dismounted, ready to collar the drunk and toss him into the clink to sleep it off.

This was no drunken man. It was a battered, decomposing body. The man had been in early middle age. His clothing was of good quality, and in the fashion of the day. Beside the body lay a pearl-handled revolver.

Patrolman Johnstone got in touch with his superiors. The alarm went out. Criminals from the Battery to Yonkers were rounded up, herded to the morgue to view the body.

Among the shady characters drawn in by the police dragnet was one Herman Steid, stooge for a notorious fence. In the morgue he slunk up to the marble slab on which reposed the remains.

He gave it a quick glance, drew back, as if the sight of death was too much for him. The cop on duty noticed Steid's actions and his suspicions were immediately aroused.

"Know him? Come on now, Steid. Out with it!"

"Yeah, I know him," Steid whispered. "Dat's Western George. He's—I mean wuz—de fastest peterman wot ever lived." Steid's voice held all the envy, tinged with reverence, that a lesser practitioner of a craft holds for a genius.

"King Of The Bank Robbers"

"Western" George, originally George Leonidas Leslie, and also known as George Howard and the "King of the Bank Robbers," had come to an ignominious end. His soul must have writhed with embarrassment as it viewed that rotting body—the good suit mussed and dirty, the fine shirt stained with blood.

George Leonidas Leslie never would have wanted his society friends to see him in any such condition. The swells, after all, were accustomed to the sight of him dressed in the height of fashion, enjoying the opera, dining in the fancier New York restaurants of the 1880's.

They heartily concurred with George Leonidas Leslie's philosophy whenever he gave a beggar a coin.

"After all, we are of the upper classes, he would say. "We should take pity on the poor and ignorant of the masses, even though we don't necessarily associate with them."

But how the swells would have shuddered had they suspected that Leslie was also known in crime circles as the Number One Boy in the business of relieving the nation's banks of their more negotiable assets! And how they would have howled for his blood had they known that on many occasions it was the banks they themselves owned or controlled which suffered from his depredations. Suffice it to say that they would not have shared the admiration of Herman Steid for Mr. Leslie.

Such A Cultured Robber!

The impeccably dressed Mr. Leslie had all the earmarks of the well brought up gentleman, which he ostensibly was. His clothes were of the best. His language and maners were beyond reproach. He was a connoisseur of the arts and an expert on wines and foods.

Yes, to the social observer, Mr. Leslie's proclivity for getting into bank vaults in the dead of night was his only discernible habit which would have raised eyebrows in the social set where he spent his non-business hours. Later he acquired another unsocial habit, which, as it turned out, was fatal.

According to the underworld, where he was so well-known, this last habit was directly responsible for his violent death. But more of that later.

Mr. Leslie, of the beautiful maners, came to New York, then the crime capital of the world, shortly after the Civil War. He flitted about, embarrassing police of dozens of cities until 1884, when he met his rather rude, for him, demise.

Leslie Was College Graduate

Son of a well-to-do businessman and a graduate of Cincinnati University, where he made an outstanding record in architecture, Leslie found the temptations of the latter-day Sodom irresistible. He got himself into various kinds of trouble, stemming principally from a too-avid interest in wine, women and song, and then found himself on the criminal merry-go-round.

Perhaps a psychiatrist might have discovered the reasons for his entry into crime. It might have been that he was desperate for funds with which to carry on his gay life, or it might have been that crime offered more excitement than did the gay life.

At any rate, one of Leslie's first jobs was the robbery of a jewelry store in Philadelphia, a job which he pulled with one Gilbert Yost. A comparative amateur in those days, Leslie and his pal were caught and tossed into the pokey. Leslie went free on bail, which he had arranged with one of the more brotherly politicians of the City of Brotherly

Love. He promptly jumped bail and left Yost to take a two-year rap.

He Bribes Politicians

He learned something from this experience, and he described it this way:

"Never get caught. Make the job fool proof. Fix everything, including the politicians."

Following his own advice he learned to handle all the details himself, from the planning of the actual job to the fixing of police and politicos and the procurement of fences to dispose of the swag.

That procedure seemed to work, for Leslie never served a sentence, even though he had committed enough crimes to merit every punishment in the penal code.

The actual planning of a bank robbery was Leslie's real forte. It was a challenge to his brilliant but warped mind and it gave him a chance in a way to practise his real profession of architecture. Often he boasted to his fellow criminals that his early training with blueprints and drawings and mathematics was what helped to make him great.

"Education pays," he would tell his mates as they sat over their drinks after talking over a robbery.

He never stopped studying, mindful perhaps of the Philadelphia experience. He made himself familiar with practically every make of bank vault in existence and he owned models of many. With constant study, he got so proficient that he could crack many just by tinkering with the combinations.

He Strives For Perfection

And with what passion for perfection, what attention to detail this suave heister went about his business! If infinite capacity for taking pains is genius, as is claimed, then Leslie was certainly a genius.

Leslie's architectural training was put to advantage in the early stages of planning a job, when he would get hold of the plans of the building in which the victim bank was located. But if he could not snare the plans, he would open a deposit account in the bank, which would give him a good excuse for regular visits.

After a few such visits, during which his eagle eye would take in all the details he would draw his own plans—from memory. His drawings would include all the salient points, such as the location of the vault, doors, windows and even the location of the furniture scattered around the premises, which might be in the way and likely to interfere with a getaway, if one were necessary.

Leslie Rehearses Thefts

Once he had the procedure worked out Leslie went ahead with rehearsals, the strenuousness of which would make a whip-cracking football Legree blush with envious shame. Working from his plans he would arrange a room so that its interior was the same as that of the bank. Then, armed with a light cane, which he used as a pointer or as a prod to get his muggs into action, he would run through session after session, lecturing, explaining and bullying. Needless to say, after a year or two of regular practise sessions of this type, the Leslie gang was letter perfect.

For a long time Leslie had been working on the idea of cracking the Manhattan Savings Institute of New York. Advance intelligence informed him that the bank was loaded to the ceiling with cash and negotiable bonds, and he left no stone unturned in preparing for the job. This one, he determined, was to pay off.

When he had definitely decided to pull the job, he made his way to a Brooklyn saloon and there met a gang of well-known thugs, including such worthies as Jim Brady, Abe Coakley, John Dobbs, "Shang" Draper, "Banjo Pete" Emerson, Jimmy Hope, "Red" Leary and "Worcester Sam" Perris, about as delightful a coterie of yeggs as ever drilled a steel door or slugged a watchman.

One Yegg Is Surly

After some talk over the whisky, Leslie broached his proposition.

"This is a big job. There'll be enough in it for all of us. How about it?"

All of the heisters except Shang Draper listened with interest.

But Draper, a surly individual, was more than hesitant.

"We're doin' all right without you, Leslie," he growled. Besides, that's a tough nut to crack."

"Not afraid, are you, Draper?" Leslie teased.

"Why you—nobody can say that I'm yella!" flared Draper.

"Okay, Draper. Prove it," Leslie snapped, grinning to himself in the knowledge that there wasn't a thug in the world who could outwit him.

Draper again hesitated. But the other members of the gang were sold by Leslie's assurance, and they got Draper to give in.

Master Crook Tells Plans

"Good!" Leslie explained, hunching over the table. "This is the way I've got this caper figured. This is no ordinary job. I've cased it thoroughly. We can't use soup. The charge'd blow the plate glass windows to smithereens and we'd wake up the neighborhood. Now, the janitor, a lug named Werckle, lives in the basement. But I got that fixed. Pat Shevlin's already working in the bank. They tell me he makes a right cute janitor. So we'll get in all right."

The other thugs nodded admiringly.

"You think of everything, don't you, Leslie," Perris said.

"Well, I didn't get to be the best can-opener in the business by not thinking of everything," Leslie replied, modestly.

Draper spat into a corner.

Leslie then proceeded to go into the plans, giving every member of the gang an assignment. Then he took them to his dark warehouse, and ran them through their paces.

All through his rehearsals, it was Draper who didn't get into the spirit of the thing, and Leslie, hard put to control his impatience, gently as he could, explained to the sullen Draper his job.

"Maybe I ought to get rid of this monkey," Leslie mused. Then he dismissed such thoughts. After all, he told himself, I'm the king of the bank heisters. Scum like Draper should be beneath my notice.

The Job Is Attempted

Finally Leslie pronounced his plan and his cohorts perfect, and went to work.

As per schedule, Shelvin let the robbers in, and Leslie went directly to the vault, where he proceeded to go to work behind a screen which he placed before the vault door.

But he was nervous. The usually steady hand shook as he worked the tumblers. He decided to give up the attempt.

"We'll get in again, so don't worry," he told his accomplices as they trooped out. Leslie noted that Shang Draper sneered as he spoke. But Leslie said nothing.

The big attack was made on the Sunday morming of October 27, 1887.

This time Leslie had a stooge bind and gag the janitor, Werckle, who lived in the basement with his family. Leslie and Perris went to work on the vault, the others were placed as lookouts and helpers.

Something Goes Wrong

Spreading his $3,500 kit of tools on the floor, Leslie made ready to roll the tumblers.

The other crooks heard him mutter an angry oath.

They looked at him and saw that beads of sweat were standing out on his face. He seemed at a loss for the next move, but he got control of himself and explained that there was a new plate on the door. Actually, what happened was that the teller who opened the vault that day after Leslie's first raid, had seen that something was wrong, and the original plate had been replaced.

Leslie now felt sure the job was jinxed. But he wasn't ready to give up. A man of lesser ego might have left well enough along, but not Leslie. It was a challenge to his pride.

"We'll have to use soup, boys," he told his confederates.

In three hours Leslie had the vault open.

What transpired during that three hours was so fantastic that it is worthy of the pen of the best fairy-tale writer in the world.

Fake Watchman Fools Policeman

Coakley, dressed to impersonate the janitor, made a pretense of cleaning the bank floor. A pavement pounding cop on the beat, one Van Orden, passed, and saw Coakley. But Coakley, a cool customer, nonchalantly waved to the cop as if he were an old college pal, and the cop waved back, not even slightly suspicious!

When the job was done, they all

trooped out the back door, a bribed cop named Nugent who had appeared on the scene carrying one of the sacks of loot!

This was just another detail that Mr. Leslie had remembered.

But with all this elaborate planning, all this blood and sweat, the Manhattan Savings caper turned out to be the most spectacular flop in Leslie's career.

For like so many other endeavors, demonstrated on the battlefields and in business, the advance reports were not quite comprehensive enough. Only $300,000 of the big slew of bonds they grabbed were of the negotiable variety. There was only $11,000 in cash, small potatoes for a bank of the stature of the Manhattan Savings Institution.

Leslie Got $12,000,000

Though this raid was a flop, it stands out like a sore thumb to break the monotony of Leslie's successes. His total take during his long and dishonorable career was in the neighborhood of $12,000,000, a lot of money even for a bandit who was estimated reliably to have been involed in 80 per cent of all the bank raids pulled in the United States in his time.

Leslie ranged all over the nation, playing no favorites. He opened the big Ocean National Bank in New York for $786,879, and the little Dexter, Maine, Savings Bank for a paltry $10,000, and many in between. He excused the small take of the Maine job by explaining:

"Oh, I was on vacation anyway. That job helped to pay my expenses."

The Manhattan job differed from others of Leslie's jobs in that the police were on it. It took them two years, but finally some arrests were made.

Leslie's stooges, Hope and Bill Kelly, were nabbed and went up the river, but Coakley and Emerson were acquitted and as for Leslie, the master mind himself—they didn't even have enough evidence to try him!

Chief Yegg Goes Free

It was not known whether it was Leslie's perfect track-covering or shoddy police work, but there he was, free, and able to go on cracking the nation's depositories.

As the years went on, Mr. Leslie continued to ride high. He developed an aversion to strenuous "field" work, and set himself up as a consultant in bank robbery, with petermen from coast to coast seeking him out for advice and suggestions. This he would furnish for a big fee or a percentage of the haul.

With practically no attention from the law to keep him on his toes, pleasure-loving Mr. Leslie began to pay less and less attention to business, and more and more to the girls. If he had occupied himself in dalliance with the beauties of the day's cafe society, he might have lived to a ripe old age.

But that was where bad move Number Two came in, and wrote finis to his career.

He became romantically interested in not one, but two, gun molls. One happened to be "Babe" Irving, sister of a notorious gunman of the period. Well, if he had stopped with Babe, it still might have been all right. But Leslie became involved with another dame, who unfortunately, held the affections of Shang Draper, his associate in the Manhattan Savings robbery.

Safe-Cracker's End

Because of the heat, Draper had been forced to lam, and when he returned he began to brood. The fires smoldering in him really flared up when he found Leslie fluttering around with his girl friend.

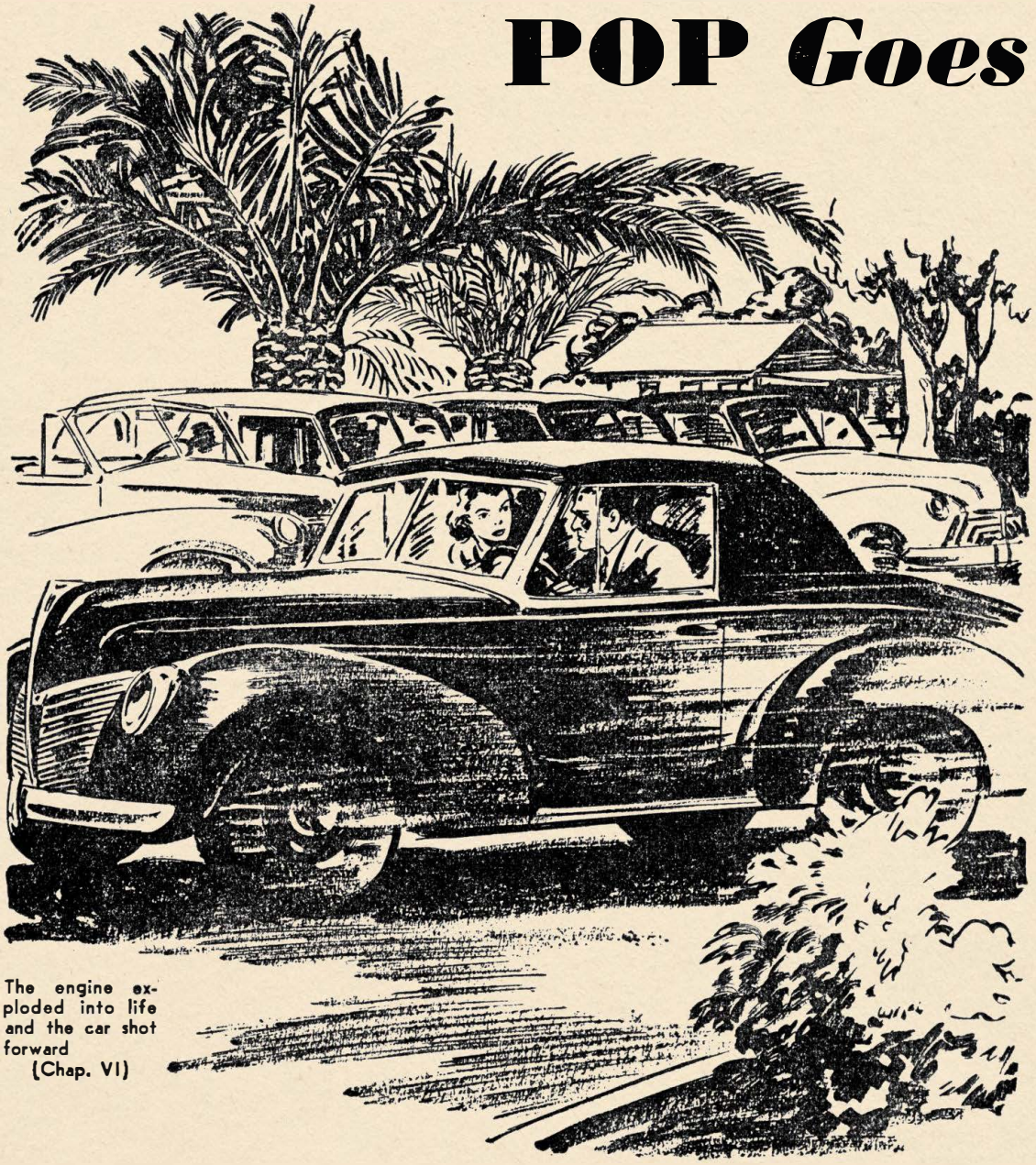
There is to this day no legal evidence that it was Leslie's attention to Draper's girl that resulted in his death. But underworld gossip, which is usually straight, has it that Leslie had last been seen alive in a Brooklyn hideout where Draper and other yeggs gathered, and that the job was done there. Further, the underworld says, Leslie's body was then hauled to the Westchester rock and dumped, later to be found on that Sunday morning by Patrolman Johnstone of New York's Finest.

The underworld would say it was only right for Leslie to be bumped off this way. For no high-hatted dude can steal another guy's sweetie-pal—and live to tell the tale. Even if he is the monarch of his chosen profession.

●

A MYSTERY NOVEL

POP Goes



The engine exploded into life and the car shot forward (Chap. VI)

ODELL walked hesitantly toward the office. His right hand was plunged into the coat pocket of his brown suit. It clutched a crumpled telegram.

The barrel of the .32 under his left arm still felt warm.

He knocked. A man's bass voice rumbled, "Come in."

The office was big and leather-fitted, with a huge desk backed up against the plate-glass window. Outside the window were the stucco buildings of Azure. In the distance, the Salton Sea mirrored the sunlight. "I was wondering what had happened to you," the man behind the desk rumbled.

A MYSTERY NOVEL

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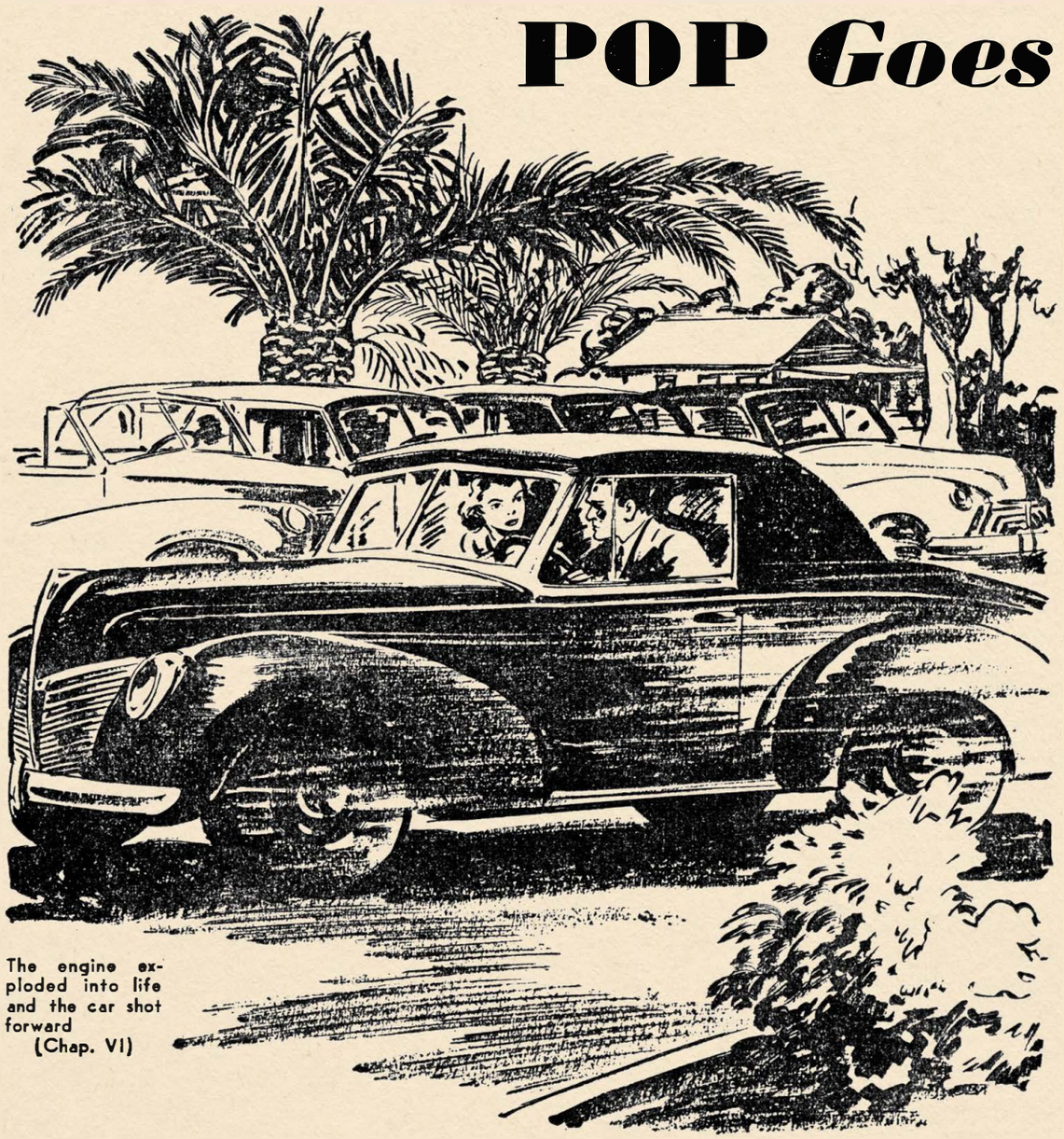

The engine exploded into life and the car shot forward
(Chap. VI)

The QUEEN

BOB WADE & BILL MILLER

Death plays the uninvited guest on the quiz program vacation of the Conovers, who must know all the answers—or else!

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Barselou was massive. Careful grooming played down the height and weight and boldness of feature. His pale blue sports suit was tailored by a creative artist. The jet hair was kept carefully combed back. Barselou was shaved twice a day and powdered to reduce the dark cloud about his heavy jaw. But his mouth was pleasant and his colorless eyes picked up the blue of his suit.

These eyes transfixed Odell. "What's happened?"

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MEET ME IN LAS DUNAS HOTEL PRONTO PER ARRANGEMENT WON POT ON QUEEN HIGH STRAIGHT

It was addressed to Mr. and Mrs. John Jones, General Delivery, San Diego.

There was no emotion on the stony face. "Let's have it."

"It's Anglin. It's the doublecross. After he reported to you this morning, he went to the telegraph office. That's the wire he sent. I used my deputy sheriff's badge to get a copy."

Barselou wadded the paper. "Then he's found the Queen—no matter what he said." He asked softly, "Where you holding him?"

Odell shifted uncomfortably. "Well—I lost him."

Barselou stood up quickly. "You let him get away?"

"He knew I was on his tail. I tried to stop him. I shot at him but I—"

Barselou flattened both palms on the desk top. "Odell, if you'd killed Anglin I've have broken you in two. I'm not going to lose the Queen after all I've spent tracking her down. You did good getting that telegram. But don't start thinking for yourself."

BARSELOU scowled out at the twilight view of Azure. It spread out before him, sloping away till the grayish-brown desert blended into the deep blue of the imprisoned sea. Now the heavy shadows of the Santa Rosa Mountains were darkening the white, buff and lemon of Azure's pseudo-Spanish architecture.

Azure. The Winter Paradise.

He had visualized before its birth the town that now spread out like a gaudy carpet from the Santa Rosa foothills. In the center of the town was his business office, the Azure Development Company. Its assets included Azure's biggest movie theater, the only department store and a multitude of restaurants, bars and other tourist businesses.

Odell stirred uneasily. "What's the next step?"

Barselou wheeled slowly, his anger gone. "Find Anglin. Alive. Obviously, Anglin has found the Queen and he's trying to sell her address to somebody else."

"Mr. and Mrs. Jones, huh?"

"Find Anglin, before he gets to the Joneses, whoever they are."

"I'll bring him in—in one piece."

Odell leaned against a corner of the desk. He was padded enough not to feel it. Around town he was called "Little B," a smaller edition of Barselou. Actually, he bore little resemblance to his employer. Where Barselou was impressive, Odell was as unimposing as an erasure.

"How about the Joneses?" he asked.

Barselou sat down. "A couple from San Diego checking into Las Dunas this evening shouldn't be hard to spot."

* * * * *

"Welcome to Azure, sir. And now if you'll please put your John Henry right here. . . ."

The thin desk man spun the registration card around. The guest wrote, "Mr. and Mrs. John Henry." After a pause for effect, he added "Conover."

John Henry was no taller than average, with shoulders that were inclined to stoop and a body that was inclined to fat. Wavy brown hair and pleasant. But his chin was strong and moved forward indomitably oftener than John Henry realized.

He was dressed all in brown—sport coat, slacks, loafer shoes, and open-neck shirt.

Gayner, the assistant manager of the Las Dunas, smiled professionally.

"Your bags, Mr. Conover?"

"They're in my car."

Gayner struck a chime hanging on the stucco wall behind him and a boy in a maroon field marshal uniform emerged from a junior jungle of potted palms.

"Vernon, Mr. Conover's baggage." Gayner flipped him the car keys.

"It's in the first row of your parking lot. Green sedan."

John Henry looked around for St. Clair. She was backed against one of the ornate pillars, nodding her burnished red head, but wearing a fixed smile as she listened to the woman who held her in conversational captivity. John Henry sauntered over.

"Darling!" St. Clair said. "You took so long."

"Sorry, Sin." He smiled at the other woman. She was past thirty and imperatively blonde. Her blue eyes hinted shrewdness.

"I'd like to present my husband—John Henry," Sin said. "This is Mrs.—oh, yes, Loomis."

"Miss Loomis," the blonde corrected. "Thelma Loomis."

"How do you do, Miss Loomis."

"I thought I recognized your wife, Mr. Conover. I'm with *Fan Fare.*"

Sin explained, "That's a movie magazine, darling. Miss Loomis writes for it."

"Well," said Conover. "That's nice."

"Gossip stuff," Thelma Loomis said in a machine-gun voice. "Features on the stars—marriages, divorces, love and the atom bomb." Miss Loomis, it seemed, had made a mistake. "A natural one," she maintained, "considering how attractive your wife—did you call her Sin?—is."

"That's a nickname," Conover explained for the thousandth time. "Her name is St. Clair." The British pronunciation made it Sinclair and usage made it Sin. Sin never minded. The nickname fitted her—even in the simple beige traveling suit mussed by the San Diego-Azure ride.

THE THICK hair, to her shoulders, was nearly the color of a cherry coke. Sin's face was piquant, but not so pretty as it was surprising. Her skin was a clear and delicate bronze that contrasted disquietingly with slanting green eyes. Her happy mouth kept Sin from being completely sirenish but still added up to a picture of lighthearted deviltry.

"I have to be on the *qui vive* for any of the Hollywood clan," Thelma Loomis was saying brassily. "So I'm a lobby-haunter."

"All we did was win a quiz contest, Miss Loomis." Sin began telling all about it. She had been one of the contestants on the Be Bry-Ter Quiz Show in Hollywood. "The jackpot question was to identify a quotation—and I did."

"So here we are with a free vacation," chuckled John Henry.

"What was the quotation?" Thelma Loomis scribbled some shorthand.

"I can't remember," Sin said plaintively.

John Henry came to his wife's rescue. "She can't remember now. Honest, Miss Loomis. That's the way Sin's memory works."

Baggage clattered on the red-tiled floor. Vernon panted gloomily, "I'll show you to your cottage now."

Sin was ready but the writer was

Crouched on the window was a gigantic black cat (Chap. VII)

after her. "What does your husband mean about your memory, Mrs. Conover?"

"Oh, it isn't much." The redhead was getting annoyed. "A party trick mostly. I remember nearly everything I read, that's all, until I've once repeated it."

John Henry started his wife toward the glass doors. He put an end to the conversation with an over-the-shoulder, "Glad to have met you, Miss Loomis."

Thelma Loomis put her little notebook into the pocket of her yellow linen dress. A glance across the lobby and her eyes sharpened.

A man in an immaculate white suit was sitting militantly in an armchair. He watched Sin sway down the steps with interested gray eyes. His hawk face was deeply tanned and in vivid disparity to his silver hair. A white sun helmet was perched on the arm of his chair.

And behind his shiny mahogany counter, Gayner gazed after the Conovers until they had wound out of sight along the flagged path. Only then did he bring his eyes back to the registration card before him.

Mr. and Mrs. John Henry Conover. San Diego.

He picked up the telephone, spoke to the operator.

"Give me Mr. Barselou, please."

CRICKETS chirruped like traitors every place but where Anglin stepped across the grass in the rear of the Las Dunas. Weirdly muted, came the sound of the orchestera in the Oasis Room.

The wound in his shoulder had opened again. The blood trickled down over his hand. Odell had been smarter and faster than he looked.

It was a good thing the cottages were white stucco. They strung out for him to count. He couldn't read the numbers because the moon hadn't shown up yet.

"Nothing better go haywire," he growled.

He wanted to get rid of the whole thing and clear out. The tenth cottage. Just four more to go and he could deliver the goods and vanish.

Ah, here it was. He stepped confidently up to the blue wooden door. From inside came the murmur of voices and a little light seeped through the Venetian window blinds onto his dirty leather jacket. Anglin was a squat man with skin as weather-beaten as his clothes. He braced himself against the white stucco and shook his foggy head. His calloused hand left a smear of blood.

He squeezed the door handle and stepped into the small living room. Light came from the open door to the bedroom. Beyond that somewhere, a man was singing.

A woman spoke from the bedroom, her voice startled.

"Who's that?"

She was as jumpy as he was. But she ought to be better trained. He told her in a low voice, "Shut up, for the luvva Mike."

Anglin could see her now, standing before the dressing table. The brush she'd been punishing her red hair with dropped from her hand to the thick rug.

He hadn't expected to know her. The big boy used different girls for different operations. This one was a looker, but why didn't she catch on?

"Get out!" she whispered. "Get out or I'll scream."

"Quit it," he said, leaning wearily against the door jamb. "Where is he? I got it for him."

"If you don't get out, I'll call the police."

What was she talking about, anyway? "You're from 'Dago, ain't you?"

She nodded.

"Then for the luvva Mike get him."

Her glance went to the phone beside the bed. Anglin put his hand in the pocket of his leather jacket, so when she looked back at him, he held the little black automatic in his horny palm.

"I don't know what you got in mind, sister. But I ain't got much time."

Behind the closed bathroom door, the man began to sing again. Anglin gestured with the gun.

"Get him."

"What are you going to do?"

He felt dizzy as the room swam around. He brushed the woman aside and rapped the muzzle against the door panel.

"Okay, okay," said the singer inside.

Anglin threw the bathroom door open and stood staring. The man inside was a young fellow, not too big but stocky,

and his body was faintly pink from a vigorous towling. He wore blue rayon shorts.

"What the heck!" he said.

"Oh, Johnny be careful," the girl quavered.

Something was screwy here. The advance arrangements had been specific about their cottage number. The only unknown had been the when and Anglin had wired that this morning. Was this more of Barselou's bunch?

"I'm sorry," he mumbled and began to back toward the living room door. "Reckon I made a mistake."

The stocky young man moved forward. "What's this all about?"

"Never mind, son. I—" Anglin opened the door and stumbled off the porch onto the soundless grass.

MR. TRIM came back to his booth. "That was my company long-distance," he apologized. "Business. I'd never be able to afford a place like this except on business."

"Oh, is that so?" Thelma Loomis commented.

She really should ask the little bore what his business was, but she'd been asking questions all day and was tired of it. She was watching Sagmon Robottom.

The man in the white suit sat morosely on one of the bar stools of the Palm Room and nursed his second Martini. Robottom was a tall man and his athletic figure was erect. Even his silver hair stood up like cropped and frosty grass.

Was he waiting to meet somebody? Thelma Loomis wondered. She drooped a little as she remembered her own companion. Then she saw Mr. Trim's watery brown eyes welling curiosity and waiting.

"Oh, I'm sorry—what were you saying, Mr. Trim?"

"I was saying that you must have quite a fascinating job, Miss Loomis. Lots of folks probably envy you the chance to mingle with movie people."

She sized him up again. He certainly wasn't much. Small, nearly bald, a pug nose like a doorknob on a tan prune, and discolored, broken teeth.

"I really should have stayed in Palm Springs this week end," she said. "I just had a hunch that someone important might pop up here."

"And they haven't?"

Miss Loomis snorted. "The only interesting people here are that cute couple in Cottage fifteen—and, of course, Sagmon Robottom—the Prince Charming of archaeology. Robottom's the All-American Boy grown up."

"He looks like a dashing fellow," said Mr. Trim. "But what's so unusual about the couple in Cottage fifteen?"

"The wife has a peculiar memory. Remembers everything she's read until she says it, then it's gone for good. And that won them a quiz contest. They—"

Mr. Trim sprang to his feet.

"Holy smoke! Are they here already?"

She watched him navigate swiftly toward an exit.

* * * * *

"It beats me," John Henry said. "Why'd he bust in here?"

"Oh," Sin said, "I guess he just made a mistake, like he said." Now that all the inside lights were blazing away and the windows and doors locked, Sin wasn't afraid any more. "Why don't we forget it?"

Sin had on her nylons, when the rap came on the cottage door. John Henry was still pants-less. Clutching the dressing gown tight around her, Sin headed for the door. Vernon, the freckled bellhop, stood outside grasping an envelope in both hands. He thrust it toward Sin,

"I'm supposed to deliver this invitation."

John Henry came up, hastily buckling his belt.

"Invitation?"

The freckled youth was pained. "From the hotel. They're throwing a big costume brawl tomorrow night."

"Oh, honey!" Sin's eyes sparkled. "I love costume parties."

"This one you're supposed to come as what you'd most like to be," Vernon said. "Now isn't that something?"

"It'll be fun," Sin said stoutly.

"Maybe," Vernon doubted.

After he'd gone away, Sin repeated, "It'll be fun." Her husband laughed.

II

BARSELOU speaking."

"Odell."

"Where'd you see Anglin last?"

"He was trying to crack the hotel from Andreas Street."

"Then keep that Las Dunas sewed up."

"We are. Incidentally, our Mr. and Mrs. Jones have checked in."

"Gayner told me that. There was only one couple from San Diego today. Now listen, Odell—tonight may mean whether or not we ever see the Queen. Anglin's got to be found quick. If he contacts anybody at all—"

"I'll call you back."

"And get this through your thick skull. This is one time when it's smart to keep up with the Joneses. . . ."

John Henry had his white shirt buttoned when a knock sounded again.

Sin said firmly, "I'm not going this time. I intend to get my clothes on."

"All right, all right," Conover muttered and went to the front door. He opened it to say gruffly, "Yeah?"

It was a wizened little man in a black serge suit and his late fifties. He had a big smile and his hand was outstretched.

"Mr. Conover, my name is Trim. On behalf of the Bry-Ter Tooth-Paste Company may I welcome you and Mrs. Conover to Azure."

"Well, thanks," said John Henry uncertainly. "Won't you come in?"

Mr. Trim stepped in and stood blinking in the living room. John Henry could see no suspicious bulge under Trim's let armpit.

"What was it, honey?" Sin demanded from the bedroom.

It broke the silence. Mr. Trim cleared his throat.

"Mrs. Conover, I represent the Bry-Ter Tooth-Paste Company."

"Oh, how thoughtful," Sin threw out to him, but she didn't appear.

"I've been commissioned by the Company to sort of look after you—see if I can do anything to make sure you enjoy your stay here."

"Are you staying here at the hotel, too, Mr. Trim?" was John Henry's question. The black-suited man nodded. "Then we'll know where to get in touch with you—if we have to."

"That's right! Mr. Trim massaged the door handle wistfully. "I'm always available—day or night." His laugh was forced. "Well, good night, Mr. and —uh—Mrs. Conover. Welcome to Azure."

He stepped out onto the brightly lit porch, peered at the cottage wall, and turned.

"Say! That looks like blood!"

John Henry sighed, "It certainly does," and closed the blue door.

They went to the Ship of the Desert for dinner. It catered to a clientele that could pay four dollars for steak without expecting stock in the restaurant.

The Conovers ate at a candle-lit table near where a small waterfall rippled over neon-illuminated rocks. The amber light of a moon threw faint shadows against the walls, which were painted in blues and browns to simulate the sweep of the desert. Palm trees carried out the illusion. The waiters wore burnooses, but the management had underwritten the lushness with an excellent cuisine.

Sin finished her dinner. "Now if I can just have some more coffee—"

John Henry reconnoitered after their waiter.

"Odd," he said softly. "I thought for a minute I saw our friend with the gun. That was the first time anybody ever drew a gun on me," he said.

THE DUTIES of assistant personnel manager of an aircraft parts factory didn't satisfy a deep-rooted urge for adventure which lurked behind his conservative manner. He had never been able to make Sin understand this.

"Sin," he said, "I don't think you have any love of adventure. A mysterious stranger with a gun, a bloody handprint on our front porch—and I've a feeling we're being watched." Her green eyes didn't change expression but he flushed, anyway. "All right, all right—I still think something's going on behind our backs. I wouldn't be surprised if somehow we haven't accidentally upset some criminal conspiracy. We do know it involves a transfer of something. Didn't the man say he had 'it' for me? And he looked like a miner."

" 'It' could be anything."

"I'd like to meet that fellow again. Next time, I'll find out just what's going on."

Their Arab-gowned waiter returned with coffee. He poured skillfully and deposited a woven salver containing the bill on the table.

"I won't be surprised next time."

John Henry leaped for Mr. Trim's throat (Chap. VIII)

John Henry stared balefully at his coffee. "Just let anybody make a suspicious move."

Sin sipped some steaming liquid. "Good coffee," she murmured. Then she jumped and screamed, "Johnny!"

John Henry had knocked over his coffee cup. All around, customers saw a young man with a white face staring at the bill on the woven salver.

Sin reddened at being part of the floor show. She looked at the spreading brown stain. "Honey, you've ruined their tablecloth."

"There" he whispered. "Look at that!"

His forefinger stabbed toward the salver. Sin looked at the bill, then she stared, awestruck.

It wasn't a bill, at all. It was just an ordinary playing card. The Queen of Diamonds. And across the queen's face someone had written:

"Your deal. . . . . ."

The headwaiter, colorful in his Foreign Legion uniform, waited for the Conovers to reach the balcony. Sin held tight to John Henry's arm. He could feel her trembling and the greenish eyes were slightly scared.

The headwaiter knocked on the oak-paneled door at the end of the balcony. A man's voice grated, "Come in," and the Foreign Legionnaire bowed the Conovers into the office ahead of him.

It was all leather except for the spacious plateglass window. A burly man who stood there wheeled as the headwaiter closed the door.

"This is the owner, Mr. Barselou," he said. "Mr. and Mrs. Conover." He bowed and left.

"Now, Mr. and Mrs. Conover," Barselou rumbled in a slow-freight voice,

"suppose you sit down and tell me what seems to be the trouble."

Sin sank into the leathery embrace of a chair, but John Henry advanced belligerently.

"This," he said, and flipped the pasteboard queen face up on the desk.

Barselou picked up the card. After a moment of study, he smiled amiably, and murmured, " 'Insipid as the queen upon a card.' "

Sin replied automatically, "Aylmer's Field. Alfred, Lord Tennyson."

Barselou quirked an astonished eyebrow but John Henry didn't intend to explain about his wife's trick memory at this moment.

He said, "That's what goes on in your restaurant. That's why I insisted on seeing you."

Barselou chuckled. "I'm further in the dark than you are, Mr. Jones."

"Conover," Conover corrected.

"Sorry. I've been thinking all evening about somebody named Jones. Tell me about the Queen. Like a mystery story, isn't it?"

"Okay," said John Henry. "It was like this."

When he was done, Barselou rubbed a spadelike hand over his heavy jaw before he spoke. "Incredible."

Sin said, "We're getting tired of that sort of thing, Mr. Barselou."

Pale eyes sparkled. "Why? has something else happened?"

John Henry silenced his wife with a glance. "We're tired from our trip, that's all."

"Yes, quite a drive from San Diego," agreed the restaurant owner, fiddling with the card again. "The queen symbol intrigues me—yet you say it or this 'your deal' inscription has no significance for you."

"What are you going to do about the waiter responsible?" John Henry wanted to know.

Barselou said, "The simple fact, Mr. Conover, is that we have no such waiter as you have described."

"Don't tell me a stranger could walk in here, serve us our meal—and nobody would know the difference! How about the headwaiter? How about the cook?"

Barselou remained undisturbed, almost mocking.

"Perhaps it was a joke, Mr. Conover. Perhaps intended for somebody else. About all I can do is apologize profoundly—and pick up your check, of course."

John Henry's stubborn chin jutted out. Barselou's bland assumptiveness annoyed him. "That's very nice," he said, "but if it's all the same to you I think we'll take a look around before we go."

ODELL lounged restlessly against the stucco wall of the restaurant, up the alley. Wadded up under his arm was an Arab burnoose.

He wondered if Barselou had got anything out of the young couple. The queen right in their laps ought to start some fireworks.

A faint scuff of shoes against the pavement twirled him alertly around. Somebody was coming down the alley from the other direction. The man stumbled as if he were having trouble with the dark. Odell slid his hand to the cold butt of his .32.

The footsteps stopped. A match rasped and the blackness was momentarily shattered as the stumbling man held the flame in front of him, peering.

A silent laugh rippled Odell's fat. Talk about luck! Here was Anglin walking right into the net. He put the gun muzzle on the dark blob and walked toward the other man.

"Anglin, don't make any funny moves," he said, "and you'll be all right for a while. The chief says no obituaries."

"Odell!"

Anglin groped wildly for the door in the alley next to his hand. Odell dropped the bundled burnoose and jumped forward, pistol menacing.

Before Anglin could find the handle, the door abruptly swung open, letting a flood of bluish-white light into the alley. Odell could see a figure outlined in the doorway. And the amazed face of John Henry Conover.

John Henry thought the alley had exploded. He barely had time to recognize the weather-beaten prowler in the doorway when the man was driven violently against him, staggering him. Then he realized the noise had been a gunshot.

Sin screamed, "Johnny, Johnny, are you all right?"

"Okay, honey."

