WINTER 25

TRIPLE DETECTIVE

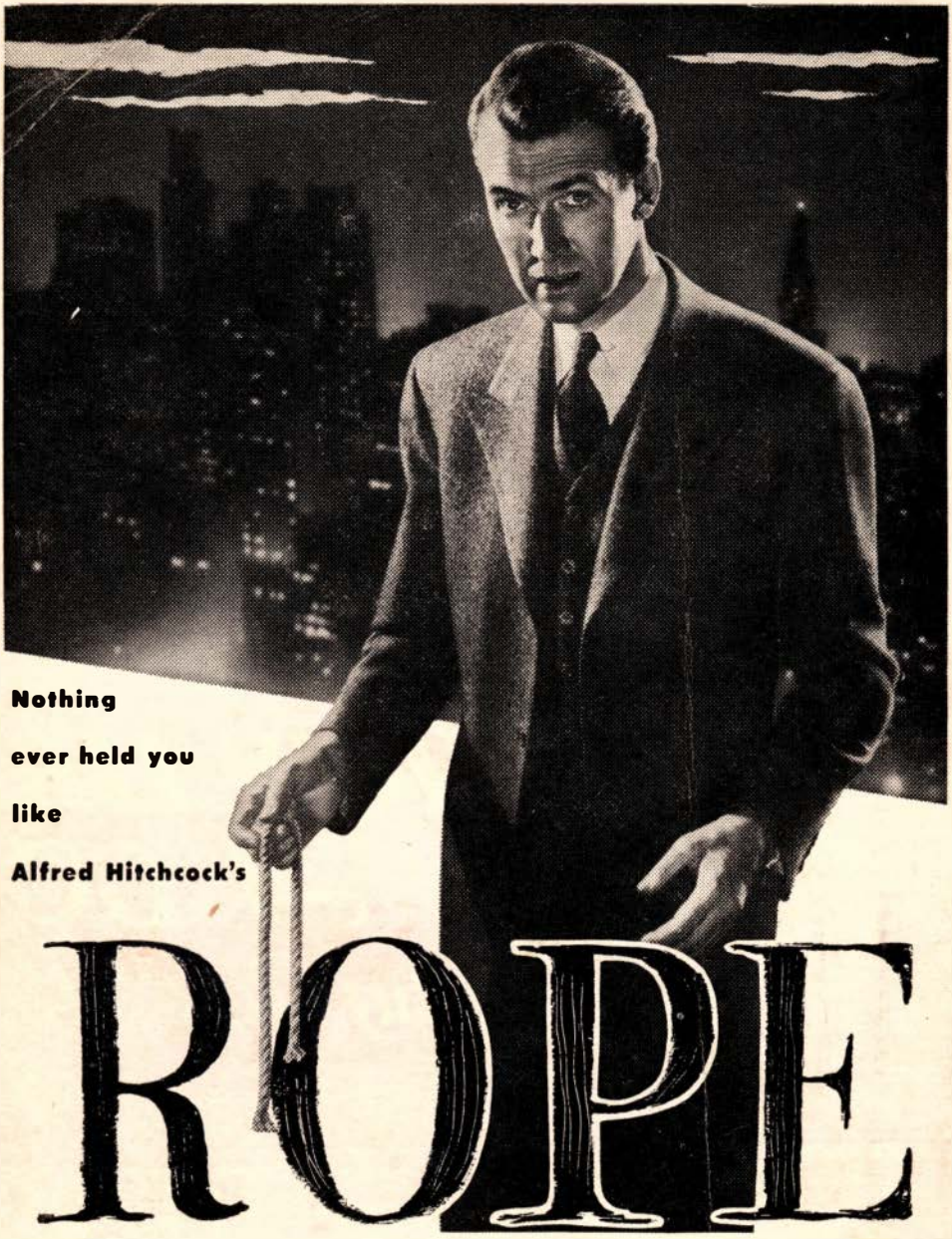
THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

The LIFE SENTENCE by H. C. Bailey

HOW LIKE A GOD by Rex Stout

Fear DEATH by WATER by Stuart Palmer

A THRILLING



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TRIPLE DETECTIVE

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

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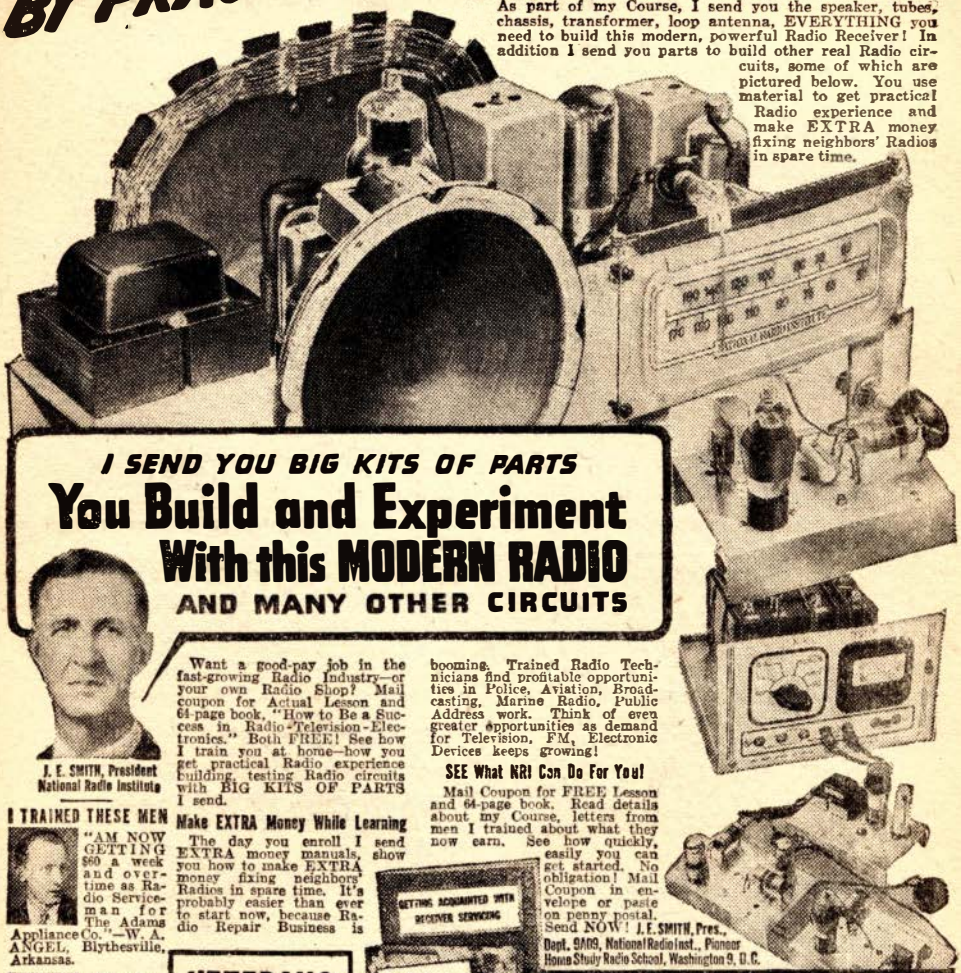

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A Panel of Authors, Mystery Fans and the Editor

THERE is a common saying that all good things come in threes. It's true in the entertainment world where we have the Andrews Sisters, the Guy Lombardo trio and the Three Suns, to name just a few. In baseball there was the immortal infield combination of Tinkers, Evers and Chance. More recently—until Vince DiMaggio's retirement from the major leagues—we had the famous brother combination of Joe, Dominic and Vince DiMaggio, all outfielders and each playing with a different major league team.

In the detective magazine field there is, of course, one and only one three-star entertainment combination and that is TRIPLE DETECTIVE. And for our next issue we are bringing you an unusually fine collection of novels, each one expertly abridged for more enjoyable reading.

Leading off in our next issue, we have "Death-Watch," a Dr. Gideon Fell mystery by John Dickson Carr. The second novel will be "Murder in the Antique Shop," an Asey Mayo mystery by Phoebe Atwood Taylor. And the third book will be "Fatal Step," a Max Thursday yarn by Wade Miller.

An Epidemic of Shoplifting

"Death-Watch," one of Dr. Fell's most extraordinary cases, had its beginning in an epidemic of shoplifting in a big department store—a crime wave that reached its climax in the brutal killing of a shopwalker and then had a macabre sequel in the home of a renowned watchmaker, where someone stole the hands of a valuable steel clock and proceeded to use them as instruments of death.

The only clue to the department store murder was that the criminal was a woman, but every witness described her differently. The only item of value stolen was a rare skull-watch, lent by Johannus Carver, a watchmaker, to the store for a special exhibit.

And it was to Johannus Carver's home that events moved as a mysterious stranger was stabbed with the missing minute hand of a steel clock Carver had just completed. Dr. Fell, sensing a connection between the two crimes, sent for Superintendent Hadley and told Hadley to bring with him Inspector Ames, the man who had been working on the shoplifting case.

Hadley came alone and immediately electrified the assemblage by identifying the dead stranger as Inspector Ames. From this point "Death-Watch" moves rapidly from one startling sequence to another as Dr. Fell matches wits with a killer whose devilish imagination regarded a clock hand as a literal symbol of time moving to the grave!

An Asey Mayo Mystery

"Murder in the Antique Shop" (originally published under the title of "Figure Away") is another in the long line of Asey Mayo mystery successes. It was Old Home Week in Billingsgate with fireworks, old settlers, visiting dignitaries, chance booths, a ferris wheel, brass bands and other attractions to lure the tourists.

The celebration had been arranged to secure funds to defray the town's debts. But a series of strange happenings threatened to blow Old Home Week sky high. First, there was a fire in the Town Hall. Then someone hacked away some of the supports of the grandstands so they'd collapse. Later the town keys were stolen together with

(*Continued on page* 8)

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THE READERS' JURY

(*Continued from page* 6)

some shotguns. And the climax came when someone fired a few shotgun blasts at some of the town's selectmen.

Selectman Wes Mayhew was so worried that he summoned Asey Mayo to police the carnival grounds and to keep rumors of the trouble out of the newspapers. Asey thought the whole business was a product of Mayhew's overwrought imagination—until Mary Randall was found dead in her antique shop in Hell Hollow, killed with a shotgun under cover of the noise of the nightly fireworks.

There was no trace of the murder weapon. Even the shotgun shells had vanished from the spot where the killer stood. In a desperate effort to force the murderer to show his hand, Asey decided to suppress news of the killing. The scheme did force the killer's hand, but indirectly led to another death as a tangled pattern of blackmail, theft and violence emerged from the vortex of tragedy to engulf the Old Home Week celebration.

"Murder in the Antique Shop" is as eerie as Hell Hollow itself, with its swamps and chill mists and unfriendly darkness. But it has humor, too, and a memorable collection of characters that will linger with readers a long time. So put this yarn on your list of *must* reading.

Meet Max Thursday

"Fatal Step" by Wade Miller, third of our trio of great novels, introduces Max Thursday, as tough a private dick as you'll ever meet. Thursday made his debut in "Deadly Weapon," followed it with "Guilty Bystander" and in "Fatal Step" really steps into high gear as he tangles with murder and mayhem in San Diego, California.

An anonymous telephone call urging Thursday to be on the Loop-O-Plane in the Joyland Amusement Park at nine-thirty in the evening because it was a matter of life and death proves to be the opening gun in this crackling pursuit drama.

Thursday kept the appointment, but no one showed up. Then as the machine lunged higher and higher, Thursday saw

(*Continued on page* 10)

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THE READERS' JURY

(*Continued from page* 8)

a slight figure in a blue sweater crossing the pavement. Suddenly there was the sound of a shot. The figure in blue wilted to the ground.

By the time Thursday got out of the Loop-O-Plane the man was dead. He was a Chinese, David Lee by name. In his pockets police found a clipping about Thursday, some cash, a receipt for some toy sphinxes and a description of a man called Leon Jagger.

Thursday was convinced that Lee was the man who had phoned him. But before he could delve into Lee's background a pretty Chinese girl stopped him at his apartment door with a drawn gun and forced him to drive off in his car with her.

The ride proved quite different from what Thursday had expected. And at the end of it he found himself taking on a bizarre assignment to clear a Chinese boy's name—an assignment that led him into the vicious orbit of Larson Tarrant, famous hardcase gambler, and brought him into the role of pursued instead of pursuer.