Automatically, he held up the leather-jacketed body by its armpits. He

couldn't see anything in the gloom, but he could hear the sound of footsteps, running.

Barselou brushed past him. John Henry felt a shudder go through the figure in his arms. Sin was staring at the man.

"He's hurt!"

Wetness had dyed the back of the leather jacket. The man twisted his head and squinted his foggy eyes. Recognition showed there.

"You already got it," the man choked. "Don't—" The head lolled helplessly.

"Dead?" Barselou scanned the body narrowly.

"Think so—or close to it."

Together, the two men eased the flaccid form to the linoleum under the fluorescent kitchen lights. Barselou's big hand rested lightly on the man's sunburned wrist. Then he got up, grunting.

The great kitchen was packed with white-shrouded cooks, helpers, and robed waiters. The headwaiter was as white as his Foreign Legion trousers.

Barselou lashed at him, "Phone Lieutenant Lay, at the police station. Get your people out on the floor. Your place is with the customers."

John Henry had his comforting arm around Sin. Barselou paced between table and exit, his face angry. He pulled up by the Conovers and his voice was barely controlled thunder.

"What do you know about this man?"

"Nothing," John Henry answered him. "I never saw him before in my life." He canceled Sin's astonished objections by squeezing her wrist.

"He knew you."

"He fell into my arms, that's all. He didn't know I was going to open the door."

Barselou eyes blazed. He said softly, "All right—you don't know him."

"Too bad he didn't get a chance to talk," John Henry said.

Sin protested, "But honey, he did say something to you!" and Conover's warning squeeze came too late.

Barselou hunched his wide shoulders forward.

"So he said something to you!"

"Well," said John Henry, "he tried to say something, but he couldn't quite make it. Too bad, too—it might have cleared the whole thing up."

"A pity," agreed Barselou grimly. "It might have made things easier for everybody."

DEAD all right," Lieutenant Lay said and got up from beside the body.

The second in command of the Azure Police Department stood with his bowed legs apart and scowled at the wall. He was a lanky man in his middle thirties with a horse face and arms too long for his body.

The scowl swung on John Henry. "Mr. Barselou seems to have the idea you knew him." Conover shook his head and kept silent. Lay rasped, "He's not hard to identify. Name's Anglin."

John Henry asked. "Who was he?"

"Oh, he hung around town a lot. Did lots of jobs. Prospected some." He glanced at the sand that had spilled on the floor from Anglin's clothes. "Was a guide once in a while. Used to deal faro over in Las Vegas."

"Lieutenant," Barselou interposed, "maybe that has something to do with the murder. A man like that is bound to make enemies."

"Maybe. Some bozo he's doublecrossed—or cheated at cards."

"What's Mr. Anglin been doing recently?" John Henry asked.

Lay muttered sarcastically, "I can't keep track of everybody in a glorified tourist camp like this. Anglin might have been prospecting. He hasn't been in town often lately."

He knelt by the dead man again, rummaging through the pockets. The black automatic came out first, to be placed on the linoleum. A dirty handkerchief, a small compass and a notebook with all the pages blank, joined the gun on the floor. After a through search, the pile also included a few coins, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, matches and a wallet. The wallet contained a driver's license made out to Homer Anglin, and nineteen dollars.

Lay got up and Barselou tapped the officer's shoulder, drawing him to one side. In a moment Lieutenant Lay came ambling back.

"Conover, why didn't you tell me that Anglin said something to you before he died?"

"He didn't."

"Barselou says—"

John Henry's temper flared. "Barselou's got a lot of ideas. Why doesn't he

have one about that waiter of his that started us on the whole thing?"

Lay said, "Oh, we all have ideas." And he let the Conovers go.

III

THE CONOVERS turned into the palm-guarded walk that wound up to the hotel's front entrance. A rainbow of floodlights, concealed in the shrubbery, bathed the area in carnival hues.

John Henry pursed his mouth. "If we only had some idea what that Barselou is up to—"

"It's nothing that concerns us, Johnny," Sin said. "We don't know he's up to anything, I mean, it wasn't his fault that poor fellow got shot in his alley."

"Look at it this way, Sin. We get that queen card in his restaurant delivered to us by a waiter in one of Barselou's costumes. We go up to his office, and you remark that we're tired from our trip and Barselou says it's a long drive from San Diego."

"Oh," said Sin softly.

"Right. How did he know we were from San Diego?"

"Johnny, he's been checking up on us!"

"Sure, and why?"

"He must think we're somebody else."

John Henry nodded emphatically. "Barselou thinks we're somebody else. Anglin thought we were somebody else. And Anglin gets murdered at Barselou's back door."

They went up the front steps of the Las Dunas and pushed through the glass doors. The lobby was bright and quiet and deserted.

"You have the key?" Sin asked.

John Henry felt in his trousers pocket. "Uh-huh."

"I sort of expected your pocket had been picked. Johnny, who *are* we?"

He grinned. "The Conovers, returning from a festive evening with the police."

Outside their path curved to the cottages. Most of the cottages were still unlighted.

"I'm glad you left our porch light on," Sin said suddenly.

John Henry could have sworn that he turned the porch light off, but there it was, clearly illuminating the black iron 15 on the white stucco.

He punched the key into the lock. Then he withdrew it. He looked down at the lock.

"I could swear I locked it."

He tried the handle. The door swung open into the blackness of the cottage. He patted around for the light switch. The front room came into brilliant being.

Sin's scream was short and piercing. John Henry swore automatically. Sin was wrapped around his arm, half behind him, her eyelashes fluttering in fright.

A girl was sitting in the big chair that faced the door. Her round eyes were ponds of friendly curiosity. Under them, softly prominent cheek-bones slanted into a tiptilted nose. She was young, with a lily-smooth face and black hair. Trim legs were doubled up under her.

"What the hell," said John Henry, "are you doing here?"

"Yes," said Sin definitely.

The girl had a small sultry mouth that said, "You're trying to scare me. Somebody told you I liked to be scared."

The Conovers looked at each other. John Henry said, "Well, that doesn't answer my question, Miss—"

The girl kept smiling, half-veiling bright eyes. Her voice came caressingly.

"I'm so glad you came to call. I need building up."

Sin said flatly, "We live here."

The girl answered, "I live here," and shook her sleek black head slowly.

"Now, look here," John Henry began.

"Tell her, Johnny." Sin nudged him. "Tell her that we're registered here."

"That's right. We're registered here, Miss—"

The girl's face saddened. "I'm sorry this is all a mistake. I was registered for this cottage less than an hour ago. Mr. Gayner was quite definite about the number."

Sin whispered, "Johnny, don't just stand there!"

JOHN Henry took recourse in reason. "Yes, I guess a mistake has been made, all right. They've put you into the wrong cottage. We've been living here ever since early this evening. I'll show you!"

He strode into the bedroom. Their clothes were in the closet. That should

convince the girl that she was in the wrong place. John Henry threw open the closet door.

Sin said, "Oh, honey!"

The closet was stuffed with clothes, but they were the wrong clothes—slinky dresses, evening gowns, dressing gowns. Nothing was Sin's, much less her husband's.

The girl pulled out a hanger with a black robe which, except for collar and cuffs of jaguar fur, was completely transparent. She held it up and looked at John Henry.

"I found this in Mexico City. Would you say it was too extreme?"

John Henry backed up and sat down abruptly on the bed. "I can't understand it," he said heavily. "This is our cottage. I know it is."

"We were registered for this one. We dressed here. Johnny took a bath in that bathroom." Sin pointed a dramatic forefinger.

The girl smiled demurely. "You must have mistaken the number this evening in the dark."

Sin folded her arms. John Henry recognized the battle flags going up.

"I," she announced, "am going to stay right here. This is our cottage."

John Henry interposed, "Suppose I get Mr. Gayner. He ought to be able to straighten the whole thing out in a jiffy."

"Wait, Johnny!" Sin scampered after him. "I don't want to be left alone here!"

The girl came in from the bedroom, and coiled gracefully into her chair again.

"Will you shut off the lights as you go? I like to sit alone in the dark."

"Sure," said John Henry hollowly.

He pulled the blue door shut and hurried Sin toward the friendly brightness of the hotel. . . .

"I wouldn't have had it happen for the world." Mr. Gayner was prostrated.

"Okay, I understand that," John Henry said. He stood behind his wife's chair. Sin sat there fidgeting angrily.

The assistant manager leaned back in his swivel chair.

"Faye Jordan is," he mourned, "a child of whim. Whim and wealth are an uncomfortable combination. Cottage fourteen has been held open for a week, pending her arrival—she paid the rental all that time. When she arrived this evening, I naturally moved her into Cottage fourteen. Then we discovered a mistake had been made in her telegram. Instead, she desired Cottage fifteen."

"Of all the silly things!" Sin exploded. "The cabins are all the same, aren't they?"

Gayner shrugged. "Exactly the same, Mrs. Conover. I emphasized that to Miss Jordan, but nothing would do but that she had Cottage fifteen, so—"

"You moved our things out," John Henry said.

"Just next door," Gayner soothed. "I regret the embarrassment this whole business has caused. I had expected to be on the desk when you returned. I could have prevented this unfortunate episode. I did my best in your absence. I secured permission to move your baggage."

John Henry swallowed. "Permission! Who gave you permission?"

"Your representative here. The tooth-paste fellow. Mr. Trim. . . ."

John Henry stopped pacing around in Cottage fourteen and plopped down on the bed beside Sin.

"I know how you feel, honey." He stroked her hair gently.

"What's so special about Cottage fifteen, anyway?" she demanded.

"Beats me."

There were two light taps on the living-room door.

"There's our boy now," John Henry said.

HE was right. Mr. Trim stood blinking on the porch. His small mouth and bald head reminded John Henry of an underfed Humpty Dumpty.

"Come in, Mr. Trim," Conover greeted him. "My wife wanted to see you."

"I hope you'll forgive this intrusion," Trim rattled in his high precise voice.

"We called you," clarified Sin. She folded her arms.

"I know," the little fellow confessed miserably, "you haven't been having a good time. That's why the Company sent me here. And I've failed. I'm awfully sorry the misunderstanding arose."

"We are, too," said Sin, unswerving.

"Mr. Gayner was so wrought up I couldn't refuse. I didn't realize a different cottage would actually make any difference to you. It must have been quite a shock to find your clothes gone."

"It was," John Henry said grimly. "But not so much of a shock as it was to find all our things had been searched."

"Searched! You mean somebody tampered with your personal belongings?"

"Uh-huh. And whoever searched our stuff did it in a hurry. Everything's a mess."

John Henry said moodily, "It's not as if we were surprised. Nothing surprises us any more."

The tooth-paste representative said vigorously, "Something has to be done. After all, I'm responsible."

"Johnny," Sin said, "maybe you should tell Mr. Trim the whole story."

John Henry regarded Trim's anxious expression narrowly. Then he attacked the story, trying to remember everything. The wounded prowler, the robed waiter, the playing card queen, Barselou's hostile attitude. Only when he got around to the shooting in the alley and Homer Anglin's dying message did Trim commence puckering his forehead.

"Say, I don't know what to say," he confessed.

"It'd make more sense if Anglin had given me something," John Henry said. "But he just said, 'You already got it' and died. I didn't get anything."

"But somebody thinks Anglin gave you something, Mr. Conover," Trim said owlishly. "That is quite probably why Mr. Gayner was so willing to accommodate Miss Jordan. Moving your baggage would give him an excellent opportunity to search it."

"Why should Mr. Gayner want to go through our things?" asked Sin.

"Because he was told to, Mrs. Conover. Mr. Gayner's boss—the boss of most things in Azure—is Mr. Barselou. Mr. Barselou owns this hotel."

John Henry grunted, "Well, how do you like that!"

"Just more weight to your belief that Mr. Barselou is hip-deep in this business, whatever it is," Trim said. "And there's no doubt that Mr. Barselou belives you are working against his interests. Are you?"

"For heaven's sake, no!" said Sin.

"Then," said Mr. Trim, "I suggest we go to the police."

"No!" John Henry flushed. "Maybe now that Barselou's searched our stuff, he's convinced we haven't got what he's after. Besides, I'd feel like a dope telling all this to that police lieutenant now."

"Well," said Trim disappointedly, "if you just want to forget it."

WHEN he finally left, Sin and John Henry undressed.

"You know, Sin," John Henry mused as he buttoned his pajama top absently, "I was thinking about what you said earlier tonight. Who are we? We don't know who Barselou thinks we are. Sin, he's fighting somebody he's never seen—or he'd never have mistaken us for them."

Sin said, "But poor Anglin knew we were wrong—after he saw you. What was he trying to deliver? He tries to drop off his 'it' here and no luck. Then he tries to give it to Barselou—and gets stopped."

Sin sighed, "Poor guy—trying so hard to peddle his something." She paused with one hand on the bathroom doorknob. "Suppose Anglin came up the canyon counting the cottages instead of reading the numbers. That's what I've been thinking. You know how some buildings and hotels don't have any thirteenth floor? 'Cause people are superstitious? So they just skip that number. I'll bet there's no Cottage thirteen."

"Sure, that's it! Clever girl! That means if Anglin came along counting cottages, and got our old Cottage fifteen, he was one number over."

"See, Johnny? Anglin came into the fourteenth cottage. But he wanted Cottage fourteen."

John Henry sat up excitedly. "Hey, maybe Anglin was going to meet the girl here in fourteen. He comes to fifteen, instead. As soon as she finds it out—wait a minute! How'd she find it out?"

"She could have seen the blood next to the door where he put his hand. So insists on having the cottage he visited."

"She figures that Anglin left whatever he was to deliver in fifteen. So she wants a chance to look for it. Just in case, our stuff is searched, too. You know, Sin, I think it would be a smart thing if I tried to get chummy with the Jordan girl tomorrow."

The morning sun sent golden rays, caressing the pale buildings, driving

darkness from the streets, invading the palm-shaded grounds of the hotel on the hill.

In Cottage fourteen, Sin entered the living room, her hair brushed into a smooth page-boy that glinted like a ruby.

"Johnny, what are you doing?"

John Henry stopped peeking between slats of the Venetian blinds and spun hastily, his round face guilty. "Just—looking out," was the best he could think of.

"What at?" Sin went to the window herself. "Oh!"

The occupant of Cottage fifteen was disappearing down the flagstone path toward the hotel. There was a great deal of pale skin which her white bathing suit didn't cover.

"Just checking up," John Henry said lamely. "Ever since you figured out that cottage number business—"

"Now see here, John Henry . . . What have you got in your pocket, anyway?" Her hand plunged into the breast pocket of his dark-blue sport coat. "Oh," she said, "your pencil," and dropped the Eversharp back into his pocket.

John Henry put a hand into his pocket and pulled the pencil into view again. His forehead had corrugated into puzzled lines.

"Funny," he said. "This isn't my pencil. Never saw it before in my life."

Sin laughed. "You probably picked it up when we registered."

He paid no attention. The pencil was an ordinary Eversharp, colored black and sea-green, with a gold point and a removable eraser.

"That's what Anglin meant. 'You already got it.' Sin, Anglin stuck this in my pocket when he fell against me last night."

His wife sobered. "Let's throw it away, Johnny."

"No. We should have guessed a pencil before. Remember? In his pockets, Anglin had something to write *on* but nothing to write *with*." Strange excitement gripped him. "Let's just look at it a little before we throw it away."

He turned the Eversharp over and over, scrutinized its scratched surface.

John Henry took off the removable eraser and peered into the cylinder. There seemed to be something wrapped tightly around the lead cartridge. He probed for it with one of Sin's bobby pins, and pried out a long narrow strip of tightly rolled paper.

"Quick, open it up! What is it?" Now the excitement had Sin too, and she crowded close against her husband's shoulder.

The paper was oiled and the tight rolling made it hard to handle, but the Conovers perused the column of writing on the paper strip, then looked at each other for an answer.

"What do you make of that?" John Henry wanted to know.

Sin rejoined that it resembled mostly an incredibly long safe combination. She took the paper from him and read it off carefully.

"R-1. L-3. R-2. L-1. R-2. L-3. R-1. L-2. R-1. L-1. R-2. L-3. R-2. L-5. R-1. L-3. R-2. L-1. R-1."

"Must be a code," John Henry muttered. "R and L usually stand for right and left, but maybe this is a cipher."

"I don't know," Sin admitted. She added, "I don't want to know."

IV

JOHN Henry placed the oiled paper in the Eversharp. He began to amble around the room, speculatively appraising the walls and furniture.

"Sin, what's the most likely place to find a pencil?"

"In the desk, I guess."

John Henry nodded. He pulled open a drawer of the small redwood writing desk, deposited the Eversharp in the pencil trough, and closed the drawer.

"Psychology," he explained. "The best place to hide anything is right under people's noses."

Sin decided the sooner the pencil was stolen and gone, the better. "Hey, where you going, Johnny?"

"Back in a few minutes," John Henry said from the doorway. "After all that's happened, I want to grill this Jordan woman."

"Johnny, you come back here!"

John Henry Conover closed the blue door in time to block the pillow hurled by his wife . . .

Thelma Loomis and Mr. Trim sat at an umbrella-shaded table on the yellow tile bank of the swimming pool. The silver-thatched Sagmon Robottom, across the pool, idly kicked at blue water while he talked gaily with a young girl in a white bathing suit. The four

of them were alone at the pool. Most of the hotel guests were Sunday morning sleepers.

Said Mr. Trim, "What are you watching him for?"

Thelma Loomis moved her gaze hastily. "Curious," she said. "I wanted to see how the old goat operated. He's got quite a reputation around L. A. Plus a wife."

Trim looked disapprovingly at the archaeologist.

"That's no relic he's found there," chuckled Miss Loomis.

The girl's swim suit clung to her rounded, enticing body. An inviting face crowned by braids of black hair was turned up attentively to Robottom. Even across the wide pool came the constant flash of white teeth in the bronze aquiline face.

Then the silver-haired man got up lithely and fumbled in the pocket of his discarded beach robe.

"He's giving her something!" exclaimed Trim. "Say, is it—a key?"

Robottom handed the girl a little card that looked like a claim check, said something, and they both laughed.

Mr. Trim clucked. "Maybe that ticket was a chance on something."

"You can say that again," the blonde writer murmured.

The archaeologist stood on the edge of the pool and stretched. Then he launched his long body into a perfect dive, cleaving the blue water.

"Say!" whispered Trim. "Another married man! Young Conover!"

Miss Loomis brought her sharp gaze up to the girl opposite. The brunette wasn't appreciating Sagmon Robottom's performance at all. Instead, she had her face turned to a stocky young man in gray trousers and blue sport coat who strode up purposefully.

The girl patted the yellow tiles beside her and Conover sat down awkwardly . . .

John Henry had no more than determined how to pursue his course of clever questioning than Miss Jordan said matter-of-factly, "I suppose you're here to find out how I got your cottage. Your wife probably sent you."

"That's not true."

The girl's eyes brightened and she leaned closer to him. He glanced around hurriedly. Sin wasn't in sight. A middle-aged man was flailing up and down the pool, apparently disgruntled over something. And at a table on the other side, Mr. Trim and the fan magazine writer had developed sudden interest in the Sunday comic section.

"Now, Miss Jordan—" John Henry edged away.

"Call me Faye."

"Now, Miss Faye—"

"Faye! With an 'e' like in 'easy.' "

John Henry forgot what it was. The girl had slid along the yellow tile so that her bare knee nudged his leg. He couldn't retreat any farther without falling into the pool.

HE started to give the whole thing up when he saw the card tucked into the waistband of her swim suit. Too large for a calling card, it evidently had some engraved letters on the side that was against her flesh. What was she doing, carrying the card around in her bathing suit?

"Let's talk," he suggested. "Let's talk about you."

"All right. Do you know why I think you're cute?"

"No."

"It's because you give a virile impression."

The fingers with which John Henry intended to steal the card were turning hot and cold alternately.

Faye put her crimson lower lip out. "Oh, you didn't want to see me at all! If you don't build me up, I'll go talk to that cute boy in the pool."

She turned her head toward the white-haired swimmer and John Henry saw his chance. He streaked his hand for the mysterious card. And she turned back. She put her face up close and whispered, "Are you a policeman? I'll bet you think I had something to do with the murder."

"What murder?" He had her now.

"You know what murder, Johnny. It was in the paper this morning. Do you think I did it?"

"Well, did you?"

Faye Jordan shook her black braids disconsolately. "I wish I had. Nobody ever thinks I'm criminal. It's not exciting. Nothing's exciting."

John Henry was baffled. The engraved card had slipped down inside her trunks. He said suddenly, "Why did you insist on changing cottages with us, Faye?"

"Johnny," she crooned, "Mr. Gayner insisted that I move to Cottage fifteen."

John Henry patted her shoulder paternally. "I believe you, Faye."

She stretched toward him as if she expected to be stroked. She whispered, "I'll bet we'll be as close as friends can get—darling."

John Henry gulped . . .

Sin clenched her fists hard. She said to herself: "Now look here, St. Clair, you are not going to lose your temper."

Across the pool, Miss Jordan was smiling sleepily up at John Henry.

Sin gritted her teeth. She was on fire, from the dark red page-boy down to the crimson toenails that peeked out of her suede sandals. She was wearing a filmy white blouse and full peasant skirt that made her look a saucy eighteen. Not like a cast-aside wife.

John Henry was helping the Jordan girl to her feet. He flashed a guilty look at Sin as the brunette seized his hand gaily and started to drag him along toward the guest cottages. Sin clenched her fists.

The reluctant Conover was pulled out of sight between screening palms. Sin marched determinedly after her husband.

On the other side of the palm trees, she felt the grip of a cold, wet hand on her elbow. A toneless voice said: "We had better have a talk."

Towering over her was a swimmer whose hair stood up in wet silver barbs. Water still trickled down his lean hard face and over the wiry muscles of his darkly tanned body.

"Well, I'm sorry," Sin said. "I have to catch my husband."

Iron fingers tightened on her elbow. "Talk first," the man said flatly. "One short warning before it's too late." The damp hand urged her onto a shady graveled way.

"Who are you?" said Sin faintly.

"A person who permits no interference," was the man's answer. They were headed for a huge brick and screen building that loomed through the tropical foliage. "Call for all the help you like," the white-haired man intoned. "No one will notice another noise from this direction."

They stood before the building. Its four corner pillars were bare adobe bricks. The rest was wire mesh. Inside, bright-winged birds darted and soared in whirlwinds of color, enraged at the disturbing visitors. They screamed piercingly.

"Pretend to watch the birds," the flat voice commanded.

RICH-BLOSSOMED trees pressed in from every side. Sunlight through the leaves cast an odd pattern of black and gold over the dripping half-naked man. The din was tremendous. Sin put her hands over her ears.

"Let me go," she begged.

Stronger hands pulled them away again. "Listen to me. My name is Sagmon Robottom."

The name didn't mean anything to her. "Let me go," Sin said again.

"My business permits me no respect for feelings," Robottom said. "I get what I seek. I've robbed graves and rifled tombs to do my duty—immortalize the dead. I want you to recognize how strongly I feel about this entire affair."

"We haven't done anything," Sin said, trying to make the man understand.

"Neither you nor your husband will be hurt," Robottom said. Then he added, "If."

"If what?" Sin quavered.

"If you forget all this Jones business and go home where you belong. I'm doing you a service, Mrs. Conover. This race is for the strong. You'll have no chance of winning. Stay out of this, Mrs. Conover. No more Joneses. No more Conovers in Azure. Can I depend upon you to take that message to your husband? Stay away from things which aren't your business. Briefly, Mrs. Conover—stay away from *her!*"

"Who—"

Feet crunched on the gravel path behind them. Sin caught a glimpse of Thelma Loomis and Mr. Trim strolling toward the giant cage.

"That is an astonishing specimen," said Robottom and his voice seemed better suited for a lecture. "The Indian hill macaw. His vocal prowess—"

Sin left him, slipping between the trees. She had to find John Henry and leave this horrible place.

It wasn't until she reached the patio that she realized she was running as if pursued by demons . . .

The road was bumpy even in her

convertible Mercury. John Henry conned the girl's profile against the speeding desert. Faye ruined his analysis with a boudoir smile.

"We're almost there now, Johnny."

"Where?"

She lowered her lashes enigmatically. John Henry couldn't get an answer for that particular question. Back at the pool, Faye had suddenly told him he would be interested in seeing a fascinating place—a secret place. Curious, he had allowed himself to be carried away from the Las Dunas, out across the rolling plains. A mile or so back, Faye had wheeled the Mercury off on a dirt road.

The sun was midway to the meridian. Heat waves were beginning to shimmer up from the mesquite and sagebrush-matted hillocks. The road hugged the Santa Rosa foothills.

Faye had changed her bathing suit for a play dress with a bare midriff. The exposed stomach bothered John Henry some. What bothered him more was the card. He could see the white edge protruding from her skirt pocket. But he wasn't going to try for it again —not right away. It was all he could do to stay on his own side of the car, the gay way she took the hairpin curves.

"There it is," Faye announced happily and John Henry opened his eyes.

The Mercury was rolling headlong down an incline toward a barbed-wire fence which vaulted the road in the form of a log archway. The swinging sign spelled out Bar C Ranch in twigs. Mesquite, sagebrush and greasewood had been banished In their place spouted feathery green tamarisk trees, pink and white oleanders and palms.

The low, rambling ranchhouse, constructed of adobe, was plastered with a beige stucco. It had been aged in spots by allowing the adobe bricks to peep through. Wooden shutters were on the windows, but behind them, John Henry could see shiny metal Venetian blinds.

"Isn't it darling!" Faye breathed as she forced the Mercury to a jarring stop.

John Henry said, "Just what is this place? What's so secret about a dude ranch?"

FAYE crawled over his lap and slid to the ground. "It's no dude ranch," she said. She had the mysterious card in one hand now.

Faye banged at the door with the heavy brass knocker.

"Are they expecting you?" Conover asked.

"That's no fun." The door swung open and a battered face peered at them.

"Won't you come in?"

Faye stepped blithely forward and John Henry followed. The man who had opened the door was dressed in a black double-breasted suit with a black bow tie. There was a lot of him. A well-groomed ape.

"Are we late?" Faye asked him.

The man said, "Never. Your card, madame?"

Faye flipped her fingers and he caught the card deftly. John Henry was disappointed. For the card bore no queen symbol. Whorls and lines of patterned engraving followed the edge like those on a bond or a bank note. In the center was a straight black line followed by a large C.

"Certainly," the butler said rustily. "You will forgive these precautions, but they have been found to be necessary. My name is Sidney, madame."

"I'm Miss Jordan, Sidney. And this is Mr. Conover."

Sidney waved them into the dimness. He walked silently behind them down the long hall. It got darker and darker.

Can you see?" Faye whispered excitedly.

"Of course not."

"I can," she boasted.

At the end of the lengthy corridor Sidney pulled a heavy drap aside and beneath it was another of the large curved doorways. Beyond the door that Sidney was opening, a band was playing furiously, brassily.

It was a big square room, low-ceilinged, with sporting prints on the beige stucco. The complete absence of windows made the walls seem blind and faceless. Near the door stood a bank of slot machines. Opposite them were chuck-a-luck tables. Down the center were faro and poker tables and at the far end a roulette wheel.

"Isn't this fun?" Faye bubbled. "Give me some money."

Automatically, John Henry dug a quarter out of his pocket.

Though it was barely eleven o'clock, the wheel was in full spin. Men and women of all ages bordered the board. Counterpointing the rhythm of the incandescent red juke box, an interminable hum of comment filled the room, punctuated by the monotonous drone of the croupiers, the laughs of the excitement hunters, the wealthy visitors to Azure.

John Henry caught up with Faye. She was angrily shaking a slot machine. As he looked around apprehensively there sounded a violent click. Silver jangled.

"I won, Johnny!" Faye scooped a double handful of coins from the machine. "Here's your quarter back."

"Thanks," said John Henry wryly. "Now what's the big idea dragging me out here?"

"Aren't you having fun? What you need is a drink."

Faye grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the bar.

"It's too early," John Henry protested.

"Better early than never."

John Henry began rehearsing an explanation for Sin.

V

SEPARATED from the gambling room by an archway, the bar was lighted only by the pink neon facings on the big mirror. A solitary man hunched on one of the leather-topped bar stools. The mess-jacketed bartender was polishing glasses.

Faye banged a fist on the bar.

"What'll you have, pardner?"

"You order," said John Henry.

"Two rye—straight," said Faye.

Conover looked at the gamblers in the main room. "What gets me," he mused, "is how they do all this. I'm surprised the police haven't cracked down." He grunted exasperatedly. "Just what I thought last night—crooked cops."

He looked in the bar mirror at the eyes of Lieutenant Lay.

"Morning, Mr. Conover," said the lanky police officer sardonically. He sat close enough, Conover realized sickeningly, to have heard every syllable.

Faye was regarding Lay with interest.

She asked, "What's your racket, stranger?"

"This is Lieutenant Lay of the Azure Police, Faye," said John Henry.

"I like policemen," Faye whispered confidentially and loudly to Conover, "He's cute."

"Well," said John Henry nervously, "good to have seen you again, Lieutenant. Now, if you'll excuse us—"

"Don't run off," said Lay evenly. "I haven't seen you playing, Mr. Conover. What could you be doing here? Here, of all places."

"Tell him," Faye urged.

"It's very simple," he said. "I don't know."

"See!" Triumphantly, she downed her rye and drank Conover's.

"You wouldn't be figuring on following up Anglin's killing, would you?" asked Lay. "I'm surprised to see you without your wife."

"Oh, she's back at the hotel."

"Convenient," said Lay and speculatively eyed Faye Jordan. "Most wives aren't that understanding."

The policeman interpreted Conover's quick frown of worry and chuckled. The bartender refilled the two glasses. But when John Henry reached for his it was already empty.

John Henry sighed at the prospect of a drunken female on his hands in addition to everything else. Lay lifted his beer glass and said, "You better have one of these, Conover. They don't disappear so fast."

Faye lost her balance. Her piercing shriek brought heads around in the gambling hall as she toppled to the floor. Her pocketful of quarters jangled like another jackpot as they spewed across the room. The crowd went back to their games.

"Did you hurt yourself, Faye?" John Henry asked, helping her to her feet.

She was cooing happily. "Play time," she gurgled. "Push me again, Johnny."

"I didn't push you—"

"Johnny! Where's my money?" Both Faye's hands scrambled in her dress pocket. "You stole it! I want a policeman!"

"Shut up!" said John Henry. "Your money's on the floor."

He began scooping it up. When he rose, red-faced, Faye was touching up

her lipstick. Lay's horsy grin was amused and mocking. He gazed through the archway at the turbulence in the other room.

"Yeah," he said, as if continuing a conversation, "it's illegal, Conover, but in a hopped-up town like this there's some things a cop has to keep his eyes closed about. If I got as rough as I'd like to around this burg, I'd be looking for a new badge."

John Henry remembered Faye. The black-haired girl was at the roulette table arguing with the polite croupier.

"I better go see what's happened to the problem child," Conover said.

"What's the trouble now, Faye?" he asked, elbowing up behind her.

"Johnny!" she squealed, gesticulating at the croupier. "He won't let me play!"

The croupier, a small, dark man put up slim, deprecating hands.

"I have explained," he said plaintively, "but madame will not listen. A house rule—she must use chips. Not quarter dollars."

"Exactly," crowed Faye. "Sock him in the nose, Johnny."

JOHN Henry fastened determined fingers on Faye's soft shoulder.

"Come on!" he gritted and propelled her toward the door.

Faye was giggling happily. "He's so strong," she said to the people they passed. "You have no idea!"

"Now snap out of it, Faye," John Henry grated. He shook her gently. "I want a straight answer."

Faye tried to salute but John Henry kept his grip on her arms.

"You had a reason for bringing me out here. What was it?"

"Wanted company," she crooned.

"There's more than that."

Her sleek braided head nodded slowly. "Got something I wanna tell you," she whispered.

"Okay. We'll go back to the car." He pushed her into the entrance hall.

John Henry put the concealing drape back in place. Faye had prowled away down the long corridor, opening doors and peering inside curiously. He caught up with her and said loudly:

"Now what—"

She put a forefinger across her lips, opened the door to what appeared to be a combination library and den. It was devoid of life.

"In here," she whispered.

The room was stuffy. John Henry went across to the window that broke the wall of books. No air at all seemed to enter the library.

Faye had closed the door and was peeking through the keyhole.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

The carpet tilted a little. He reached for the desk to steady himself and it moved away. Faye got up and walked up hill and she got farther away. Then there were two of her, a dozen, a whole roomful.

He couldn't count Faye Jordan any more because all of her were performing a weird dance that glided faster and faster. The last thing he heard was the chorus of Faye, giggling.

* * * * *

Sin flung herself across the bed, still panting with fright. Where was John Henry? Why did he insist on getting mixed up in things that were none of his business?

She caught herself watching the redwood desk that held the Eversharp and the cipher. There was always the police. Sin turned her back defiantly on the telephone. If she started the police looking for John Henry and he was all right, he'd he angry.

Sin heard a door close softly in the next cottage, Miss Jordan's cottage. If she had come back then John Henry . . . Eagerly, she peeked through the slats of the window blind.

It was not John Henry who had pulled the blue door to gently behind him. It was Gayner. He stepped off the porch and started walking quickly back to the hotel.

Sin stepped outside. Gayner had already vanished. Without reason, Sin began to run, anxious not to lose sight of him. Gayner was a tangible link between her and the tangled web that might have enmeshed her husband again. Something furtive in Gayner's manner warned her that this had been no official visit.

Gayner was just going into the Las Dunas lobby when Sin reached the patio. Somebody called her name. It was Sagmon Robottom, his bronze face stern, sauntering toward her from the pool. Sin whirled and fled. She rushed

into the lobby. Gayner was going down the front steps, his walk brisk and purposeful.

"You look like you're in a hurry," Thelma Loomis said, as the two women dodged around each other at the front entrance.

Sin kept going.

Mr. Trim was just getting out of the elevator. She gave him a tight smile and didn't slacken pace.

Gayner was still in sight through the driveway border of palms and tamarisks. Sin loitered behind a palm while Gayner looked up and down the street. Then he went hurriedly down the hill toward the center of town.

A block away from the Las Dunas, Gayner suddenly disappeared from sight. However, he was apparently oblivious of his tracker. Sin found he'd merely angled sharply into a narrow alley leading to the back door of one of the buildings.

The place looked familiar and it came to Sin why it should. Homer Anglin had died there. Gayner was letting himself quietly into the Ship of the Desert . . .

Gayner knocked on the door to Barselou's office. There was no reply, and the beat of his knuckles echoed emptily throughout the big deserted restaurant.

He opened the door, edged into the office. Gayner sat down behind the desk, pulled the telephone to him and called Barselou.

FROM her hiding place among the music racks on the bandstand, Sin watched Gayner come from the balcony and across to the kitchen doors. A moment later, she heard the slam of the back door.

A church hush lay over the Ship of the Desert. She was all alone in the restaurant. Sin began to feel more foolish than nervous. She'd have a hard time explaining what she was doing trespassing. She didn't even know herself.

Sin slipped off the bandstand and tiptoed to the staircase that led to the balcony. Since she was trespassing anyway, she might as well make a good job of it. Sin climbed the stairs. At the top, she paused to listen. She heard nothing to keep her from opening the door to the office.

There was nothing interesting in sight, so Sin tried the desk. In the center drawer was a sheaf of papers, all maps apparently of the area surrounding Azure, the Salton Sea and Borego Valley. The first was labeled: "Flood of 1849." Penciled under this was the handwritten notation, "Very rough reconstruction—prob. inaccurate." A large area of the drawing had been shaded, most of it lying south of Azure.

The next map was no more explicit. The date was 1891. Again a portion of the map was shaded. The date on the third map was 1905-07 and it was titled: "Formation of S/S." The darkened area was present, drawn in greater detail. Sin recognized Highway 99. At the southern tip of the Santa Rosa Mountains, another and smaller section had been shaded, its vertical lines superimposed on the horizontal stripes of the larger expanse. A cross had been drawn in pencil at a spot in this area and a notation made.

The rest of the papers were aerial photographs of desert country.

Light, torrents of it, flooded the office. Sin shrieked and jumped up.

"Bad for your eyes, Mrs. Conover—reading in the dark." Vernon leaned sorrowfully in the doorway.

He moved toward the desk, and Sin saw that he was pointing a gun at her.

"Keep quiet," he said, "and you might be all right." He raised his voice. "All right."

Gayner stepped through the open doorway and regarded their captive with chilly amusement. "I hope we didn't give you too much of a shock, Mrs. Conover," he said pleasantly. "Vernon, you may put away the gun. Mrs. Conover realizes that she'll have to do as we say."

"What do you want from me?" Sin quavered.

Gayner said neartily, "That's exactly what I was going to ask you. And I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Barselou didn't repeat the question."

Gaynor motioned Sin toward the door and down the staircase. The bellboy threaded a path before them and pushed through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

No one had mentioned John Henry, Sin thought. Was that good or bad?

"Where's the car?" asked Vernon.

"The usual place," Gayner said

quietly. "Now, Mrs. Conover, I needn't warn you that any commotion at all will be utterly useless. And foolish on your part." They went out into the alley.

"But I don't know anything!" Sin cried desperately.

"Come on," said Vernon. "I'm supposed to be on duty."

They urged her out into the street. Down the block, a black sedan nuzzled the curb.

FROM behind them, a man's high-pitched voice called, "Yoo-hoo! Mrs. Conover!"

"You don't hear him," Gayner muttered.

"Mrs. Conover!" Trim appeared alongside the trio, on a bicycle. Coming up behind him was Thelma Loomis, pedaling energetically. The Bry-Ter representative showed his teeth in a waggish grin. "Ah, Mrs. Conover—you were trying to run away from me!"

"Not from you!" Sin choked.

Gayner said hurriedly, "We're in quite a rush, Mr. Trim, so if—"

Sin wriggled forward frantically. "Don't wait for me, Mr. Gayner. I've been wanting to talk to Mr. Trim, anyway. It was nice of you to offer me the ride."

Thelma Loomis got off her bicycle.

"You take this machine, young lady—I'm not built for it." She shoved the bike at Sin. "Here—or don't you think these things are safe?"

"Oh, yes!" breathed Sin, grabbing the handle bars.

Gayner bowed slightly. "We'll run along then, Mrs. Conover. Some other time."

He and Vernon got into the Buick. It slid away from the curb. Thelma Loomis strode chuckling up the street toward the Las Dunas.

Mr. Trim asked, "What was it you had to say to me, Mrs. Conover?"

"This!" Sin cried, laughing brokenly.

She threw her arms around the little man and kissed his bald spot.

* * * * *

"Whereabouts you want to go?" the truck driver growled.

"Any place in town," John Henry said.

As the truck crept into the center of the city, the driver said, "You see some characters around this place. Take a gander at that creep on the bike—a black suit in this heat!" His calloused forefinger gestured in disgust toward a couple approaching.

"Stop the car!" John Henry yelled.

Alarmed, the driver jammed on his brakes.

"What the hell!" he said.

John Henry had already opened the door and vaulted to the pavement.

"Thanks a lot for the ride," he tossed over his shoulder and darted across the street.

"Sin!"

The red-haired girl on the bicycle looked up. Then she screamed.

"Johnny!"

Her handle bars spun unguided into Trim's bicycle. Cement and sky whirled crazily for a moment. When the sky was on top again, Sin was sitting on the cement. Both bicycles were heaped on Mr. Trim.

"Sin, Sin—are you all right?" John Henry's voice said.

Sin reached her arms up for her husband. He hugged her.

"Johnny, darling, I was worried sick!"

"I'm sorry, Sin. I shouldn't have—"

Amid a jangling of metal, Mr. Trim arose from the street.

Sin began to get some presence of mind. "I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Trim. I was so worried about Johnny and when I saw him—"

The Bry-Ter representative summoned up a brave smile. It faded as he discovered one serge trouser leg was ripped from the hip down, exposing a milk-white thigh and calf.

"I'll insist on taking care of this," John Henry said.

Trim shook his head. "Expense account."

VI

ACROSS Date Street, at a sidewalk café table, John Henry related his adventures.

"I got dizzy all of a sudden," he concluded. "When I woke up I was all by myself. Somebody had gone through my pockets. Faye was gone."

"She drugged you and searched you!" Sin said accusingly.

"I guess so. Anyway, I climbed out a window and hitchhiked back here." John Henry looked uncomfortable. "All

right, I made a fool of myself. Next time I'll keep my nose in my own business—like you, Sin."

"Well," she murmured, "as a matter of record—"

While she told of Sagmon Robottom and his mysterious warning, John Henry's chin began to jut forward. As she continued with the story of following Gayner and finding the flood maps, his face turned red. And when Sin had ended the tale of near kidnaping, her husband slammed his fist down on the table hard.

"We came here on a vacation," he stated. "Not to sun ourselves on a firing range. Not to be searched. Not to have my wife threatened. "We're through with this munitions dump!"

Mr. Trim bade them good-by in front of the Las Dunas. Sin flatly refused to enter the lobby where Gayner or Vernon might be waiting.

So the Conovers sauntered innocently along the front of the south wing. Then, they turned the corner and plunged into the shrubbery.

"Do you think anybody saw us, Johnny?"

"Hope not," muttered John Henry. "We'll get the baggage and beat it."

The grass they hurried across was lifeless in the hot afternoon sun. The flagstones gave off ripples of heat.

Sin stopped in her tracks. "Johnny—look!"

Slouched on the porch of Cottage fourteen was Vernon. His mournful face split into a pitying grim at the sight of the Conovers.

John Henry grabbed Sin and whirled her around. "Back to the hotel," he said under his breath.

Vernon was matching them stride for stride when they pounded up to the glass doors. They were halfway across the lobby when a thin length was framed in the opposite glass portal. Gayner was just entering.

Except for the clerk, the lobby was empty. Both exits were blocked. Conover swung his wife about and they headed for the elevator. Gayner and Vernon started in pursuit of the fleeing couple.

John Henry half-hurled Sin into the open elevator. "Up!" he snapped.

"Johnny," Sin moaned, "there's no operator!"

The elevator was designed to function for either the individual guest or an operator. Now, the determining lever was set in the drive-yourself slot.

John Henry threw the sliding doors together just in time to avoid Gayner's clutching hands. Blindly, he pushed one of the black buttons on the panel. The elevator began to grind upward smoothly.

John Henry let out his breath in a long sigh. His legs felt weak. Sin was crouching in a corner.

"Buck up, honey," John Henry said stoutly. "We're doing all right."

The elevator came to a stop at the fourth floor.

"It's okay, honey," John Henry said soothingly.

He reached out a hand to open the sliding doors. The elevator started down again. The light marked "1" glowed red. Gayner or Vernon had pushed the "down" button on the main floor. Since the doors had been closed, the elevator had responded automatically. Wildly, John Henry began punching at all the black buttons. Then he saw the red button. It angered him. He jabbed it.

The elevator jarred to an abrupt halt between floors.

Immediately, John Henry pushed one of the black buttons again. He shouted in exultation as the cage surged upward.

"We're still winning, sweetheart!" he cried. "Get out the minute it stops!"

The elevator stopped at the third floor. John Henry forced the doors apart and they bounded out into the hallway. As the doors slid to behind them the elevator started down again.

"Where to now?" Sin asked tremulously.

HE seized his wife's hand reassuringly and they hastened down the hallway, looking for a friendly door.

Sin said anxiously, "Maybe we should start knocking on doors."

By the window at the end of the hall, the last door opened. Sin let out a yelp.

"Oh, Johnny—it's *him!*"

The man who stepped into the hall was Sagmon Robottom. His dark face went astonished as he sighted the Conovers. Then he strode forward. His hand plunged into his coat pocket and stayed there, a grim bulge.

John Henry jerked Sin sideways and

dashed down the stairs. Stumbling, gasping with terror, she followed him in his wild flight toward the second floor. Behind them, Robottom's shout trailed off.

The second floor was like the third—a deserted carpeted gauntlet of reticent doors. John Henry took one heedless step down toward the lobby. Then Sin backed up so quickly that she sat down heavily.

In huge relief on the stucco wall of the landing was the shadow of a man climbing the stairs. The shadow wore a pillpox hat. It might be Vernon.

With a squeak, Sin was on her feet again. John Henry hustled her along the hallway. The window at the end was a curtained view of the free outdoors. John Henry's face brightened.

"Out on the fire-escape, Sin. Hurry!"

She scrambled over the sill. Swearing tensely, her husband followed. He could hear Vernon's yell of triumph as he spotted the fugitives.

Seizing his wife, Conover stepped out onto the swaying fire-escape. It creaked rustily and the far end began to float toward the ground. There was a clank and a slight bounce. The Conovers clattered down the iron steps and the staircase soared back to the second floor.

"The car—come on!" growled John Henry.

They trotted along the porch wing of the hotel between a hedge and the stucco wall, then burst suddenly into the Las Dunas parking lot to run for their car.

John Henry halted his glad reach for the door handle. He felt in his left-hand trousers pocket, then rummaged through all his other pockets.

"When Faye searched me, she stole the keys to our car!" he said bitterly.

Sin let out a wail of fresh panic. John Henry peered into the useless sedan. The car, like their baggage and himself had been thoroughly ransacked.

"Let's look for one with the keys in it," he snapped.

They had rounded the row and were starting back toward the other side when Gayner's voice came from the opposite side of the automobiles.

"Vernon, get a move on! They must be around here somewhere!"

Sin sank toward the gravel as if her legs had melted. John Henry held her up with one hand, opened the car door nearest his hand—a convertible coupé with the top up—and thrust his trembling wife inside. He shut the door quietly behind him.

"See 'em?" Vernon's question came from four or five cars away. Gayner replied something that John Henry couldn't make out.

"Johnny—" Sin began.

John Henry jabbed her. "Quiet!" he breathed.

"But, Johnny, all I wanted to say was that the keys—"

"Will you keep quiet?"

Sin pointed a finger. From the dashboard, a chain with several keys trailed down from another key which was half-buried in the ignition switch. The feeling surged over John Henry that he had been here before. He craned his head at the registration slip. The name was Faye Jordan.

"I might have known," he muttered.

Gravel ground against gravel as shoes crunched closer to them. Vernon spoke, so close that the Conovers nearly fell off the seat.

"I told you they went back to the cottage."

Gayner's severe denial came from almost directly behind the convertible. The trap was perfect now—the bellboy on one side and the assistant manager on the other.

JOHN Henry cautiously wormed under the steering wheel and turned on the ignition. The coupé jolted as a body leaned against it and a freckled hand trailed along the window ledge. John Henry went into motion before his reason had time to argue. His right foot kicked at the starter. He drove his left fist straight at Vernon's startled face. Vernon's profane surprise was just a squawk as he fell.

The engine exploded into life and the Mercury leaped forward. Behind them, they could hear Gayner yelling. The coupé cut around the parked cars and hurtled onto Coachella Street. John Henry gunned off toward Highway 99 and escape from Azure.

Sin pulled herself to the seat. "Damn my memory—damn my memory," she mumbled. "I'll never remember another thing as long as I live. I'll never answer a question in public. I swear it." She squirmed around for a look

at the hotel. "Johnny! They're following us!"

John Henry flicked his eyes at the rearview mirror and swore. A big black Buick sedan danced in the polished surface of the highway. It looked like Vernon behind the wheel.

John Henry glanced at the gas gauge and swore again. The tank was less than a quarter full. They'd never be able to outrun the Buick on that.

"Where the hell are the cops?" John Henry wanted to know, outraged. "Any other time they'd be swarming all over us." His cheerless face went suddenly incandescent. "The ranch!" he shouted. "There's a crowd at the ranch. Faye's back at the hotel—we've got her car. And Lieutenant Lay's at the ranch! It's the safest place in the world right now!"

John Henry, keeping anxious watch in the rearview mirror, lost sight of the big black car for moments at a time as they raced up and down the rolling hillocks. They were nearly to the dirt road which led to the Bar C Ranch. Vernon and the Buick were hidden behind a rise of ground. Tires screamed as the convertible checked its headlong rush and bounced off Highway 99 onto the dirt road. It skidded in the soft sand, swayed sickeningly for a moment, then righted itself. Conover brought the coupé to a stop behind a screen of trees.

He was watching what he could see of the main road through the back window. There was a furious rush of sound and the Buick sedan tore by them. Vernon was alone in the car.

When the black car disappeared John Henry grinned at his wife and let out the clutch again.

"I think we shook him for a while," he said. "By the time he finds out we're not in front of him, we'll be safe."

Sin dropped back against the leather cushions. By the time he raised a face that was white under its tan, the Bar C Ranch sprawled before the windshield.

They whisked under the log arch and came to a stop in the parking area. The automobiles had vanished.

"H'm," mused John Henry, "I hope the place isn't closed."

They didn't knock. John Henry had no admittance card and he didn't want to summon Sidney. The door opened easily. The Conovers stepped in.

"I don't hear anything," Sin pressed nervously.

"It's in a back wing. That's where everybody is."

They crept cautiously down the corridor and John Henry pulled aside the drape. Through the heavy arched door he could hear the juke box and the clang of the slot machine.

"We made it, honey!" he cried joyously, threw open the big door and plunged into the casino.

They stopped short on the threshold. The juke box blared, but the room was empty except for two men.

"Well, look who came," said Barselou from where he stood before the one-armed bandit.

He had pulled down the lever and a flood of quarters began to pour from the metal mouth.

"Jack pot," commented the other man.

He was the plump waiter from the Ship of the Desert, but dressed now in a brown suit. In one fat hand he held a revolver.

"I didn't expect you so soon," Barselou remarked.

The pseudo-waiter gestured with the gun. "Come the rest of the way in. And close the door."

The stupefied Conovers obeyed. Barselou jerked his head at the fat man. "Better check, Odell."

ODELL patted John Henry's pockets and armpits and thighs with a questing hand. Then he looked at the girl. Sin shrank behind her husband and Conover clenched his fists.

"We won't cause bad feeling," Barselou told his henchman.

John Henry recovered his voice, though it was scarcely better than a croak. "Lieutenant Lay?" he asked.

"Oh, were you expecting to meet him here?" Barselou asked. "He's been gone a good hour. His bright idea was we close down until the Anglin killing blows over. I didn't argue. Sidney and the boys deserve a couple days off."

John Henry cursed himself for not heeding the warning of the empty parking lot.

Barselou said, "You see, the Bar C is more than a place of business to me. This is my home."

John Henry couldn't suppress a groan.

Barselou sat in a chair opposite them. Odell leaned against the slot machine, carefully inattentive.

"All right," said the big man. "Now suppose we talk business."

"Okay," said John Henry. "We're willing to listen to a proposition."

Barselou looked as if he were not smiling on purpose. "You're in no position to bargain. We hold the cards, Conover."

"But not the Queen," Sin said.

Barselou said, "You're right. I don't hold the big Queen. But I do hold you."

"I'm still listening," said John Henry.

"Then listen to this—I want to know everything that went on between you and Anglin."

"And if we don't feel like telling?"

Odell moved forward, his hand falling into his coat pocket.

Sin said quickly, "Wait! Please wait a minute! Mr. Barselou, we have a confession to make."

"You came to the right church," said Odell.

"We don't know what all this is about."

Barselou laughed incredulously.

"That's right, Barselou," said John Henry with angry deliberation. "And we don't want to know. All we want to do is get out of here and forget all about it. We were going home when we got sidetracked here."

Barselou shook his heavy head slowly. "That won't do. Not at all."

"Please, Mr. Barselou," Sin pleaded. "We're telling you the truth. We don't have anything you want. We don't know anything. P-Please believe us!"

A vision of a pencil in a desk drawer suddenly rose in John Henry's mind. But, either Sin had forgotten the pencil or she was using her feminine guile to throw Barselou off-balance.

"So you don't know what it's all about," mocked Barselou, considering them with narrowed eyes. He reached a conclusion. "Maybe," he said, "Anglin didn't sell you everything he knew. Maybe he didn't think you'd believe the actual facts about the Queen. Or maybe you're lying. I want you to know what an unbelievable amount of money is at stake.

"The story of the Queen is quite a story, Mrs. Conover. If you've read any California history at all, you should know it."

VII

CONOVER kept silent. He had something to bargain with—the all-important pencil—but how to use it?

"In the year seventeen-hundred and forty-four," Barselou began to relate, "a Spanish galleon left Manila, headed for Mexico. This ship was loaded with jewels, silks, gold and other precious metals. The wealth of the Philippines, intended for Philip the Fifth. This ship was one of the Manila galleons that had been crossing the Pacific every year for almost two centuries. They came south along the coast of California and eventually arrived in Mexico—with luck. It was a hard trip. It took several months and usually half the crew died of scurvy before they got to Acapulco.

"On top of this, there were other hazards. Pirates flocked from all over the world to get a crack at the Manila galleon. Sir Frances Drake, Woodes Rogers, Shelvocke, Clipperton—all of them had their try. They'd wait for the galleon along the California coast. In seventeen-hundred-and-forty-four, this section of the country was unexplored. Then when the galleon came along the pirates would jump her. The battle was usually one-sided."

Barselou let his gaze encompass John Henry. "So the first point, Conover, is that the particular ship that left Manila in seventeen-hundred-and-forty-four was named *La Reina*—the Queen. The Queen was commanded by a Spanish officer named Arvaez y Moncada. She carried a mighty rich cargo that year. Old records put the value of the pearls alone at four or five million dollars."

"Gosh," Sin murmured.

"An English pirate named Bledsoe fired on the *Queen* off the tip of Lower California. But Captain Arvaez was lucky. A storm blew up and he was able to dodge the buccaneers. However, to be on the safe side, Arvaez decided to take the *Reina* north, up the Gulf of California. I guess he figured on waiting a few days until Bledsoe got out of the neighborhood.

"Well, the *Reina* reached the head of the Gulf. But as far as Arvaez

could see to the north was a great inland sea. Neither he nor his navigator, a Portuguese named Ferrelo, had dreamed of such a body of water. But I don't suppose they were too surprised. In those days, the maps were more often wrong than right.

"Arvaez decided to explore this new sea. So the *Reina* kept going north. Now and then they passed little islands but there weren't any signs of life. After several days, Arvaez discovered the sea was getting shallower. So he turned back, and got the shuck of his life. The water had disappeared and only sand was left. Desperately, he sailed back and forth. Everywhere he went, the inland sea was drying up. At last, there wasn't enough water to allow the *Reina* to draw. Her keel struck bottom and that was that. There'd been heavy rains and the Colorado River overflowed its banks. The overflow flooded this desert country, most of which is below sea level, anyway. The *Queen* sailed in when the flood was at its height. Then when the waters receded, she was left high and dry." He surveyed the Conovers' expressions of incredulity. "It's fact. The floods have happened three times since. The last time was in nineteen-hundred-and-five. That's how the Salton Sea got there."

"Oh!" cried Sin excitedly. "That's what you were doing with those maps!"

Barselou's heavy lips curled ironically. "Let me finish the story. The *Reina* was stranded in the middle of the desert. Arvaez and his crew were hundreds of miles from civilization, with a cargo worth millions and no way to get it out.

"They packed up what they could carry and hit the trail for Mexico. Only one man made it—Ferrelo, the navigator. He didn't want to go back and look for the Queen, but during the next sixty or seventy years, several parties searched all over this section of the country for the lost treasure ship. They didn't find her."

"Maybe Ferrelo's memory was bad. The important part is that the galleon stayed lost—until recently. That's where you folks come in."

SIN ASKED unbelievingly, "You know where the *Queen* is now?"

"The general location, yes. She's somewhere in the Badlands, between here and San Felipe Creek, rocky, rugged country, chopped up with a lot of sublevel canyons."

"Why don't you -"

"Because finding something in the badlands is like looking for the needle in the haystack," Barselou replied coldly. "You can find it if you've got the time. I thought I had the time—until you showed up." His pupils showed as chips of silvered glass. "Now I can't afford to wait. From here on, you help."

"Who killed Anglin?" John Henry insisted.

"That doesn't matter," said Barselou impatiently, ignoring the shocked faces across the table. "I hired him last year to find the *Queen*. I was to pay him so much over expenses. A week ago, Anglin said the galleon was in the Badlands and he was figuring out a route to reach her. Yesterday Odell found out that Anglin wasn't playing all his cards over the board."

"He thought he'd play it smart," Odell muttered.

"Anglin had wired to a Mr. and Mrs. Jones in San Diego telling them he'd found the *Queen*. What exactly Anglin had in his mind, I don't know. However, Mr. and Mrs. Conover—or Jones—I will not play games."

Sin protested faintly, "But we're not the—"

"We tried to get to Anglin before he saw you. We couldn't. So we tried to bluff you out. That didn't work either. Then"—he looked at Odell—"Anglin got himself shot."

John Henry said desperately, "You know we didn't kill him, Barselou. You were right behind me."

"I can't remember, Conover."

"If you think we killed Anglin, then turn us over to the police!"

Barselou bared his teeth. "You don't get the point, Conover. I don't care who you are or what you've done. Anglin had only one thing that was worth a damn—the route I need to find the *Queen*."

John Henry was careful, "I'm not saying we have the route, Barselou. But if we have—and hand it over to you—what next? The last guy that had the *Queen* information for you got killed at your door."

Barselou put a mask of friendliness

over his granite features. "My lifelong policy has been to avoid bloodshed. Give me the information, Conover, and as soon as I've verified the dope, you're as free as birds."

John Henry looked at his wife tensely upright in her chair.

"I know you won't go to the police," Barselou went on smoothly, "because if you did I'd have to tell Lieutenant Lay that there's a handprint in blood by the door of Cottage fifteen, which you occupied last night. Gayner saw it this morning. We think it's Anglin's blood. The police would be glad to test it for us."

Sin's eyes were big and hopeful.

"Okay," said John Henry. "Let me talk to my wife alone for a minute or two and I'll give you the route."

"You'll have to do your talking in this room," Barselou demurred firmly.

John Henry rose and Sin followed him across the room.

"Johnny, what are we going to do?" Sin whispered.

"Can't you remember that combination, honey?"

"I guess so."

"Okay," he muttered. "Start talking. Softly."

Sin closed her eyes and began whispering the combination to him. John Henry wrote it down and folded the paper into a small pellet.

"Now listen, redhead. I want you to do everything I say. Don't argue. Just remember I love you."

"Well—"

"Promise me." John Henry squeezed her arm.

She smiled but her face was troubled. "I promise."

John Henry marched her back to the two men.

"Got it?" Barselou queried.

"Uh-huh." John Henry held up the pellet. "I'm going to give it to you, Barselou—on one condition."

"Conditions yet," grunted Odell.

Barselou said softly, "Yes. A condition?"

"That my wife be allowed to leave the ranch immediately."

"Oh, no, Johnny!" Sin cried.

"Shut up, Sin. How about it, Barselou?"

Barselou moved his eyes to Odell's heavy coat pocket and said, "Why?"

JOHN Henry popped the pellet in his mouth. Barselou didn't stir. He said, "So you swallow it. We know your wife has the information memorized. What's to keep me from letting Odell wring it out of her?"

John Henry spoke carefully around the paper. "Don't make me discuss it, Barselou. My wife has a freak memory. Sure, she had the combination memorized. But once she repeats it, she can't remember it any more. And she's repeated it. Anglin's dead, she doesn't know the key anymore, and I never knew it. Your move."

"Nuts," said Odell, and dropped his hand in his pocket.

Barselou said, "Luckily for you, we've checked pretty closely on you two. What you just said jibes with something Gayner found out from that Loomis woman. All right. Suppose Mrs. Conover does leave."

"Fifteen minutes after she's gone, I'll give you the combination."

Barselou nodded. "You're free to go, Mrs. Conover."

Sin hugged John Henry's arm. "I'm not going, honey!"

"Sin, you've got to. Don't argue about it. Nothing's going to happen to me with you loose. I'm ordering you to leave."

"All right, darling," she whispered. "Please be careful."

He kissed her and mumbled, "Go to the Brawley police station. If I'm not in front of it by six in the morning, go inside and spill the works." Aloud he commanded, "Now, scoot!"

There was silence in the room after the door had closed behind her. Then there was the sound of a car being started. Tires whispered away on the gravel. The desert quiet returned.

John Henry straddled a chair facing the other two men. Their eyes were glued to his throat muscles.

The three of them sat in the silence as the hands of John Henry's wrist watch crept from 3:15 to 3:30.

Odell let the front legs of his chair come down on the floor.

"Fifteen minutes," he announced sleepily.

John Henry extracted the small wad of paper from his mouth. Barselou stretched out an eager hand, but John Henry backed toward the door, keeping the big man between himself and Odell.

He reached in back of him, found the handle, twisted it.

"Okay," he said. "Catch!"

He tossed the pellet at Barselou. As the hairy hands grabbed, Conover leaped into the hall, slamming the door behind him.

There was a muffled crash. A moment later, the door opened.

"That does it," said Vernon.

Barselou said jovially, "Good work, Vernon. I think that takes care of that Jones situation. . . . ."

John Henry moaned and opened his eyes. Gray light stabbed them and he shut them again. A slow fire was baking one side of his face; the other was ice-cold.

"Johnny, Johnny!" He could hear Sin's voice near him. "Darling—please wake up!"

He was lying on his side with one cheek pressed against dark concrete. He tried to sit up but discovered that his arms were bound in back of him. His legs, too, had been tied together and a rope connected his wrists with his ankles.

He wriggled to a sitting position, groaning, to look at his wife. Sin had been similarly hobbled. Her red hair was mussed and her bright eyes had held recent tears.

John Henry groped for memory. "Sin—what are you doing here? Why aren't you in Brawley? What happened?"

Sin repeated the gibing explanations she had got from Vernon when he had added John Henry to the basement prison. Vernon claimed the Conovers hadn't fooled him. When they had turned the Mercury toward Barselou's ranch, it had just saved him trouble. He had followed them and listened outside the casino door. When Sin came out, he had shoved a gun into her spine and a cloth over her mouth. She had been left, trussed, in the cellar and Vernon had driven Faye Jordan's coupé down the road to persuade John Henry that Sin had left.

The story didn't help John Henry's head. He was not cheered by the thought that he had not only set his own feet in the danger zone, but had dragged his wife along with him.

Sin's thoughts strummed the same funereal note. The basement was too much like a tomb. "What do you think's going to happen to us, Johnny?" she asked fearfully.

"I don't know, Sin," he admitted gloomily. "It's all my fault. If I hadn't thought I could do better than the police—"

"It's not either all your fault," Sin said bravely, trying to control her trembling lower lip. "If I hadn't followed Gayner to the restaurant—"

"I should have left Faye Jordan alone. Then we wouldn't have come back here to the ranch."

HE THOUGHT about Faye Jordan. "I don't think she knows anything about this ship business," he said suddenly.

"Well, then who was it that put something in your drink and searched you?" Sin demanded.

"I thought it was Faye. But why couldn't it have been that bartender of Barselou's?"

"Why'd they let you go then?"

"Barselou wasn't sure we were the right people," said John Henry. "But when you got caught with Barselou's maps, it made him sure. It just goes to prove that there's somebody else mixed up in this race for the *Queen*."

"Mr. and Mrs. Jones?"

"Sure. I don't know where Robottom fits in but he thinks we're the Joneses. Barselou thinks we're the Joneses. Anglin was looking for them when he stumbled into our cottage by mistake. There are two sides. Barselou on one and the Joneses on the other. Anglin was playing on both teams and didn't score anywhere. So the next big question is are the Joneses man and wife or a team of acrobats or what?" He was staring blankly at the opposite wall. "Look, Sin. Whoever Jones is has to be living at the Las Dunas, because Anglin was supposed to meet him there. It has to be somebody that isn't working for Barselou. Therefore, we can eliminate Vernon and—"

He stopped. A scratching noise came from one of the high windows in the cellar wall. The window was being shoved from the outside. It stuck for a moment, then screeched inward and upward. Crouched on the window sill, peering in at them curiously, was a gigantic black cat.

The cat leaped lithely to the concrete floor, stood up on its hind legs. Without

moving its jaws, it said, "For goodness sakes, what are you doing here?"

The cat put a paw up to its nose, lifted its face off and the puzzled face of Faye Jordan took its place.

"Faye!" John Henry almost shouted. "Quick! Get a knife, Faye!"

"Where is that policeman and all the cute people?" She peered at the dark corners.

"Don't waste time with questions! Find a knife somewhere and cut us loose, will you?"

Faye said to Sin, "He wasn't very nice to me this morning. He put something in my drink!"

"Oh, no!" groaned John Henry.

"You did too! And when I woke up in a closet somebody had searched me. You should be ashamed of yourself, Johnny!"

"I am, believe me," John Henry said sincerely. "But now, Faye, please forgive me and cut us loose, will you?"

"How do you like my costume?" Faye asked, surveying herself contentedly. The big black ears flapped grotesquely. "It's for the ball tonight, you know. Are you coming?"

"For crying out loud!" he shouted. "Turn us loose!"

Faye leaped back and Sin glanced angrily at her husband. She spoke soothingly to the girl.

"How did you return to the ranch, Faye?"

"Taxi," said Faye. "I was trying on my costume and I decided to go for a drive to see what an ocelot felt like." Her face got unpleasant. "Then my car was stolen. Right off the hotel parking lot, too. I thought it might be here, so I took a taxi and it's just where I thought it would be!" Faye's short upper lip curled in triumph. She got up. "Where did you say those stairs went?"

"Faye, wait! Where are you going?"

"I'm going to find who stole my car—and then I'm going to kill him."

John Henry leaned an aching temple against the cement wall. Sin hunched forward and her voice was calm only by desperate effort. "That's exactly what you should do, Faye. But I've got a good idea. Why don't you untie us and then we can look for the thief who stole your car?"

John Henry held his breath while the bright-eyed girl thought it over, afraid that a single movement on his part might turn the decision against them.

"That's a good idea!" Faye said after a minute of consideration. "I don't know why I didn't think of that." She ran forward and kneeled at Sin's side. John Henry started to breathe again, but softly.

Sin gave a little cry and brought her arms around in front or her, free of the imprisoning ropes. Faye was unloosening the cords that bound her feet together. A few swift movements later, Sin pulled herself up. She swayed dizzily.

"My fingers won't feel," she said. "Just a second and I'll let you loose."

VIII

FAYE Jordan was slinking around the pillars, a cat in every respect except that she prowled on two legs instead of four. She cocked the big ear to one side, listening.

"I think I hear footsteps," she hissed. "I'll stalk them." She glided up the concrete steps, opened the door, and was gone.

"Hurry up, baby," John Henry said nervously. "Barselou might come down here, if that screwball kicks up a rumpus. . . . There!"

John Henry rubbed his wrists to restore circulation. Then he worked his feet free.

"We're all right now, honey! Keep your chin up."

He urged her toward the window in the opposite wall. The grime-encrusted panes still swung half-open where Faye Jordan had left them.

By piling cardboard boxes against the wall, they achieved a perilous platform that threatened to collapse if they breathed wrong. John Henry scaled it first, wriggling painfully through the window, then reached a hand down to Sin and pulled her through the opening. North of the orchard, the barbed-wire fence was only about fifty yards away. Beyond that, sagebrush and scrub oak promised covering. They ran like mad for the fence. . . . .

Not far ahead of them twinkled the lights of Azure, set in an incandescent halo against early evening.

"Whereabouts you want to go this time?" the burly driver of the speeding truck asked wearily.

"Any place there's a phone," John Henry said. He wished they hadn't flagged the same truck that had given him a lift earlier in the day.

"Drive-in up here has one. I'm going to pull in here for some chow, anyway."

They bore down rapidly on a big neon sign that flashed *The Tomahawk.*

The driver pulled the huge truck onto the asphalt. John Henry jumped down from the high cab and held up an assisting hand to Sin.

"Thanks for the lift," John Henry called up.

"Anytime," muttered the driver.

"Gosh, am I glad to see people again," Sin burbled happily. "Just plain old unarmed people!"

The phone booth was inside. A solitary customer was reading a newspaper near the phone booth and munching absent-mindedly on a hamburger. As the Conovers came in, he gulped down the last bite, and squeezed by them.

John Henry pulled the folding door open, and said, "I guess you just ask for the police."

Sin sat down at the counter, ordered two hamburgers, and scooped up the newspaper the departed customer had been reading.

John Henry folded the door shut behind him and dropped the coin into the slot. There was a sudden banging on the glass. Sin was hammering against the pane and pointing to the newspaper.

John Henry pushed open the door, asking irritably, "What's wrong, Sin?"

"You didn't get the police, did you?" Her face was white and strained.

"Not yet. Why?"

"Johnny—look at that!"

Her pointing finger trembled over the front page of the newspaper.

AZURE HOTEL MAN BRUTALLY SLAIN
SECOND WEEK-END TRAGEDY HERE

The tall black type blurred. John Henry began to read. His lips moved and now and then a phase escaped. "Stabbed to death . . . James V. Gayner . . . in one of the guest cottages . . . Statewide alarm . . . Arrest of Mr. and Mrs. John Henry Conover, occupants of guest cottage . . . Automatic pencil, believed to be property of Conovers, found by body. . . ."

"They think we did it!" John Henry gasped in amazement. "Can you imagine that?"

"But what are we going to do?"

This was a tight spot. They were present at, perhaps implicated in the first murder. Their alibi for the second murder was Barselou. And Barselou was certainly no friend of the Conovers.

HUNGER, weariness and confusion had brought Sin close to tears. John Henry took her chin gently between thumb and forefinger.

"Calm down, baby. We're still going to shake loose from this."

"How? Johnny, they think we murdered those two men."

"But we know we didn't. Don't attract attention." John Henry noted nervously that the truck driver had joined them in the glass room.

Sin raised her head. "But we're all by ourselves, Johnny!"

John Henry slapped the counter. "We're not either all alone, not by a darn sight! The quiz contest. Your fairy godfather. He's supposed to take care of us."

"Oh, but what can Mr. Trim do?"

"I don't know, baby. That's his department." John Henry banged the booth door to and began to call feverishly for the operator. . . .

"This is about the right spot," John Henry said. The Tomahawk neon sign flashed in back of them up the highway, "I said about a hundred yards past the drive-in."

"Why couldn't we've waited for Mr. Trim back there?" Sin complained through the last mouthful of her hamburger. Eating while keeping up with the fast pace her husband set had used up most of her breath.

"That driver was pretty suspicious," said John Henry. "The minute he read that story he'd have hollered for the cops."

"Are you sure it's safe here?" Sin asked anxiously.

John Henry thumbed toward a cluster of sagebrush. "Sure. We can hide back there till Trim gets here. I hope he has some ideas. He sounded pretty excited."

"What was he so excited about? He doesn't have a close personal interest in us."

"Sin," said John Henry after a pause,

"We're pretty sure this Jones person killed Anglin last night, aren't we?"

"Yes," Sin faltered.

"And it must have been Jones who killed Gayner."

"I suppose. Gayner would have no way of knowing we'd give the combination to Barselou. So I guess he went on looking for it. And found it, too, since the Eversharp was by his body. And Jones surprised him and stabbed him and got it instead."

"Well, why not?" demanded John Henry.

"But not Mr. Trim. He's such a nice fellow. And just this morning he saved me from those two—"

"By gosh, it could all be part of an act." John Henry's voice took on excitement. "Sin, who was it popped up right after Anglin stumbled into our cottage?"

"Well, he did know pretty much what went on with Barselou."

"And he was the one who said it was all right to move our clothes."

"And, Johnny, if Mr. Trim thought we had the combination, of course he'd want to rescue me from Vernon and Gayner!"

"Honey," cried John Henry, "I think we're on the right track."

"Johnny he's coming out here now. He's got the combination and he's coming to kill us!"

"Good grief! I never thought of that." John Henry squatted behind the mesquite and beat one fist on his knee. "Sin. Look. You wait at the edge of the road for Trim to drive up. As soon as he's out of the car, I'll jump him."

"But what if we're wrong about him?"

"Then we apologize." John Henry stood up and stretched. "Baby, that's a chance we have to take. It's obvious Jones got the combination. And if Trim is Jones, he's not letting that slip of paper get out of his hands. He'll have it on him. So we'll search him."

A sedan was coming slowly down the road from the direction of the Tomahawk.

"Now don't be scared, Sin. Just do what I say and we'll be okay."

John Henry shoved her hastily through the mesquite toward the road. The automobile was slowing down.

"Is that you, Mrs. Conover?" Trim's high-pitched voice called.

"I guess so," Sin quavered.

Trim turned out the car lights and shut off the engine. John Henry could hear a car door open and close, then footsteps.

"Where's Mr. Conover?" Trim asked.

"He's—he'll be back in a minute," Sin stammered. "Let's get off the road. Behind these bushes—over here."

John Henry braced himself for the spring. Through the leaves, he could see their heads. Trim seemed to be wearing a three-cornered hat.

They were two yards away now. One yard.

John Henry leaped like a tiger for Mr. Trim's throat.

THE SMALL man let out a yelp of terror and jumped backward. John Henry's hands missed the scrawny throat and fastened on a wide leather belt. The two men crashed heavily.

Sin was shouting:

"He's got a gun, Johnny! He's got a gun!"

Trim wriggled away and got up. John Henry suddenly realized the significance of the cocked hat. Mr. Trim was all ready to go to the costume ball. He was dressed like a pirate, complete with skull and crossbones cockade on his hat. The long pistol was wood.

Trim brought the wooden gun up as if to use it as a club. John Henry's hand hit his arm. The pistol sailed to clank on the running board of the car.

John Henry launched his stocky body into a flying tackle. The two men collapsed and slid along, face down in the sandy earth.

Sin ran up. "Johnny, Johnny!" she was sobbing.

John Henry got up, panting. Trim still lay crumpled on the ground.

"Is he—" Sin whispered.

"Nope. Just knocked out." John Henry scooped up the limp figure in the pirate's costume. "Come on."

He strode back to the shelter of the mesquite. Sin tagged along.

"I'll pass out his things, Sin. You go through them and look for the combination. Feel the linings especially."

He began to go through the little man's costume. He passed out the cocked hat for Sin's examination. Then, over the bushes, he tossed the long dark-blue coat and the bright-red knee-breeches.

On his side of the leafy barrier, John Henry searched the white ruffled shirt, the boots, shorts and undershirt.

The combination was not there.

"Find anything?" he called to Sin.

"Not a thing," she said.

"Maybe he wasn't hiding it. Try his wallet."

"What wallet?"

"In his pants."

"There wasn't any."

"Maybe it fell out when I tossed them over."

Sin poked around in the underbrush. "I found it."

"Good," muttered John Henry.

Sin let out a horrified cry. John Henry burst through the bushes. Sin was standing by the car. She had turned on the parking lights. In her hands she held a black-leather wallet and she stared at it with stunned eyes.

"What is it, Sin?"

"Johnny, look at this!"

Sin handed him the wallet. He held it up to the light. Something gleamed, something small and golden. It was a badge, and the lettering on it said "FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION. . .".

"Golmighty," said Mr. Trim.

Sin kept stroking his bald head. His inert form had been clumsily redressed except for pirate hat and coat, and she was holding the bruised head in her lap.

John Henry sat morosely on the running board of the gray sedan. A vision occupied his mind, a vision of John Henry Conover gripping the bars of a cell. He had assaulted and battered a guardian of the law and the law provided for actions like his.

The pseudo-tooth-paste representative moaned again, stirred. John Henry leaned forward. Trim's brown eyes opened and cleared.

"It's all right, Mr. Trim," Sin comforted him.

"Let me up, dammit!" he croaked and spat out a mouthful of sand.

"Look," said John Henry, "I'll come along quietly."

This was not the greeting Trim had expected. He got to his feet, and said, "Huh?" warily.

"Of course, it's out of the question to apologize. But I'm sorry. Things just got moving too fast for us."

Mr. Trim wiped fine white dust from his face and considered them through narrowed eyes.

He said, unsmiling, "Well, you stumbled into everything else. Just who the devil did you think I was?"

Sin spoke up. "We thought you were this Jones that Barselou—"

"Start from the beginning," Trim said wearily and sat down on the running board.

SIN explained the tenuous reasoning that had led them to believe that Trim was the mysterious Jones who was leagued against Barselou in the race for the galleon. It all sounded pretty thin now.

"We thought we'd be smart and capture you first," Sin concluded.

Trim showed no surprise at the mention of the *Queen* or anything else. He just sat there, his brown eyes as hard as marbles.

"We're awfully sorry," Sin added weakly. "Does your head hurt much?"

"Never mind that," he said curtly. "I've had worse days. Whoever killed Gayner made off with the route to the galleon."

"And that means two people know how to get there now." John Henry elaborated eagerly, telling Trim how they had bargained with Barselou, lost, and escaped from the cellar with Faye Jordan's help. "Gayner's murderer is headed for the *Reina* right now, the same as Barselou."

Trim stood up. He donned the pirate hat at a rakish angle and jammed the wooden pistol back into his belt. Then he faced the Conovers.

"We'll call it quits," he said. "You probably thought you were doing the best thing. Besides, as the Bry-Ter Tooth-paste man, I haven't been any great help to your vacation."

Sin asked, "There's really supposed to be a tooth-paste man here?"

Trim grimaced. "Yes. I'm taking his place for a while, so I'd have a reason for wandering around town."

"You're after Barselou?" John Henry burst out.

Trim stared down at him.

"I'll tell you what I can, but you two have to be frank with me. In answer to your question: only incidentally. There's some tie-up there with Sagmon Robottom and—"

"What's he done?" cried Sin.

"Nothing yet—that we can prove. He just keeps popping up in key positions. A professional organization one place—a crackpot discussion group somewhere else. The L. A. office thinks there's something off-key about him. Subversive. Undercover."

"Gosh," said Sin. "If I'd known that, I'd have really been scared this morning."

Trim pursed his lips. "Nothing had come of my work when I ran across this lost treasure business. Okay—that's not my jurisdiction. The two murders aren't my jurisdiction, either. If Barselou finds the *Queen,* the money's his. But the government is interested if he's going to back Robottom in some subversive activity with that money."

John Henry began to pace back and forth. "Then Robottom could be Jones?"

"Oh, he could be," admitted Trim. "But the two dead bodies belong to Lieutenant Lay—not me. I'm here to cinch a subversion case. All I know about your Jones or Joneses is that a Barselou employee—Anglin—sent a wire to them yesterday morning. I was too late to find out who picked it up at the San Diego end."

"But how about us?" Sin wanted to know.

"Oh, San Diego cleared you this morning."

"I know we're not spies, too!" cried John Henry. "Just being murderers has got us worried!"

"Yes, Lieutenant Lay may be a little hard to deal with, being up the tree he is. However, once the killer is found, you should have no further trouble."

"That may take months," John Henry hurled a stone viciously across the highway.

"I'll do what I can with Lay tomorrow morning. I'm sorry I won't be able to run you back to the hotel, but I better get a move on." Trim started to slide under the steering wheel.

Sin looked at the agent quizzically. "What are you going to do now, Mr. Trim? Or is it a secret?"

"Well—" Trim squinted at the moon-painted mesquite. "I'm going to wait for Barselou at his ranch. I might as well warn him about registry and tax and some other details. Then it'll be his move if he wants to play with Robottom."

"Couldn't we come with you?"

John Henry looked up sharply. "What did you say, Sin?"

TRIM frowned at the girl. "Hardly. You'd just be in the way, Mrs. Conover."

Sin grabbed the little man's hands. "But, Mr. Trim, wouldn't you like to follow Barselou and Jones and Robottom or whoever it is to the *Queen?"*

"What are you talking about, Sin?" John Henry interrupted.

Trim mused, "I might find out pretty definitely about the subversion angle." He laughed harshly. "But, unfortunately, Mrs. Conover—I don't know the way. All I can do is wait at the ranch for one or both of them to come back."

"That's it exactly," said Sin, jumping up and down with excitement. "We know where to start—Walking Skull. We heard Barselou say so! And we've got a third copy of the combination—me." Sin pointed a proud forefinger at herself.

John Henry was disgusted. "Don't be silly. You've said it once. Now it's gone. Why should that list of numbers stick with you?"

"Because," Sin explained, "they don't make sense! Just to prove it, here's the first two directions. R dash one. L dash three." Her words tumbled over one another. "I know I can remember it, Johnny. It doesn't have any order and I can remember it perfectly. I knew it at the ranch, but I didn't want to tell you then for fear you'd want to go after the *Queen* by yourself. But now we've got help. And Johnny, honest—I can't get the darn thing out of my head!"

"It'd be too dangerous for you, Sin."

She put her arms around him. "I don't want to go to jail and I don't want you to, either. This way we won't have to, honey. Because Jones will be at the *Queen."*

John Henry felt the tempting excitement begin to bubble inside him again. "I wouldn't mind running into the guy responsible for all this, at that."

Triumphantly, Sin turned to the wizened agent in the sedan.

"How about it, Mr. Trim? What do you say?"

Trim opened the glove compartment and took out a heavy service automatic,

checked the magazine. He shoved the gun at John Henry, butt foremost.

He said, "Stick close to your wife then, and come along. This may be the bag of the year or it may be a wild-goose chase. I guarantee it won't be any picnic."

IX

A TAN-SHIRTED cop pounded loudly on the door to Cottage fourteen. Then he opened the door and motioned Thelma Loomis into the room ahead of himself and his companion.

Every light in the cottage had been turned on and the air was hazy with cigarette smoke. The desk, the wastebasket and the area around the doorknobs had been dusted with a gray powder. Near the desk, the carpet bore the dark oval of dried blood.

"Wait here," the policeman said, and went into the bedroom.

Miss Loomis was lighting a cigarette with a steady hand when Lieutenant Lay came in from the bedroom. In his horse face were tired lines. He needed a shave.

"Thelma Loomis?" he asked heavily.

She nodded. Lay motioned at a chair and sank into the one opposite. His eyes studied her keenly.

"That your real name?" Lay asked suddenly.

"It's my real name."

Lay nodded. He pulled a brown imitation-leather notebook from his inside coat pocket and flipped a couple of pages.

"You work for *Fan Fare.* Campbell Publications.

"That's right."

Lay shook his head. "That's wrong. We checked with Campbell Publications. Want to see the wire we got back?"

Thelma Loomis grinned. "Never mind."

"Okay, then. Suppose you tell me who and what you really are, Miss Loomis."

She took another slow drag on the cigarette. "If you want to know what I really am, check the Castle-Scudder Detective Agency in L. A. They'll tell you. So should this."

He looked at the plastic-sealed card in her wallet and handed it back. "Private cop, huh? Let's have the whole story."

"It's nothing you haven't heard before. Errant-husband stuff."

"Who's the victim?"

"Sagmon Robottom. Myra's not the gal to take that sort of thing lying down."

"Jealous?"

"Sagmon's quite a hand with the girls. Myra's tired of it. Last week Sagmon dashed down here without explaining and Myra's sure there's another woman involved. If there's to be a divorce it's to be Myra who gets it. So here I am."

"What have you got?"

"Nothing that'll stand up in court—yet. But there's a gal here at the hotel, name of Faye Jordan, that Glamour Boy thinks is hot stuff. She's playing him on a line right now."

"Women!" said Lieutenant Lay scathingly.

"I was looking for Robottom when your men put the arm on me. It's my guess that he's off somewhere with the Jordan dame. Now that I've shot square with you, Lieutenant, how about letting me go back to work?"

Lay smiled bitterly. "You're about as square as a tennis ball—all you private cops. But go ahead, get back to your keyhole. And since you're looking for Robottom—" He paused tantalizingly. "He grabbed a taxi this evening and said something about going out to the Bar C Ranch."

TRIM turned off the car lights. Then they rolled slowly toward the Bar C Ranch. The low ranchhouse showed no lights.

"Looks like Faye's still here," Sin said, from the back seat. The Mercury stood before the house.

Trim coaxed the sedan to a quiet halt.

"Still want to go through with it?" he inquired.