Hard hitting action, staccato dialogue and mounting suspense combine to make "Fatal Step" a sure winner in the mystery league. Look forward to it in the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE along with the other mystery headliners and fact features that will go to make up a gala number. —THE EDITOR.

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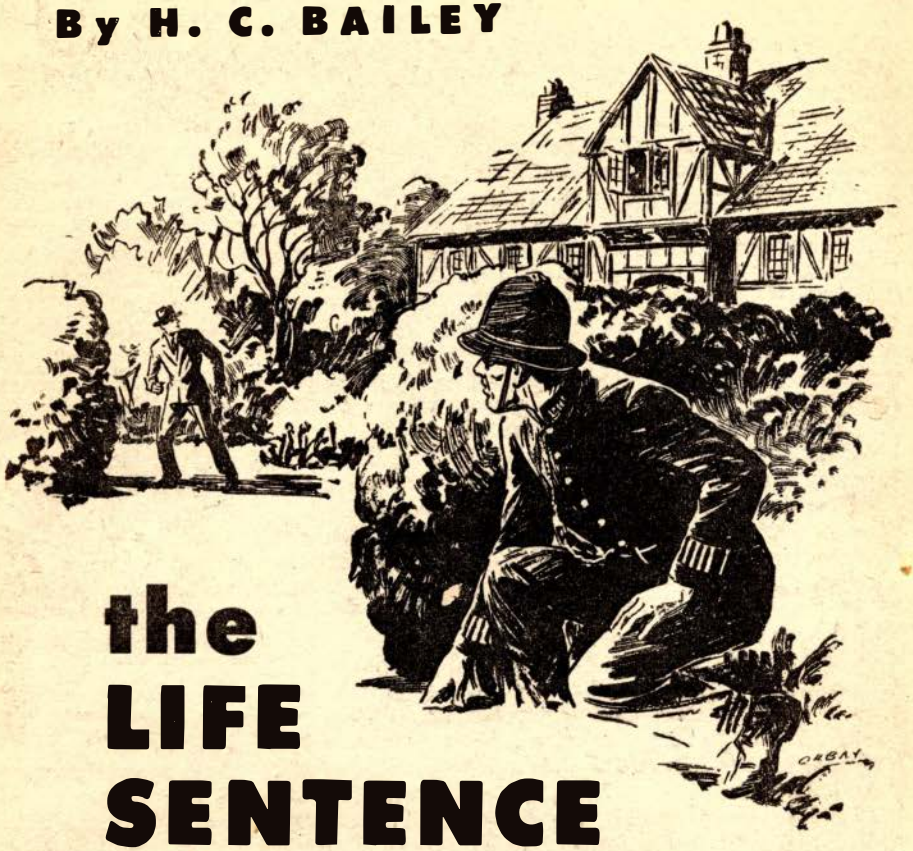
WILD TURKEY HUNTING IN A SOUTHERN NATIONAL FOREST CAN HARDLY BE CLASSED AS A DANGEROUS SPORT, BUT WHEN A WOUNDED WILD BOAR INTRUDES...

By H. C. BAILEY



the LIFE SENTENCE

A slain octogenarian, a girl left to drown, and a woman paroled from jail are the keys to a grim and bewildering jigsaw of crime!

ROSALIND was getting quite a big girl. That statement gave her no comfort. Her brother Lancelot was big but he went to heaven. He had been gone a long time.

At first she hardly noticed. Then afterwards the house seemed dreadful big and she always alone.

Rosalind thought the house just like the one in a picture Lancelot used to show her in a book, men being driven towards a great, tall, dark house. They were pilgrims, and Giant Despair had taken them prisoners and would put them into a dungeon in Doubting Castle. She never saw the pilgrim book after Lancelot went.

Most days Mother put Rosalind to bed and kissed her goodnight. One day Mother hadn't come. Rosalind told her-

A REGGIE FORTUNE NOVEL

self she must wait for Mother, but having waited till d ark, cried and slept.

The nursery was dark when she woke, sat up and looked at the place Lancelot's bed used to be. Someone was downstairs talking loud, and cross.

Afterward, she drifted into sleep again . . . Then it was morning and Nanna came. She was in a great hurry because they were going to Grandfather's house.

Strange people were everywhere in the house as Nanna took her downstairs. She heard them speak about Mr. Ward—Father's name—but Nanna dragged her on. . . .

In those days Mr. Reginald Fortune, though irrevocably fallen from grace, from the general medical practice which he loved, to specialization in solving crimes, was still new at it and his correct relatives cherished hopes they might yet save him. His younger sister, Pamela, was not by nature correct, but she married a bishop. Laura, the elder, did worse, marrying the highest-browed civil servant the Treasury could produce. The Bishop of Laxbury and the Treasury clerk, Michael Hammond, and Laura took counsel together and instructed Pamela that Reggie must spend a week at the Bishop's palace and be shown the error of his ways.

Pamela solemnly agreed. Reggie accepted, and when he arrived, homilies by the bishop, dissertations by Hammond, and advice from Laura occupied several evenings. Reggie approved all they said and asked for more. Always wondered how policemen could be and why. Crime had no obvious charm. Or had it?

He came down one morning and found them all, except Pamela, reading newspapers and debating the news.

THE Home Secretary had reprieved the notorious Mrs. Ward. This decision the bishop could not understand. Far be it from him to restrict mercy, but in the case of Mrs. Ward her trial was elaborately fair, and the evidence of her guilt was overwhelming. Without hesitation the jury convicted her. Her counsel took the case to the Criminal Appeal Court and three judges unanimously maintained the death penalty.

Yet the Home Secretary annulled the verdict supported by the highest judicial authority and spared her life!

Reggie ate his breakfast, listening to these lectures like a puzzled child.

Laura began another discourse the minute her husband finished. The principle that punishment must be curative, was difficult to apply. What treatment could cure this Mrs. Ward?

"Difficult question," said Reggie meekly. "Don't know the answer."

"She poisoned her husband," Laura went on. "Her only son was drowned in a lily pond and it puzzled the police why the child didn't scramble out. But the letters they found half burnt after her husband's death showed she had misconducted—"

"Laura!" The bishop was majestic. "You have said enough."