"Sure," Sin said.

They got out. Trim led the way to the stable.

"Now," he began, "if we can—"

Something white fluttered in the gap between the sliding doors of the stable.

"Everybody just stand where they are," Odell said, "and don't make any sudden moves."

He came plodding from the dark slot, the barrel of his .32 shiny over his fist.

"Imagine," Odell said pleasantly. "Mr. and Mrs. Conover, back again. "Who's this?" He swung the revolver toward the little man.

"My name is Trim."

"Where's Barselou?" John Henry asked. "There's some questions—"

"Forget it. But let me tell you, Junior, I'm mighty happy you got back before he did."

Odell gestured with the gun. "Okay, turn around and put your hands on the back of your head. Now start walking."

The three began to walk slowly back across the moonlit yard. Nearly to the ranchhouse, Sin couldn't hear any footsteps behind them. She wondered if she dared peek around. She lowered her hands cautiously, braced for a possible blow.

Nothing happened. Emboldened, she looked back. Then she whirled, grabbing at the two men.

"Look!" she cried. "There's no one following us!"

"Where'd he go?" asked John Henry, astonished.

"Let's get out of here before he comes back!"

Trim's arm clutched her, held her back. "Don't worry, Mrs. Conover. He's not coming back."

His finger pointed. Just outside the stable's square shadow was a mound of dark and white. Something like a furled pennant stuck up from the furled figure.

John Henry ran toward it. Trim and Sin followed. Trim's humpty-dumpty face was grave in the moonlight.

"Dead," he said quietly.

"But how did it happen—no noise—" Sin gulped.

"He was hit in the neck by an arrow. Death must have been almost instantaneous."

"Where—who could have shot the arrow?" Sin asked.

"There's an archery range around at the other side of the house," John Henry said.

"That's where it came from, then," Trim ruminated. "Want to take a look?"

"Let's get away from here," Sin quavered.

The three hurried back to the stables. Horses were quickly saddled. They swung silently onto their mounts and moved out into the moonlit yard, the erect little pirate leading. The crunch of hoofs on the sandy ground was the only sound. . . .

"This is Walking Skull," said Trim. "And that's the start of the Badlands."

He gestured into the night. Walking Skull was a rough bowl-shaped depression in the desert, littered with huge boulders and dotted with a few stunted palms. Trim explained that a weathered skeleton had been found leaning against one of the rocks years before, looking as if it were still trying to take the few steps that separated it from the waterhole. The skull had never been discovered.

"The legend is that the skull still roams these parts at night searching for water."

To the south and to the west, the smooth desert had been carved into a twisted labyrinth of narrow, deep canyons, writhing and losing themselves in the night shadows. A single canyon cracked the side of the rough bowl on the southwestern edge.

"I can see why you'd need a combination to find your shadow in a place like this," John Henry observed.

"That one canyon that cuts into Walking Skull—that must be the starting point. From then on it's up to your wife."

"How about it, Sin? What's the first move?"

"R dash one," she announced triumphantly.

Trim nudged his horse forward and the Conovers followed. "We turn right at the first cross-canyon. You still agree?" Trim asked.

The Conovers agreed. The dark jagged walls rose higher and higher on both sides. They rode down an incline until the sky was a crooked slit of pale blue overhead, then the canyon floor leveled somewhat.

"Here we are," Trim announced. "I'm turning right."

The little man reined into the first side canyon. The floor was sand and smooth stones. At the sides leaned great sheets of shale that had evidently crashed down from above.

"Can you see Barselou's tracks?" Sin called.

"I can't see much of anything," Trim replied cheerfully. "But three horses kick things around more than one.

What's the next turn, Mrs. Conover?"

"Left three. . . ."

THELMA LOOMIS turned her spotlight upon the timber archway and read the twig letters.

Then she clicked off the spot and urged the car up the curved driveway. The Bar C Ranch house was dark, a somber bulk in silver moonlight. She braked the automobile in front of the door. On the parking lot were two cars—a convertible coupé and a gray sedan.

From her big purse she dug out a snub-nosed revolver. Expertly, she flipped the cylinder out and examined the shiny brass shells. Satisfied, she eased out of the car.

Ignoring the brass knocker, she punched the button beside the door and stood listening to the distant loneliness of chimes. When the last tone had died, she tried the latch. The heavy door swung away from her on oiled hinges. Her flashlight cut a round hole into the blackness beyond. Lightly, she stepped after it and closed the door behind her. . . .

John Henry squinted at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. It was nearly four hours since they'd left the Bar C Ranch. The moon was directly overhead now, melting the shadows at the bottom of the tortuous canyons.

Trim halted his horse and said, "No talking, please. If Barselou hears us—"

"You do think we must be nearly there, don't you, Mr. Trim?" Sin asked anxiously.

The Federal agent was indefatigable. He sat erect and alert in the saddle, apparently as fresh as when they had ridden away from the ranchhouse. His narrow shoulders shrugged under the blue buccaneer coat.

"I hope you can answer that better than I can, Mrs. Conover. How many more numbers are there?"

Sin pushed her eyes shut. She felt wrung dry. "I don't know," she confessed finally. "Two or three, I guess. They just seem to come one at a time."

Trim grinned encouragement. "Didn't mean to hound you. I keep worrying over what the office would say if they could see me now. What's next?"

"Right one," Sin replied automatically.

Trim began to move toward the next gap in the high stone corridor. The Conovers trailed after him.

Trim tilted his pug nose upward, sniffing. Sin whispered, "What is it?"

"We're getting close," Trim muttered. "I caught a whiff of smoke just then. Campfire."

"Barselou?"

"Maybe. Or Mr. Jones." The FBI man straightened in his saddle. "What's the next one, Mrs. Conover?"

The number seemed to elude her. "Left—left—two," she said doubtfully.

They passed the first gray mouth of a canyon on the left. Sin caught the scent of burning wood. Despite the danger, the familiar fragrance abated her nervousness. There was other human life in all this desolation.

She frowned suddenly. They had passed the second left-hand canyon. Sin called after the little pirate softly.

"You've made a mistake. We passed the second canyon just then."

"Oh, that," deprecated Trim. "You were the one who made the mistake. Your memory's phenomenal, Mrs. Conover. But that last direction should be 'left three,' not 'left two.'"

He opened his fist. Lying in the palm was a strip of oiled paper, a narrow curling strip of directions which began, R-1, L-3, R-2. . . .

Sin's lips moved but no sound came out. John Henry's mouth hung open loosely.

Trim plucked the wooden pistol from his belt. He let John Henry stare at the cork on a string that was stuck in the muzzle.

"Please be sensible, both of you. The cork is laughable but it comes out—followed by a very real bullet."

John Henry croaked, "Mr. Jones, I presume?"

NOT a soul was in the house. Thelma Loomis was ready to stake her professional reputation on that.

But somewhere there had to be people. The evidence of the two cars pointed that way. Of course, Lieutenant Lay might have been wrong about Robottom. Or he was the kind of guy who'd think he was funny.

She opened the back door, let herself out into a little patio and headed for the higher boxlike building a hundred yards away. Suddenly, she stopped short, her hand fumbling for the re-

volver. Something dark huddled on the ground, something that might have been a man. A darker blob crouched beside it.

"Good God!" she ejaculated. The second shadow had moved. Thelma Loomis was staring at a huge cat, its ears erect, its eyes gleaming brightly at her. She tried to level the muzzle of her .32 at the giant animal.

"You nearly surprised me," the cat purred. "Not quite. Nearly."

Miss Loomis forced her legs to carry her up to the cat.

"Nice kitty," she said unsteadily. The cat stood up and stretched.

Moonlight poured over the face of Faye Jordan and the blonde woman began to understand the cat disguise. She had forgotten that she, too, was in costume, the blue uniform of a policeman.

"You're a policeman," Faye Jordan remarked.

"That's right." Thelma Loomis felt her smile slackening as she scanned the unmoving shadow, with professional interest. "You certainly surprised me. Both of you."

"It's pretty fur, don't you think?" Faye said and preened her costume contentedly. "It zips down the back so I can get out. But I don't want to get out. I want to wear it all the time."

The other woman kneeled on the sandy ground and looked at the man huddled there. He was short and plump and dead. From the back of his neck the feather-tipped shaft of a long arrow protruded. He had been dead for some time, she decided.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Faye said. "I don't think we've ever met."

"Who killed him?"

"I did," the girl said carelessly. Thelma Loomis got up slowly, the revolver ready. "I have claws. Not everyone has claws as sharp as mine." The girl crooked her mittened hands and scratched languorously in the air.

The blonde inspected the too-bright eyes, the vacuous pretty face.

"Why?" she asked softly.

Faye Jordan looked reproachful. "I hope you're not going to ask all those questions, too."

"Who else asked you questions?"

The girl assumed a mysterious expression and prowled away toward the stable. Thelma Loomis followed her into the shadows, gun in hand.

Faye was swinging gaily on the wooden gate to one of the stalls. Miss Loomis lanced the gloom with her flashlight. On the straw of the stall lay a man with arms and legs limply extended. The dark hawk face was relaxed. The man's head was lop-sided with swelling under one half of the mussed silver hair. By Sagmon Robottom's ear rested a stirrup iron.

"What happened here?" the blonde asked gently. Robottom's chest rose and sank regularly and an eyelid twitched.

"He didn't believe I was a cat." Faye's mouth contracted viciously. "I think he said I mustn't use my claws. I don't like people who order me around."

"Would you like to go for a ride?" Thelma Loomis suggested soothingly. "Just the three of us. I know somebody you'd like to talk to, Faye. A man."

"Oh, that's a good idea," Faye said excitedly. "I like to talk to men!"

MR. TRIM howled with laughter. But the sound was thin, not carrying far. Though his merriment was deep, neither his eyes nor his disguised pistol wavered from the Conovers.

"Shock can certainly produce a variety of comical expressions," Trim said with a final chuckle. "And yours rank with the finest in my collection. First, however—" his voice turned sharper "—gently toss that forty-five back to me, Conover. Not that I trusted you with a loaded gun—but you might be tempted to club me with it."

Carefully, John Henry lobbed the automatic to the other man. Trim pounded his wooden pistol down sharply on the saddle-horn. The painted shell shattered. He peeled the broken pieces from around a short black revolver.

"No need for masquerade any longer, is there?" he commented.

Sin finally found a tremulous voice. "Then you're not a G-man, at all?"

Trim shook his head. "Let's say that I'm really—" he touched the cocked hat with a flourish of his weapon "—a pirate. That's closer to the truth than my other personalities."

"Just one thing I want to know," said John Henry. "Then I'll shut up.

Where did you have that combination? We searched you."

Trim chuckled. "My dentures are false. No one thinks of that. Whoever heard of owning a set of false teeth that look worse than real ones? Everybody assumes that they must be natural—but they're false." He peered to see the Conovers' chagrin. "Enjoy the joke," he commanded. "Others among my foes have been fooled and appreciated it."

"Mr. Trim," said John Henry earnestly. "We are not your foes. From the beginning, we've only—"

"No," said Sin.

"Nonsense. You've been a complication since Saturday night. It was an accident that Barselou learned we were in that game at all. But then to have you gullible innocents mistaken for us—I call that highly amusing."

"We? Us?" questioned John Henry.

"My daughter Faye and I," replied Trim blandly. "My name is Jordan—if names mean anything."

"Oh!" gasped Sin. "Then she—then we—"

"Haven't you noticed the family resemblance—the Jordan nose? It's turned up at the world—pushed into that position by generations of well-applied thumbs. Yes, it was Faye who insisted the cotages be switched so she could go through your belongings for this combination while they were being moved. Gayner didn't suspect a thing—he was that eager to search your stuff himself. But he searched the clothes after Faye had finished and it was he who mussed them."

Sin trembled with rage. "You killed him!"

"Relax, Honey," said John Henry uneasily.

"Yes," chortled their captor, "you might frighten Barselou. Though he's probably so busy chopping into chests of pearls and emeralds that he couldn't hear Judgment Day. I hope he's saving me the heavy work."

X

JOHN HENRY sensed that his wife was shivering, although it was not chilly between the protective canyon walls. He edged his horse closer to hers.

"Let's move on," he said, his voice tired. "Let's get it all over with."

"No rush," was Trim's amiable reply. "I prefer to board the *Queen* by daylight. Barselou is an excellent shot." His proud voice said, "Faye's taking you to the Bar C was impromptu, Conover—but it shows her flair. That way she was able to separate you from your wife and go through the only clothes of yours she hadn't inspected."

"And I let you rescue me from Vernon and Gayner!" cried Sin in disgust.

"Merely protecting my investment," Trim assured her smoothly.

"Just how," asked John Henry, "did you know Anglin had wandered into our cottage in the first place?"

"Careless Anglin," clucked the man. "Faye was waiting for him in the cottage next to yours. When she saw you turn on all your cottage lights, she crept over and—behold!—Anglin had left his signature by your front door. A handprint in blood. She immediately phoned me. I was chatting with that Loomis woman who told me about your quiz contest. My mind leaped instantaneously to the obvious—I would gain entrée to your company by being the Bry-Ter Tooth-Paste man."

"You must be insane!" Sin whispered.

The little figure under the pirate hat stiffened.

"No," said Mr. Trim softly. "Merely irreverent." In a gayer voice he said, "Faye went to the Bar C Ranch tonight to discover the starting point for the route I gained from Gayner. It was no error—her releasing you two. But what I commend her for is the way she waited, guessing I would come along eventually and need her."

"No!" said Sin. "She couldn't have—"

"Yes. She removed Odell at the proper moment. Odell was stabbed with the arrow—not shot with it." He peered up at the sky. It was lightening. "Forward march!" he commanded cheerfully. "You, Conover, will go first—and I will bring up the rear. I count on you to realize that your first foolish move will send a bullet through your wife's spine."

They clip-clopped around the last corner. A few yards away, a brush fire had been built in the lee of a great boulder. Two horses stood near the rock, hobbled. The roan whinnied softly in greeting.

Trim held his revolver poised, eyes

snapping from cliff to cliff. He spurred forward as they came abreast of the mammoth boulder. His thin-lipped smile was triumphant.

A man lay beside the fire, his big body swathed in a blanket.

"There is Mr. Barselou," Trim said. "Signed, sealed and delivered." He gestured up the canyon. "And there is the *Queen.* Another *Flying Dutchman.*"

The jigsaw line of sky seemed to brighten and the outline of a wooden hull slowly took form against the rosy glow. The *Reina* had not come to rest on the canyon bottom. Rather, the galleon was wedged between the rock jaws of the chasm, almost two hundred feet above their heads. The *Queen* was earthbound, as in some gigantic dry dock.

Awestruck, Sin murmured, "Poor lonely thing."

The sails and masts and most of the high stern had rotted away, exposing three layers of deck. Near Barselou's camp, was a pile of rubble that had fallen over the years. Here trailed a rustly length of chain and there jutted a crumbling plank.

The sleeping form on the ground stirred, moaned, and raised itself on its elbows.

"Good morning, Mr. Barselou!" Trim greeted.

Barselou scrambled to his feet, still half-fettered by the heavy blanket. His eyes widened, then narrowed at the three mounted figures above him in the dawn. One hairy hand twitched toward the carbine on the ground and Trim said, "No." Barselou halted, warily motionless, and looked at the pistol muzzle.

"Rude to awaken you like this," Trim pattered on. "Particularly to the noise of a dream castle crumbling about your ears."

Barselou's shoulders hunched grimly. "Odell," he gritted.

"You won't have to worry about Mr. Odell," Trim said. "Mr. Anglin, Mr. Odell, Mr. Gayner—all gone. And that young bellhop is being closely questioned by the police. Calamity has come."

BARSELOU'S rugged face turned and his eyes glinted at the Conovers.

"It was you—" he began hoarsely.

"No," said Sin earnestly. "We're here by accident. Don't you understand? *He's* Jones."

"Or Trim. Or Jordan," said the little man. "Yes, don't give these two credit for my adventuring. The Conovers were brought because they knew of Walking Skull and for company through the night. And principally"—his voice gained metallic edges—"because I suppose a lot of their knowledge is dangerous."

"Jones," said Barselou dully.

"A mailing address only." Trim chuckled. "There's no harm in telling you that my real name is Jordan, widower, age fifty-five, one daughter, and that Anglin's blunder was to disregard my instructions to communicate by mail when all was ready. He was in such a big hurry that he telegraphed."

Barselou lifted his head. "So you guessed I saw the wire."

"I couldn't ignore the chance, considering the hold you had in Azure. I generally include a female companion in my exploits—they kick up such a blinding dust. And in this case it was a sort of celebration. My daughter Faye had just been released from—" Trim halted abruptly. "She was held illegally. Her only illness was over-originality!

"Forget that carbine!" he snapped, twisting back toward Barselou. Then he continued pleasantly, "So we had to separate for the time being, as you were expecting a pair of Joneses. When Anglin wired instead of writing, Faye was forced to occupy the cottage alone, while I took a room. We didn't dare to bear the least resemblance to a Mr. and Mrs. Jones of San Diego. Anglin made a stupid mistake over the cottage number, thought I reneged, and turned to you in desperation. I couldn't catch him, but I stopped him."

"And I blamed Odell—"

Trim glanced overhead quickly. There was a tinge of gold on the cliff edges above the imprisoned galleon.

"Light enough to work by," he said happily. "Well, shall we join the lady?"

* * * * *

Lieutenant Lay tossed the statement on his desk and said, "Run through it again." Leaning against the closed

door, Thelma Loomis brushed ashes from her patrolman uniform.

Robottom cleared his throat. "I'm an archaeologist, Lieutenant. I first told the story of the lost Spanish galleon to Barselou more than a year ago. Naturally, I was eager to locate it. So was he and—well, we pooled our talents. I discovered that Barselou regarded the ship almost fanatically but believe me, Lieutenant, I didn't realize how far he'd go!"

"Go on," said Lay inflexibly.

Robottom stared at the floor. "He hired a man named Anglin to do the exploration and promised to sponsor an expedition later. A week ago I hurried here from Los Angeles. Anglin had found the ship, but Barselou phoned me that a man and a woman named Jones, masquerading under the name of Conover, were trying to beat us to the *Reina*. I thought I might bluff the Conovers out. I thought I had succeeded. I was wrong. I found that out when they killed Gayner and made their getaway. But this time, I was frightened. I hadn't bargained for murder."

"So you went out to the Bar C to talk things over with Barselou," Lay prompted.

Robottom's face flushed slightly. "I was looking for him when I discovered that Odell too had been murdered—but apparently by the Jordan girl. I tried to remonstrate with her and—well—"

"You got slugged," Miss Loomis said.

"—and your policewoman rescued me."

The Homicide chief glanced her way and passed it off with a "Sure."

"What about this Faye Jordan, anyway?" Lay pressed. "I understand you know her pretty well, Robottom."

"I met her once—this morning. I gave her a card to Barselou's—ah—"

"Casino," said Lay evenly. "I konw about it. You might be in pretty hot water now. Conspiracy, possible accessory to a murder, intimidation—"

Robottom raised his tired face. "What are you going to do to me, Lieutenant?"

"What'll you do if I let you go?"

Robottom's dull voice replied automatically. "Why—I'll go home—my wife—"

Lay made a gesture of dismissal and said, "Recognizance and this statement will do me for the time being. Just keep in touch."

Sagmon Robottom stood up abruptly and then went out.

"What about the girl?" Thelma Loomis asked curiously.

"We agree she's nuts. I'll check the asylums. I don't think she just cracked—she's been cracked before. I can't make answers out of her cat talk but she definitely places the Conovers at the ranch last night. So the next step is to find the Conovers."

IT took them a half-hour to climb up to the suspended ship. Anglin had done his work well. Steps had been chipped in the soft stone of one cliff, leading up to the stern of the *Queen*.

John Henry, Barselou, Sin, Trim with his revolver—that was the order. Sin had never been so frightened in her life. The armed maniac was terrifying. Then suddenly, to one side, was a rotting balcony of sand-covered wood. John Henry pulled her onto the deck of the galleon.

"No wonder I couldn't spot it from the air," Barselou muttered.

This topmost deck was heaped with sandy dirt and small rocks. Sagebrush, mesquite, a few struggling wild flowers had taken root. From above, it would seem a piece with the surrounding Badlands.

Trim chuckled. "Down into the hold. That's where the chests will be."

Barselou led the way, but at every step the timbers creaked and groaned. The four picked their route gingerly down a rotting flight of steps, and into the low waist of the galleon. Part of the decking had fallen away here, and Barselou landed with a heavy crash. The *Reina* shuddered under the impact.

"Careful, damn you!" snapped Trim.

Sin extended a trembling forefinger. "Look at them!" Sprawled around the deck in haphazard piles were bleached bones. A skull stared at them with hollow eyes.

"Some of Arvaez' crew," Barselou said.

A cannon lay helplessly on one side by a roughly square hole that had once been a hatch. Two of the great planks had sprung and almost directly beneath Sin she could see the five horses in the canyon, two hundred feet below.

Trim, in his red knee breeches and

long blue coat, seemed a fit commander for the ghost ship. His sharp eyes raced around the shadowy deck. Then he let out a whoop of triumph.

Against a moldering bulkhead, far forward, was a row of squat chests. "There!" he ordered. "Hurry—open them up!"

The four people moved cautiously toward the ironbound boxes. Barselou and John Henry wrestled with the first chest, prying at the lid. Together they forced it open, stared into the black depths. John Henry lifted his head and looked at the man in the pirate costume.

"False alarm," he said. "It's empty."

"Don't lie!" Trim rasped.

He bounded forward and drove the other two aside with the gun. A moment later, he raised a face that was pale and contorted with rage. Barselou's countenance had gone dead.

"Get back!" Trim commanded, panic in his words as he went down the row kicking at the dusty ironbound tops. Most of the lids flew back instantly. A red dust arose and sunbeams danced on flakes of rust.

At the last chest, Trim uttered a howl and pulled out a fistful of round black objects like withered marbles, staring uncomprehendingly. Then he pivoted and hurled the tiny wrinkled balls spitefully at Barselou.

"There's your fabulous riches!" he shrieked. His high cracked voice screamed curses at Barselou.

The withered black globules lay on the sandy timbers. Sin gazed at them and remembered something she'd read. Pearls, exposed to the elements, deteriorate and become valueless.

"I don't understand," Barselou said dully. "I don't understand."

"Maybe you can understand this," Trim panted. "Somebody beat you to the gold, the emeralds, all the treasure. Somebody maybe a century ago. Anglin knew! Anglin was doublecrossing us both!"

John Henry laughed. He couldn't help it, even in the face of the maniacal fury. Barselou's search, Trim's involved intrigue—all had been for nothing. Three men had died for a chest of worthless pearls.

Sin laughed too. "It's another Spoonerism," she said, her shoulders shaking. "You know—the man who always got his words twisted. Remember? Somebody asked him if he sang and Mr. Spooner said, 'I know only two tunes—God Save the Weasel and Pop Goes the *Queen.*' Don't you get, Johnny? She just popped!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" yelled Trim. He thrust the muzzle of his revolver almost in Sin's face. "Get over against the wall—all of you!" Flecks of light were dacing oddly in his eyes. "This is high tragedy. I will not accept the role of clown."

SIN and John Henry backed up silently, Barselou mechanically.

"There!" barked Trim as three backs touched the side of the galleon. The trio stood on the gun platform. Behind them, the rectangular cannon ports revealed the rock face of the cliff, blind and gray. From a beam that ran the length of the ship's side, several rusty iron chains dangled. Each chain terminated in a wide iron cuff. The ship's irons.

Trim was addressing Barselou. "Snap those chains around their wrists, if you please."

Sin licked her trembling lips and asked, "What are you going to do, Mr. Trim?"

"An old pirate custom, Mrs. Conover. No prisoners. By the time you're found, you'll be indistinguishable from the other skeletons here."

"No—you can't—" Sin choked. She almost fell to her knees but John Henry held her to him.

The threatening pistol motioned at Barselou whose mind had been numbed by the loss of the treasure.

"Johnny—don't let him—"

Conover struggled but the expressionless gambler forced John Henry's wrists into the iron circlets. It needed all the power in his hairy hands to press the rusty gyves together.

Sin submitted limply. The pair stood side by side on the gun platform, their wrists held at ear level by the ancient cuffs anchored to chairs from the beam above.

Barselou wheeled slowly and said, "What next?"

Trim smiled, but his mouth was stiff. "It's your turn, Mr. Barselou. Face the wall."

Dumbly, the big man obeyed.

"Put your hands up just like the others." Trim stepped catlike across the

deck and shoved his pistol into the small of Barselou's back. "Now just hold still."

John Henry felt the perspiration beading his palms. He lashed out with his foot at Trim's kneecap. The little man danced back, howling, and stumbled on the uneven timbers. Sin screamed.

Over her shriek came the blanketing roar of colossal rage. Barselou jerked a rusty chain loose from its mooring and whipped it ferociously at the cocked hat. Trim sank to one knee in the center of the gun deck, blood streaming from his bald head. He raised the revolver.

John Henry got one hand free of the loose cuff of iron. But Barselou had leaped, with another reverberating roar, for the crouched figure. The pistol exploded against his chest like a cannon blast.

Barselou's huge body enveloped the little man, his fists battering, pummeling, mauling. Trim's revolver blasted again.

The deafening noise joined the echoes of the first explosion. They bounded against rocky walls up and down the canyon, until the wooden ship was a trembling fury.

The *Reina* began to move.

"—collapsing!" Trim yelled and tried to claw his way from beneath Barselou's flailing bulk. John Henry pulled Sin close. He braced his feet as the gun platform shivered. The deck tilted and the thrashing bodies rolled toward the stern. Old timbers creaked agonizingly and sand poured from above. Two of the great overhead planks parted.

A convulsion seized the *Reina* as the roar of bursting seams soughed in the narrow canyon slot. With a climatic ripping of wood, the decks of the *Queen* collapsed and plunged through the ancient keel for the canyon floor. Trim's final maniacal shriek spun a thread of terror as the two struggling men dropped from sight. The thin noise was drowned by the crash of timbers into the earth below.

Dust swirled in the air.

Sin began to cry.

Below them yawned the gorge with its churning column of brown dust. Most of the hull and rotten decking had given way, but the stout curving timbers of the *Reina's* sides had remained between the canyon walls. The curb on which the Conovers huddled had been part of the funnel through which the ruins of the hulk had poured. And the beam to which three of their four wrists were gyved had stayed up.

"We're all right now, honey," said John Henry comfortingly.

"I know, Johnny," Sin whimpered. "That's why I'm crying."

Gingerly, Conover pried at their iron cuffs. Two of the rusty hinges bent open easily. His own gyve broke apart in his hands.

The dust cloud was thinning now. He could make out the dead campfire and the startled horses neighing and rearing at the new mountain of rubble that had poured from the sky. The red disk of morning sun had just topped the mountains.

John Henry took a deep breath. As soon as Sin felt better, they'd climb down to the horses.

They looked down into the depths of the canyon silently. Far below, nothing moved in the heap of broken timbers that had once been the Manila galleon.

"Funny," Sin said softly. "I feel sorrier for the *Queen* than I do for anybody."

"The poor old *Queen,*" John Henry agreed. "It took a long time for the pirates to catch her. But, Sin, she put up a wonderful fight."

●

The Almost Perfect Murder

There's more to a mystery slaying than meets the eye, as proved by this true story of the strange case of Walter Baker!

by JACKSON HITE

Baker was dead, a bullet hole in his head

A POLITICAL-WISE police captain once remarked that there is more to murder than meets the eye. This is a good adage to remember in approaching any true crime case. Facts may not always be what they seem to be and a perfect murder may not be that at all. Take the case of Walter Baker. Police frankly admitted that they were puzzled by his death and accepted it as a perfect crime. They even brought in students of criminology to study the baffling situation. If you are surprised at the solution, don't say you weren't forewarned.

It was on a winter's night in 1941 when Walter Baker returned to his suburban home from a trip to the city of Portland, Maine, where he had driven to pick up his daughter, Hilda. Baker stopped in front of the house to let off his daughter and then drove to the garage in the rear.

Baker Goes To Garage

Hilda entered the house while the father parked his machine in the double garage. Some time passed before Hilda and her mother noticed that Baker had not come into the house as yet. They looked over at the garage and noticed that the light was on.

Mother and daughter exchanged good-natured glances that seemed to say, "Men and their cars!" But when another fifteen minutes passed with still no word from the man of the house, Mrs. Baker became worried and asked

Hilda to see what was causing the delay.

The girl slipped over to the garage and calling her father, entered a small side door. Moments later her screams rang out in the frosty stillness and police of South Portland found themselves confronted with a first class mystery.

Baker was dead, his body lying just within the door, a bullet hole in his head. When police arrived and moved the body they found the dead man was lying on top of an unloaded shotgun.

The Open Window

The investigators discovered that a side window in the garage, which Baker usually kept closed, was wide open. Two cars were parked, the one just driven in by Baker and the other belonging to a neighbor who lived several doors away. The glove compartment of the neighbor's machine showed signs of being ransacked and some of its contents were strewn about. Outside, a few feet from the open window, one of the officers picked up a plain leather holster.

When the officer on the post reported that Baker complained the previous week that he had spotted a prowler in the garage near the neighbor's car, police felt they were in a position to reconstruct the killing.

Baker had entered in time to discover the intruder searching the other machine. He reached for his unloaded shotgun, either to frighten the other off or to bluff him into capture. The prowler, however, had a gun concealed in a holster.

He yanked out his weapon, fired one shot and then fled through the window, losing the holster as he made his escape. If robbery had been his motive he had been frightened off by his deed and did not search Baker's pockets.

The Unheard Fatal Shot

Neither Mrs. Baker nor Hilda had heard the shot. Neighbors likewise reported that they had not heard the gun nor had they noticed any strangers in the quiet home neighborhood. An immediate search of the area turned up no clues. The thorough officers even sent flashlight rays dancing about the attic over the garage to make certain that the killer wasn't hiding there.

Various state and county experts went to work on the case. Medical examiners performed an autopsy and reported that the fatal bullet had been fired from either a .32 or .38 caliber revolver. The doctors said the bullet had entered slightly above the right ear and had angled upward sharply, indicating that the killer had been kneeling or crouching when he fired at point blank range. The severe powder burns showed that the gun had been held no more than an inch from the dead man's head when it was fired.

With the coming of daylight, police searched the banks of a nearby river to see if the killer had discarded his weapon. No trace of the gun was found but officers did locate several fragments of a bullet in the garage. These were carefully preserved and removed to the state police technical laboratories.

The Killer's Smudges

One of the experts working on the case was the commanding officer of the technical division of the state police. He supervised the dusting of both machines in the garage in the hopes of finding the fingerprints of the killer but all the officers found were several prints belonging to Baker and some smudges, including one which had been left by somebody wearing gloves, one of which had a hole in one finger.

As the day passed with no new clues police lost their enthusiasm for the prowler theory. There was nothing in the double garage to merit the attention of a thief, since both Baker and the owner of the second machine kept no valuables in their cars. The machines themselves were neither new nor particularly expensive.

If the intruder had intended to steal one of the cars he was making it tough for himself since the garage was deep in the rear of the house and he would have had to drive the full length of the long driveway before he could even reach the street to get away, thus doubling his chances of being seen. Neighbors in the small community would have spotted any stranger at a glance, and no one could be found who had seen any strange figures moving about in the dark.

Check Victim's Background

Wondering if the murder of Baker had been deliberate, officers began to

check into his background hoping for a lead. They soon found they had drawn another blank. Baker had conducted a restaurant for over 20 years in Portland and had retired only the month previous. He had laughingly told neighbors that he now was going to enjoy life after years of working over a hot stove. He was a quiet man who got along well with people and had lived at the same spot almost all of his mature life.

He had taken to his life of leisure with relish and was seen puttering about repairing the many small things that constantly need attention in a house. He preferred to stay home evenings with his feet in slippers, smoking a pipe and listening to the radio.

"What more could a man ask?" he remarked to a neighbor.

Killing Stirs Public

Yet such a man, leading a blameless life, had been ruthlessly shot down without being given a chance. His fingerprints were found on the holster and officers reasoned that he clutched at it when the killer yanked out the gun.

The murder stirred not only the residents of South Portland but of the much larger neighboring city of Portland, the largest city in the state. Local and state police worked tirelessly on the case only to realize that, the way matters stood, there was little chance of finding the killer without a lucky break of some kind.

It so happened that while the investigation was going on, a group of local officers from various parts of Maine were attending classes given by the state police at central headquarters in Augusta. One of the men giving the lectures was the captain in charge of the technical laboratory. He had to give up teaching to take over active assignment on the case.

Technical Students Investigate

The captain realized that the shooting presented an opportunity for the student officers to obtain practical expericence of the kind they never could gather in the lecture rooms. He obtained the consent of the county attorney to bring some of them along while authorities continued to plug away on the case, hoping against hope to pick up some clue, no matter how slight, that might put them on the right trail.

As a test to see how it would work out, the Captain brought along only a few of the students, most of them being young deputy sheriffs without much experience in crime investigation.

The veteran officers who had been at the scene soon after the body had been found explained to the neophytes exactly what they had found. They chalked in the position of Baker's body, with his head near the door just under the light switch and his feet parallel with the wall. The garage actually was composed of one larger and one smaller structure in a sort of L-shape. Baker kept his car in the smaller half.

The exit door was situated in the larger half which was used to house the neighbor's car. Baker was found dead in the larger half of the garage and probably was on his way out when he was killed, being no more than a step from the door.

Deputy Discovers Gun

While the veteran officers were going over the details, one of the young tyros moved about the garage examining everything he could find. When the officer mentioned that the body had been found just under the light switch, the young deputy moved over to the light switch for a better look.

He noticed that there was a hinged door above the light switch and so he opened it and looked in. Baker evidently had constructed it as a handy cabinet in which to keep his tools in place and out of sight. The cabinet actually was nothing more than several shelves constructed in a hollow space in the wall which went up to the attic.

The young officer, listening to the lecturer and at the same time busy with his own explorations, noticed several ropes hanging down into the cabinet. He gave an experimental yank on one. As he did this, the rope in his hand came down while the other ropes went up, indicating that the cord was on a pulley. As the young deputy watched, a gun came floating down on the rope and stopped in front of his face.

Blinking, he pulled the other rope and the gun went up the wall out of sight.

By this time the other men in the room had turned to see what was happening. Once again the young deputy tugged on the rope and down dropped the gun to dangle in the cabinet securely tied to the rope. He pulled it out and let it go and the gun went back into the cabinet, whisking up out of silght while the hinged door closed automatically. The veteran officers hurriedly examined the weapon. It was a .32 with one discharged shell.

Surprise Solution

A fingerprint man applied white powder to the weapon and brought out several distinct prints. He compared them with those collected on the case. The prints on the gun belonged to Baker, the dead man. Ballistics experts examined the bullet fragments found at the scene and compared them with the bullets still remaining in the weapon. They were identical.

Several hours later Portland newspapers were carrying the story of the solution of the murder of Baker. It wasn't murder at all. Baker had rigged up an elaborate scheme to commit suicide and make it appear that he had been murdered. The moment he shot himself and the gun fell from his hand, the pulley brought the weapon up into the attic wall out of sight, the hinged cabinet door closed tight, and police were confronted with what appeared to be a motiveless crime.

The officers had no difficulty in learning that Baker had closed his business because business had fallen off. He was in debt and had selected his "perfect murder" as a way of easing the path for his wife and daughter, both of whom he loved deeply.

It seems that there is more to murder than does meet the eye.

A THATCHER COLT NOVEL

About the MURDER

I

ONLY a desk-lamp was burning in that famous private office at Police Headquarters. The rest of the Commissioner's room was darkened with the premature shadows of a gusty winter afternoon. Brooding over blueprints, Thatcher Colt sat at his desk, enchanted with the traffic puzzle of a great city.

Finally he glanced up at me. "You can go, Tony," he said. "You've done enough work for one secretary today."

"Captain Henry wants to see you, but I told him you didn't wish to be disturbed," I replied.

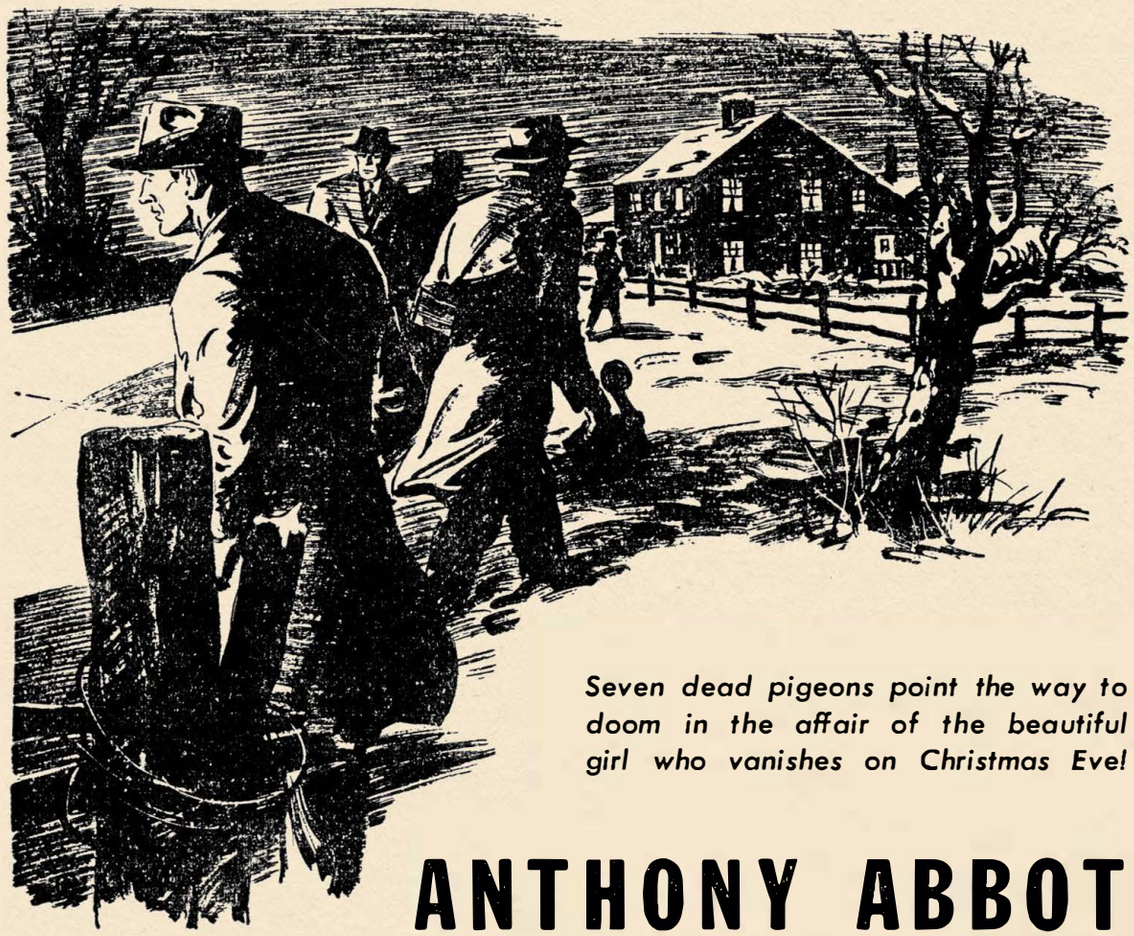
"Oh, well—send him in."

Israel Henry marched into the office, a heavy-set, silver-haired police captain, and, saluting, laid an opened envelope before Thatcher Colt.

"Young lady brought this in. Says

A THATCHER COLT NOVEL

About the MURDER of Geraldine Foster



Seven dead pigeons point the way to doom in the affair of the beautiful girl who vanishes on Christmas Eve!

ANTHONY ABBOT

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"Young lady brought this in. Says she won't go away until you've looked at it yourself."

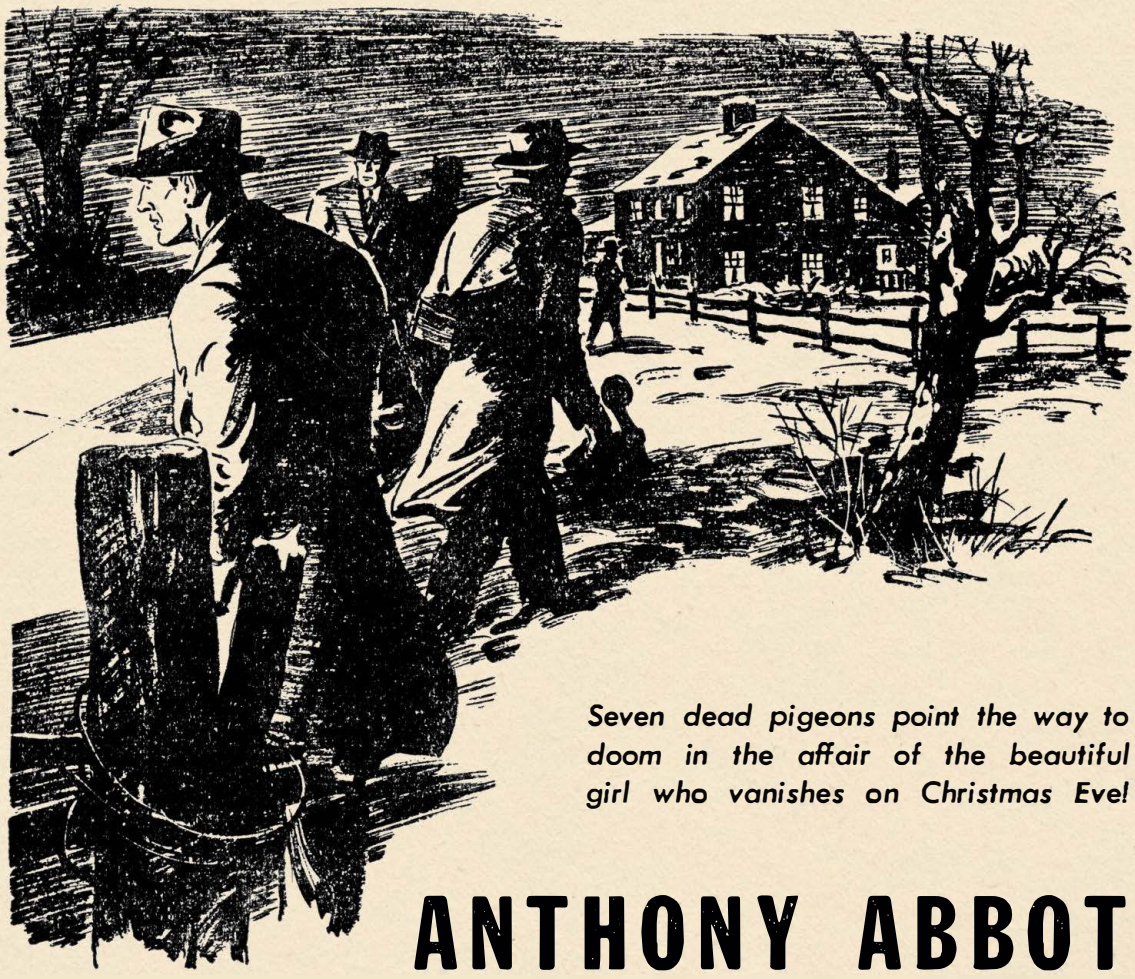
Under the lamplight, the Commissioner was a striking figure, with his huge and powerful frame and soldier's face. He was the best dressed man in public life, and not since the days of Theodore Roosevelt had the Department known a chief of such strength, courage and decision. His black hair was crisp and closely cut, his brown eyes somber, and his features firm.

Having read the letter, he picked up the telephone, called Captain Laird.

"Helloa, Captain . . . Girl in my office—sent by one of my oldest friends. Mind if we talk with her together? Come right up."

Meanwhile, Captain Henry had led in the girl and introduced her as Betty

# of Geraldine Foster



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Meanwhile, Captain Henry had led in the girl and introduced her as Betty

Canfield. She had an attractive, piquant face, large brown eyes, and wore a squirrel coat and a saucy blue hat. Thatcher Colt greeted her pleasantly.

"So you are the niece of Frank Canfield," he said. "It will be a pleasure to do anything I can for you. One of your friends is missing?"

"My roommate," said Betty, with a catch in her voice.

The door opened to admit Captain Laird, a tall, keen-eyed officer, who at Dartmouth had been a track star. Thatcher Colt explained to Betty Canfield:

"Captain Laird is the chief of our Missing Persons Bureau. He will tell you that our most difficult cases are those in which the family or friends give only a part of the truth. So tell us everything."

FOR three years, Betty Canfield said, she had been sharing a small apartment on Morningside Heights with Geraldine Foster, a girl who worked in a doctor's office in Washington Square. Geraldine was planning to be married in January. The last time the two had been together had been around noon on the previous Saturday, Christmas Eve, when they had lunched at the Hotel Brevoort.

"I said good-by to Geraldine at Fifth Avenue and Tenth. Suddenly she leaned forward and kissed me and said, 'If I don't come home for supper, Betty, don't be worried—I'll be doing my Christmas shopping.' And before I could answer she was walking toward Washington Square."

"And you haven't heard from her since?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"I talked with her later that afternoon over the telephone and, Mr. Colt, it was that conversation which makes me feel so frightened."

"Why?"

"I could tell that she had been crying, and she admitted she and Doctor Maskell had quarreled. But she wouldn't tell me why."

"Doctor Maskell!" reflected Colt. "Is he related to George Maskell, the criminal lawyer?"

"They are brothers," said Betty.

"A distinguished family," interposed Captain Laird. "And a strange one. George Maskell is the Robin Hood of the radicals. He and his wife, who is his law partner, represent rich clients at enormous fees and work for radicals for nothing. At the death of their father the two sons will inherit millions. But neither has much now, I understand."

"What time was it when you had this telephone conversation with your roommate?" Colt asked Betty.

"It was exactly three o'clock. There is a little clock on my desk and I was looking at it all the time I was talking."

"I see. What further was said between yourself and Geraldine?"

"I told her if she would come home to supper, I would go out shopping with her. But she said, 'Christmas doesn't hold anything for me now, Betty. I wish I was dead. I guess I soon will be.' Then she burst out laughing and said she was acting like a fool, and promised to be home early."

"But she did not come home?"

Betty Canfield shook her head.

"No! But I wasn't much worried because she often stayed away for weekends. I supposed she had gone over to her folks in New Jersey. But Monday when I hadn't heard from her, I telephoned her mother. Mrs. Foster told me she had expected her for Christmas dinner, and was surprised she had not phoned. But she wasn't really worried. Geraldine was impulsive and had often disappointed her family. They supposed she had gone to Boston to spend Christmas with the family of her fiancé, Harry Armstrong.

"I telephoned Harry, but he hadn't heard from her either, not since Friday night when he took the train for Boston. Then I called up Doctor Maskell. He says that when he returned to his office on Christmas Eve afternoon, Geraldine was gone without leaving any note or message, and without waiting for her salary."

"What did her parents say about that?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"Old Mr. Foster is really alarmed. He and Mrs. Foster will be at my apartment tonight."

Thatcher Colt sat back in his chair.

"How old is Geraldine?"

"Twenty-two."

"Have you a picture of her?"

Opening her handbag, Betty handed the Police Commissioner a photograph. As Captain Laird and my chief studied it I could see the face of an intelligent, lovely girl.

Thatcher Colt asked for a detailed description—coloring, height and weight.

Betty Canfield said that Geraldine Foster was five feet, five inches tall, and weighed one hundred and thirty

GERALDINE FOSTER

pounds. She had light brown hair, reddish, and blue-gray eyes. Her hands were long, slender and beautifully kept. She wore a diamond engagement ring. When last seen she had been wearing a beaver coat, an orange and brown hat, brown shoes, brown gloves and bag.

Thatcher Colt asked: "Where any of Miss Foster's clothes, or other effects missing from your apartment?"

"No. Geraldine took nothing with her. As a matter of fact—" Betty leaned nearer. "It may not have any significance, but Christmas Eve Geraldine went to the theatre with Harry, and when she came home she sat down and suddenly said she was sick of the sight of her honeymoon clothes."

"Do you think she was a girl who might get despondent and—"

"Never, Mr. Colt!"

CAPTAIN Laird looked at his watch. "I shall get started on this at once," he said.

"What time do you expect Geraldine's parents?" Colt asked Betty.

"Around nine o'clock."

"I would like to pay a visit to your apartment tonight. Now, this doctor that Geraldine worked for. What is his full name and address?"

"Doctor Humphrey Maskell. His office is at one eighty-six Washington Square North, but he lives at a hotel on lower Fifth Avenue. Geraldine was his receptionist."

"Why don't you like Geraldine's employer?" asked Thatcher Colt, suddenly.

Betty's dark eyes flashed. "I dislike him instinctively, without any real reason whatever. But there must be something wrong with a man whose own father and brother won't have anything to do with him."

"Thanks, Miss Canfield. Stop worrying, and we'll try to find your friend. Expect us about eight tonight."

She gave him the number of the Esplanade, an apartment house on Morningside Drive, and had reached the door when Thatcher Colt called:

"Miss Canfield, what did you and Geraldine have for lunch on Christmas Eve?"

The girl's eyes held a startled gleam. Then she answered:

"We had snails, Mr. Colt."

"Thanks."

Thatcher Colt picked up his telephone as the door closed behind her. The Commissioner spoke into the transmitter as the call was completed.

"Doctor Humphrey Maskell? The Police Commissioner speaking. Could you arrange to be in your office around ten o'clock tonight? . . . Thank you."

Turning from the telephone, Thatcher Colt said to me:

"Pretty little thing, Betty Canfield, eh, Tony? Nice, sweet girl, from a good family, but she comes down here and tells me lies. Too bad."

"But, Chief, how did she—"

Thatcher Colt waved my question aside.

"Get your dinner, Tony, and meet me in an hour. I am taking you with me tonight."

What had made Thatcher Colt believe that Betty Canfield had lied to him?

Over my dinner I puzzled that question, but came no nearer to the answer. It was generally that way when I tried to follow the strange thought-ways of the Police Commissioner, though I knew him better than he cared to know himself. I had first met him when I was a reporter on the staff of the old *Sun*. Later, I served under him in the Argonne. When he was appointed Police Commissioner he made me his secretary.

As I hurried through a particularly dank and unpleasant night back to Headquarters, I was musing about the pretty girl who had come to the office. Would Thatcher Colt be able to solve the mystery she had laid before him?

I found Neil McMahon, the Commissioner's chauffeur, at the wheel of Thatcher Colt's car, which is equipped with non-shatterable glass windows and windshields and two Thompson machine-guns.

When we were joined by the Commissioner, Neil drove us uptown—Neil, who had four bullet scars from his service in plainclothes, who cut through any maze of traffic like a knife, and exposed himself and you to death a dozen times in a simple ride across the town.

Exactly at eight o'clock, we reached the Esplanade Apartments in the region of Columbia University. The apartment we sought was on the fourth floor. Betty Canfield opened the door.

"Have you heard anything?" was her first question.

Told that it was too early to hope for any results, she led us down the entrance corridor.

The apartment was a pleasant and homelike place with its gay chintzes, nice prints, and touches of color. Then I remembered that a girl who had dreamed of her wedding day here had mysteriously disappeared.

RETURNING to the living room, after roaming from front to back, Thatcher Colt stared around as if seeking the truth about Geraldine Foster through clairvoyance. Then he began to question Betty with skill, leading her to talk about her friend confidingly.

For half an hour they chatted, then Thatcher Colt said:

"I think I have what I want now, Betty—a psychological portrait of Geraldine Foster. A receptionist, because she wanted to be in the big city, instead of the little town where her parents lived. An ambitious girl who was taking night courses in Columbia University. A good-natured girl, loyal to the man she intended to marry. Sent little presents home to the family every week although her salary was small and her father worth perhaps a hundred thousand dollars. Kind to her mother, father, brother. Within three days of her marriage, she disappeared, after that curious telephone conversation with you."

"Oh, there must be some way of tracing her!" exclaimed Betty, quivering.

"Easy does it, Betty. I've only just started. Now, your friend's employer, Doctor Humphrey Maskell."

"They call him 'the laughing doctor of Washington Square'," said Betty, with a toss of her head. "Geraldine told me."

"Do you think Doctor Maskell has any idea where Geraldine is?" Thatcher Colt asked amiably.

"She quarreled with him. And I wouldn't put anything past him. I told you his own family won't speak to him. His brother, George, the lawyer, has not visited him in twenty years. I think the doctor did sometimes see his father, but not often. And I think Geraldine had a suspicion that the doctor was a little mad. He is given to unexpected absences and has a passion for chopping down trees—says he loves the swing of the ax."

"But you haven't told me why the family doesn't like Doctor Maskell?" urged Thatcher Colt.

"I don't know—but I do believe he could tell us about Geraldine this minute if he chose."

"Maybe it is the doctor who won't have anything to do with the rest of the family," suggested Colt. "Betty, I have a feeling that you are not being entirely frank with me about Doctor Maskell."

She flushed slightly.

"I am trying to tell you everything. All I know is what Geraldine told me. She said he wasn't as wild as he liked to make out. But she found out last spring that detectives were following

him, and believed his family had employed them."

"George Maskell, you mean?"

"Or Mrs. George, the gorgeous Portia. Or the doctor's father. They are all frightened to death that the doctor will disgrace them. He is a fighter when he drinks, but he has been off liquor for several years. Anyhow, Geraldine knew I did not like her working for the doctor. I distrusted him."

"Again—why?"

"Instinctively, as I told you. Geraldine would tell me how he raved against his family, calling his sister-in-law a money-grabbing banshee, making fun of her drawing and singing, and calling his father a deceived old man. When the sister-in-law went to Europe last summer, I think the doctor tried to make up with George. But it didn't work, and the doctor cursed so I tried to make Geraldine resign."

"And she wouldn't?"

"No. She liked him as much as I disliked him."

Colt nodded thoughtfully.

"Betty," he said suddenly, "you mentioned that your roommate sometimes stayed away on week-ends. Did she confide in you about personal matters?"

"She talked with me about Harry's jealousy, but for the last few months she had grown secretive. Ever since she began to talk about having royal blood in her viens. Someone had written to her about her family tree. After that, she kept her business to herself, most of the time."

"Perhaps you may save her life by telling everything you know—or suspect."

"I don't know anything. And besides—suppose she were to come back and find me telling you all this!"

II

GROTESQUELY enough there came a ring at the door bell just then. Betty admitted into the living room a well-dressed elderly couple.

Old Edmund L. Foster, father of the missing girl, was a tall, bent man, with shrewd blue eyes, large, red, gnarled hands and a helpless air. His wife was quite stout; her round face was wrinkled and her eyes sparkled excitedly behind double-lensed glasses.

Thatcher Colt soon obtained a verbal

THATCHER COLT

picture of the family background and history. He asked about their son, Bruce, then inquired why he had remained behind.

"Oh," said Mrs. Foster, "Bruce thinks he knows where she is, and he's gone to look for her."

"Where does he think she is?" asked the Commissioner quickly.

"We couldn't drag it out of him," explained Mr. Foster. "He just told us he was going, and he wasn't coming back without his sister."

"I would like to have your permission," Colt said, "to make a search of your daughter's private effects."

"Go ahead," said the father. "You won't find anything to her discredit."

Betty guided the Commissioner in his search, and I, with my notebook, followed them.

"Geraldine's trunk contains most of her trousseau," explained Betty.

But our search of those scented garments gave us no information.

"May I see Geraldine's comb?" asked the Commissioner presently. Betty handed him an amber comb. "Not a strand of hair left in it," he remarked disconsolately. "Has she a used hair-net lying around?"

Betty found one she said Geraldine sometimes wore. Clinging to it were several strands of fine brown hair which Thatcher Colt put in an envelope

and sealed. He wrote in his precise hand;

Samples of the hair of Geraldine Foster

He opened a closet door.

"Was this her coat?" he asked, taking down a tweed jacket, the skirt of which was hanging nearby. As Betty nodded, the Commissioner began fingering through the pockets and drew forth a key.

"Is this for your front door?" he asked.

Betty said it was not. Nor did she know what lock it fitted. The key was a large one, of greenish metal—a key to fit an intricate old-fashioned lock.

Colt asked the parents if they recognized the key. They did not. With somber eyes the Commissioner resumed his investigation.

"We shared this desk," Betty pointed out. "The two left-hand drawers were Geraldine's."

Colt removed the drawers and spilled their contents on the couch. He examined the papers, insurance premium receipts, bills from dry-cleaners and department stores, the commonplace memoranda from any girl's life. Nevertheless, Colt asked Betty to preserve them. The Commissioner found a message that had come by special delivery:

Dear Sis, for the love of Mike wire me twenty-five bucks, will you?

Your loving brother
Bruce

Colt was on the point of pushing the second drawer of the desk back into place when suddenly he thrust his hand and arm deep into the dark recess. Presently he drew out into the light a fragment of green note paper, on which some words were written in ink. When Colt handed the paper to Betty, she instantly exclaimed:

"That is Geraldine's handwriting!" and in a low voice she read aloud: " 'I will never show the white feather. You tell me it is right. Something tells me it is very wrong. Once in your sleep I heard you say her name. I am getting married and I need the money. I must have four thousand dollars from you or—' "

A deep silence followed that last significant clause. Geraldine Foster a blackmailer? And who had talked in sleep, in the hearing of this pretty girl who could not be found? There was a strange look in the father's eyes as he kept his gaze fixed on the calm, inscrutable face of his wife.

"This is different from the mental portrait you gave me of Geraldine," Thatcher Colt protested. "The girl you painted for me was not a criminal."

"No! Never!" cried Betty.

The mother and father nodded, but said nothing.

"You are sure it is Geraldine's handwriting?" asked Colt.

"Yes. I saw Geraldine write that note. On the morning of Christmas Eve. All at once she tore up her unfinished letter and threw the pieces into the wastebasket. Then she wrote another letter."

"But how does this fragment get way back there, behind the desk drawer?"

BETTY had no answer, and Thatcher Colt lifted the wastebasket.

"When did you empty this basket last?" he asked.

"This morning."

Colt called the switchboard operator to have the janitor come up at once.

While waiting, Colt studied the letter with brooding interest. Something had occurred to him. He walked over to the desk, sat down, studied a memorandum Betty had left there, then lifted the desk pen from its holder and began to write on a blank sheet of paper.

He shoved the paper from him, regarded it frowningly, then lifted it and held it close to his eyes, slanting the paper to an oblique position, then comparing his own writing with the torn fragment.

"How long have you been using this kind of ink, Betty?" he asked.

"At least a month," she said.

"Any other ink in the apartment?"

"None that I know of."

"Did Geraldine have a special ink bottle of her own?"

"No. Is there anything wrong with that ink?"

Thatcher Colt shrugged. "I don't know. But the ink with which I have just written is not the same ink with which Geraldine Foster wrote that note, although both are purple. What is extraordinary is that these notes are written in different ink, but with the same pen."

The door bell rang and I admitted the janitor.

"Is today's waste paper still down in

the cellar?" the Commissioner asked him.

"Tomorrow morning they will take it all away," declared the janitor defensively.

Thatcher Colt turned to me. "Tony, I ordered Sergeant Burke to report to me at my car in front of this house. Show him this scrap of torn note, and tell him to go through all the waste paper in the cellar if it takes a week until he finds the rest of the pieces. . . ."

I left Burke on an all-night job, and found Thatcher Colt impatiently waiting for me in the lobby. As we hastened out to the car, Neil McMahon saluted and announced:

"Chief, I got some dirt for you on this Foster case."

"Well?"

"The janitor was telling me that about eight-ten A.M. on the morning of December twenty-fourth, the Foster dame and the Canfield dame were having a big row upstairs. He says the fight was a lallapaloosa."

"Thanks, Neil. Let's go."

As we started along Morningside, the chief remarked:

"Now, why didn't that charming Betty tell us about that quarrel, Tony? And why didn't she tell us that she was once engaged to Geraldine's brother Bruce?"

"How did you learn that?" I asked quickly.

"From the father. I got some crumbs from him. But he is *not* disposed to be communicative."

We drove down to Washington Square. Doctor Humphrey Maskell had the first floor of an old-fashioned house for an office suite. Thatcher Colt and I were about to mount the steps when a figure appeared in the vestibule, a little man, bent, as if slightly hunchbacked. His eyes were sliding slyly from side to side, as if he were watchful for a sudden attack.

We heard him mutter: "Get me to talk? Never. Think I can remember? Never. But Geraldine was kind to me."

He fled past us without a glance.

"Now who do you suppose that was?" I asked.

"I don't know," replied my chief, "but I certainly mean to find out."

We were promptly admitted into the hallway and found Doctor Maskell standing at the entrance to his offices and smiling affably.

A tall, rather good-looking man was Doctor Humphrey Maskell, broad of shoulder and strong of muscle. There was a patch of gray in the thick brown hair at his temples, his jaws were set in a strong line, and his gray eyes were bright and restless.

"Good evening, Mr. Commissioner," he said pleasantly, his voice deep and full. "Will you step in?" We followed him into the reception room. "I suppose you want to talk to me about my receptionist."

The doors of the suite were thrown open. In the front room were chairs for waiting patients, a table heaped with magazines, and a few etchings. In the doctor's private consultation room I saw a desk, and therapeutic paraphernalia. Beyond this was a closed door.

THE doctor invited us to be seated. "Forgive me for an abrupt beginning," said the Commissioner, "but did someone just leave here as we entered?"

"Yes, certainly," replied Doctor Maskell. "A poor misshapen child who is a combination valet and chauffeur and cook for a lonely bachelor like myself. His name is Checkles. I brought him home from the war, which broke his body and his mind. I am gradually giving him a new body and a new mind."

"I remember you in the war," Thatcher Colt said in a low voice. "They called you the 'fighting doctor'."

Humphrey Maskell laughed.

"Tell me what you know about the disappearance of Miss Foster," suggested Colt, abruptly.

"I don't know anything about it," replied Doctor Maskell. "I wish I did. Geraldine was going to leave me to be married, and this unexplained absence alarms me."

"When did you last see her?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"At two o'clock on Saturday afternoon, Christmas Eve. Every year I give presents to my patients. I like to deliver them in person, the day before Christmas. All that Saturday morning, Geraldine was helping me wrap the bundles and attach the cards. Around noon she went out to lunch, but came back a few minutes after one. She helped me

load the presents into my car and I drove off."

"Was she with you?"

"No," replied the doctor with a broad smile. "I had another lady with me. Miss Doris Morgan, eleven years old, who lives with her mother and father and grandmother on the floor above."

"Doctor," Colt said evenly, "where did you go on that trip?"

"All over town."

"And when did you get back?"

"Oh, it was well after four o'clock. . . Mr. Colt, a remarkable thing happened when I came home. I am sure it could have no bearing on this matter, yet I suppose I ought to tell you. I was holding Doris by the hand, and we were both laughing. As I stepped into the hallway, I noticed a woman in front of my office door. The hall lamp was not burning and I could see her only indistinctly. But I did make out that she was dressed in a dark coat, with the collar turned up. I asked her if she wanted a doctor. She answered by demanding to know why I did not keep someone in the office while I was away. She said she had been ringing for fifteen minutes and no one had opened the door. I thought this peculiar, for Geraldine was faithful about her duties.

"I tried the door, and to my surprise it was locked. I opened the door with my key and walked in. The woman followed me. There were no lights on, and I called for Geraldine. No answer. Then, to my astonishment, the strange woman pushed past me and walked straight into my consulation room. Before I reached her, she had opened the rear door and looked into the little room at the back. That, too, was empty.

"I asked her, rather peremptorily, what she was looking for, but she only said she was too late and burst into tears. She rushed past me, out into the hallway. I followed her, and saw her drive away in a taxi and that is all I know about it. At first I was inclined to think that Geraldine had played me a rather shabby trick. But now, I don't know what to think."

"Queer," Colt said musingly. "That mysterious lady might have been just a wandering person with a disordered mind. On the other hand, she may prove to be of supreme importance. I think I shall take a look through your establishment. Mind?"

He strode through the two rooms to the door at the back and into the rear room. His eyes turned from one object to another in the clutter of stored material. He fingered bottles and packages and over one large bottle he lingered, removed the stout cork, and sniffed. Then Colt left the bottle and went into the consultation room. He halted suddenly before a closed door.

Colt opened it and thrust his hand inside. When he withdrew it he held a brown fur coat.

"Did this belong to Geraldine Foster?" he asked, staring at the doctor with profound melancholy.

"Yes. Though I cannot imagine what it is doing in there. I have not opened that closet since Saturday."

"Was this the coat she wore on Christmas Eve?"

"It was. I saw her with it on when she went out to lunch."

"Christmas Eve was a cold day," Colt said in a low voice. "Geraldine would need her coat. And there is her bag, hanging on the same nail that held her coat. Where can she be—if she went out with no coat and no purse?"

IN STRAINED silence we stood there while Thatcher Colt examined the purse. Compact, lipstick, a book of addresses, a roll of bills and a handful of silver. The Commissioner turned again to Doctor Maskell.

"Do you suppose the mysterious woman who accosted you could have brought back the coat and purse?"

"Why—why—no," answered the physician.

"I am sorry if I have inconvenienced you," replied Thatcher Colt gloomily. "And I am sorry to say that I may have to trouble you soon again. For the present, good night."

But at the threshold, Thatcher Colt paused.

"Doctor," he said, "I am sorry to observe that you have not been frank with me."

"What do you mean?"

"You failed to tell me that you and Geraldine quarreled before you left on your errand of good cheer."

Doctor Maskell shrugged.

"That is true," he admitted. "But it was a private matter. Miss Foster would not want me to discuss the subject."

At the rear of the house we came upon seven pigeons which lay dead at our feet (CHAPTER III)

"But the police want you to discuss it. What did you quarrel about?"

Again the physician shrugged, helplessly.

"About her engagement. She had broken off. I told her she was a fool. That is why we quarreled."

"Why did she say she had broken off the engagement?"

"She did not tell me."

The doctor was lying. Thatcher Colt knew that, and Maskell knew that he knew.

III

I HAD started down the marble steps of the house when I was suddenly halted by Thatcher Colt. He was in the vestibule, pressing a button near the name "Gilbert Morgan."

Presently the familiar clicking was heard, and I followed my chief to the second floor where we found a woman at an open door. Her blond hair was radiant in the yellow light from a lamp behind her.

"Mrs. Morgan?" asked Colt.

She was a beautiful woman, beautiful in its finest sense. But there was a lifetime of suffering in her watchful eyes, in her very tone.

"I am Felise Morgan," she replied. "What is it you wish?"

Thatcher Colt explained who he was and why he was there. But at the mention of Geraldine Foster's name a gleam flashed dangerously from the woman's blue eyes.

"I know nothing about Geraldine Foster," she answered.

Thatcher Colt repeated what had just been told to him by Doctor Maskell. Mrs. Morgan nodded. It was true that her daughter had helped the doctor with the distribution of his Christmas presents. They had been gone about the length of time fixed by Maskell.

"Might we talk to your daughter?" suggested Colt.

"She is asleep," protested the mother, and Thatcher Colt waved his hand, dismissing the notion.

We returned to the street.

Centre Street was deserted when we reached the Department building. I was glad to get inside, for there was a raw wind abroad. As we walked through the vaulted stone corridors, our footsteps echoed on the flagstones. But the very atmosphere of the old building seemed to charge Colt with new life. No Commissioner ever loved the Department more.

On his desk lay a stack of reports and he began to finger them, swiftly gathering their import. He picked up a layout for a police circular to broadcast the search for Geraldine Foster. With a pencil, he made a few swift corrections, then read quickly through a sheaf of notes left for him by Captain Henry.

"Laird has found nothing," he said glumly. "And Burke telephoned he had found none of the missing pieces of that note. I'll put a tail on Doctor Maskell. That may help."

By noon of the following day, there was still no word of Geraldine Foster. Thatcher Colt told me he had done some solitary prowling in Washington Square, after breakfast, and had learned two interesting facts.

"I talked with a girl named Lizzie Clark," he explained. A nursemaid. Lizzie remembers seeing two women leave the Maskell house on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. What fixed it in her mind was that each of the women carried a large bottle, almost the size of a jug."

"Can you be certain one of them was Geraldine Foster?" I inquired.

"No," admitted the Commissioner. "But there was a large juglike bottle in Maskell's office last night, and near it some wrapping paper with a tag, showing three bottles were to be delivered before three P.M. on Christmas Eve." There was a worried note in his voice. "Also," he added, "Doctor Maskell has left town."

"Where on earth—"

"No one seems to know. The smiling doctor of Washington Square has decamped. He eluded my man an hour after he began to tail him."

Captain Laird arrived then and the chief of the Bureau of Missing Persons promptly stated, as his theory, that the girl was in deliberate hiding. She had remained away before for days at a time.

"I am certain she will return," Laird said.

"I hope you are right," said the chief emphatically. "But the unexplained absence of a beautiful girl is, to me, a danger signal. We must find Geraldine Foster, dead or alive."

Captain Henry came in, saluted, and announced that Sergeant Burke wanted to talk to the Commissioner.

"Bring him in at once."

Burke marched into the office, his face red.

"I have been through all the bales and I have not found the missing pieces, Mr. Commissioner," he said lugubriously.

Thatcher Colt glared at the detective. Then to our surprise, Burke laid a handful of green paper fragments before the Commissioner.

"What's this, Burke? You just told me you couldn't find them."

"I couldn't, sir," pleaded the distressed detective. "These are pieces of a note written by the Foster girl, but they don't belong to the piece you showed me.

HASTILY, Thatcher Colt fitted the pieces together and read:

Dear Harry—

After what has happened, I can never marry you. You could not love me and take the position you do. I love you—the you I knew before—but I shall never see you again.

Geraldine

"Who is Harry?" Captain Laird asked.

"Harry Armstrong—the boy she was to marry. Did she tear up two letters? Where are the missing pieces of the other one?"

Burke held up his right hand as if taking the oath that he had personally examined every scrap.

"Go back and try again!" said Thatcher Colt, and Burke departed.

The Commissioner leaned over the torn pieces of paper and said:

"Don't you see that this note is written with the household ink used in the girls' apartment? This makes the blackmail note even more curious. . . ."

The nation-wide quest for the missing Geraldine seemed to be fruitless, as day followed day. But Thatcher Colt stuck to the case, though what clues there were seemed inadequate and confusing. There was, for example, what Colt referred to as the "Clue of Ephraim Foster." This was unearthed in some letters Geraldine had written home. In them the Commissioner found why Geraldine had said she had royal blood in her veins. She had got the idea from letters written to her by one Ephraim Foster, of Willoughby, Kansas. He was tracing the genealogy of the Foster family and intended to write a book.

"We come from kings," wrote the old gentleman, in a letter which the girl had sent proudly home.

Colt called six detective sergeants into his office, read them the letter, and showed them a telephone book.

"Divide up the Fosters among yourselves," ordered Colt. "Find out how many received similar letters."

By five o'clock the next afternoon, we knew that none of the several hundred Fosters in New York had received such a letter. Apparently Ephraim Foster had written only to the girl who now could not be found. Colt dictated a wire to the Chief of Police of Willoughby, Kansas.

The reply came the following morning:

EPHRAIM FOSTER HAD POST OFFICE BOX HERE LAST SUMMER. UNDERSTAND NOT A MAN BUT A WOMAN. DROVE IN FROM SOME OTHER TOWN TO GET HER MAIL. ANYTHING WE CAN DO?

CHIEF OF POLICE DEWYRE.

Thatcher Colt wired him to follow any trace. But before we had heard from the West, a new development drove all other matters temporarily from our minds.

This was the finding of the fragments of what I have called the blackmail note. Betty Canfield phoned Thatcher Colt, and when he turned from the telephone, his face was glowing with excitement.

"Betty found the missing pieces of that note behind the desk drawer!" he exclaimed. "Funny—I looked there, too. Get on the extension, Tony, and take down the message while she reads it to me."

Listening in, I wrote:

My dear Casanova:—

There is nothing you can do about it. If I tell, your happiness will be destroyed. What is the small amount I need compared with your happiness? I think I am letting you off easily. Particularly as I do not approve of your romance and cannot be scared by your threats. I will never show the white feather. You tell me it is right. Something tells me it is very wrong. Once in your sleep I heard you call her name. I am getting married and I need the money. I must have four thousand dollars from you or I will tell about the house on Peddler's Road. I have—

There, Betty told us, the note abruptly finished.

Saying good-by to her, Colt turned to the inter-office telephone. To another division of that immense Department he put a question:

"Hello—Brampton? Is there such a place in the five boroughs anywhere as Peddler's Road? . . . All right, I'll hold on."

He turned and looked at me.

"That note sounds bad," he said. "Who was Casanova?"

Then he spoke again into the phone and listened to the crisp voice from the other end.

"Thanks," he said, and cradled the receiver.

I KNEW my chief would give orders to find out about all the houses on Peddler's Road.

"Chief," I said, "let me do that job. I'm all up on my work here."

Thatcher Colt smiled.

"All right," he said. "Peddler's Road, Brampton tells me, is a small lane, running across some undeveloped property behind Riverside Drive near Dyckman Street Ferry. Hop up there and take a look around. Report back here."

It did not seem to me then that an hour's time would make an important difference, and I had invited Betty Canfield to lunch. I did not think it necessary to break the engagement.

I found Betty a charming luncheon companion. Of course we talked about the fragments of the note she had found, then I got her to tell me about herself. She related incidents of her childhood in western Maryland. Her family still lived in Wingsboro, a little

mountain town, where they had been neighbors of the Fosters. Betty and Geraldine had come to New York about the same time. Geraldine had taken night courses in accountancy while Betty had been studing interior decoration. She now had a good position with a firm on Madison Avenue.

Betty did not refer to her engagement to Bruce Foster, and I did not ask her about it. She asked me to tell her about my work, and we lingered over the table while I talked about the Police Department.

"I think you are a good detective," said Betty. "But I suppose that comes from your newspaper training."

"How did you know I was a reporter?" I asked.

"I know more than that," she said. "You were in the war and served with the Commissioner, and you were never afraid of anybody but him, and you're proud of your drinking capacity."

I stared at her in amazement.

"Who told you all about me?"

But she only laughed, and I saw then that she had talked with Thatcher Colt when I wasn't present.

Betty begged me to tell her about what Thatcher Colt was doing to find her roommate. So interested was she that I told her about my assignment. She pleaded to go with me.

I saw no harm. Betty's knowledge of Geraldine Foster was valuable. It was about half-past two when we started for Upper Manhattan.

At Dyckman Street we left the car and climbed a narrow path into forgotten country, a stretch of land which hid itself in a region filled with apartment houses, stores and garages. Old trees were growing there, and a few abandoned frame houses.

As we trudged up the hill, a sallow-faced boy passed us and I called to him:

"Where is Peddler's Road?"

"Up there by the haunted house where you can see the naked ghost," he said.

"What's that?" I cried, but the boy ran down the steep slope.

Betty and I looked at each other, then laughed. Being lost was ridiculous. Was this lane the Peddler's Road we had come here to seek? There seemed no way of telling. There were no street signs, nor any living being of whom we might inquire.

"I think this must be the place," said Betty, pointing to a wider road, but in no better condition.

There were a few large old trees, whose bare boughs cried in the wind of that bleak afternoon. Skirting these we came suddenly upon a lonely house, a two-story house, a charming one, painted white with green windows and door sills. Its green pitch roof and the white scrim curtains were pleasing and homelike.

"Perhaps," I said, "we can make inquiries. First, let's take a look around."

I passed to the rear of the house, where at first I detected no signs of life, but the next minute I came upon startling evidence of death.

Seven pigeons lay dead almost at my feet. I picked up one, only to let it fall as I saw that the breast feathers of the dead bird were smeared with red; a scarlet splash. Regretting my weakness, I picked it up and examined it more closely, wondering if someone had been heartless enough to kill all these pigeons out of sheer wantonness. But I could find no wound upon the bird. One after another, I took the remaining birds into my hands, only to find the same scarlet daubs, and no signs of injury.

"Betty," I said, "what are these red stains on the poor birds? Have they been drinking red paint and poisoned themselves, or—"

STRUCK with a fantastic notion, I stopped. Those stains—could they be blood stains? How had they come there? Had they drunk from a brook that ran red with blood?

With deep misgivings I followed Betty to the front of the house and rapped on the door. There was no answer, although I knocked repeatedly. Finally I impatiently tried the knob. To my surprise, it yielded and the door opened.

I stepped inside and then stood appalled, rooted at the threshold. My first glance around the living room told me that a horrible crime had been committed there. Everything seemed bedaubed with blood. I have never seen such a spectacle of fury let loose within four walls. Tables, chairs, bookcases, all were flung around as if overturned in some life and death struggle. Blood was smeared everywhere, staining the

drapes, spotting the walls, and clotted on the floor.

"For God's sake, don't come in here, Betty!" I called.

But she had seen, and she stood there in the winter sunlight with her gloved hands lifted against her cheeks and her eyes closing with fear. Then she turned and ran.

My hand was groping for an electric switch-button when I suddenly heard a noise—the sound of a footstep on the stairs. Only a slight sound, merely the scraping of a shoe. But it was the sound of something moving and alive in this house where hideous murder had been committed.

The sound came again. Footsteps descending a staircase.

I drew my revolver and waited. Then, suddenly, I heard a familiar voice, yet sharpened with an unfamiliar choler.

"Put down your gun," said the voice. "It is a fancy weapon, I see. All very impressive to the young lady. But you won't shoot. You're no cop—you're too busy taking girls to lunch to be a policeman."

I put down the gun and stood, shamefaced and guilty, as Thatcher Colt walked into the room.

IV

AS THE Police Commissioner pressed a button, the lights in the wall bracket lamps glowed softly over the shocking confusion of the room. But I looked only at Thatcher Colt, wondering how and why he was here.

"Tony," he said, "I caught a glimpse of you and your girl friend at luncheon. While you were chatting over a table I came up here and made the discovery that could have been yours."

"I'm sorry, Chief. I—"

He waved aside my contrition.

"The girl we have been looking for was probably murdered in this room. You remember that I carried away from her apartment a sample of her hair? Well, in this room I have found other samples—soaked with blood. I found them clinging to the blade of this."

From a corner behind him he lifted an ax that gleamed in the light. On the steel blade were dark red stains.

"Geraldine Foster was hacked to death," he said. "Somewhere near this house we'll find her body. I found a

Under the drug Doctor Maskell, utterly relaxed, spoke without any reserve whatsoever (CHAPTER IX)

spade in the kitchen, apparently used lately. The murderer wore silk gloves, leaving thumb and finger prints on the handle of both the ax and the spade, but no identification. Moreover, the person who committed this crime was five feet, eleven inches tall, exceptionally strong. That is clear because once the ax blade in a particularly vicious swing struck the wall. We can guess at the height from that."

As he talked, he kept nodding.

"The lock on the front door has recently been repaired," he said. "The kitchen window was broken, and the house burglarized, either by a midget or a small boy. The footprints in the dust show that. And Tony, since the kitchen window glass was smashed, pigeons have taken to roosting here. They even drank of warm human blood, and then, struggling to get into the open air, they died. I found one little corpse in the kitchen."

"Extraordinary!" I gasped.

Thatcher Colt's eyes were roaming around the room.

"I am inclined to believe that a boy with a swallow face actually saw part of the murder. But he thinks he saw a ghost. I didn't have time to question him fully, but I have his name and address."

What a bungler Thatcher Colt would have thought me if I had told him the same boy had crossed my path, and I had let him run off!

Suddenly the Commissioner gave a low whistle and dropped to his knees. From the floor he lifted a hair or a thin strand of fabric.

"Just a straw, Tony," he said. "To show the way the wind blows. Golden hair that might belong to some innocent person, yet might have dropped from the head of the murderer."

He put the hair carefully away, marked for identification.

"The brutality of this crime," he informed me, "is the best promise of its solution. It was not the result of sudden fury; it was neither casual nor accidental. It was planned. The bathroom smells of pine trees. When we find out why, Tony, I believe we shall unearth a peculiar fiendishness behind this murder."

Suddenly the door knob rattled, the front door was pushed open, and we faced Betty Canfield staring at us. She looked pale and ill.

"Chief," I pleaded, "may we send Miss Canfield home?"

"In the investigation of a suspicious death," he said, "it is the duty of the police to prevent unauthorized persons from entering upon the scene of a crime until a member of the Detective Division appears. But it is also essential for the identification of the body of the deceased to be made. Under one rule, I can't admit you in the house, Betty, but under the other I must ask you to remain nearby."

"All right," said Betty. "I'll wait outside until you call me."

"One moment," said Thatcher Colt, and striding toward her, held out his hand. On his palm was a platinum wrist watch.

"It's Geraldine's," moaned Betty.

"The crystal is broken," said Thatcher Colt, "and the case dented. It was undoubtedly struck by one of those blows with the ax. The hands likely indicate the hour of death—five-ten."

"Where did you find it, Mr. Colt?" asked Betty.

"In the bath tub," he answered.

He put away the watch and laid a hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Brace up," he said. "I'm afraid you have a tough job ahead of you. It looks as if your roommate was the victim of some brutish, yet clever criminal who turned this pretty little house into an abattoir. But the crime, I believe, was premeditated and performed coolly and with calm intention. That's what makes it so horrible."

HE TURNED from the girl, and began emptying his pockets.

"Take these, Tony," he said. "They may point us to the murderer."

He put into my hands the watch, wrapped in a handkerchief, two envelopes, on each of which the word "hair" had been scribbled, and a white facecloth on which were two scarlet stains.

"I'll have more for you later," he promised. "Just now I want to—"

He did not finish, for suddenly Neil McMahon towered in the doorway, a gleam in his eyes.

"I have the grave, Mr. Commissioner," he announced.

Thatcher Colt followed him out of the house. I was close upon his heels. Betty

leaned against the doorpost, looking after us with frightened eyes, as we plunged into a thicket of trees.

The little light that still lingered penetrated but dimly into the wooded section that surrounded the house. But Neil led us through the dimness, spraying a stream of light from his fiashlight. The mystery of dusk lay over us as we came to a little open space, and Neil played his fiashlight on a sinister mound, covered with dried leaves.

Colt knelt and swiftly pushed aside armfuls of leaves. The earth laid bare was frozen and stiff in the grip of winter. In another moment, the most immaculate dresser in the city administration, on the knees of his gray-striped trousers, was clawing up handfuls of earth. Neil and I followed suit, scooping up clods of earth.

Suddenly I gave a cry. My hand had touched something cold and stiff—the bare foot of a human body.

We clawed at the earth that lay around that stiff form. The air was bitter cold, yet perspiration ran from our foreheads into our eyes. But ages seemed to pass before we could stand up and, sick with horror, look down upon that illuminated trench.

We had unearthed the nude form of a girl, the head covered with a stained pillow-case, the body hideously hacked. On one slim finger glistened the diamond of an engagement ring.

After the first long, appalling scrutiny, we turned away. Neil clutched off the light. In the dark we stood there, men who had fought in front line trenches, shaken and sick.

Then Thatcher Colt's own flashlight was turned on the grave and he knelt on the rim of the pit. Reaching down, he pulled away the pillow-case that shrouded the head. The cruelly battered face looked up at him with its sightless eyes.

The resemblance to the photograph of Geraldine Foster was undeniable.

"The body is nude," cried Thatcher Colt suddenly, "and yet—"

He put his finger on one cruel wound in the shoulder. Carefully he disengaged a piece of thread, imbedded in the flesh.

"There are these almost invisible traces of cloth in several of the ax cuts," he said. "Evidently she was clothed when she was attacked, and stripped after she was dead. Why?"

The Commissioner played his flash on the pillow case.

"It's wet," he said, "but not with blood. And this is dry ground. Very dry ground. What is water doing in this grave? And the smell of pine trees all around? There are no pine trees here."