The breakfast party broke up and Reggie, left alone, looked at the newspapers.

No fresh fact. No reason given for Mrs. Ward's reprieve, photographs of the woman. Muzzy but not too bad. Suggested a woman who'd been attractive once. Murderesses were, as often as not. Still, good features and a come-hither look didn't make a murderess.

Reggie wandered into the episcopal garden, sat down, and closed his eyes.

"Now tell me all about it," said Pamela. His eyes opened a little as she settled herself beside him. Pamela frowned. "Do you believe Mrs. Ward murdered her husband?"

"Always believe evidence. According to which husband was poisoned and Bill's right—wife's conviction justified. Michael may be right also. Very difficult, morphia poisonin' problems."

"If there is doubt, she oughtn't to be kept in prison," Pamela cried.

"Feel some doubt. Superior relatives too definite for my simple mind. I should say, more things told than are true, more things true than are told."

TIME went by. Few remembered the Ward case. Rosalind was now nineteen. From the day she left the tall, dark house, she had never seen her mother. The house she lived in was quite different, a low, pretty, bright house with a beautiful garden, between hills and the sea. She seemed to have lived there at

Reggie Fortune

Peverel and been Mrs. Bruce's daughter all her life.

Now and then something made her remember that Mrs. Bruce had been Aunt Naomi and then turned into Mamma, but dim childish consciousness that father and mother were Mr. and Mrs. Ward had passed away.

Nothing ever recalled the once notorious name.

No one of any account came to Peverel. Mamma disliked having people except the vicar and his wife and so on. Rosalind was allowed to bring girls from school sometimes.

School had been quite decent. The mistresses were nice and the classics mistress told Mamma Rosalind should go to Oxford. Mamma thought she wasn't strong enough. She could read just as much Latin and Greek at home.

So she had left school and lived content with her books, the sea, the cliffs. Nowhere could the sea be so delightful. But it was terrible when it stormed, or when fog hid sea and cliff and hill for days.

She had heard Mrs. Foot tell Mamma the child brooded too much. It was tiresome being watched over always. . . .

BRIDCOMBE HALL, a school with some modern ideas, required that each girl should be examined each term by Dr. Isabel Cope, but Dr. Cope was patient, so Rosalind didn't mind much.

The weather had turned vile. Dr. Cope drove back from Peverel slowly, despite firm intention to be home when her brother, John, arrived for a visit. He met her in the hall, and each looked the other over thoroughly.

Then she laughed. "Same old John."

"And the same young Isabel."

"Has Clara given you tea?"

"I put her off till the doctor came."

Clara, small but furious, put them on either side of a fierce fire in the drawing room with tea between them.

John saw a woman of earnest, pleasant countenance who might have been any age from thirty to forty. Isabel decided that John was more vigorous than when he took the Scotland job, almost handsome.

He talked about his work in chemical manufacture. But before long he asked: "How have you done here, Isabel?"

"Fairly. The old folks have no use for a woman doctor."

"Do you get much out of the school appointment?"

"Bread and butter."

"I mean does girl inspection bring you worth-while cases, worth while professionally?"

"You hidebound scientist! Every human case is worth while. Take one case, a sixteen-year-old when I first saw her. She covered up from me as much as possible. It took more time than usual to get on friendly terms with this girl. I can find nothing organically wrong and yet there's something not right. At school she wouldn't mix. She showed brains—Oxford scholarship form at classics—yet she left school and stayed

at home with Mamma. It's a queer choice these days."

"Is Mamma a snob, a matriarch, or the feeble type?"

"Mamma doesn't throw her weight about. I'm called to see the girl quite often. Mamma runs a general worry she isn't strong. Yet she can walk all day and do brain work all day. But for days on end she flops, shedding gloom."

"The young enjoy depression," said John.

"She doesn't enjoy it. . . ."

Rosalind was looking out her bedroom window. The week-long fog had been blown away while she slept. All over the garden flowers glistened in mellow sunshine.

She made haste to be out of doors. The hills were magnificent. Rosalind made for Durley Beacon, the highest point, and with some surprise she discovered a man in it. Few people walked the hills.

This man was rather a striking person, tall, big every way, muddy to the knee. He came on with head thrown back, eager high-browed face. John Cope exclaimed: "Where am I?"

"You are on the summit of Durley Beacon," she told him.

"Thanks." John sprawled by her side. "These everlasting hills are built so that one beyond always look the real peak."

"It's fine to go on and on," said Rosalind. "How did you lose your way?"

"I didn't have any way to lose, only a general idea of the lie of the land."

"You are wet," said Rosalind. "You must have been in Briddle mire."

"All the mire there is."

"Briddle mire is the only one on the hills with sweet gale. Did you find the bog asphodel?"

"Asphodel? That sounds like poetry."

"It is," Rosalind cried. " 'Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel.' "

"I'm only a chemist."

"Why do you say only? Science must be fascinating—to find out the real causes of things, and in spirit traverse all the immensity."

"My word!" He seemed frightened. "You have thought deep."

"No. That was from Lucretius."

"Do you come up here often?"

"Oh, yes, whenever I can.'

ROSALIND watched the myriad of colors change. He watched her and she was glad. No one had ever watched her so kindly.

"But I must go home," she cried and stood up.

"Why?" John protested.

Rosalind smiled. "It's late now."

"Do we go the same way home?"

"I live at Bridcombe."

"So do I. I started from Bridcombe. I'm on holiday, stopping with my sister. The name is Cope."

"Dr. Cope? Yes, I know her." Rosalind began the downhill journey.

She walked fast, and finally told him where he turned off without telling him her name.

The women in John's life had never given any trouble. But the girl of Durley Beacon bothered him. Trim figure, pink-and-white face, black hair, good to look at.

Why had she suddenly frozen up on him, the minute he let her know he was Dr. Cope's brother? Why wouldn't she let him know her name? Because she was the girl case about which Isabel couldn't be certain? It seemed possible. Isabel had said the girl wouldn't make friends.

He found Isabel on the verandah and was not welcomed.

"You're all mud. Go to the back door."

He made a quick change and returned.

"Where ever have you been to get so filthy?" she scolded.

"In Briddle mire, the girl told me."

"What girl?"

"I wouldn't know. Between twenty-five and sixteen. Complexion on the fair side, fresh color, jet black hair and dark eyes wide apart. Do you recognize her?"

Evading, Isabel said: "Some girls change from minute to minute."

"She made me think of the one who puzzled you. She said she knew Dr. Cope."

"How did she come to mention me?"

When Dr. Isabel Cope reached the point, she saw Mr. Fortune waist deep in the sea, with a limp form in his arms (Chap. III)

"I mentioned I was your brother. Have you ever scared her?"

"I'm not in the habit of frightening girls."

"Who is she? Is she your unsimple simple case?"

"Suppose she is, what do you think of her?"

"If you ask me, split personality. She mixes the real with the unreal. What split her? Was she born with some flaw or did something break her up?"

"I wish I knew," said Isabel. . . .

To Rosalind's amazement Mamma did not ask her where she had been. Mamma seemed anxious about something, fussed over telephone calls, wrote letters.

That night Rosalind dreamed she was a tiny child climbing on hands and knees through thick fog up endless steep flights of stairs. There was a big boy at the top who laughed and vanished and she knew the boy was her brother Lancelot and she must follow him.

The fog made everything so dark, she fell into water, into mud. But she didn't die because a man told her to wake up and he beat her, driving her towards a grim, tall house. She knew he was Giant Despair and would put her into the dungeon in his Doubting Castle.

She smelt the dungeon. She saw someone inside. Mother! Though she heard Mother gasp and moan, she couldn't help. She saw someone else in the dungeon, a man she didn't recognize. He lifted Mother, gave her something, then went out.

Mother held up the thing he'd given her. The thing was a key. She put the key in the door, opened it. Before she had time to go out there were people round her who pushed her back into the dungeon and shut the door. . . .

Bells were ringing. One stopped. That must have been the telephone. The other went on, the church bell tolling.

How tired she felt! Why? Oh, that dreadful dream! It haunted her still.

She contrived to dress and go down. At breakfast she couldn't make herself eat much and Mamma said they must have Dr. Cope.

"Oh, please not," Rosalind cried, "I don't want her."

"Yes, you do, darling," said Mamma.

It wasn't the least use arguing with Mamma.

II

MR. FORTUNE protested.

"Oh, no!" he said. He was building a doll's house and his wife had inflexible ideas.

His secretary came in. "Dr. Cope, of Bridcombe," said she.

"Don't know him," Mr. Fortune said.

"Dr. Isabel Cope," said the secretary. "She is on the phone asking for an appointment this afternoon."

"Tell her three o'clock."

The secretary withdrew.

"Another!" Mrs. Fortune rebuked him. "But they are not generally doctors. How did this happen, Reggie?"

"She was a student at St. Helen's. Suffered from my pathology and forensic medicine lectures which she did not understand, though she tried hard."

At five minutes to three Dr. Cope arrived.

"Well, well." Reggie shook hands and smiled. "I haven't seen you since when?"

"It's nearly six years," said Dr. Cope. "I've come to consult you about a case I don't understand."

She frowned at Reggie's amiable smile.

"What kind of case?"

"That is difficult to say, Mr. Fortune. Rosalind is the adopted child of a widow, Mrs. Bruce, who brought her to live at Bridcombe years before I went there. Few children have such devoted mothers as Rosalind. Perhaps the care is excessive. I think Mrs. Bruce discouraged her from going to Oxford University but Rosalind seemed content to stay at home. Mrs. Bruce has a fixed idea that she is not strong. From time to time Rosalind lapses into feebleness which she will not admit and I have been unable to discover the cause."

"How old is Mrs. Bruce?" Reggie murmured.

Dr. Cope was startled. "I should think about forty-five."

"Oh. So she might be Rosalind's real mother."

"I feel quite sure she is not. They are in every way unlike."

"Why did Mrs. Bruce bring Rosalind to Bridcombe?"

"I can't tell you."

"Rather off the map, Bridcombe. Secluded spot. What sort of life do Mrs. Bruce and Rosalind lead? How about money?"

"Mrs. Bruce has the most charming house in Bridcombe."

"Where did she come from?"

Dr. Cope looked bewildered. "I never heard. Does it matter?"

"It could. Anything unknown can in obscure cases. However, go on."

"The second phase began last summer when Rosalind left school. I had so far broken through her reserve. Since then she has withdrawn into herself again. I cannot imagine why. The fits of languor are serious, yet Rosalind persists in denying any discomfort and evades inquiry."

"Noticed any special fear or obsession?"

"She has a peculiar dread of fog."

REGGIE FORTUNE frowned. "Is there much fog at Bridcombe?"

"We have thick sea fogs sometimes. There was one nearly all last week."

"Did it get Rosalind down?"

"I believe it did but the effect was delayed. Yesterday was clear and bright. Rosalind walked over the hills. My brother happened to meet her. He found her cheerful till he told her he was my brother. Rosalind wouldn't tell him who she was, and hurried home."

"How did brother John learn she was Rosalind Bruce?"

"I had discussed her case with him and he recognized her from my description."

"Brother John is medical?"

"Oh, no, a chemist and engineer. Please let me go on. This morning Mrs. Bruce asked me to see her. I found her in a far worse condition than ever before. I have no doubt she encountered some painful shock. She treated me as an enemy—the first time she has done that."

"Was Mrs. Bruce present?"

"I always see Rosalind alone."

"But Mrs. Bruce before and after? Yes. Any talk with her about shock?"

"When she rang me up she said Rosalind seemed ill."

"Hence you didn't tell Mrs. B. she'd had a shock. What advice did you give?"

"I said Rosalind needed care but not to impress on her she was ill."

Reggie sat back and contemplated Dr. Cope dreamily. "Interestin' woman, Mrs. B. Rosalind—a perplexin' case. I'll come down."

"Thank you so much. I warned Mrs. Bruce I might require another opinion."

"My ghost! Did you warn her to expect Mr. Fortune?"

"No."

"Leave her guessing. The name has cramped my humble style."

"I understand," said Dr. Cope.

Ushering her out, Reggie sprawled down in an easy chair and meditated.