He put one hand on the knee, then on the shoulder of the stiff form, and drew it away.

"The body, too, is wet," he muttered.

Suddenly he rose.

"Tony," he said, "you stay here and guard this body. McMahon, come with me."

As I watched them retreat through the trees and I stood there with the open grave and its dreadful burden at my feet in the dark, I was very cold and lonely.

The Commissioner had taken the pillow-case with him. Why had a pillow-case been put over the head of the corpse, leaving all the rest of the tortured body nude? I wondered if that meant the killer could not bear to look upon the mutilated face of his victim.

Suddenly, I heard the rustle of footsteps, and a light gleamed fitfully through the trees.

"Who is there?" I called.

"It's me," said McMahon, and covered me in the glare of his fiash. He was carrying a small bottle.

He passed me his flashlight and dropped into the shadows that hovered over the grave. Lying flat on his stomach, he uncorked his bottle and lowered it out of sight. I heard a gurgling sound, then he lifted the bottle, half-filled with some fluid, corked it, and stood up.

I SAW Thatcher Colt approaching, with Betty Canfield by his side. She threw me a glance of horror, but did not speak.

"Just take one look and tell me," said Colt, and put his arm around the girl as they stood together on the brink of the grave.

No loud cry came from Betty, but her low moan of anguish was poignant and pitiful.

"It is Geraldine!" she wailed, then Thatcher Colt was leading her away, with Neil hastening after them. Cruel, but a necessary performance.

I kept my lonely vigil over the body

of Geraldine Foster. I could guess what was afoot in the house. McMahon, acting on the orders of his chief, had telephoned Headquarters. Already the word had gone out about Colt's gruesome find. Detectives from the Homicide Squad were on their way with police photographers and stenographers; the Medical Examiner or one of his assistants had been summoned, and someone from the District Attorney's office was headed for us, too. Meanwhile, I knew that Thatcher Colt had returned to his solitary quest, the hunter already started on a private trail.

Though it was only half an hour, it seemed I had stood guard for hours before I saw the flashing of lights and heard the rumble of many voices. Colt strode forward, leading a procession of officials, patrolmen, plainclothes men and others from the Department. A dozen flashes blazed around the grave.

Colt had ordered the entire plateau of undeveloped land roped off, so that possible footprints and other traces might be safeguarded. A Department photographer set up his camera, and blast after blast of lighted smoke flashed up in acrid plumes through the trees as pictures were taken.

Under Colt's orders, some of the detectives began a meticulous search of the surrounding land. Still others were delegated to repeat the Commissioner's search of the house.

wo patrolmen hoisted the body from the grave, carried it back to the house and heaved it up on a white enameled table in the kitchen. Assistant Medical Examiner Multooler had agreed to make a preliminary examination.

"How long do you think she has been dead?" asked Colt, after perhaps five minutes.

Doctor Multooler replied: "I can only guess until I make an autopsy. But I would say not more than thirty-six hours."

"Thirty-six hours!" Colt repeated. "That seems impossible!"

The doctor smiled. "Impossible, Mr. Commissioner? The state of the body tells me it has not been dead more than forty-eight hours at the utmost."

Thatcher Colt's eyes, staring into space, seemed to be contemplating some mystery that horrified him.

A detective scraped under the dead girl's fingernails and deposited the dirt in separate envelopes, then Sergeant Wickes, from the Statistical and Criminal Identification Bureau, inked the dead girl's finger tips and took the black impression of her whorls and loops.

Finally, the body was carried out to a patrol wagon, waiting to carry it downtown.

"When can I have your final report?" asked Colt, as the doctor was departing.

"Some time before morning."

"Please send it to my office at Headquarters."

When the two cars drove off down Peddler's Road, the hunt was already organized, with that skilful military precision which Thatcher Colt had brought into the Department.

One of the first results of the systematic search was the finding of two large bottles, several hundred feet distant from the grave. Colt received them with interest.

"Remember," he said, "that Geraldine Foster—or a girl resembling her—was seen leaving the house in Washington Square, in company with another woman, and both carried large bottles, just like this, and just like another in the back room of Maskell's suite of offices. We'll give more thought to those bottles, Tony." He paused and smiled at me. "For your peace of mind," he disclosed, "I have sent Betty Canfield down to Headquarters. There are some questions she will have to answer tonight. I have also telephoned for the poor parents of the dead girl . . . Tony, I think I hear the stentorian boom of a familiar voice."

THROUGH the door came a huge man with curly red hair, large, bold blue eyes and prognathus jaw. The newcomer shook hands grimly with the Police Commissioner. He was that vital and magnetic Merle Dougherty who was such a firebrand while he was District Attorney. He and Thatcher Colt disagreed on almost every known subject, with the exception of their admiration for each other.

I soon learned that Dougherty had kept himself informed about the police search for Geraldine Foster.

"Well, Colt," he said, "your hunch was right. It was murder—and a pretty messy one. I have decided to take personal charge of the affair, and bring the murderer to the electric chair so

quickly it will be a lesson to the whole country."

"I shall be glad to have your cooperation, Dougherty," drawled Colt. "I thought I might take a hand in solving this business myself."

"Conflict of authority?" barked Dougherty.

"Not at all. At head of the Force, I am merely doing my duty . . . Isn't Hogan with you?"

"Sure!"

A bald-headed little man stepped quickly through the door, Dougherty's favorite detective, assigned to the District Attorney's office. He held a white package, tied with red ribbon.

"Hogan might as well listen, too," explained Colt, and gave the District Attorney a complete resumé of the crime, from the first appearance of Betty Canfield at Headquarters down to the finding of the corpse.

"Some lover of hers did it," said Dougherty promptly. "All we have to do is to find who owns this house and have a talk with some of her boy friends."

"By the way, Hogan," Colt said, "is that a Christmas present you have found?"

"Yes, a silk muffler," said Hogan. "I found it under the sofa."

"I've already had a look at it," answered Colt agreeably. "Also, I have found that this house is owned by a Mrs. Haberhorn. It will be simple to find out the name of her tenant—if the tenant gave her his real name. And, by the way, I am temporarily removing some evidence from the scene." He lifted the pillow-case and flung it over his shoulder.

"What's inside the bag?" asked Dougherty.

"Seven dead pigeons," answered Thatcher Colt. "About midnight join me at Headquarters, will you, Dougherty?"

"Okay," said Dougherty. "If I haven't arrested the murderer before then."

"You won't!" The Commissioner chuckled and led the way to the street.

V

HAVING eluded the reporters, waiting for Thatcher Colt, we hurried on toward the Commissioner's office. As we entered the octagonal reception room, with its old-fashioned woodwork and its transoms of stained glass, we saw most of the people concerned in the mystery of Geraldine Foster staring into our faces with haggard eyes.

The father and mother of the murdered girl guessed the truth before Colt spoke to them briefly. Among the others were two young men I judged to be Bruce Foster and Harry Armstrong. Aloof from them all, looking pale and worn, sat Betty Canfield.

Thatcher Colt hastened on into his private office and I followed him. On the desk he laid the pillow-case with the dead pigeons. Then he dashed into a small retiring room and I heard the sound of rushing water. Mr. Colt was taking a shower. In an amazingly short time, he came out again, as immaculate as if he were just reporting to work.

Meanwhile, I had laid on the desk the envelopes of hair, the face cloth with the crimson stains, the watch, and the ax, which I had wrapped in a newspaper. Then I got busy on the telephone, for the Commissioner.

Presently the Deputy Chief Inspector arrived, followed by Doctor Clesleek, one of the most scholarly chemists attached to the office of the Medical Examiner.

Thatcher Colt issued crisp orders. He wanted the owner of the house on Peddler's Road found and brought downtown. A detective must be sent to a chemist's shop on Madison Avenue, to find out what had been in three large bottles delivered to Doctor Maskell on Christmas Eve.

"You might add that those bottles smelt like pine trees," said Colt.

He gave instructions for examining the refuse from under the nails of the corpse and the hairs in two envelopes. Then he called Doctor Clesleek and in a low voice gave other instructions about the wash cloth.

"What you ask is almost impossible," said Doctor Clesleek. "But I will do my best."

"In the pillow-case on my desk are some dead pigeons, Doctor," Colt said. "Can you examine them and make a guess as to how long they have been dead?"

Doctor Clesleek sighed. "I'll do my best," he repeated.

Following the officers, Clesleek, his arms full of dead birds, left the room.

"Tony," Colt cried, "I wonder if those blunderers up on Peddler's Road have found Geraldine's clothes yet! I assigned three of them to the job . . . Ask that poor old couple to come in, Tony."

Mr. and Mrs. Foster trudged into the office and sat down before the Commissioner's desk, making an effort to hold their composure. Gently Colt gave them a part of the story, urging upon them the importance of remaining calm and giving what help they could.

"Mr. Colt," rumbled old Foster, "whatever happens, my daughter was a good girl, and don't forget that!"

His wife stared fixedly through her glasses. But there were no tears on her strained face.

"I am sure Geraldine was a good girl," returned Thatcher Colt earnestly. "But, Mr. Foster, you remember the key that we found in her pocket. Are you sure you know nothing of that key?"

"Nothing," declared Foster.

Colt explained then that the key fitted the house on Peddler's Road. He questioned the father about the friends and acquaintances of his daughter. Mr. Foster liked them all. He thought Betty Canfield a sweet girl, Harry Armstrong a smart young fellow, and Doctor Maskell had treated Geraldine fine. The father had a good word even for Checkles, for whom Geraldine had manifested a pitying kindness.

"Was Geraldine in any financial distress?"

"Bunk!" thundered the father. "I have a hundred thousand dollars and half of it would have gone to my girl when I died. She must have been crazy when she wrote that note you found. Why, she knew I was going to give her ten thousand as a wedding present. And she knew she could come to me for anything!"

"Who will inherit her share?" asked Colt.

"It goes to my boy Bruce, now," said Foster.

A KNOCK sounded on the door and Captain Henry announced that the Medical Examiner had sent for the parents of the dead girl. The Commissioner shook hands with them and sent them forth on one of the saddest errands that can come to mortal kind.

"Well, Tony," Colt said to me, "if you are looking for motives for the murder, you have two now."

"Two, Chief?"

"Yes. There is the possibility of the Virginius motive—the father who places such store on chastity that he would kill a violated daughter. And Bruce Foster might have killed the girl to get her share of the inheritance. He would not be the first brother to do such a thing."

He told me to bring Bruce Foster into the office.

The young man who stalked in was tall and thin, but looked strong. He had sandy hair, ruddy complexion, and challenging blue eyes. In his very walk there was an air of truculence as if he were determined to prove to the world that he was not afraid of it.

He thrust forward his head and said to Thatcher Colt:

"This is a hell of a way to treat white people. You send my father and mother to the morgue to look at Gerry, before they cut her up, but you won't let me go with them to catch them when they fall!"

"Sit down," Colt said crisply.

Bruce flung himself into the chair and glared defiance at the Commissioner.

"Your sister has been murdered," said Colt. "I know it is hard on your parents. But the police need you right now. To tell what you know."

"What *I* know? I don't know anything."

"We'll never get anywhere that way," Colt remonstrated. "You thought your sister was having an affair. You didn't want your father to know. So you started to settle the matter yourself. Who did you think she had an affair with?"

The young man turned pale. "Who told you that?" he demanded.

"I guessed it," said Colt. "Whom did you suspect, Bruce? Where did you go to search for your sister?"

The boy would not answer. Thatcher Colt fixed him with a glance.

"Bruce, I had one report on you from Betty Canfield. She used to like you. But she broke her engagement with you. She said you used to be a fine fellow, but turned into a good-for-nothing all at once. Hitting the booze. Almost lost your accountant's job. Didn't you take to drinking because you believed

your sister was leading an immoral life?"

"What has that to do with the murder?" Bruce asked.

But Thatcher Colt was relentless.

"Does that refresh your memory?" he asked, and tossed the key on the desk. "Whose key is that? To whose door?"

Bruce Foster shut his eyes to avoid the stare of Thatcher Colt's eyes. He moved restlessly.

"I never saw it before," he declared.

"All right," said Colt. "Tell me where you went to look for your sister."

"I was just a fool," said Bruce bitterly. "I'll tell you all about it. I knew things hadn't been going well between Gerry and the fellow she was going to marry. The nearer the wedding came, the more miserable she seemed. But she wouldn't tell me what the trouble was, nor Pop, nor Mom. On Christmas Eve I was in New York and I called her up. I was going to take her home for Christmas. But she was crying and said she didn't care what happened to her. I said I would come right up, but she told me not to."

"What time was that?" asked Colt casually.

"A little after two o'clock in the afternoon."

"And when you learned that your sister was missing, where did you go to look for her? This is the third time I've asked you that question!"

"I went to Harry Armstrong's apartment. That day Pop and Mom came into New York and talked with you. I didn't know what might have happened to Gerry. I was ready to have it out with Harry. But I couldn't locate him. And since I've talked with Pop and Mom, I know there wasn't anything wrong between Gerry and Harry."

"Who else did you question about it?"

A look of surprise flushed Bruce's face.

"Betty!"

A rap came at the door, Captain Henry came in, and laid a small envelope on the desk.

"From Doctor Multooler," he said.

COLT opened the envelope, and I was close enough to see minute particles of some dried, red, flaky substance.

"Take these to Clesleek," ordered the Commissioner. "Tell him I want the brand established at the earliest possible moment."

Captain Henry saluted and retired, and Colt turned back to Bruce Foster.

"Maybe you are not telling everything," he said. "You will, sooner or later. Now, Bruce, get your mother and father and take them home. But I want you back here tomorrow morning."

As Bruce left the room, Thatcher Colt's eyes held a cryptic expression.

"Tony," he said, shaking his head, "I know you wish I would talk to Betty Canfield next, so she can go home."

"Right," I exclaimed, and bounded for the door.

My heart ached for the woebegone little figure that slumped in the chair before Thatcher Colt.

"Betty," he began, "you have not been frank with me from the start, but now you must realize you have to be. Why did you and Geraldine quarrel the day before she disappeared?"

Her shocked expression betrayed her surprise.

"Mr. Colt, I don't want to tell you!"

"This is murder!" he reminded. "It was about Bruce's suspicion of his sister's morals, was it not?"

Betty would not speak. I had to admire her loyalty.

"Bruce thought Geraldine had an affair with Harry Armstrong—and that he refused to marry her. He came to you about it. You told Geraldine, and that started the quarrel." He paused, then asked, "Betty, was Geraldine innocent?"

"Absolutely."

"But the engagement was broken?"

"Yes, But they kept trying to patch up whatever it was they quarreled about."

"When was the last time Harry Armstrong telephoned your apartment?" Colt asked.

"He telephoned twice about three o'clock on Christmas Eve morning."

"But how is that possible? He was supposed to be on the night train to Boston."

"I hadn't thought of that before, Mr. Colt."

Thatcher Colt lit his pipe, and resumed:

"Now tell me the real reason why you meet Doctor Maskell with the frappé glance and the glacé maner? You said you didn't like him, but didn't

know why. But I doubted that, Betty. What makes you dislike the doctor?"

She stood up. "Because Doctor Maskell told Geraldine that he believed murder justified under certain circumstances. After I heard that I could never bear the sight of him!"

After Betty left, Colt remained moodily at his desk, toying with the key.

"Our motives accumulate, Tony," he remarked. "Now let's have a look at Harry Armstrong."

The fiancé of the murdered Geraldine was a young man of medium height, with greenish-blue eyes, curly brown hair, and a slightly supercilious air. But a tragic, wounded expression glowed in his handsome eyes.

Thatcher Colt began by trying to win his confidence. In a murder mystery the police place their chief reliance on the frankness of the friends of the slain person. He hoped he might count on Mr. Armstrong to answer all questions freely.

"You may," said the young man laconically.

"All right. Now, tell me about yourself."

Armstrong was a bond salesman in the Wall Street district. He had met Geraldine Foster two years before, their friendship had ripened until they finally became engaged. They had planned to be married the day after New Year's.

"Were there premarital arrangements between you and Geraldine Foster?" Colt asked.

"Bruce Foster has been talking to you!" cried Armstrong angrily.

"You know, Armstrong," Colt said, "I am glad to find such sensitiveness about such matters. Lots of people today consider trial marriage wholly respectable. Apparently that isn't true of Bruce Foster, old Mr. Foster, or yourself."

"Or Geraldine!" exclaimed Armstrong vigorously.

"Suppose she *had* been intimate with another man?" Colt said suddenly.

DEEP pallor crossed the young face, and beads of perspiration stood on his brow.

"I won't discuss that," he said huskily.

"Good!" agreed Colt. "Now about your own movements recently. On Friday night, December twenty-third, you took the midnight train out of Grand Central Station. Yet I understand you telephoned Geraldine a few hours later. Where did you telephone from, Armstrong?"

"From Hartford. I was worried. Geraldine and I had had several ittle misunderstandings. I decided I was all wrong, so I got off the train, called up and suggested that we elope and show up Christmas morning at my mother's house as man and wife."

"And she refused? Why?"

"Because she was still angry. I hung up. Then I got lonesome and morbid. I had a few drinks, called her again, and we had the whole argument all over again."

"And she still refused you?"

"Yes," said Armstrong bitterly. "If she hadn't, she might be alive today."

"What did you do after the telephone call?" asked Colt.

"I drank myself into insensibility. When I regained my senses I was in Grand Central Station. That was around six o'clock Christmas Eve."

"What had you been doing meanwhile?"

"I don't know."

Thatcher Colt looked sharply at the young man.

"Do you mean to tell me you cannot account for your movements from the time you called Geraldine, and six o'clock Christmas Exe?"

"That is correct, Mr. Colt."

"Do you realize that the girl vanished within that time?"

"I certainly do. But can you think of any sensible reason why I should kill the girl I loved?"

"Well, Armstrong," the Commissioner said, "I'm sorry you cannot give a clearer account of your movements. What was the cause of your disagreement with Geraldine?"

"I can't answer that—fully. I will only tell you this. Bruce is not Geraldine's brother. I quarreled with Geraldine because I was a snob, and I regret it. Bruce is an adopted child."

Thatcher Colt looked at the young man inscrutably.

"You are not telling me the whole truth!"

"No—and I don't intend to."

"Then I am sorry. I shall have to

turn you over to some of our men for questioning."

Colt spoke into the inter-office phone. Soon Captain Henry led Harry Armstrong away. As soon as we were alone, Colt was on the phone, calling the Chief of Police of Wingsboro, Maryland. He held a long conversation, during which I caught the name of Bruce Foster. Presently, there was a lull and Colt turned to me.

"The Chief of Police has a brother who knew the Foster family well when they lived in that town. He is getting the brother to the telephone. Get on the extension phone."

Listening in, I heard:

"Helloa, Mr. Colt . . . I've found out about the Foster family adopting that child . . . They named him Bruce . . . Yeah, his mother died when he was born. His father was hung down here for an ax murder—one of the worst murders in the history of this state . . . Yeah! People always said Mr. Foster was the boy's real father . . . Anything else?"

"Thanks, nothing else," said Thatcher Colt.

As he hung up the receiver his eyes were grave. I was about to ask several questions when Captain Henry came in.

"The woman who owns the house on Peddler's Road is here," he announced, and at a quick nod from the Commissioner, he hastened to admit her.

Mrs. Haberhorn was a shabbily dressed old woman, with a voice like a tugboat captain's, and a breath like a still. But she did her best to be a lady. Her hair had recently been dyed brown, and her blue eyes glittered suspiciously.

"You don't expect I can ask for the marriage license of everybody I do business with, do you?" she asked Colt. "If you don't think I am honest, ask any policeman on our beat. *They'll* tell you."

After we had calmed her down, we learned that she kept a rooming house on West One Hundred and Twenty-second Street. Apparently she was miserly, dressed poorly to hide her affluence. She also owned the plot of ground on Peddler's Road, which she had held for twelve years as an investment. Two years ago she had rented the ground to a tenant who put up the portable house in which Geraldine Foster had been slain.

"What was the name of the tenant, Mrs. Haberhorn?" asked Colt.

"He said he was a Mr. Bigsbee. But why don't you ask him yourself? He's right outside your office."

"Here?" cried Thatcher Colt, springing to his feet. "Show him to me!"

We followed Mrs.Haberhorn to the door and she pointed to a man, smiling blandly at us in the outer room.

He was the missing Doctor Humphrey Maskell.

VI

IN SPITE of the grimly controlled expression on his face, Thatcher Colt was taken by surprise that the "laughing physician of Washington Square" had returned to New York.

"Good evening, Mrs. Haberhorn," Doctor Maskell said urbanely. "You seemed as if you did not want to recognize me when you passed me going in just now."

"I shall want to talk to you in just a minute, Doctor," said Thatcher Colt.

"I felt sure of it," replied Maskell, with a wide and complaisant smile.

The Police Commissioner backed into his office, and Mrs. Haberhorn followed him.

"How long did you say that man has rented your place, Mrs. Haberhorn?"

"About two years ago."

"What dose he use the house for?"

"What should he use it for?" countered the landlady indignantly. "What's he done wrong up there? Not arson?"

"No—just a little murder. Pretty girl chopped up with an ax. You don't want to get mixed up in that, do you?"

Mrs. Haberhorn suddenly paled, threw out her hands and fell in a stupor on the floor. Captain Henry and I had to carry her out. Instructing the Captain to restore her, but to keep her in the building until further orders, I hurried back to the office. There I found that the questioning of Doctor Maskell was, for the moment, delayed. Thatcher Colt was shaking hands with Dougherty, who seemed bursting with excitement. Behind the District Attorney stood Hogan, smiling secretively.

"I've gone over nearly everything up at the house," announced Dougherty. "And Colt, I think our work is nearly done."

"Really?" Colt looked startled.

"Yes," boomed the District Attorney. "We have come pretty close to the solution. All we have to do now is to find the guilty man and put the handcuffs on him."

"Is that all?" sighed Thatcher Colt, as he dropped back into his chair.

"You remember the package wrapped in red ribbon and white paper?"

"The muffler that was a Christmas present?"

"Yes. That parcel came from a Fifth Avenue haberdashery. Hogan traced the sales slips and found the name of the purchaser. Is that quick work, or isn't it?"

Dougherty's eyes were glittering with triumph.

"And the name was Humphrey Maskell," supplemented Thatcher Colt softly.

Dougherty glared at the Police Commissioner.

"Who told *you* that?" he demanded.

"There was a card attached to the package, signed by Doctor Maskell, and wishing one of his patients a Merry Christmas."

Taking the card from his vest pocket, the Commissioner tossed it on the table.

"Is this what you call cooperation?" shouted Dougherty. "Why didn't you tell us about that card?"

"Because I first wanted to find out what it meant," answered Colt.

"It means that the doctor was on the scene—and it probably means he is as guilty as hell!"

Thatcher Colt lifted a deprecating hand.

"Perhaps he is. At least there is more evidence besides your muffler to point that way."

"For instance?" snapped Dougherty.

The door opened to admit an attendant, who spread out on a side table the damp prints of the official photographs taken at the grave and in the house. Thatcher Colt stood beside Dougherty, his hand on the shoulder of his impetuous friend, as they studied those grisly scenes.

"Dougherty," said Colt, "I am beginning to believe this is a crime far more awful than we have for one instant supposed. We must not be in a hurry."

"Tell me what you have found out," proposed Dougherty.

"I can't tell you everything just yet," stipulated Colt, then gave the District Attorney a résumé of what had happened since our return to Headquarters.

FOR a moment, the District Attorney looked interested, then grew skeptical.

"The muffler is the real clue," he said. "If we could only find Maskell."

"The Police Commissioner's office, however, will want to know what Geraldine Foster did, where she went, and with whom, from the moment she left Washington Square on the afternoon of December twenty-fourth until she died," Colt stated crisply.

"Maskell can tell you all that," cried Dougherty. "Why don't you find him?"

Thatcher Colt stared at him earnestly.

"I know we can build a case against Maskell," he conceded. "Most likely we shall have to. But on the other hand . . . Dougherty, stand by and let me finish the rest of the job. If Maskell is guilty, let's cinch the case."

"If Maskell were under surveillance, I wouldn't mind delaying, but—"

"All right, Dougherty. Would you like to talk to him?" Colt turned to me. "Tony, bring in Doctor Humphrey Maskell."

While Dougherty stared in dumb amazement, I led Maskell in.

"Sit down, Doctor," invited Thatcher Colt, after presenting him to the grim Dougherty and to Hogan.

The physician sank easily into a chair, and Colt began to question him. "You know that Geraldine Foster is dead?"

"I heard some talk while I was waiting outside. I gather that she was murdered, poor girl! Will you tell me how she was killed and where she was found?"

"Do you know anything about it."

"No—certainly, no!"

"Haven't you any suspicions?"

"None," answered the doctor heartily.

"Where have you been since I talked to you in your office?"

"Traveling in the West. Since I returned, two days ago, I have been visiting my father in Scarsdale. Tonight I returned home and found a detective who told me I should come here, that something had happened."

"Can you account for your time since your return?"

"Surely. I arrived in town early

Thursday morning and went to my office. All day I was busy with my patients. But about three o'clock in the afternoon, I received a telephone call that gave me the shock of my life. Mr. Colt"—Doctor Maskell's voice vibrated with conviction—"I talked with Geraldine Foster."

"*Geeraldine Foster*!"

Dougherty's voice was a shout of surprise. We were all astonished.

"She said it was, and it sounded like her voice," the doctor added calmly. "But the connection was bad."

"Go on," urged Colt. "What happened?"

"She informed me she was in some terrible trouble, but she could not tell me about it over the telephone, so she begged me to come to her at once. She asked me to meet her at the entrance of Bronx Park on the Pelham Parkway. I drove out there alone, waited two hours, and saw nothing of her. Then I came home."

"Did anybody who knew you see you there?" asked Colt.

"Nobody, I am sorry to say."

"And when was this?"

"This was Thursday last, in the afternoon."

"The time she was murdered!" thundered Dougherty. "And that is your alibi?"

"You knew the police were looking for Geraldine Foster," Colt resumed. "Why didn't you tell me about that telephone call?"

"I wanted to talk with her first."

Dougherty snorted and winked at Hogan. Colt veered to another tack.

"Doctor, you have an office in Washington Square, and an apartment on Fifth Avenue. Do you rent or own any other property?"

"A good deal." He enumerated some farming land he owned in upper New Yory State, a house on the West Side which he rented, and a fishing shack on the eastern shore of Maryland.

"But you and I both know you also have a bungalow on Peddler's Road?"

"Right you are," Maskell admitted. "I guessed you knew when I saw Mrs. Haberhorn. But why do you bring that up?"

I NOTICED a note of anxiety was in his voice.

"What did you use that house for?" asked Colt. "A hide-away for weekends that required privacy?"

Doctor Maskell shook his head.

"No. I hope that you do not assume—"

"I am not assuming anything, Doctor Maskell," Colt assured him. "Did you ever take Geraldine Foster to that place?"

"Absolutely never," said Doctor Maskell.

"Did she know of its existence?"

"I don't think so."

"Doctor," suddenly barked the Commissioner, "do you realize that you are in a nasty fix?"

Maskell drew himself up with dignity.

"Will you tell me what my property on Peddler's Road has to do with all this?"

"Did you keep an ax on that place? A short-handled ax, with a double blade."

"Why, yes, I did. For firewood."

"Someone used it for something else. Doctor Maskell, Geraldine Foster was hacked to pieces in your house with your ax."

Doctor Maskell leaped to his feet.

"This is a trick!" he shouted. "You are trying to scare me!"

Colt thrust near the man's face a photograph still wet, showing the girl's nude body stiff in the grave. The doctor stared at the print.

"Poor Geraldine," he muttered. He swung on the Commissioner. "Who was the monster that would commit a crime like that—and in my little house?"

"Never mind that," snapped Colt. "You must realize now that you have a lot to explain."

"When was she killed?" demanded Doctor Maskell.

"I am asking the questions, Doctor."

"It does not matter. I'll prove my innocence."

"If you can do that, fine—in the face of what we can bring against you."

"Nevertheless," cried Doctor Maskell, "you will be unable to bring a single witness to place me on the scene of the murder! And surely someone will come forward to bear me out that I waited at the entrance to Bronx Park for a girl I believed to be alive!"

As he was speaking, the door was opening for a patrolman who stamped in with a sheaf of notes.

"Just a moment," Colt murmured.

"These are the reports from the eight autopsies."

"Eight!" exclaimed Dougherty.

"One girl, and seven pigeons." explained Colt. "Ah, and here is Doctor Multooler."

The Assistant Medical Examiner nodded wearily.

"How long had those pigeons been dead, Multooler?"

"At least ten days," replied the Assistant Medical Examiner.

"The girl was supposed to be dead two days but the pigeons were dead ten days, eh?"

"Well, we don't suppose that, any more. Somebody tried to fool us. The girl also was killed about ten days ago."

Thatcher Colt did not look at Doctor Maskell.

"Was there any food in her stomach?"

"Snails."

About how far digested?"

"Not more than five hours."

"Then Geraldine Foster unquestionably met her death about five o'clock on the afternoon of December twenty-four," Colt declared feelingly. "Thanks, Multooler. What did the chemist find in that bottle of water we took from the grave?"

"Tannic acid. The body had been soaked in it, and a quart of it forced down the throat after death."

"Tannic acid! Of course! Made from the bark of trees! Used in tanning leather, Dougherty. That's what preserved the body!"

Colt dismissed Multooler.

"It is simple," he explained to the District Attorney. "Geraldine Foster was killed. Then she was put into a bathtub filled with water loaded with tannic acid and that preserved the body."

"But why preserve the body?"

"It seems obvious enough. She was killed ten days ago, but she was buried in the last forty-eight hours."

"I see!" cried Dougherty. Pushing back his chair, he stood up, striding back and forth. "It was a slick alibi. We are supposed to believe the murder took place during the last forty-eight hours. And, of course, the murderer hoped to account for his movements. He thought he would never be asked to show where he was when the murder was really committed. This is the crime of a genius, Doctor Maskell—only it didn't work."

"Bunk!" snorted Doctor Maskell. "Don't you see that only a feeble-minded person would think of such a scheme as that? The alibi would be no good for the murderer for the last forty-eight hours, unless he had an accomplice. Somebody had to go up there and bury the body. He was on the scene! So such an alibi would be worthless to me or any one else. Christmas Eve I was distributing gifts to my patients, accompanied by my chauffeur and little Doris Morgan, who lives upstairs. For Christmas Eve I have a perfect alibi."

"Good!" Thatcher Colt said emphatically. "You have the rest of the night to prove it."

A HAGGARD look crept across Maskell's face. He forced a chuckle of defiance, confidence, or else malevolence. I could not tell whether he was brave or cocksure.

"I have an alibi," he repeated. "I did not kill Geraldine Foster."

"Just tell the truth," said Thatcher Colt.

Hogan seized the doctor by the arm. "Step lively," he said. "There's a gang waiting for you downstairs."

Hogan led him hurriedly away.

"A hundred to one that fellow breaks before morning," said Dougherty.

But Thatcher Colt only smiled. . . .

Doctor Maskell was not under arrest, although there was more than sufficient evidence to hold him under a short affidavit, or to jail him as a material witness.

Hogan led the suspect downstairs to a brightly lighted office, where a battalion of questioners awaited him. The attack upon him began at once, launched by three of the most experiencd men in the Department. But the dark hours passed and a calm man, with ready answers, still faced the onslaught of investigators, grimly intent on a breakdown.

At three A.M., when Thatcher Colt, Dougherty and I joined them, they had got nowhere. They could not seem to break this man's iron nerve. Maskell had answered all their questions over and over again and not once had they tripped him. True, he had a higher degree of mentality than most of his questioners, but they had the strength of

numbers, of reserve force. First, one detective would question him for fifteen minutes, then another would begin, while the first checked up on any doubtful information the doctor had given him.

During the night at least a dozen detectives, from the Deputy Inspector down, asked the man questions. At five o'clock, when they gave Maskell a glass of milk and a sandwich, his story was still unbroken. It was one of the most desperate attempts to break down a denial in my experience in the Department.

Outside the door of the examination room, two newspaper men were playing seven-up. When we led Doctor Maskell out of the office to the washroom, one of the reporters remarked that the doctor appeared to be standing the ordeal of grilling much better than his tormentors.

We took him back, and the Commissioner took charge.

VII

FIRST, Thatcher Colt reasoned with Doctor Maskell. Over and over he took him through his story, but Maskell stuck to it without the slightest significant change. At six o'clock in the morning, he was still far from being a broken man. His energy was equal to Thatcher Colt's restless vitality. Finally, Dougherty whispered to Colt, and the Commissioner nodded.

"Now, Doctor," proposed Dougherty, "I want you to come with me."

In the dark hours of that morning, Dougherty, Colt, Doctor Humphrey Maskell and I drove to the morgue, at Bellevue Hospital. There the doctor was confronted with the body. He could not remain unmoved. He betrayed signs of nervousness and repulsion. But who could say they were indications of fear or guilt?

Finally the police brought him back to the examination room, after the night's inquisition, but secretly they marveled at the undaunted vitality of their prisoner.

Detectives were checking up on all he had told. Colt had a whispered conference with Dougherty, and a messenger was dispatched to the doctor's offices.

But Thatcher Colt was not ready to give up. Again and again he made Doctor Maskell retell his story, the oldest and one of the most effective devices known to police—the trapping effect of repetition. Make the suspect tell the same story often enough, in wearying repetition, until he is sick of the very lies that he is telling, and eventually he lets fall some significant little detail which may break his story altogether.

Colt tried to reach Maskell from a different angle.

"Do you believe in justice, Doctor Maskell?"

"Yes," he replied.

"And do you want to see justice done in this case?"

"Certainly. But what is justice?"

Thatcher Colt then told him he was overbearing and conceited, that most people disliked him. That did begin to get under the suspect's skin. Maskell never had been unpopular. The dislike of people affected him painfully.

"If you want to know how you stand," the Commissioner told him, "let me call Betty Canfield in here. She will tell you quickly enough. She believes you chopped up that beautiful girl with an ax."

Maskell paled, but made no answer. Dougherty, springing forward, shook his finger in the doctor's face and cried:

"Doctor, you are going to be electrocuted, because you're guilty! So why don't you take your medicine like a man?"

Doctor Maskell stood up and began pacing around. But he was still in thorough command of himself, though he looked weary when a new detail of detectives came in to take over the job of questioning him. At dawn, they were still at it, and the doctor was undaunted.

I was transcribing my notes when the sleepless Captain Henry came in with the astonishing announcement that some indignant kinfolk of Doctor Maskell were demanding to see the Commissioner at once. They were Mr. and Mrs. George Maskell, the criminal lawyer and his wife.

Ever since my reporting days on the *Sun* I had known George Maskell and had admired him for the good-hearted buccaneer that he was. The brother of the man we suspected of murder trained with a clever group of skeptical thinkers, considered himself a sophisticate, while being naive and sentimental enough to believe that the oppressed and the downtrodden had rights.

George Maskell was one of the most picturesque figures in New York. Already a rich lawyer, and half-heir to his father's considerable fortune, he espoused all causes where an issue of justice was involved. This had not made him too popular in the Police Department, although Thatcher Colt always admired George Maskell.

As the lawyer was ushered into Colt's private office, I was reminded of my chief's description of him—"an old war horse." He was a short man, with a bald head, a shrewd face, wrinkles of thought in his forehead and furrows in his cheeks. Only in his eyes was there a likeness to his brother. I noticed the same twinkle, or gleam of inscrutability in those hazel eyes.

My eyes turned from his familiar face to study his companion. That was the first time I had ever seen Natalie Maskell, though I had read of her, and had listened to reporters tell of her. The one thing agreed upon in all quarters was that Natalie Maskell, in spite of her beauty, had one of the best legal minds before the bar. She and her husband were inseparable.

SHE WAS tall, pale and august—a woman with dark-red hair, lovely features, and tragic eyes. I do not think I have ever seen a sadder or more beautiful woman.

She looked around inquiringly, and I explained that I feared it was impossible to see either the Police Commissioner or the District Attorney. Nodding sagely, George Maskell said confidently:

"Nevertheless, they'll see me. Tell the Commissioner I've come here to sit alongside my brother while he is being questioned."

"Did Doctor Maskell send for you?" I inquired.

George Maskell looked at his wife with eyes that seemed to hold a conversation in a secret language. It seemed to me that George had conveyed to his wife the suggestion that she, better than he, could prevail over an impressionable young man.

"No, my brother-in-law did not send for us," she explained, with a friendly smile. "Mr. Maskell and I were starting this morning to drive to Florida. We heard about Doctor Maskell's difficulty over the radio and came right back."

One could not resist the gentle and earnest manner of Natalie Maskell. I do not regard myself as impressionable, but it did seem my duty to let Thatcher Colt know they were in his office. I was about to buzz for Captain Henry when my chief came in, with Dougherty, blotched-eyed and weary, trudging behind him. I could tell from the slump of the District Attorney's shoulders that Maskell had not confessed.

There was an exchange of greetings, then George Maskell demanded to see his brother.

"Now, George, you know we can't do that just now," protested Dougherty. Climbers like Dougherty like to call famous men like George Maskell by their first names.

"Why not?"

"Doctor Maskell is not under arrest," explained Thatcher Colt. "But he is being questioned."

"Humphrey is innocent of any crime," declared Maskell, "and I would appreciate it if you would let him know we are here."

Thatcher Colt looked the lawyer squarely in the eye.

"I have always understood," he said, "that you did not approve of your brother!"

"In a time like this, blood is thicker than water," replied Maskell.

Natalie Maskell took an impulsive step forward.

"May we leave him a note, at least?" she asked.

Dougherty bowed, and her husband scribbled hastily on a scratch pad:

We are standing behind you. Send for us when you want us.

George and Natalie and Dad

Thatcher Colt seemed nervous. He walked up and down the room, like a man possessed with impatience. Suddenly he reached on a high shelf and pulled down two file boxes of old correspondence, raising a cloud of dust. He was full of apologies, but Dougherty's face was discolored with dust, and Mrs. Maskell needed to repair the damages.

"I found it!" exclaimed Colt, after opening the first file box. "Here is a letter of congratulation I wrote you, Mr. Maskell, on the Scopes trial. You never replied to it."

"Careless of me," said George Maskell, with a bleak glance.

The curious behavior of the Police

Commissioner had perplexed us all. But there was no further apology from Colt, as with great dignity, the Maskells took their departure.

The minute the door closed, Dougherty exclaimed:

"What a trial this will be! But I will beat him, Colt. This is one time that all the genius of George Maskell won't cheat justice."

"Oh, stop making speeches," said Thatcher Colt.

Hogan threw open the door and led Doctor Maskell into the office, haggard, disheveled, but his eyes were still indomitable.

"Did I see my brother down the hall?" he demanded, looking at Colt.

The Commissioner told him frankly what had happened.

"I would have liked at least a glimpse of Natalie," said the doctor.

"Come to this window," said Colt. "There she is at the wheel of their car."

For a thoughtful moment, Doctor Humphrey Maskell stared down at his sister-in-law. Some powerful emotion possessed him. I wondered—did the doctor love the beautiful Natalie? Was it because of her that the brothers had quarreled?

THEN came the suspicion—could a woman have committed this awful crime? Was Natalie Maskell jealous of Geraldine Foster?

"Now," said Thatcher Colt, suddenly breaking the silence, "I have made some arrangements for our morning, Doctor. There is another car downstairs, in which you will find some of your friends. We are going on a journey."

Dougherty shook hands with my chief, and he and Hogan departed.

We went out into the fresh air of the young morning. Banks of rain clouds were massing; the air was damp and cold.

In front of Headquarters a maroon-colored car was drawn up at the curb, with that strange little fellow Checkles at the wheel. In the rear seat was a woman and a child—Felise Morgan, and little Doris, Doctor Maskell's alibi. Love and tenderness were in Doctor Maskell's eyes when he looked at Doris. I think the sight of her unmanned him. He caught her to him as she rose with a squeal of joy and kissed him.

"Hello, Doris! Hello, Checkles!" called the Commissioner, taking his place beside the child and motioning me to a folding seat.

"Good mornings and good nights and good fellows and good gods," said Checkles. His head bent over the wheel and he pushed the horn button with his long, peaked nose.

Doris laughed.

"Isn't Checkles funny?" she asked Thatcher Colt. "He always blows the horn with his nose."

The Commissioner nodded, as he drew a slip of paper from his pocket, and read off the names and addresses of the patients of Doctor Maskell to whom, the suspect had declared, he and Doris and Checkles had delivered the presents.

"You were with the doctor every part of the time on Christmas Eve?" Commissioner Colt asked the child.

"Yes, sir, every part," said Doris.

"Now," continued Colt, "you went first to Patchin Place. Is that right?"

"Yes, certainly," replied the doctor.

Colt gave Checkles his orders and immediately we started in the direction of Greenwich Village. There was no conversation during that journey, until we reached the narrow *impasse* behind the Jefferson Market Court, where artists and poets live in the little red brick houses, rejoicing in the air of another century that hovers over the place.

"Doris," said Thatcher Colt, "do you remember anything about your last visit here?"

"Oh, yes," said the child. "We brought a parcel to an old lady who lives in that third house over there."

"Who delivered the package?"

"The doctor rang the bell, and sent me up to deliver it."

"How long did that take?"

"Oh, not more than a second or so. The doctor had so many other places to go. I was awful tired by the time we got home."

As we started off again, Colt asked Mrs. Morgan:

"You were a close friend of Geraldine Foster?"

"Oh, no. Doris and Geraldine met in the halls. The doctor took a fancy to Doris, and soon we all got to know each other. . . ."

We fully understood the weariness of little Doris on Christmas Eve before we

had finished our itinerary. In and out of crowded New York streets we drove, while Checkles pushed the horn button with his nose, and heaped maledictions on taxi drivers and pedestrians who tempted death under our wheels. From house to house we drove, from a broker in East Twelfth Street, to an actor who lived at the Chelsea Hotel.