Nobody's fool, Isabel Cope. She would have spotted any of the common causes of adolescent girls' recurring fatigue and depression. So there must be something uncommon wrong with Rosalind. Nothing less would send the level-headed Isabel running for help. Yes, Rosalind had crashed under some sort of shock.

But what sort? Isabel's brother had got along with Rosalind yesterday until he owned to being Isabel's brother. Why did she turn him down then?

Then Mrs. Bruce. Every time Mrs. Bruce called the doctor but every time the doctor was refused any light on the case by Mrs. B. and the girl. Such refusals could happen from criminal purpose. Slow murder by poison or ill treatment under cover of regular doctor's visits. But why should Mrs. B. wait till she was nineteen to smash her?

Between afternoon and morning Rosalind was given a shock that broke her.

Reggie dialed Scotland Yard, heard the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department speak and answered: "My

Lomas! It is Fortune, desirin' a lady's past."

"Not done, Reginald."

"Police work never gets done. Particular problem up to the East Durshire police. Who was Mrs. Bruce of Bridcombe? What was she, before she adopted a girl and settled down there? Also where did Mrs. Bruce acquire the child and why?"

"Just those few simple, easy questions? The East Durshire chaps would love them. What the deuce are you aiming at?"

"Safety of girl, who may go off her head, may die. Suspect crime in background. This Mrs. Bruce—make the East Durshire constabulary do their stuff on her."

Reggie dropped the telephone and condemned himself for ignoring crucial evidence—Rosalind's special dread of fog. Sometime in her life fog had been associated with evil. When and how should provide a master key for the whole case. . . .

That night Mrs. Bruce sent Rosalind to bed earlier than usual.

But Rosalind desired no sleep. She feared another dream.

She lay down and kept awake.

There were voices in the house. Someone — not Mamma — rather husky, drawling. Mamma and the man. She must have taken him in the room where she saw people on business.

That room was below Rosalind's and she could just hear the man's voice. Who could he be? Rosalind didn't recognize his voice.

How strange mamma should listen to him such a long time. Mamma generally got rid of people soon.

SHARP, angry sounds. Rosalind could not distinguish what voice made them, but they were somehow familiar. The loud crossness seemed a part of life without beginning or end.

The sounds stopped altogether. Rosalind fell into a sleep to which no dream came. . . .

It was the most beautiful morning. Mamma seemed happy.

They had hardly finished breakfast when Dr. Cope called. The wretched woman pried more than usual and Rosalind made herself impenetrable.

"There's been another change," said Dr. Cope. "What was the difference between last night and the night before?"

"I slept through both," Rosalind answered.

Dr. Cope finally said she should go out but she shouldn't go far.

The high hills were far, so Rosalind went up to Durley Tout, the cliff.

Rosalind did not reach the cliff top till eleven, and lay there and found everything good.

On the way home she saw a man coming towards the cliff. Not Dr. Cope's brother, thank heaven. He was slim and tall, he was elaborately dressed in an out-of-date King Edward fashion. He was quite old, white hair, hollow, wrinkled cheeks but rather handsome.

He said good-morning and smiled as she passed. He had extraordinary eyes, big and almost all reddish-brown.

When she had gone some distance, she looked over her shoulder. He was wambling down to the shore.

After lunch Rosalind stole out of the house.

She made for Bridcombe. From the shore the cliff was an immense height, and the pools were hidden though they reflected sunshine that dappled shadows on the cliff sides.

Durley Hole! What a name! Rosalind laughed. She wandered along the pools, gazing at the sea anemones.

She returned to the farther side, where the cliff rose almost perpendicular. A track zigzagged between them to the top. There was a man coming down, but not on the track. He hung from an edge. She saw him, arms and legs spread out. One hand found a crevice and gripped it.

"Can I help?" Rosalind cried.

"Stand from under!" he roared.

Small stones and wet earth fell about her as he worked his way down till the gully widened and he jumped.

"I told you to buzz off. Why didn't you? You might have got it in the neck."

He was Dr. Cope's brother! But he seemed so distressed she couldn't but ask: "Why ever did you come down that horrible place? It was frightfully dangerous. Had you climbed up that gully?"

"No, I went up the cliff face."

"But that's tremendous," Rosalind cried. "Show me where you went."

"All right."

He gripped her hand and conducted her along small crevices in the cliff which made a short cut to the strand.

"Here we are, at the base of the eastern buttress, which I went up."

"It doesn't seem possible," said Rosalind.

"Easy enough. Look, you can see a ladder of safe-and-sound holds. I'll take you the first pitch to that nobbly pinnacle, if you like."

Rosalind examined his keen, clever face, and told him: "I should like to go up there."

"Right. Up we go. Slow and sure, my girl."

Rosalind felt much safer than she'd ever dared think she could be. The man showed her where she must put her feet and her hands, yet he didn't touch her.

It seemed almost no time before they were sitting by the pinnacle.

"Well, what do you think of your first climb?" he asked. "But don't come places like this by yourself till we've climbed some more together."

Her eyes sought his. "Could we?"

"At your service. The name is John."

She frowned. "I am Rosalind Bruce. Haven't you heard of me from Dr. Cope?"

"Isabel doesn't talk about people."

"I've always been shy, I'm afraid," said Rosalind.

THERE was a rustle and clatter above them. Rosalind sprang to her feet. John gripped her. "That's how you might crash. Can't you see? They're nothing but jackdaws."

She stared round. "Why did such a lot come so suddenly?"

"Jackdaws often do. Your trouble is you expect frightfulness, so you find it."

"I am a coward," said Rosalind.

"You simply don't know yourself."

She drew away, telling him they had better go down. On the descent she was careful and sure-footed.

When they reached the strand, "Pretty good," said John. "Come and have tea in Bridcombe."

"Thank you, I must go home now," said Rosalind and left him.

Why, John wondered, had the girl turned him down flat a second time after they'd got on so well? His own fault. He'd worked too fast. He'd got closer than she could bear to the inner nature she hid from herself. . . .

Next morning Rosalind went out early, walking fast, intent upon reaching the western cliff of the Tout, which was the most unlikely place to meet Mr. Cope.

The morning bus to Bridcombe from Durminster went by but stopped where two hill lanes met the road. One woman got out. She opened a map, evidently uncertain where she was, looked towards Peverel and Bridcombe, consulted the map once more.

Rosalind approached and said good morning.

"It's a beautiful day," said Rosalind.

The woman only stared as if finding her an unpleasant creature.

So Rosalind withdrew and made for the west cliff. Rosalind couldn't endure inquisitive people herself. The woman had some right to be distrustful and suspicious. But she did stare horribly. She had gray clothes, gray hair, gray eyes, even her face was gray.

Nearing the point, Rosalind saw someone between the point and the top of the Tout. She stopped. Mr. Cope? Whoever it was disappeared. Not big enough for Mr. Cope. A woman. The gray woman? Well, she needn't fear Rosalind might bother her.

III

A LARGE car purred through the winding streets of Bridcombe to Dr. Cope's door. Mr. Fortune unfolded himself and contemplated the neat garden sleepily.

Opening the door, Clara snapped: "Do you want the doctor?"

"Yes, please," Reggie sighed.

From somewhere upstairs Dr. Cope cried: "Show the gentleman into the drawing room," and she was in the room almost as soon as he.

"It's very kind of you to come."

"Oh, no. Challengin' case. Any more bewilderin' changes in Rosalind?"

"There has been a great change for the better."

"Well, well. Any cause discovered?"

"I am quite at a loss. She resents being examined more than ever."

"Has your brother met her again?"

"He hasn't said anything about her since I saw you."

Reggie's eyelids drooped. "Brother lost interest?"

"I doubt if she did interest him much. Girls don't. Do you want to see him? He's out walking. He walks all day."

Reggie moaned. "Hardy fellow."

"Excuse me," said Dr. Cope. "That was the telephone."

When Dr. Cope returned, it was a certainty she'd brought trouble.

"It was Mrs. Bruce, Rosalind's mother," she told him. "Rosalind went out early this morning, didn't come back to lunch, hasn't come back yet."

"Why did Mrs. Bruce ring you?"

Dr. Cope flushed. "To ask if Rosalind was here. It's preposterous, but Mrs. Bruce says John rang Peverel this morning to speak to Rosalind. She had gone out."

"Oh. Could happen girl interests brother John more than sister thought." Reggie rose. "We're for it. Where does the girl go? What are her favorite haunts?"

"The hills, or the sea."

"In a boat?"

"Of course not. You don't realize the life Rosalind has led, Mr. Fortune. She knows nothing about boats. She's never been allowed. Mrs. Bruce wouldn't even let her have swimming lessons at school with the other girls."

Reggie sighed. "Come along and show me the places she generally goes. Can we make it by car?"

"We're only a few minutes from the beach, but we can drive there if you wish."

Reggie hurried her to his car. "Back seat, Sam," he told his chauffeur. "The lady knows the way."

Reggie brought them unscathed to the shingle beach.

"You can't drive any farther, Mr. Fortune," Dr. Cope announced.

"Where now?" Reggie demanded.

Dr. Cope pointed at the cliff.

Reggie strode on watchful and after a while murmured: "Does Rosalind go right to the cliff?"

"She is fond of going round the headland to Durley Hole."

"It's makin' fast over the rocks out there. Speed up, doctor."

Neither Reggie nor Dr. Cope was built for speed, but he is capable of short bursts. She had fallen some distance behind when he passed from the shingle to the boulders at the point. He clambered over them, and uttered prolonged shouts for his chauffeur:

"Sa-am! Sa-am!"

Then Dr. Cope reached the point and saw him in the sea, waist deep, struggling among the rocks.

He made for the shore with someone in his arms.

"Rosalind!" Dr. Cope gasped. "Is she dead?"

Reggie laid the body on the beach. "What's your opinion?"

Dr. Cope examined her. "She's not dead, Mr. Fortune."

"Not yet," said Reggie, with a bleak smile.

Sam ran into sight. "Hallo, sir! What's to do?"

"Take the girl's legs."

He and Sam carried Rosalind to the car.

"Any hospital at Bridcombe?" he asked.

"There is a fair cottage hospital."

"You sit with the girl behind telling me the way. Sam, crack along back where she was and watch it." Reggie drove off. . . .

Satisfied with the hospital, he drove to the police station and gave the in-

spector his card.

"I came down at Dr. Cope's request to see a patient of hers, Miss Rosalind Bruce. This afternoon we found the patient unconscious and half submerged on Durley ledge. Medical evidence, concussion. Head, body and limbs much bruised. Better have a look at the place."

"I'll come right away, sir."

"Splendid. I have my car here."

AS THEY twisted through Bridcombe, "It beats me what took her out there," Inspector Strode complained. "Why should she be stuck on the ledge with a rising tide? If it had been ebbing, it might have swept her out."

Reggie was respectful. "Very sound. Tide still rising when we spotted her. A few minutes more and she'd have been drowned. Now we tramp the weary beach."

They tramped and Reggie pointed to footprints. "Not mine nor Dr. Cope's. Observed 'em on first journey. Man and woman, what? And recent."

"You may be right. Not definite."

Rounding the headland, Strode whispered: "Look, Mr. Fortune! There's a man."

"Oh, yes. My chauffeur. Seen anyone, Sam?"

"No, sir, not a soul."

"You've been careful, Mr. Fortune," said Strode. "What did you expect?"

"Didn't expect anything. Always try everything. Well, tide's turned. Miss Bruce lay among these nearest rocks. No way she could have jammed herself there by accident. Would she attempt suicide like that?"

Inspector Strode answered: "I can't believe it."

"Nor can I. What then?"

"She must have been put there unconscious."

"I agree. Carefully planned and skillfully attempted murder frustrated by luck."

"By you, Mr. Fortune. You did extraordinary well to hit off the exact place she was, and in time to save her."

"Used the luck I got, that's all. While Dr. Cope and I were conferrin' Mrs.

Barbed wire entangled Rosalind—scratched her legs and tore her stockings (Chap. VI)

Bruce rang her, panickin' about Miss Bruce. Had the girl come to Dr. Cope? Because early this morning Dr. Cope's brother phoned Mrs. B.'s house, askin' for the girl, who'd left the house still earlier and hadn't returned. Dr. Cope didn't believe the phone call was made by her brother, but felt anxious. So we discussed where the girl could have gone and the likeliest place was the sea. On that I chanced my hand. Observe one suggestive fact here. State of shore."