Farther north, our journey was confined largely to the West Side. When we stopped in front of the Sherman Square Hotel, Doctor Maskell reminded us that it had been just three o'clock on Christmas Eve afternoon when he had been there before. He knew because he had been wondering if he would be able to complete his trip before it was time for Doris to be home.

The doorman knew the doctor, who often called to visit a patient in the hotel. The doorman recalled Doctor Maskell asking the time, and that it was three o'clock.

At the next place we stopped, a small hotel apartment house near Central Park, the patient to whom Doctor Maskell had delivered a present there was a Mrs. Westock. She told the Commissioner that, on Christmas Eve, before the doctor reached her house, someone had called on her telephone and asked for the physician.

"It was a woman's voice," said Mrs. Westock. "She seemed anxious to get word to him. The message she left was: 'Please come at once to Peddler's Road. Something terrible has happened.' She did not leave any name. When I told him he looked surprised, but all he said was 'Thanks'."

DOCTOR Maskell did not hear this, for he had remained in the car, with Detective Burke guarding the party. Colt did not tell the doctor.

On Park Avenue, we stopped in front of a large apartment house.

"Oh," exclaimed Doris, "here is where I had the ice cream! Checkles and I had ice cream while Doctor Maskell delivered some presents by himself." She pointed to a confectioner's on the opposite corner.

"Did you have more than one plate?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"Three!" cried Checkles gloatingly. "I had three! But Doris took only one."

I could follow the rapid calculations Colt was making. I could see the dangerous implications of this disclosure. Thatcher Colt had his finger on the first weak link in the chain of Doctor Maskell's alibi.

"What were you doing, Doctor, when they were in the confectioner's?" he asked point-blank.

"I distributed seven presents in the neighborhood," replied the doctor promptly.

"That's right," said Doris innocently. "We had to wait for him a long, long time."

I could almost see the lightning of suspicion flashing across the stormy sky of the Commissioner's thoughts.

Geraldine had gone to the house on Peddler's Road. From there she might have telephoned Mrs. Westock. She would know all the places the doctor was planning to visit, and how to reach him. He might have left Checkles and Doris and rushed off to kill her and get back. Such at least was the theory suggested by this gap in the doctor's itinerary.

And still the doctor smiled, as if he knew there was still something missing, before they could bind him to the crime.

"There are only seven more addresses on your list," remarked Colt. "Can anyone identify you as having delivered these seven presents?"

"No. I was hurried. I merely dropped them on hall tables. I saw no one."

"Yet you took an hour to deliver them?"

"I do not know how much time I took."

"Well, you must know this blows your alibi to smithereens."

Colt sent Mrs. Morgan and Doris home in a taxi. Burke went with them.

"Checkles," said the Commissioner, "drive us up to the house on Peddler's Road."

Checkles laughed, a low-pitched chortle.

"Peddler's Road!" he chuckled. "Whew!"

I have seen a guilty man look upon the scene of a crime, and remain quite unmoved. I have also seen an innocent man go into hysterics at the sight of a butchered body and actually confess to the crime. In a sufficient number of instances, a criminal cannot endure to look again upon his work.

But it was not with any hope of un-

nerving the doctor by horror, that Thatcher Colt was taking him back to Peddler's Road. My chief had the idea that some sentimental remembrance might unexpectedly upset Maskell's poise.

VIII

EVERY path approaching Peddler's Road had been roped off and put under guard, and crowds of the morbidly curious strained against the ropes around the base of the hill. Inside, reporters were snooping, and it seemed as if there were plainclothes men and patrolmen behind every tree. The search for clues was still going forward relentlessly.

We climbed the hill, and as we approached the house, Thatcher Colt said:

"You know, Doctor, the body had a pillow-case over the head, as if the murderer could not bear to look upon the dead face, after what he had done."

"Yes?" said Doctor Maskell, in a tone of inquiry.

"It was a pillow-case with rosebuds embroidered on it. I could not find its mate in your bungalow. Do you happen to know what happened to the other one?"

"I know nothing of that," replied Doctor Maskell disdainfully.

The doctor removed his hat as he entered the door of his little house, profoundly moved. He looked at the disorder, and at the detectives still searching, and looked miserably upon the wreckage, the carnage, the stains.

"You can see, Doctor," said Thatcher Colt quietly, "that a great deal of blood was spilled. Isn't it extraordinary, how much blood there is in a human body, Doctor Maskell? Your dissection practice partly prepared you for that, of course, but when you start to let it run out of a living person, there's a lot of it, isn't there? Like a red Niagara coming from sweet young veins and arteries."

"Thatcher Colt," said Doctor Maskell, "I have to listen to you, but my mind cannot be shocked into a breakdown, or a fake confession."

"No," agreed Colt. "But I do know one thing—that reason is the certain method that can appeal to you. Doctor, you know there is a perfect case against you."

"No. I had no opportunity to do all this."

"Where were you, then, when Checkles and Doris were eating their ice cream?"

"I told you."

"You told me a cock-and-bull story. Do you expect any jury to believe that?"

Instead of replying the doctor was looking mournfully around the room . . .

Colt sent me home to snatch a few hours' sleep. But after bathing and shaving I had tea with Betty Canfield. Every time we met we liked each other better.

It was five o'clock when I reached the Commissioner's office where I found Thatcher Colt in deep conversation with Dougherty. Neither the District Attorney nor my chief had been in their beds since the case "broke."

From their conversation, I learned that Doctor Maskell had been permitted a few hours' sleep in his apartment, with a policeman guarding his doors. Bruce Foster had returned to Headquarters and had given Colt a complete statement of his movements. The details had been checked and seemed to exonerate him from suspicion. The District Attorney declared that Armstrong, too, was above suspicion. But Thatcher Colt did not agree.

"There is a theory that may involve Armstrong," he declared.

"Why don't you spill it to me?" demanded Dougherty.

"Because you would disbelieve in it so much you might block me," said Colt. "No give us the rest of this day, Dougherty."

"I promised," sighed Dougherty. "And while I have all the evidence in the world to justify the arrest of Maskell, I'll live up to my word. The doctor is guilty. Why don't you let me go ahead?"

"I believe," replied Colt, "that before midnight, you will agree that there is something much more surprising yet to be found."

"All right," Dougherty growled. "Where do we go from here?"

Thatcher Colt stood up, smiling.

"To the home of the Police Commissioner of the City of New York," he said. "To get the truth out of Humphrey Maskell."

Colt's proposal seemed incomprehensible. Why should we have to examine Doctor Maskell in the home of Thatcher

Colt, the Commissioner? Why not at Police Headquarters, where we could have information, check-ups?

But we left the office and soon were uptown.

The Commissioner lived in a house in the West Seventies. There were flower boxes before the windows, and bright green paint on the wookwork. It was more like a house in some dozing little Southern city than in the heart of Manhattan.

WE were led to the library, a room running the entire stretch of the third floor, and shelving a collection of more than fifteen thousand books on crime and related topics, more than half of which would not be found together in any ordinary library in the world. Waving us to comfortable chairs, Thatcher Colt retired.

Dougherty and Hogan looked around in bewilderment. Their very glances seemed to say that Thatcher Colt could not be a practical man. Presently, the Commissioner reappeared, wearing a dressing gown of a flowered paduasoy. From a recess in the library wall he drew out a tray on which reposed glasses, and a bottle of old port. He called our attention to a filmy crust of scales of tartar on the top, the beeswing of a rare old wine.

"There is not much wine like this," he said. "Gentlemen, your health!"

That precious liquor warmed the inner lining of my soul.

Leaning back in his chair, Thatcher Colt said:

"I must begin by explaining that this is wholly an extra-legal proceeding. I must also make that clear to Maskell. He has the right to decline to have anything to do with these experiments."

"What kind of bunk have you fallen for, Colt?" Dougherty asked.

"Two things," replied the Commissioner. "The first is this!"

On a table was an object covered with a green cloth. Lifting this, Colt disclosed a drumlike electrical instrument.

"What is that?" mocked Dougherty quizzically.

"A pneumo-cardio-sphygmometer," answered Thatcher Colt.

Dougherty blinked. He was a well-educated man, but had cultivated a public pose of roughness and readiness.

"A what, Mr. Commissioner?" he purred, as if he regretted the absence of an audience to laugh at his comedy.

"A lie detector," said Colt.

Dougherty laughed uproariously.

"Have you fallen for that piffle?" he cried. "Well, you'll have to show me."

"Very well," said Thatcher Colt.

He opened a door in the rear of the room and a good-looking young man, slender and serious, entered.

"Let me present Mr. Carl E. Leonard, an assistant state criminologist for Illinois, and one of the recognized experts in this line. Mr. Leonard flew here at my request so we could go through with this test."

"It's childish," said Dougherty frankly. "No one has ever really taken that thing seriously.

The young expert from Chicago only smiled and nodded as if he understood the District Attorney's skepticism. Colt pressed a knob on the edge of the chair which registered a signal in some distant part of the house. Soon the door was opened and two uniformed men led in Doctor Maskell.

With the wraith of his familiar smile playing over his pale and haggard face, Doctor Maskell glanced at the table on which the lie detector lay exposed.

"Do you know what that is?" asked Colt.

"Yes, certainly," said Doctor Maskell, with magnificent indifference. Was he such an egoist that he felt confident he could beat the machine?

It took little time to adjust the apparatus to his chest and bared arm, as he sat in his shirt sleeves. Then Thatcher Colt began asking again the same questions with which Maskell had been battered for so long. For an hour Colt talked calmly about the same old story, but after that first hour, the tone, the pace, the accent of the questions changed. Colt's voice became brittle, harsh, commanding. He stood towering above the doctor, as the very air of the room became tense and charged.

"What are you most afraid of in life, Doctor Maskell?"

"I am afraid of nothing."

"What are you most ashamed of in your life?"

We could almost hear the agitation of the electric pens, recording the heart and blood secrets of this erect and defiant man.

Both Dougherty and Colt were studying the tapelike stream of paper emerging from the drum with the telltale graphs drawn upon them. Until this moment, the tracings had shown only indifferent variations. But the latest question had caused tremendous excitement within the dark spirit of this mysterious physician.

UP SHOT the graph of the heart line and with it leaped the diagram of the blood pressure. Why? Doctor Maskell pondered his answer, while the Police Commissioner and the District Attorney waited with growing interest.

"What are you most ashamed of in your life?" repeated Thatcher Colt.

"Of nothing," declared Doctor Maskell, finally. But we knew from the lie detector that he was laboring under great excitement.

"Come, Doctor," urged Thatcher Colt patiently. "Are you ashamed of something in connection with the house on Peddler's Road?"

Again the jiggle of emotions, traced by the electric pens, showed that the Commissioner had struck a sensitive vein in the doctor's emotional system.

"No," he said.

"Why did you keep that place on Peddler's Road?"

With every reference to the little cottage of blood and death the charts leaped into high peaks of emotional excitement and descended into valleys that might have recorded shame and despair.

"I like to have a place to hide away in."

"Alone?"

"Yes!"

The District Attorney was solemn and serious now, beginning to have some respect for this apparatus.

"When were you last in the house on Peddler's Road?"

"About three weeks ago."

"Anyone with you then?"

"No."

"Had Geraldine Foster ever been there?"

"I have no knowledge that she was ever there."

"But she was murdered there."

"I mean previously."

"Did you know she was going there this one time which resulted in her death?"

"No."

The chart lines during these last few questions were quite unimpressive. The emotional excitement in the doctor seemed to pass away when Geraldine Foster was brought into the question. It was on some obscurer point that he trembled.

"Do you believe that murder is ever justified?"

"Yes. I believe in euthanasia. But I do not practice a philosophy opposed to the laws under which I live."

"But doesn't your philosophy hold that murder is justified even if it is opposed to those laws?"

"Theoretically, yes."

"If sufficiently justifiable grounds arose, would you commit murder in spite of the laws?"

"I don't know."

"Why did you quarrel with your brother George?"

"Because he did not approve of my private life."

"Did his wife also disapprove?"

"She did not know anything about it. What happened took place before she married my brother."

"Does she dislike you now?"

"She does not know me. We have never met."

"Will you look at this?"

Thatcher Colt for the first time gave into Maskell's hands the note which George Maskell had written that morning. The physician was plainly delighted.

"That's the silver lining for all this," he remarked, with unsteady voice.

"There is nothing to indicate she doesn't know you," prodded Colt.

"No," said Maskell, smiling broadly. "No—that's what's so wonderful about it."

Certainly, if the lie detector was to be trusted, the doctor was telling the truth.

"Your brother is a clever lawyer," resumed Colt, "but how do you intend to explain to him the lies you have been telling me—about your whereabouts on Christmas Eve? You know you have concealed the truth about that."

"I do not conceal the truth."

"You did not deliver those seven presents while Checkles and the child were eating ice cream. No one at the addresses you supplied can remember

your delivering them. Where were you?"

"I was where I said I was—delivering those presents!"

ALL passivity of the chart vanished when the ice cream episode was mentioned. We had an almost unmistakable accusation that Maskell was lying.

"You know that your insistence on this falsehood, which even this machine proclaims, subjects you to the gravest suspicions?"

"Unjustly so."

"Had you quarreled with Geraldine?"

"No—except about her marriage."

"She hadn't tried to obtain money from you?"

"Blackmail? Why, of course not."

Colt pulled the paper ribbon over far enough for the doctor to see it.

"Look at that graph and admit that you lied, Doctor Maskell."

"You're showing yourself guilty as hell!" roared Dougherty.

Doctor Maskell shrugged and lit a cigarette.

"What are your next questions?" he demanded. "I tell you that Geraldine Foster was above trying to blackmail anybody."

Thatcher Colt had been holding back the evidence of the blackmail note, rescued from the waste paper. At the trial it might easily seal the doctor's doom.

"Why do you suppose Geraldine told Betty Canfield she wished she was dead and that she might soon be dead?"

"I don't know."

"You told us you were surprised about the bottle of tannic acid delivered to your office."

"I was."

"But you didn't call up the chemist and ask him to explain?"

"I did. I talked to his clerk, who told me that Geraldine called up and said I needed the stuff in a hurry. She ordered several bottles, three of which were left at my office."

All this time the graph was as calm as the waves of a summer sea. No sign of excitement in the doctor at all.

"You don't know if Geraldine was having a secret affair with anyone?"

"I do not. Nor do I believe it."

"Are you in need of money, Doctor?"

Again came that flashing smile, unforced and genuine.

"I am not," he answered firmly. "I have a small private fortune, and I am heir to one-half of my father's estate which will make me something like a millionaire."

Thatcher Colt hesitated. Judging by the lie detector, he was on a cold trail. He decided to try a new tack.

"Have you any explanation for the fact that Geraldine Foster's coat and purse were found in your office, days after the murder?"

"No, but if I had murdered her, would I have left them there?"

"Have you formed any theory in your mind as to who that woman was—the woman whose face you never did fully see, and who came to your office door late in the afternoon of the murder?"

"No."

"Could it have been Betty Canfield?"

"No."

"Could it have been any of your patients?"

"I don't think so."

The chart rose and fell with palpitations of manifest concern.

"I repeat—could it have been one of your patients?"

"No," Maskell answered deliberately. But by the machine we knew again that the doctor was not being honest with us.

"Suppose," Colt said, "that you were in love with a woman whose name you are protecting."

The telltale chart told that the doctor was in emotional agitation.

"Suppose," went on Colt relentlessly, "that you and she hid yourselves in the house on Peddler's Road."

Now the doctor's graph was maniacal in its weird convolutions.

"Suppose that Geraldine Foster had some hold on you, and you killed her to remove an obstacle. Would that be far from the truth, Doctor Maskell?"

"No!" said Doctor Maskell. "No! I did not kill Geraldine."

"Where are the dead girl's clothes?" demanded Thatcher Colt.

"I don't know. I did not kill her."

"Do you know that the refuse cleaned from under Geraldine's nails contained bits of small hair left after a recent barbering, and that those hairs correspond to your own?"

There was a wriggle of lines on the chart, and the doctor gave a deep sigh.

Dougherty sprang forward shouting:

"Why did the murderer use an ax, Doctor? Hacking away her life, and laying her naked in that shallow grave?"

THE LINE of the heart and blood pressure showed no trace of excitement. Colt looked puzzled. But the District Attorney's voice was triumphant.

"I'll tell you why an ax was used!" he bellowed. "You knew Burce Foster's father had killed a man with an ax and swung for it! You thought you could throw the crime on him. Doctor Maskell, isn't it time for you to come through?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders and made no reply. Then Thatcher Colt interceded.

"I would like the doctor to leave the room for a minute," he said. "He needs a rest anyway."

The District Attorney looked confounded. Certain that he was on the point of getting a confession, he stared at Colt in indignation.

Then he saw the significant expression in Colt's eyes.

At a sign from Colt, the young man from the West removed the plates and tubes and covered up the lie detector. Two policemen led the doctor off, and Leonard followed.

The moment we were alone, Dougherty exploded.

"Good God, Colt!" he cried. "You shouldn't have done that. We've clinched this case now. Maskell is guilty!"

But Thatcher Colt shook his head.

"We are making progress," he conceded. "But we have still not reached our goal. We must turn to a truth drug, I'm afraid."

IX

DOUGHERTY ran his thick red hands through his mop of ruddy curls. His eyes rolled upward, and he swore.

"More bunk!" he moaned. "Are you out of your senses, Colt? We have a case against that Maskell fellow now—one that will convince any twelve men you pick. The guy is just about ready to kick in and then you—"

"Suppose Maskell is innocent?" said Colt.

"Innocent as Cain! Innocent as Jack the Ripper!" Dougherty thrust forward his head and barked: "What makes you think Maskell might be innocent?"

"This lie detector, for one thing."

"Why, if it proves anything at all, it proves his guilt!" howled Dougherty.

"No, it proves merely that he lied," corrected Colt. "And look here—the reactions of Doctor Maskell to questions about the murder itself were negative. See, where we mentioned ax, blood, body, grave—everything gruesome—the chart remained normal."

"The fellow has himself in hand, that's all."

"But no—at other questions he has not himself in hand at all. Every reference to the house on Peddler's Road, for instance, makes him nervous."

"You caught him off his guard."

Thatcher Colt shook his head.

"No, Dougherty. I went over the same ground not once but several times. Undoubtedly the doctor is hiding something from us. I don't think it would take a mind reader to guess it is a mysterious lady, whose very existence the physician is prepared to deny. Suppose that rather than involve her in the matter, the gallant doctor has lied. He has involved himself dangerously, yet he seems determined to go to the electric chair, rather than snitch."

Dougherty shook his head.

"The house was a rendezvous, all right, but the lady was Geraldine Foster, and when Maskell got tired of her, he chopped her up."

"But just suppose it *was* another woman. Then what?"

"Why should any man go to such preposterous lengths to shield any woman? Why not arrest Maskell here and now?"

Thatcher Colt gravely shook his head. Out of a wall closet he brought a small black bag which he placed on the table. Then he had Doctor Humphrey Maskell brought in again.

Colt held out his hand.

"Doctor Maskell," he exclaimed, "if you are a murder, you are a wonder. You have shown colossal nerve to submit to this examination. Is your nerve still good?"

"What is it now?" asked the doctor, the contempt again coming into his tone. "The trial by fire and water, like the ancient savages? Or divination by birds? Or what?"

"A truth drug," said Colt.

"Why should I subject myself to a

drug?" the doctor snapped. "I think I have been too acquiescent. I'm fed up."

"Correct," Colt admitted. "You are not compelled to do what I ask.

"Do you think that District Attorney Dougherty would be convinced if I maintained my innocence under the influence of the drug?" Maskell asked mockingly.

"I'll try anything once," declared Dougherty.

Suddenly Doctor Maskell stood up, took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and bared his heavily muscled arm.

"Let's go," he said.

After the needle was plunged into the doctor's arm and he was stretched out on a couch in Thatcher Colt's library, he spoke without any reserve whatever. He was utterly relaxed. His eyes were closed. His breathing was deep and regular. His voice gradually sank into a monotone, like the murmur of a sick person talking in a fevered sleep.

"Doctor, did you kill Geraldine Foster?"

"I did not."

"Did you hate Geraldine Foster?"

"No."

"Did you love her?"

"No."

"Did you have any reason to kill Geraldine Foster?"

"Yes."

We all leaned forward as the doctor made that confession. Thatcher Colt's brittle voice broke the silence.

"What reason did you have to kill her?"

"Because she threatened someone I love."

"To whom did she threaten to betray you?"

"To my wife!"

WE LOOKED at each other in complete astonishment. I felt compassion for this strong man, who lay like a fevered child, telling on himself. But Colt boldly shot the next questions.

"Your wife! How long have you been married?'

"Fourteen years."

"When did you separate?"

"Ten years ago."

"You were not divorced?"

"No!" The voice of the doctor had become very weary. "She will not give me a divorce. That was why I went away. To Reno. But I came back when —when I saw that Geraldine was really missing."

"What did Geraldine threaten?"

"To expose a beautiful love—drag it through the courts—blacken the name of the one I love."

"Who is that?"

"I—won't—answer—that."

"How did Geraldine Foster know about your wife?"

"I don't know."

Thatcher Colt came back to that sensitive spot in the doctor's mind.

"Why are you so stubborn about where you spent the time when Checkles and Doris were eating their ice cream?"

"Because I will not drag her into it."

"Who?"

"I—won't—answer—that."

Thatcher Colt gave Dougherty a swift glance, and the two men bent low.

"Why were you with her?"

"I was not with her. I was waiting for her. It looked like an attempt had been made to trap us."

"Tell me."

"Mrs. Westock said I was wanted at the house on Peddler's Road."

"Yes. Well?"

"It seemed strange to me. The lady —I very deeply adore and respect—do you understand that?"

Colt said, in a voice full of conviction:

"I fully understand that, Doctor."

"Well I called up the lady at her home. Fortunately, she was alone. I explained what had happened. She said she would come and meet me, and told me of a note she had from Geraldine, demanding blackmail. But she did not appear. Later I learned it was impossible for her to leave the house."

"And you spent the next hour waiting for her?"

"I did. More than an hour."

"In that time, you could have gone to Peddler's Road and committed the murder."

"I didn't."

"The lady will testify to these facts?"

"I will not permit her."

"You would rather die than involve her?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Don't you realize, Doctor, that if there is such a lady, the police will find her?"

"I do not have any fear of that."

"Do you believe your wife was laying that trap for you?"

"Perhaps."

"Could she have killed Geraldine and tried to put it on you?"

"She is cunning and cruel."

"Do you know this key?"

Thatcher Colt placed in the doctor's hands the key that had been found in Geraldine's coat pocket.

"Yes. It is the key to the house on Peddler's Road."

"How did Geraldine get hold of it?"

"I don't know."

"Why was the pillow-case put over her head?"

"I don't know."

"Was the pillow-case the property of the lady you are protecting?"

"I don't know."

"What is your wife's full name and where does she live?"

There was no answer. At that moment, there came a hasty rapping on the door. I went to the door. As I opened it, Hogan burst past me and held in front of him a filled pillow-case embroidered with rosebuds—a duplicate of the one found over the head of Geraldine Foster. Hogan dramatically removed the contents and held them up for inspection.

They were the blood-stained clothes of the murdered girl.

"Where did you get these?" asked Colt crisply.

"In a closet in the office of Doctor Maskell," said Hogan.

"Now we'll talk turkey!" exploded Dougherty.

BUT COLT, even then tried to stay the determination of the District Attorney.

"Doctor Maskell has fallen asleep," he protested.

"This man killed Geraldine Foster! answered Dougherty. "Wake up, Maskell."

The District Attorney seized the sleeping doctor and shook him roughly. Blearily, the prisoner opened his eyes and peered up at his captor, who drew a document from his pocket.

"Doctor Maskell." he said. "I arrest you for the murder of Geraldine Foster. Here is the warrant!"

The doctor closed his eyes and fell instantly back into slumber.

At a signal from the Commissioner, the two police attendants carried the unconscious prisoner out of the library. Then Thatcher Colt faced Dougherty.

"You think this was a crime of passion. It was not. It was a cold-blooded, business proposition, and I do not believe that the murderer and the victim were even acquainted with each other."

"Colt, sometimes I think you are mad."

"Because I do not believe Maskell is guilty?"

"He will burn before Thanksgiving," predicted Dougherty.

"For heaven's sake, listen to reason, Dougherty. Maskell is as innocent as you are. And if you give me time, I'll prove it and deliver the guilty person into your hands."

Dougherty put his hands on his hips.

"Colt," he remonstrated, "I have been more patient with you than any man in my position should be. But now I'm through. Maskell killed Geraldine Foster, and he's going to fry for it."

"And what if I prove you wrong?"

"I'll be the first to apologize."

"But suppose Doctor Maskell has been electrocuted by that time?"

The District Attorney shook his head sadly.

"He'll be electrocuted a long, long time before you or anybody else proves him innocent," he retorted confidently. "You're through with this case now. Hogan will clear up the details for me and we'll rush the case to trial."

Thatcher Colt folded his arms, and said quietly:

"Nevertheless, the Police Department will go on with the work. It does not regard this case as closed. Dougherty, before you can convince me of the guilt of Doctor Maskell, there are four questions you will have to answer."

"And they are?"

"Why was Geraldine Foster killed with an ax? Would it not have been simpler to shoot her, poison her, instead of all that blood-letting? Why was she stripped nude, *after* the murder? Why was the pillow-case over her head? Who was the mysterious woman the doctor found at the door?"

Dougherty laughed as he shook hands with Colt.

"Come to the trial," he shouted, "and you'll hear the answer to all your questions. . . ."

The midnight arrest of Doctor Humphrey Maskell, made in the home of the

Police Commissioner, set the papers frenzied with excitement.

Unmoved by George Maskell's denunciation of the methods of the District Attorney, Dougherty appeared before the grand jury the next morning, bringing with him a parade of witnesses. On our way to lunch, Thatcher Colt and I passed by the closed door of the Grand Jury room and my chief said in a low voice:

"Observe the two old men at opposite sides of the door?"

I instantly recognized Edmund L. Foster, the father of the murdered girl. But who was the other—the short, neat and feeble old gentleman with the walking stick and the gardenia in his buttonhole?

"That is old Alexander Maskell, the millionaire architect," said my chief. "The father of the victim, and the father of the accused face each other at the grand jury's door. Nice touch for the tabloids."

COLT was not amused. As we hastened away he talked of his disagreement with the District Attorney.

"But think of the evidence," I ventured.

"The Grand Jury will eat it up. That is what is the trouble with our Grand Jury system. There you have a bunch of men, twenty-three of them, with sixteen constituting a quorum, and if only twelve of these men think that Maskell is guilty, they will vote a true bill, find an indictment, and leave a stain on his character for the rest of his life. All this, and remember, Tony, that only one side will be heard by those grand jurors. Almost always, Dougherty, or any other district attorney, can get the indictment he wants.

"I know, and you know, that an indictment is not supposed to count against a man's character. But it does, just the same. The general public always believes the indicted man guilty and if he eventually is discharged, they generally think it was due to influence. Even if Maskell gets out of this, the indictment will ruin him. The Grand Jury acts upon a superficial knowledege of facts and little knowledge of the law: And so, I am ashamed to say, in this particular case, does my old friend, Dougherty. He is making an ass of himself, and a martyr out of Maskell."

Just as Colt had predicted, within a few hours the Grand Jury handed down an indictment.

Promptly, the prisoner was taken to the Homicide Court. There, with great dignity and assurance, he pleaded not guilty to the indictment and waived examination. With that formality, Doctor Humphrey Maskell passed completely out of the jurisdiction of the police, being taken over officially by the Department of Correction, who put him into a cell in the Tombs.

During his brief examination in Homicide Court, with his brother and sister-in-law standing by his side, I saw the doctor's gaze roving over the crowd in the court room, as if searching in vain for some well-beloved face. Was he looking for a woman whose name he had refused to give, even when under the influence of the truth drug? Or was there no such person—except the slain Geraldine?

The secret activities in the office of Thatcher Colt, during the busy days that followed, are probably without parallel in the history of police procedure.

So far as the public was concerned, Colt had solved the murder of Geraldine Foster. Yet, secretly, the Police Commissioner of New York City set to work, bending all the energies of his Department to undermine the very case he had presented to the District Attorney, and to find, instead, the really guilty person.

The police and the District Attorney, the Grand Jury, and everyone connected with the case were being complimented by the newspapers. Everybody seemed to expect the conviction of Doctor Maskell. By the man in the street he had already been condemned to the electric chair.

After reading an interview which Dougherty had given the papers, the Commissioner laughed softly and said to me:

"It is amazing what a convincing case Dougherty had in his hands. But he explains only one of the cardinal mysteries that I saw in the affair from the beginning—and I am convinced that his explanation is not the correct one. Why was an ax use? Because, says the District Attorney, Maskell wanted to throw suspicion on Bruce Foster, whose father was hung for an

ax murder. If Geraldine dies, Bruce gets twice as much inheritance, so Maskell is supposed to have found even a motive for the man he meant to be suspected.

"If Maskell figured all that out, and tried to involve Bruce Foster he was a thirty-third-degree blunderer. On the other hand, why does not Dougherty just as well suppose that Bruce Foster really did it and planted evidence to convict the doctor?"

Every detail filled the papers, and was given in the radio news broadcasts. The reporters even recounted gleefully that on his second day in the Tombs, Maskell ordered green turtle steak, cooked in Spanish fashion, brought from a Sevillian restaurant on Pearl Street.

Dougherty was pressing for an early trial. He was an honest civil servant, but by no means blind to opportunities for spectacular public impression.

The prisoner made few statements, but gave one interview that was widely discussed.

"I am proud," said he, "of the way my family is rallying to my support. My father told me here this morning, with this steel door between us, that I was the apple of his eye. I found tears in my eyes when my father said that. And my brother George has undertaken my defense."

THAT night Thatcher Colt and I worked late in his office. Toward midnight, he shoved aside his papers and said:

"The Foster case is still anybody's puzzle, Tony. When I eliminate some of the clues tomorrow the choice of the killer will have narrowed down greatly. Some other essential clues are lacking—trifles, yet containing the vital evidence we want."

He drew thoughtfully on his pipe.

"Dougherty has muddied the waters," he complained. "There is still the mystery about why that crime was committed with an ax. There is still the question of who that mysterious woman was at the doctor's door. Doctor Maskell has been lying, but not about that. . . When was the girl's body buried? I wish I knew that. Why did they bother to bury it at all? I have found a motorist who remembers seeing lights on the hill on the night of January third. That probably was the night of the strange burial. Well, we have two means of attack. One is to eliminate the suspects."

"There is first the doctor himself," I said. "After him Bruce, then Armstrong, who still can't account for his movements. Even the father had a motive, as you pointed out."

"Tony," said my chief, "you have left out some of the most important suspects. But no matter. They are all innocent."

"How do you know?" I insisted.

Irritatingly he paused to light his pipe.

"Because," he said then, "I have been certain from the first, that not only was another woman involved, but that Geraldine Foster was killed by a woman!"

From a drawer in his desk he took the embroidered pillow-case which he had found over the head of Geraldine Foster.

"I believe a woman did this crime," repeated Thatcher Colt. "And I have to find that woman by means of this pillow-case."

"No laundry mark?" I asked.

"It was new," Colt said. "Come with me, Tony."

He marched into a small room, where there were thirty detectives. On a table lay a pair of shears. Colt cut the pillow-case into thirty segments and gave one piece to each man.

Then in a brief speech to the detectives, he said the slip was of fine texture and shoud have come from a shop that dealt in the finest quality of linens. The detectives were not told they were working on the Geraldine Foster case. Each was assigned to a section of the city in which were located the lofts and sample rooms of manufacturers—dealers in bedding and bed linen.

Off they went, each with his own sample.

X

ALL day long, day in and day out, for the next three days, the detectives went from building to building, questioning every maker and distributor of pillow-slips, exhibiting the samples in an organized effort to track this unmated pillow-case to its source

I could not guess the purpose. What

could be proved, even if they did locate the wholesaler from which it came?

Each night the thirty men reported not the slightest results. But Thatcher Colt refused to be discouraged.

"If we don't find some jobber in New York who recognizes this pillow-case," he declared, "we'll visit every mill in the country."

Stolid, reliable Detective Sergeant Gernsback finally came proudly to the Commissioner's office to report that he had taken his piece of pillow-case into the office of a manufacturer's agent who had identified it as part of his own line.

"I remember it well," he had told the detective. "It cost me a lot of money."

He had told Gernsback that these expessive pillow-cases had been sold to a number of stores throughout New York City. Despite their excellent quality, their gaudiness had made them almost unsalable. The manufacturers had been left with almost the entire output on their hands. Finally, to prevent a total loss, they had been sacrificed to a lot of little stores.

"Has he got the sales slips?" asked Colt.

Detective Gernsback couldn't say. The Commissioner hadn't ordered him to find out anything about sales slips.

"Come on, Tony," said Colt. "Let's go down there and see what we can find."

The office of the Wigglestaff Pillow and Case Factory was just off Fifth Avenue in the Thirties—a crowded region, with trundle wagons dodging through the trucks and limousines.

Mr. Pearlman, the Manhattan agent for the Wigglestaff Company, greeted Thatcher Colt, who explained what we were looking for. Did Mr. Pearlman keep records of all his sales? Mr. Pearlman said that since these particular pillow-cases had been sold for cash the duplicate delivery slips might have been destroyed. However, he would investigate.

Presently he returned with the duplicate delivery slips which he placed in the Commissioner's hands. Seven stores had bought those cases. I quickly made notes of the names and addresses, and we hurried off to make the round of the shops.

They were in widely separated areas. We drove first to a little dry-goods and notions shop on Third Avenue. The proprietor was a loud-voiced Irishwoman who called down a pox on the maker of those pillow-cases. She had never been able to sell one pair of them. We checked them against the quality indicated on the delivery sheet and found that she still had them all.

At the store of one Joseph Schnutz, a dealer in household furnishings, in Fourteenth Street, Thatcher Colt learned that Mr. Schnutz was a careful merchant who had exhaustive records of all his transactions.

"Did you buy any pillow-cases like this one?" asked Colt thrusting the piece Gernsback had used, under his eyes.

He had, Mr. Schnutz declared, the most beautiful pillow-cases he had ever handled.

"Did you ever sell any of them?" asked Colt.

Mr. Schnutz shook his head.

"Only one pair," he replied. "People don't appreciate beautiful things."

But did he know to whom he had sold them?"

"Yes," said the merchant. "It was a lady with a little girl—pretty little girl. She bought that pair of pillow-cases, after she saw them in the window. Had them delivered. Here's the record."

He read from one of his slips:

"Mrs. Felise Morgan, one eighty-six Washington Square, North."

The pillow-slip which was found over the head of the buried Geraldine Foster had been purchased by the mother of little Doris Morgan!

At first it seemed to me as if this latest discovery completely shattered all possibility of Doctor Maskell's innocence. Then came an entirely different and unthinkable accusation.

Had Felise Morgan killed Geraldine Foster?

Even after what Colt had said, I rejected the idea as impossible. A woman wield that murderous ax, deal those awful blows, and then, unaided, bury that body after soaking it in a bathtub full of tannic acid?

THATCHER Colt, beside me in the Department car, was watching me with an amused smile.

"It's hard to figure out, isn't it?" he

said banteringly. "But one thing now is clear. Doctor Maskell is in love with Felise Morgan."

"You think that a woman as lovely—"

"Women have killed women before, and have not scrupled to use an ax, if it suited their purpose."

"Is that why Doctor Maskell is so secretive?"

"Did you notice the way he looked at Doris, the day we rode around town in the car?"

"I did."

"For that child he would do anything. Maskell would rather take all the blame, even if innocent, than ruin the life of that little girl. He may even think Felise is guilty."

"Do you think Mrs. Morgan is guilty?"

Thatcher Colt shook his head.

"That is what I have come here to find out," he replied.

We were once more in front of the house in which Doctor Maskell had his offices, and where Doris Morgan and her beautiful mother lived.

As we started up the stairs, a man was coming out, a thick-set, heavy-shouldered man, in a heavy overcoat. As he passed us, he gave us one disdainful glance. The next moment, someone else ran down the steps, chattering in a low voice to himself. It was Checkles, the doctor's hunch-backed chauffeur, plainly bent on following the first man.

"Just seeing where he goes—I suspect him," cried Checkles to Thatcher Colt, as he hopped away.

"Who on earth is Checkles following?" I asked.

"That is Gilbert Morgan, Doris' father and Felise's husband."

The door of the Morgan apartment was opened by a tall woman with severe features and black hair brushed tightly over her head. She recognized Colt at once.

"Mrs. Morgan will see you in a moment," she said. "Please come in."

She led us to a charmingly decorated small room off the living-room. Here we were left. I was about to speak, when a scraping footstep made me turn. I saw an old woman creeping into the room. For all her age and feeble condition, she was looking from me to Thatcher Colt with eager curiosity.

"Don't tell her I came in here, will you?" she croaked. We promised, wonderingly. She came nearer to Thatcher Colt, and with her palsied fingers on his wrist, she said:

"Make Felise tell you the truth. She stays here because of me. I am not worth it. Tell her to follow her heart. I can take care of myself."

"Who are you?" asked Thatcher Colt.

"Her mother-in-law." The old woman retreated to the door, then added: You make her do it and you may prevent another murder!"

The hard-featured woman who had admitted us returned hurriedly and seemed to whisk the old woman bodily from our sight. As I looked at Thatcher Colt, he put his finger to his lips.

A few minutes later Felise Morgan entered the room.

Her blond hair fell around a pale and fragile face, characterized by refinement, taste and delicacy. She looked ethereal and lovely in a soft lavender negligée, her eyes studying us, as if sensing that we were here to pry into the most secret chapters of her life.

The Police Commissioner rose and bowed.

"Mrs. Morgan," he said, "I came here on a most unpleasant duty."

"So the police have found out about Humphrey and me at last," she said with a sigh. "I intended going to you. I was resolved to do so, no matter what the cost."

"Hasn't the doctor forbidden you to speak?" Colt inquired. He held up a protesting hand. "Don't be under any misapprehensions. Doctor Maskell does not know I am here. He has no idea that his relation to you is discovered. Only by keeping that quiet have I any hope of saving him."

"Saving him?" echoed Felise Morgan, slowly rising. "Why, you are the man who wants to kill him!"

"I am the man who gathered all the evidence on which the indictment was brought," Colt corrected. "But I have never believed him guilty. The District Attorney took the matter out of my hands and has gone ahead on his own course. I want to arrest the *right* person." He went on swiftly: "Did you or did you not receive a letter from Geraldine Foster shortly before she died?"

PALLOR suddenly swept across the beautiful face. Stark terror came to her eyes. Colt did not wait for her to answer.

"It demanded blackmail?"

"Yes."

"Have you the letter?"

"No, I destroyed it."

"What did the doctor say?"

"He was very angry."

"And ever since then, Mrs. Morgan, you have been afraid. And when her body was found, you believed—"

"No! I didn't believe it. Doctor Maskell was not capable of such a crime."

Thatcher Colt nodded.

"I believe you," he said. "Now, on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, did the doctor telephone you?"

"Yes. He said he had a message, apparently from me, to meet me at the house on Peddler's Road. He telephoned here to confirm it. We both saw there was something wrong, and I promised to meet him. But I was prevented from leaving the house—by my husband."

Thatcher Colt stood up and came closer to Felise Morgan. Bending over her, he asked in a low voice:

"You are sincerely in love with Maskell?"

"I am."

"Would you divorce your husband and marry the doctor if you could?'

"Gladly."

"Why haven't you done it, then?"

Felise Morgan's eyes were tragic.

"You don't know all, then?"

"No, indeed, I do not."

"The doctor went to Reno. He was to make arrangements. I was to follow with my little girl and also—"

"I know," said Thatcher Colt, "that your husband has been a drug fiend for years. Now, who else did you mean to take with you?"

"His mother," she murmured. "A poor old woman with no one—"

She halted, all her body trembling. We heard a key, and heavy footfalls after the slam of the door. Down the hall strode the man Checkles had followed.

Gilbert Morgan was spherical and plump. His shiny bald crown was like a hemispherical roof over his head. His little black eyes looked at us malevolently.

"Felise, who are these men?" he asked.

"I am Thatcher Colt, the Police Commissioner of the City of New York," my chief suavely explained.

Was it fear that leaped into the face of the fat little man? Or was it suspicion?

"The Police Commissioner?" he repeated. "To what—"

"It is a difficult matter," interrupted Colt. "The police have received complaints against this apartment. Of screams, quarrels.

"Preposterous!" grated Felise Morgan's husband.

"I felt so," agreed Thatcher Colt. "I know a man of your position would not create disturbances. However, I could not ignore the matter. Mrs. Morgan has already assured me it must be a malicious practical joke. Good day, Mrs. Morgan. Good day, sir."

When we were on our way back to Headquarters, Thatcher Colt said:

"How did a fine woman like that ever marry such a man?" After a moment's pause, he added: "Why should Humphrey Maskell want to kill Geraldine Foster? If he wanted to kill anybody, there was a ready-made victim for him —his beloved's husband. . . ."

An hour after dinner Colt and I left Police Headquarters and drove to Greenwich Village. Where Fourth Street crosses Seventh Avenue, we left the car and proceeded on foot. The Commissioner led halfway down the block to a basement barber shop. We descended and found the shop deserted of customers. The barber was reading a newspaper account of Doctor Maskell's arrest.

Thatcher Colt sat down in the barber chair and asked for a hair trim and shave while I slouched in a chair.

"Good evening!" said the barber, adjusting a cloth around the neck of the Police Commissioner. "Nice night."

COLT conceded this point with affable good nature. Encouraged by his friendly customer, Marinelli, the barber, like so many others in town, began to talk about the Foster murder.

"Ah," said the barber, "but that is very sad."

"How so?" asked Colt.

"That Doctor Maskell. He is one of my best customers. He come here often.

But he is too damn attractive to the girls."

"It's a great way to be cursed sometimes," Colt jested.

"No. It was the doctor's ruin. The women followed him. Even into my shop they followed him."

"So women followed the doctor into this very place!" exclaimed the Police Commissioner.

"One did. She just wanted to be near him. She admitted it to me when he was gone."

"Pretty girl?" asked the Commissioner carelessly.

"Not so young—very pretty—not so bad," chortled the voluble barber. "Blond hair, nice shape, sweet voice. Just a married woman—I saw the ring—with a yearning for a strong, good-looking man. She said she did not even know his name. But she confessed her feeling to me. She wanted a lock of his hair. I gave it to her."

The Commissioner laughed. No one could have guessed that now the hunter had sniffed a scent.

"Does she come here often?" he asked.

The barber shook his head.

"No, she never came back. Why? You are not that silly lady's husband?"

"No," said Thatcher Colt. "But I am a friend of Doctor Maskell, one of the few men in the city today who believes him innocent."

"Si, signor."

"The lady wore a wedding ring. What did it look like?"

The barber's liquid eyes turned upward.

"The ring," he said at last, "was of platinum, set with diamonds, and two big pearls."

Thatcher Colt, who remained silent while the final touches were given his face and hair, had one question held in reserve. He put it casually, as he rose from the chair.

"Would you know that woman if you saw her again?" he asked.

"Yes—yes. Sure."

We emerged into the street.

"Now," said Thatcher Colt, when we were driving uptown, "it is becoming more apparent that the killer had no grudge against Geraldine Foster. That poor girl was merely a pawn to be sacrificed in a larger game, in which millions were involved. All the evidence planted against the doctor is leading to that conclusion. Imagine collecting the doctor's hair cuttings, just to fake the refuse under the dead girl's finger nails. . . ."

We came to a halt in front of a walk-up apartment on upper Broadway, not far from the scene of the crime. Colt mounted four flights and rapped on a door. A woman opened the door and stared at us.

"Mrs. Planzen?"

"Yeh."

"Has your little boy gone to bed?"

"What's he been doin'?"

"Nothing. I want to talk with him. I want to reward him, in fact."

"Oh, yeh? And who are you?"

"I'm from the Police," said Thatcher Colt, in his friendliest voice. "Now, Mrs. Planzen, you are not in any trouble. It happens that your little boy plays near Peddler's Road and I am hoping he can help me in an important case."

"Oh, gee, Mom, lemme talk to him!"

There came under the mother's elbow the same sallow-faced urchin who ran from me that cold day when Betty Canfield and I first came upon the house on Peddler's Road.

"Hello, Warren," said the Commissioner. "Remember me?"

"Sure."

Mrs. Planzen said: "Any reward that would go to my child comes to his mother what needs it to keep soul and body together, and not to his father who drinks up every cent that he lays his hands on."

"Exactly," agreed Thatcher Colt, and we were admitted into the shabby little living room.

"Now, Warren," he said, "you told me a wild story about a ghost without any clothes in the murder house. What made you say that?"

"I saw it. Inside the house. Christmas Eve."

"What were you doing there?"

THE boy turned red and hung his head.

"I broke in the house," he confessed. "But I didn't steal anything. I was playing robber's cave."

"Did you break the window?"

"No, sir. That was broke a long time ago."

"Did you find anybody in there?"

"No, sir—not right off. Then I heard a noise and I got awful scared, and finally, just to prove I wasn't scared at all, I sneaked up the back stairs. It was getting dark and I got more scared. I was sure there was somebody up there. I was afraid to go upstairs or down, so I climbed out on the window sill. I let myself down by my hands when I saw the ghost coming down the hall."

"What was it like?"

"It didn't have any clothes on, and it was all covered with blood."

"Warren, was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman," answered the boy, beginning to whimper. "I ran home."

"Did you tell your mother?"

"Not a word," said Mrs. Planzen bitterly.

"Did you see anything else up there?" persisted Colt.

"No, sir. But I hung around. That's why you found me."

When we emerged from the house, Thatcher Colt asked the patrolman on the corner:

"Is there a locksmith near here?"

"Yes—right there." The patrolman pointed to a basement shop where a light was still burning.

The locksmith was a thin, weazened old man.

"Ever see that before?" asked Thatcher Colt, throwing down the old-fashioned key.

"I made it. For a lady. I don't know her name."

"Describe her."

The description given by the locksmith differed slightly from the one furnished by the barber, but her method of obtaining the key seemed to interest the Commissioner. The woman had taken the locksmith up the hill to the house on Peddler's Road. The door was open. It was fitted with an old-fashioned lock and the woman said the key was lost. Could he make her another? As Colt later pointed out, she must have broken the kitchen window to enter. The mechanic had taken the lock to the shop and found an old key which fitted.

"Thanks," said Thatcher Colt. "You will hear from me later."

XI

WE drove downtown and stopped in front of the Esplanade Apartments on Morningside Heights. Betty Canfield had moved from here now.

Thatcher Colt sought out the janitor.

"Who showed Apartment Four D to prospective tenants?" was the Commissioner's question.

He said there had been only one person interested after the girls decided to sublet, because Geraldine was planning to be married.

"Do you remember who it was?" asked Colt.

"It was a lady," he said, "with blond hair."

"Can you remember her more accurately? Was she pretty?"

"I didn't get a good look at her," said the operator. "She kept her coat muffled up about her face both times she was here."

"Oh, she was here twice?"

"The first time was about two or three weeks before Christmas. The girls were not at home, but I showed her around."

"Did you leave her alone in the apartment?"

"Well—"

Colt turned to me.

"That was the time she had the opportunity to steal the pen and paper," he said.

"Nothing was ever reported missing," protested the man, but Colt waved that aside.

"When did she come again?"

"About two in the afternoon, Christmas Eve. She said she thought she would take the apartment, but wanted another look at it."

"This time she brought back the torn note she had forged," muttered Colt. "Tony, this woman was clever enough to be a forger. Probably she obtained a sample of Geraldine's writing as Geraldine's mysterious correspondent, wanting genealogical information. She planted those torn papers on the second visit. Then she went down to Doctor Maskell's suite. I wonder what she did there?"

Early next morning, Colt sent for Clesleek, and had a long consultation with him. When Clesleek left the Commissioner's office, he carried a sealed envelope, and a small gold object, and he promised to see the perfumers.

I was deep in my work, late in the afternoon, when Thatcher Colt came in and touched me on the shoulder.

"Tony," he said, "stop your work."

I looked up and he smiled.

"I have the honor to report," he said, "that I have finally solved the Geraldine Foster murder case. . . ."

A strange meeting was held that night in the Commissioner's house on West Seventieth Street.

All the witnesses in the Foster case were in one of the rooms on the second floor. In the Police Commissioner's library sat George Maskell, and across from him sat his wife, Natalie, looking pale and beautiful. Between them, grim and thoughtful, sat Doctor Humphrey Maskell.

Facing this trio stood District Attorney Dougherty. He found it difficult to contain his indignation at these bizarre and unnecessary proceedings.

Looking somberly upon them all, Thatcher Colt suddenly appeared at the little private door.

"I want to say," Dougherty blurted, "that I regard this entire proceeding as entirely irregular! Why are we here?"

Colt replied, "To rehearse the murder of Geraldine Foster, and to accuse the actual criminal, whom I now have safely under lock and key."

"The actual criminal *is* under arrest," Dougherty snarled.

"Sit down, Dougherty," counseled Colt, "and let me explain."

Dougherty sat down.

"Shoot!" he exploded.

"I know who killed Geraldine Foster," began Thatcher Colt promptly, his voice quiet. "I know how Geraldine was killed, and why. I am prepared to prove every statement I make about this bloody business."

He turned directly to Dougherty.

"Doctor Maskell," he said, "is the victim of an unfortunate marriage. He never tried to free himself until he fell in love with Felise Morgan. Her marriage, too, was unfortunate but she stayed on, out of pity for her mother-in-law. It is true that this man and this woman broke the laws of convention. But that was the only offense Doctor Maskell committed—except that he left for Reno, to make arrangements for a double divorce, to be followed by a marriage. That was why this crime was committed."

THE three Maskells looked at Colt with eager interest. Dougherty sulked.

"The killer of Geraldine Foster," resumed Colt, "did not know her. Slayer and victim were total strangers. Hate did not enter into the crime. Neither did love, jealousy, or fear. The murder of Geraldine Foster was a cold-blooded proposition."

"A cold-blooded ax-murder," scoffed Dougherty.

"From the outset," Colt went on, "there were three major questions in this murder. Why did the murderer use an ax? Why was the corpse denuded of all clothing, except for a pillow-case over the head? Who was the mysterious woman who met Doctor Maskell at his office door, within an hour after the murder was done? Those questions were vital. Through them I felt certain I could grope my way to all the other necessary facts."

"Did you?" asked George Maskell.

"I did. We will call our criminal 'X', a person who is money-crazy, for the murder of Geraldine Foster was done for money and nothing else."

I could feel a cold chill crawling through my veins.

"How do you know that?" asked Natalie Maskell. "It is hardly a plausible theory."

"I would like to hear the facts," purred Dougherty.

"Nevertheless, assume that X was money-crazy. X suddenly conceived a brilliant scheme. By the death of Geraldine Foster, X foresaw gain. The temptation was irresistible. The bloodthirsty notion of the most consummate schemer finally was ready for execution."

"All sheer assumption!" remarked Dougherty.

"It became necessary for X to obtain a sample of the handwriting of Geraldine Foster. Out of the West came a letter for Geraldine, a genealogical inquiry from one Mr. Ephraim Foster. He assured Geraldine that she was descended from kings. Geraldine replied to the letter. Then Geraldine heard from the genealogist no more.

"I sent a wire to the chief of police in Willoughby, Kansas, whence the letter came. Through the local police, I learned that a box had been rented in the Willoughby post office by a transient visitor to a nearby town, in August of last year, and that the so-called Ephraim Foster was a woman!

"I was not surprised. From the first I suspected that the murderer was not a man. And I learned that the one person to whom I might ascribe a motive—a woman—had been away from New York during August. Forgery is by no means the rare and delicate accomplishment generally supposed. So between August and December twenty-four, X had ample time to copy the handwriting of Geraldine Foster.

"Geraldine was about to be married. She was leaving Morningside Heights, and the apartment was for sub-let. Geraldine and Betty worked during the day and X called to look at the apartment during the day. On the first occasion, X stole stationery and a pen, but overlooked the important detail that all purple inks are not the same. That aroused my first suspicion.

"The note which demanded blackmail money from Doctor Maskell was forged. It was brought back to the apartment on Morningside Heights by X who, left alone in the living room, tore it across and thrust the pieces into the desk drawer, certain that they would be found. Betty Canfield saw Geraldine half-finish a note, then destroy it—which threw us all off the track, until detectives found the fragments of both notes.

"It was also on the second visit that the key to the house on Peddler's Road was left in Geraldine's coat. This was not the only note written by X. Another was sent to Felise Morgan, to create in her mind a doubt of the doctor's innocence."

"You have not explained why Humphrey was selected as the victim of this mysterious X," said Natalie Maskell.

Thatcher Colt smiled.

"Doctor Maskell was the only possible victim. X had been finding out about the private affairs of the doctor, everything that he would wish to keep hidden. He had been followed to the house on Peddler's Road, and his secret love affair was known.

"X broke into the house, studied the layout, and had a key made for the front door. And X's all-seeing eyes had fallen upon Doctor Maskell's ax.

"By now, you must see that Geraldine Foster was only an incident in the scheme. The doctor was to be the real victim. X would murder the girl, then preserve the body until it would be possible further to entangle Doctor Maskell. That might be days, yet when the body was found, it must have the appearance of being freshly killed. Tannic acid would do that."

SHOCKED murmurs came as Colt paused.

"Later," he said then, "one could go back, bury the body, then contrive to involve the doctor with a difficulty in proving his movements. But he must not get into the house, otherwise he would discover what had happened, perhaps notify the police himself. Here was a real problem, yet X met it with skill.

"But let me leap ahead for a moment. A few days after Christmas, Doctor Maskell leaves town suddenly, without an explanation. Why? X knew—the trip to Reno preparatory to getting a divorce. It was this romance which hastened the crime. If Felise and the doctor got married, the reason for the crime itself would cease to be.

"X knew that the doctor would return on January fourth. No one would be visiting the house on Peddler's Road. All that time the body of Geraldine Foster lay in the tub of tannic acid. But on the night of January third, someone saw a light in the house. That was the night X buried the body. The pigeons gave me a clue, which the autopsy substantiated. The girl had been in the grave thirty-six hours but she had been killed on December twenty-fourth. It had been the design of X to make it seem that Geraldine had been killed on January third, when Doctor Maskell could not account for his movements.

"On January fourth, he received a telephone call. He was told that it was Geraldine talking, that he could save her from great trouble. The doctor went to meet her at the Pelham entrance to Bronx Park. He waited two hours and no one who knew him saw him there. That made the doctor's story look fishy, and the District Attorney laid stress on it, just as X intended he should.

"But the tannic acid ruse had not worked. The snails in the stomach of Geraldine Foster were conclusive. We now knew that Geraldine had been killed on Christmas Eve. But that did not help the doctor, for his Christmas Eve alibi was just as defective as the

one for January fourth. The killer had first meant to lure him there directly, in which case no tannic acid would have been necessary.

"After Mrs. Westock delivered the message, the doctor called Mrs. Morgan, because he was suspicious. They arranged to meet, but Mrs. Morgan could not leave her apartment. Doctor Maskell had no alibi, and would not betray the lady. We had to find her through the pillow-case which had been deliberately put over the head of the victim, to lead to the doctor, through Mrs. Morgan."

"A gruesome scheme," remarked George Maskell.

"X decided to leave nothing to chance. It must be shown that Doctor Maskell had bought the chemical. A telephone call was made to a druggist who was told that Doctor Maskell wished three large bottles of tannic acid delivered before two o'clock. A witness saw Geraldine Foster leaving the office carrying a bottle—her own embalming fluid. A woman with her carried another.

"At a little after three o'clock that afternoon, X arrived at the office of Doctor Maskell. She accompanied that woman, bringing the bottles the doctor supposedly had requested—to her place of execution.

"Now we have to draw upon our deductive powers. X and Geraldine entered the house. The woman went upstairs, taking the bottles. She took off every inch of clothing and came downstairs naked, ax in hand. Her clothes must not be spattered. So she was nude."

"Good God!" breathed Dougherty.

"At the time exactly fixed by the battered wrist-watch, X, the bloodthirsty woman, without warning fell upon poor Geraldine with the ax. The girl was literally hacked to death. Lifting the bloody body, the naked murderess carried it upstairs to the bathroom. Crossing to the bedroom X saw a boy looking in the hall window. The room was dark. Identification was hardly possible. Instantly the clever mind of this mad creature worked out the solution as the boy fled. The body would be stripped anyhow, for the soaking in the tub, so would be buried nude, and if that boy ever testified, he would believe that it was Geraldine he saw, and not the murderess.

"The murderess drove back to Washington Square, opened that office with Geraldine's key, carried the girl's clothes inside, where they would eventually be found, and hung the coat and purse conspicuously on a hook. Then she came out, locked the door and was about to leave when suddenly—and here I guess—she remembered having left something distinctive inside. The doctor came before she could unlock the door and get back. The doctor, however, did not recognize her. But I found traces which led me to her. The first clue was a hair."

FROM his desk drawer, Thatcher Colt drew out two envelopes, marked "Hair." Dougherty bent over the desk, his face almost free of doubt.

"This first envelope," said Colt, "contains a hair I took from Geraldine's hair-net the night I first visited her apartment. I thought I might need it if her body were found and identification proved difficult. This other hair I found on the floor, where it had fallen from the head of the murderess, probably during the struggle."

Opening the second envelope, Colt drew out a long strand of medium blond hair.

"The murderess has since had her hair dyed," added the Commissioner. "Now I'll show you a third exhibit."

Colt drew out a third envelope. Then from a drawer he took out a long, thin glass tube filled with a colorless liquid.

"Recently," explained Colt, "I managed to obtain several hairs from the head of the woman I suspect of killing Geraldine Foster. I went to her own beauty parlor—just as she had gone to Doctor Maskell's barber and obtained a cutting for deadly purpose. Here is one of her hairs—a dark, lovely auburn. But when I drop it into this chemical see the dye fall away."

The strand of hair fell into the chemical, and the liquid became discolored. After a moment Thatcher Colt drew out the hair and beside it he laid the one found on the scene of the crime.

They were a perfect match.

"God God!" cried Dougherty again. "Who is this woman, Colt?"

The Police Commissioner shrugged.

"This might not convince a jury," he said, "but in the bathroom of the murder house was a face cloth. It had lip-

stick on it. I had those stains analyzed and compared them with the lipstick taken from the lips of Geraldine Foster. The lipstick used by Geraldine was a Corday product, but the one used by the murderess was from Coty. I saw her stick one day when she dropped it in this room."

Natalie Maskell, rising, was as pale as snow.

"Do you accuse me of murdering Geraldine Foster?" she cried.

"I do," said Thatcher Colt. "And you did it with an ax because no one would connect a woman with such a weapon!"

"I have yet to hear the motive," she mocked.

"Your father-in-law has not long to live. He will bequeath millions of dollars to each of his two sons. But if one son dies, the other gets all. You wanted all. You are mad—money-mad."

She laughed balefully.

"You are clever, Mr. Colt. But you have not won yet."

Natalie Maskell sat down and began quivering. Humphrey Maskell sprang to the side of the woman who would have destroyed him. But she was already beyond the need of a doctor—and not one of us had noticed when she swallowed the poison tablet.

The murderess of Geraldine Foster was dead. . . .

When finally all the others had gone I congratulated my chief, and he smiled a little sadly.

"Tony," he confessed, "I feel lonesome tonight. Everybody has gone home except you and me—and a little girl waiting downstairs. Betty."

"Really?" I said.

"Will you two join me in a little supper, or would you rather be to yourselves?"

We ate our supper, Betty and I, as the guests of Thatcher Colt.

Zotter wrenched the roll from the old man's fingers

MURDER STAMP

by LEWIS LITTLE

Cabbie Zotter had his eye on easy dough!

IT WAS a wet, muggy summer night, but there weren't many fares around. The long week-end was on. The crowd that usually rides in taxis was up in Connecticut or on the Jersey shore, complaining about the weather. Week-enders kept their fingers crossed that the sun would come out next day and dry up the beaches.

The rain didn't bother Zotter, though. Nor did he envy his holidaying fares. And swimming was farthest of all from his thoughts. Zotter was out to do a job, the profits from which he would never report on his income tax.

Zotter cruised up Eighth Avenue, waited for the light at Fifty-fifth Street, then turned left and parked midway down the block. He got out of his cab, pulled his cap lower over his eyes, and walked back to Eighth.

He turned down the avenue and walked casually past the Empire Hardware Store. Sure, Anderson was still there, grinding out quarters and dollar bills. Other store owners would know when to close up shop and go home, but not Uncle Walt Anderson. As long as there was a loose penny around, Anderson would be there to grab it.

Zotter walked inside. He had been there a week ago, to have a key made. He had paid for it with a five-dollar bill, and Anderson had made change from a roll that had widened Zotter's narrow blue eyes.

"Business must be good," he had commented casually.

"I don't trust banks," Anderson had said curtly.

The old man was putting some stock on a shelf as Zotter came in now.

"Yes? What can I do for you?"

"You can do plenty for me, Pop," Zotter thought. "You should just know all you're going to do for me." He said aloud:

"It's that duplicate key you made for me last week."

Anderson frowned. "Well, if it broke off in the lock, that's not my lookout. The kind of metal we get nowadays, what can you expect?"

Zotter's mouth twisted. "I don't want a refund. The key didn't break off. I just lost it, and I want a duplicate."

"Oh, that's different. Say, I remember you. You're a taxi driver."

"I don't own the Third National Bank."

Anderson glanced at the hard face, took the original key, and sat down at his work bench. He took a blank from a rack, compared it with the original, and had the duplicate ready in a few minutes later.

Zotter handed him a five-dollar bill.

"I had to change a five last time," Anderson complained.

"This time just don't bother, huh?"

ANDERSON stopped peeling ones from his thick roll. His head jerked up at the other man's hard tones. His mouth gaped when he saw the Luger in Zotter's right hand.

"You catch on quick, Granpa. We'll just make a little exchange, see? You give me your bank roll, and I'll pay you a quarter—for the key."

Anderson began to tremble. His breath became quick, short, and his face was white.

"You get out of here! You get out of here right away! There's a police station just a couple of blocks away. I'll call the cops!"

Zotter jammed the gun against the old man's stomach. "Go ahead. "Call."

Anderson backed up, shaking. The taximan wrenched the roll from his fingers and stuck it in his pocket. Then he transferred the gun to his left hand and fingered his change. He came up with a quarter.

"For the key, Granpa. I like to pay my bills."

He threw the quarter in Anderson's face. It was a smart-aleck touch, a mean gesture, but it was not wise. The old man got mad. He got furious, and the blood rushed to his head. With surprising speed, he reached for the key block on the work bench, and slammed it against Zotter's chest, almost in the same motion.

Zotter's reaction was partly reflex, partly rage. He squeezed the Luger's trigger. The bullet smashed the old man in the throat and went out the back of his head.

He was dead before he hit the floor.

Zotter broke out in a cold sweat. He scooped the quarter off the floor, made sure he had both keys in his pocket, and stepped gingerly around the body, just in time to keep blood from his shoes. The murder had taken place in the back of the store.

Even if someone had heard the shot, it wouldn't matter much now. Zotter was already through the door, and heading back to his taxi. . . .

They found the corpse two hours later. Patrolman Joe Tule, that is, and half the peolpe in the neighborhood. Tule made the discovery when he found the door open and lights still on. The neighbors found out when the ambulance and the Medical Examiner drove up, minutes behind a couple of plainclothes detectives.

"Murder," said the M. E., after a quick, professional examination. "Man's been dead since about seven-thirty, I'd say. A gunshot wound, obviously. Any trace of a bullet?"

Patrolman Tule reached into his pocket and came up with the slug.

"When I first found him," he said, "I noted the position of the body, and figured out the trajectory. The slug wound up in that shelf—over there."

One of the detectives took it. "Good work. Hmm—it may have come from a Luger."

Tule nodded. He was a stocky fellow, about twenty-seven, on the force two years since the war. He seemed to take things as they came.

"Yeah,—if the killer hasn't thrown the Luger away by now," he observed.

They put a sheet around old Uncle Walt Anderson and took him away. Tule accompanied the two plainclothes men

over to the precient station, to file his report. And make four phone calls.

Just before he left the store, he took the key block from the work bench—where he had put it when he'd found it on the floor. And his fingers held onto it like a vise. . . .

"Say—what's that you got, Joe?"

They were in a patrol car outside the station. Pete Wright, one of the two detectives on the case, examined the key block rather casually.

"Old Anderson threw it at his murderer,—I think," said Joe Tule.

Wright frowned. "Why didn't you hand it over to the desk sergeant?"

"I will, later. Let's head for the cab stand on Fifty-seventh, huh?"

The uniformed driver turned his head. "Aren't you supposed to be walkin' your beat?"

"Isn't the City of New York supposed to catch loose killers?"

The driver said something sour, and they drove up to the hack stand.

Tule had his hand on his gun as he jumped out of the car. He spoke quickly to the two hackies on duty. The second man told him what he wanted to know.

Tule got back in the patrol car. "I thought our boy might be working. He isn't. He's home. Let's go get him, huh?"

He told the driver to head for an apartment house—an old brick tenement—on West Third Street, in the Village.

"What's this all about?" Detective Pete Wright demanded.

Tule glanced at him, but his face was grim now. "Maybe it's a chase, Pete. Get your gun out. Maybe our boy hasn't got rid of his Luger yet."

On Tule's instructions, the patrol car parked midway down Macdougal Street. The usual Saturday night gang saw the two uniformed men and the detective as they approached the brick tenement on West Third. People began to gather.

Tule turned to face them. "Mum's the word, folks. We're just checking up on a guy. Don't block the doorway, huh? This is just a routine job."

BY THE time the three lawmen were inside, the crowd was drifting away.

Tule glanced at the letter boxes. "Third floor, it says here."

They drew out their guns and followed Tule up the narrow stairs. On the third floor, Tule turned right and walked to the end of the corridor. He knocked on a door—loudly.

After a minute or two: "Who's there? What do you want?"

"Ish thish where Dunbar lives? He shaid I should come up for a li'l drink shometime."

The man inside swore. "Beat it! Ain't no Dunbar livin' here."

Tule strained for the effect. "There ish too! Maybe you ain't Dunbar, but I know he's livin' there. Fifth place from the corner, third floor. Shaid I should come up any time—any time at all!"

The door opened a crack. The moment the tenant saw Tule's uniform, he tried to slam the door shut, but Tule had his toe in the crack.

"Stop horsing around, Zotter," he ordered, and put your hands up!"

Zotter swore viciously. He put both hands up—but one threw the wall switch, darkening the room, and the other squeezed a gun trigger.

"Ow!" Detective Wright clapped a hand to his shoulder, dropping his pistol.

Joe Tule and the patrol car driver brushed past him into the room, guns blazing.

Zotter had already smashed a window and was out on a fire-escape. He fired once, twice. Tule heard two slugs whistle past his head. Then feet could be heard, clambering up the fire-escape.

"Follow him!" Tule shouted. "I'll go up on the roof!"

He ran from the room, up the corridor to the staircase, and up that to a skylight. An impartial moon was out now, as the sky cleared. Tule thought he saw a dark outline behind an air shaft.

He fired. The outline, materializing with a string of oaths, fired back. Tule shot instantly at the flash, and struck pay dirt. There was a loud scream of pain, and presently another shot.

"We can keep this up all night!" Joe Tule called. "Can you?"

Just then he heard cautious steps from the fire-escape, then two quick shots. The patrol car driver was right on the ball.

Zotter screamed in pain and frustration. He came out, firing wildly, blindly, and they brought him down with two

slugs—one in the leg, one through his gun shoulder. . . .

Zotter passed out on the operating table, but he was lying propped up in bed when Patrolman Joe Tule and Detective Pete Wright, his arm in a sling, came in the next morning.

"You ain't got a thing on me!" Zotter snapped.

"We had three slugs in you last night, before the doctor took 'em out," Tule reminded him.

"Wise guy!" Zotter snarled.

"Sure, why not?" Tule grinned as he lit a cigarette. "Smart enough to track you down, anyway. Although I will say this much. You didn't make any mistakes."

Zotter's small eyes widened. "Huh? You mean this is all a bluff? Why, you big—"

"Shut up!' Detective Wright snapped. "And listen."

Jos Tule took the small oblong key block from his pocket.

"This is a key block, Zotter," he said. "Maybe Old Man Anderson was making a key for you, huh? Okay—it doesn't matter. But the murder took place near his work bench. I'd say that you pulled that Luger on him and demanded his roll. "He got sore. He got so mad that he forgot all about his life, and picked up that key block. He hit you across the chest with it—right on your hack badge."

Tule held up the key block so Zotter could see it.

"Inside this block is a bed of wax, Zotter. That's how you take the impression of a key. Well—and I doubt if it was deliberate—Anderson smacked you, and the raised letters on your cab badge made an impression in the wax. Not only the letters, but your badge numerals—two-six-three-o-nine. Look."

Zotter looked, his body in fear-sweat. The badge letters "HA" and the numerals. Plain as day. Plain, in fact, as death.

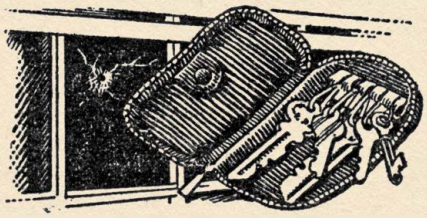
"H-A," Tule said. " 'Hack', of course. The rest was comparatively easy, after I'd phoned around to the neighborhood cab stands."

Zotter couldn't talk for a couple minutes. Finally he said, hoarsely, viciously:

"So that makes you a detective, flatfoot!"

On Joe Tule's face broadened an infectious grin.

"That's what they tell me," he said.



THE READERS' JURY

(Continued from Page 10)

in the sand, to reach the conclusion that the girl had been knocked out by falling stones and that it wasn't accidental, at all.

In fact, he was sure that somebody had carried the girl out to a shallow ledge where the incoming tide would have swept over her and finished her. After that, the would-be killer had carefully obliterated his tracks in the sand and made his escape.

The situation, therefore, was worse than he had imagined. Not only was the girl close to an emotional crack-up; she was in immediate danger of death.

Then, while Rosalind was recuperating in the hospital, Reggie was called away to investigate the apparently unrelated murder of an octogenarian in Manningham. The police suspected the old man's daughter-in-law, who had recently been paroled from a life sentence for the murder of her husband.

Reggie made it his business to meet the pretty suspect and decided the woman was innocent. But he found something else. He found that there was a link between the old man's death and the devilish persecution of Rosalind Bruce. And, by the time he raced back to Bridcombe to follow up his new leads he learned that even the hospital wasn't safe for Rosalind!

Battling against time and a killer made desperate by circumstances and fear of exposure, Reggie Fortune shoulders through a baffling sequence of entanglements that make "The Life Sentence" by H. C. Bailey one of the best in the long-established Reggie Fortune series.

An Intriguing Experiment

"How Like a God" by Rex Stout marks a distinct departure from the type of mystery we have been accustomed to running in TRIPLE DETECTIVE. Frankly, it is an experiment with us, but we think you readers will be intrigued by it.

"How Like a God" is no whodunit in the ordinary sense of the word. Clifton Fadiman says this about it: "Real

[*Turn page*]

and exciting . . . an unusual book." That sums it up. It is a story that will possess you not as a reader, but as an actual participant. You will be pulled into an irresistible vortex of events that had their beginning in one man's abnormal boyhood and culminated in a grim vendetta of vengeance.

Bill Sidney, a stranger to himself as well as a stranger to others, was a timid and vengeless man until one night a woman drove him too far and he climbed the dim, shadowy steps of her apartment house with a gun in his pocket and murder in his heart.

Always he had been a victim of weird desires and impulses. During his early school days when his family despaired of him it was his sister who always shielded him. Later, one of his teachers shielded him—but in a different way.

Then came college and Dick Carr. That was one of the few times when he managed to break out of his shell. A harsh, taunting word and suddenly timid Bill Sidney was fighting big Dick Carr, a rugged football star and getting the beating of his life.

Oddly enough, that scrap led to an enduring friendship between Carr and Bill. It also led to Bill's going into business with Carr. Soon he began to prosper. But, despite all the money he made he was still only a shadow, a wraith—and the knowledge was like a poison in him.

He was still timid and vengeless when he married Erma Carr, Dick's sister, and let her run his life. And he was timid and vengeless when he met Millicent and found himself caught in a trap that was worse than the empty farce that was his marriage to Erma Carr.

An Inescapable Lure

Millicent was a lure he couldn't escape. He hated her, but he couldn't stay away. And she was using him just as Erma had used him—until one night she crowded him too far.

That was the night he crept into Millicent's apartment house. He had the key to her apartment in his hand. His mind was a-whirl with strange, conflicting sensations. His nerves were

wires humming with pain and fear and distress. He could picture Millicent sitting in the blue chair in her fadded dressing gown.

He didn't know if he'd have the courage to go all the way up those stairs. But still his moving legs carried him up step by step—toward a black tunnel of violence and death.

We defy you to put this sensational novel down until the last page has been turned. You meet Bill Sidney on that fatal stairway in the very first page of "How Like a God." In between that first compelling sequence and the smashing conclusion on the final page is an uncanny and memorable psychological story of suspense and vengeance!

The Crucial Clue

"Fear Death by Water" by Stuart Palmer, third of the trio of novels scheduled for the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE, provides another vehicle for the incomparable Hildegarde Withers to joust with crime. In this one a queer example of cannibalism in a tropical fish tank suggests the crucial clue that helps Hildegarde trap the murderer of a wealthy socialite on his Long Island estate and save an innocent man from the electric chair.

The tale begins with Pat Montague, ex-GI, walking along a curving highway toward the palatial estate of Huntley Cairns. He wasn't expected and he wasn't sure if he would be welcomed. But one thing he knew: he had to see Helen Abbott, who was now Mrs. Cairns.

Helen's picture had been with him all during the grim and dirty days of the war. There had never been anyone else for him. And for a time, after he saw the newspaper clipping announcing her marriage to Huntley Cairns, he hadn't cared much about living.

Another Man's Wife

Yet, here he was, still hungering for her, though she was another man's wife.

He came to the gateway to the estate and some odd impulse carried him beyond it. He came to the crest of a hill.

[*Turn page*]

Below him he saw the green-blue shimmer of water in a swimming pool.

Beside the pool there was a flash of white which vanished at once. He crawled through the fence, the blood pounding in his temples. As long as he had known her, Helen had always worn white bathing suits.

He hurried down to the bathhouse and stopped. Nobody was there. He wondered if he had been seeing things. He moved to the pool. Then a station wagon pulled into the service driveway and stopped. A gardener got out and came over to Pat who was staring down into the pool.

"Lose something, mister?" the gardener asked.

Pat didn't answer. He was looking into the greenish depths of the water under the diving board. Staring back at him was the round white face of Huntley Cains.

The gardener ran for a rake. Together they hauled the body out onto the tiles. The gardener directed Pat to the bathhouse and told him to use the telephone and summon an ambulance.

Suspected of Murder

Pat ran inside. As he did so the door slammed shut and a key turned in the lock. When he went to the phone he heard the gardener's voice talking to someone on an extension. The gardener was reporting the murder and stating that he had caught the young fellow who did it.

With a sinking heart Pat realized the gardener was speaking about him. He was throwing himself breathlessly at the door when the lock clicked and he

found himself face to face with a girl. She was Lawn Abbott, Helen's strangely beautiful sister. Without listening to his frantic explanations, she told him to clear out as fast as he could.

Pat didn't need any urging. He ran as he had never run before. But it didn't do him much good. It wasn't long before he found himself in the hands of Inspector Oscar Piper and a prime suspect in a nasty case involving the twisted, tangled lives of Huntley and Helen Cairns, Lawn Abbott, hot-shot lawyer Jed Nicolet, Harry Radebaugh, a young surgeon and others.

Pat had about given himself up for lost when he appealed to Hildegarde Withers for aid. Hildegarde, reluctant to interfere with Piper, remained aloof —but only for a time. Before she realized it she was picking up clues and finding herself believing in Pat's innocence.

As for the others, they all had mo-

[*Turn page*]

tives for killing Huntley. It wasn't easy to sort out those motives. And it was still more difficult to find the vital clue. When Hildegarde did find it she took some hazardous steps that led her dangerously close to destruction.

You'll have to read "Fear Death by Water" to learn the full details of Hildegarde's gray-haired escapades and adventures. The old girl really has to use her wits to save her skin as well as Inspector Piper's reputation. How she does it is an exciting experience!

All three of the novels we have been discussing will be carefully abridged to make for faster and more entertaining reading. And, in addition, we have scheduled some unusually fine stories and features.

JURY JOTTINGS

THE mailman has brought in ballots from jurors all over the nation. Once again the comments are overwhelmingly favorable. Our cases have been rated top-drawer and the verdict by The Readers' Jury is one of great pleasure and enjoyment.

For example, here is Milton Papayianis of Barstow, California, who puts in a strong vote for "The Night Before Murder" by Steve Fisher, which appeared in our Spring issue.

Dear Editor: Steve Fisher! That versatile master of the pen is continually consistent. He has depth, spine-chilling atmosphere and terrific suspense that he weaves into all his murder classics. "The Night Before Murder" in your Spring issue was only another example of his thrilling work.

Please—more Steve Fisher in TRIPLE DETECTIVE!

Well, Milton, we're glad you like Steve Fisher so much. We feel the same way. Not only is he a top-ranking writer, but he happens to be a good friend of ours. If he can find any spare time away from his scenario writing on the Coast maybe he'll buckle down to doing another book.

Jim Cassel of Little Rock, Arkansas, also liked our Spring issue and while he is at it, puts in a bid for our Summer cases, too.

Dear Editor: The Spring issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE with Halliday, Fisher and Wellman, was a truly bang-up job. I enjoyed every bit of it, features and all. But I think you went yourself one better with the Summer issue. Those three novels by Dana Chambers, Constance & Gwenyth Little and George Bagby were tops. The Jim Steele yarn, "She'll Be Dead By Morning" was exciting from first to last. And "The Twin Killing" was exceptionally interesting because of its baseball background. Being a ball fan myself, I naturally ate it up. Thanks a lot.

Thank you, Jim, for taking time out to let us know how you like TRIPLE DETECTIVE. After all, the tastes of The Readers' Jury guides our selections. When we please our jurors then we know we're doing a satisfactory job on the bench. Keep writing, everyone! All letters and postcards are welcome. Send them to The Editor, TRIPLE DETECTIVE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

—THE EDITOR.

THE TELL-TALE TURKEY

or, How a Counterfeit Ring Was Smashed!

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

IF the counterfeiters hadn't used some of their bogus money to buy a Thanksgiving turkey they might still be at large. Instead, the members of the largest counterfeit organization in the country in more than a decade are now behind bars!

The farmer, whose name Harry D. Anheier, Chicago chief of the United States Secret Service, wouldn't reveal, didn't like the turkey buyers or their money. He called in the authorities and with one note to go on they trapped the largest outfit to operate since 1934. The ring's members had printed and "passed" more than $600,000 in worthless five, ten, and tweny-dollar bills.

When Secret Service men apprehended Joseph Moschiano, an ex-convict, at his West Side Chicago home, they also found $350,000 in fake money hidden in the walls of his garage.

All five men in the ring were traced and arrested and most of the $600,000 was recovered by the Secret Service.

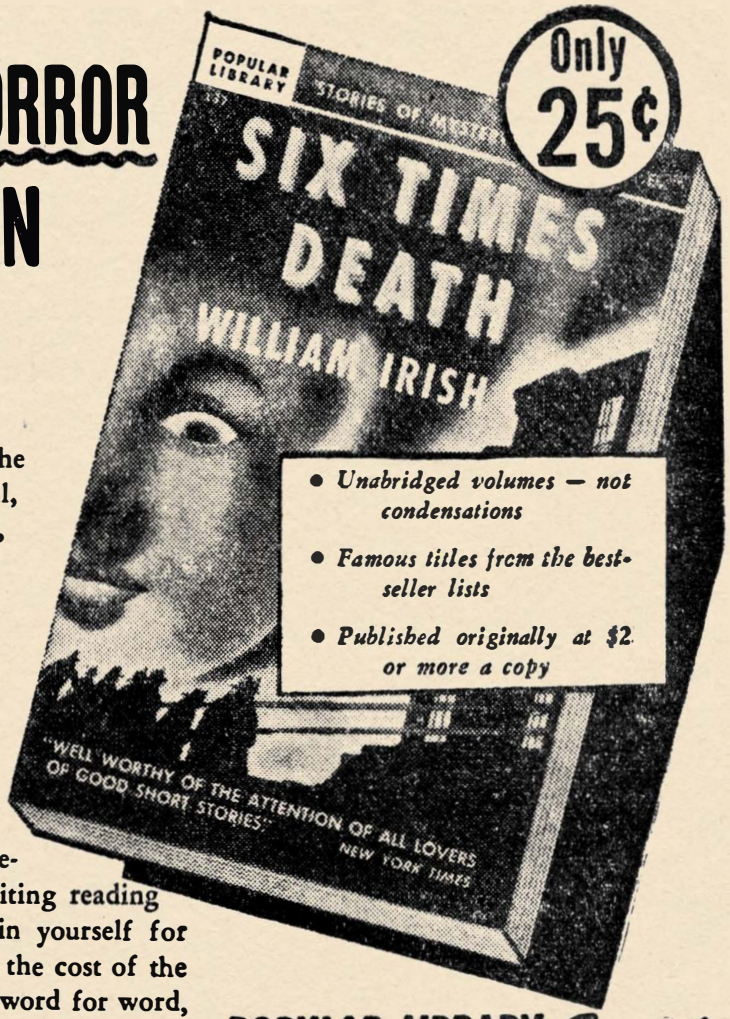
In 1934 the United States Secret Service broke up an even larger organization. A "Count" Victor Lustig had brought more than $1,000,000 in spurious bills into this country from Europe, where they had been made.

Lustig and his cohorts were doing nicely until they got greedy and started pushing the fake bills a little too fast and too often in the same convenient places. Here, too, the Secret Service had almost nothing to work with at first; but digging diligently they built a chain that eventually linked every member of the gang and rounded up all the bogus money.

According to the Secret Service, Europe has always been and is right now a very fertile field for counterfeiters of American greenbacks.

Dollar-hungry Europe, anxious for American money, has perhaps $2,000,000 in worthless notes hidden in private caches by unsuspecting buyers, many of whom paid black market prices of as high as three to one for these American dollars!

HOW MUCH HORROR CAN A MAN BEAR?



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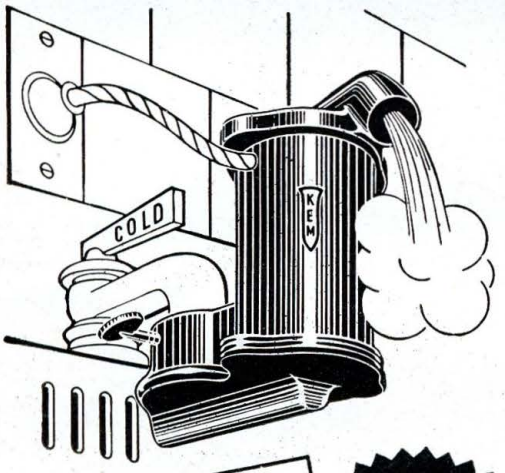

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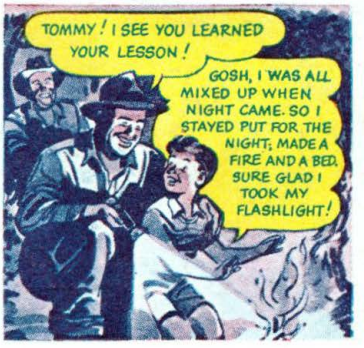

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