Inspector Strode looked puzzled. "Any amount of foot marks."

"My feet, Dr. Cope's, Sam's—but beyond—not one footprint. That is the suggestive fact."

"I don't understand, Mr. Fortune."

"Try again. Sand smeared rough in places."

"You're suggesting someone messed up footprints?"

"No possible doubt. Follow the smears—and here we are at the bottom of a zigzag track up the cliff—and observe recently a stone fell down the track."

"You mean Miss Bruce was knocked out by falling stones?"

"Possible. Not certain."

"That's saying her injuries were accidental."

"My dear chap! If accidental, she'd have been found where the stones fell. She didn't pick up her unconscious body and put it in the sea to drown. Someone else did that for her, then obliterated footprints on the sand. But may not have had time to obliterate all those made on the track. So we ascend."

The third zigzag was half covered with stones, large and small.

"General muck," Reggie sighed. "Up and up, Inspector. To where the fall started. What started it?"

"The cliff's rotten hereabouts."

"Oh, yes. And the track undercut both sides of the fall. Which has left a gap. Loose earth flattened by gap. Someone stood here and pushed rotten stuff down."

Strode looked at the track. "I don't say you're wrong. I've got to own it's not the usual sort of cliff break."

"Not natural, no. The inhuman sort."

They passed the gap.

"Hallo!" Strode exclaimed.

The track showed some footprints.

Reggie purred, "A little more luck. Hard earned."

"A man's footprints quite fresh coming down," said Strode. "That pretty well proves the case."

"I wonder. Footprints not all male." Reggie proceeded and reluctantly Strode followed. "Two females," he murmured. "Two came down. But only one went up. The one who went up was not Miss Bruce."

Strode studied the prints and measured them.

"What is the conclusion?" Reggie asked.

"A man wearing rubber soles, size eight. There certainly was a woman and may have been more than one. Small, narrow feet and lightweight, but there seem fewer up than down."

"Not merely seem fewer but are. So your conclusion is two females resemblin' each other came to this spot, one continued down, one went up from it. Does Miss Bruce resemble Mrs. Bruce?"

STRODE'S mouth fell open. "I never noticed any resemblance."

"Miss Bruce is a lightweight. What about Mrs. B.?"

"Much the same, I suppose. Are you telling me Mrs. Bruce pushed the stones over on Miss Bruce, then put her in the water?"

Reggie sighed. "Inquiries how Mrs. B. spent the day are essential."

"You forget the man."

"Oh, no. Start the hunt, good and quick."

Strode laughed. "What do you think of Dr. Cope's brother?"

"The mind is vacant. Not knowin' the young man."

"I take him first, and I'll be off now. Are you staying in Bridcombe, Mr. Fortune?"

"Not me. Address, the *Clarence,* Kenmouth, till further notice."

Strode hurried away down the track.

Reggie walked slowly up, seeking further footprints, and found some. No possible doubt, two women had come down, one gone up, and one man down. Beyond the top of the track on the grass, wider research convinced him that the two women entered the track at the top, though perhaps separately, but the man some distance below.

Which Inspector Strode should have seen for himself. Too much the speed merchant. Better have postponed giving brother John the works till he'd collected all facts available. He'd ignored the certainty Rosalind must say something as soon as she was fit to talk, and ignored the desirability of checking Mrs. Bruce's alibi at once.

Well-meaning chap, Inspector Strode, but ran blind past the main problem. Why footprints of one woman came down no further than the spot in the sixth zigzag well above where the stone fall was engineered.

* * * * *

Strode rang Dr. Cope's bell and Clara opened the door and said the doctor was out.

"I want Mr. John Cope."

From behind her John answered: "Here he is. Who are you?"

"Inspector Strode of the county police. I am engaged on certain inquiries."

"Come along." John conducted him to a small back room. "Sit down."

"Thanks. When did you last see Miss Bruce?"

"Yesterday."

"Are you well acquainted with the young lady?"

"I've met her twice, walking."

"Did you phone her this morning?"

"I phoned her house and asked for her and they told me Miss Bruce wasn't at home."

"Why did you phone?"

"Miss Bruce and I made a small cliff climb yesterday and I thought she might like another."

"Have you been on the cliff today?"

"No. I walked over the hills."

"Was it a dangerous climb you made with her?"

"Not the least danger about it."

"There wasn't, wasn't there?" Strode barked. "How did she come to be crushed by a cliff fall?"

"What?" John shouted. "I heard she'd been found in the sea on Durley Ledge. My sister just phoned from the hospital."

"Is your sister aware you climbed the cliff with Miss Bruce yesterday?"

"No."

"Did you inform your sister you planned to take Miss Bruce a climb today?"

"No. What is all this cliff-climb, cliff-fall stuff?"

"I'm asking the questions, Mr. Cope. Was Miss Bruce friendly when you parted yesterday?"

"Quite. I'm a patient bloke, Inspector, but talk straight or push off."

"I'm not satisfied with your answers, Mr. Cope."

"That's because you ask trick questions. What is this story Miss Bruce crashed in a cliff fall?"

"Where did you climb with her yesterday?"

"One short pitch above Durley Hole."

"Are you sure you didn't climb round the track?"

John laughed. "Nobody could climb the track side. It's all rotten rock and loose scree."

"Where are the shoes you went out in today?"

"On my feet."

Strode looked at them. They were muddy. They had rubber soles.

"I warn you, Mr. Cope, don't attempt to go away . . ."

THE *Clarence,* Kenmouth, gave Reggie a meritorious dinner. Afterwards, dozing in the lounge, he opened his eyes and beheld Inspector Strode.

"Zeal, all zeal," he sighed. "What about Mrs. B.? Where did she spend the morning?"

"At home. Never went out till Dr. Cope phoned from the hospital. Naturally she went straight to the hospital. That's all about Mrs. B."

"No," Reggie objected. "Mrs. B.'s alibi. Will it stand up?"

"She doesn't need an alibi. But her old housekeeper confirmed it. I went after the man, that brother of Dr. Cope's."

"Could have been Cope," Reggie drawled. "But why?"

"I put him through it, and he owned he'd taken the girl cliff climbs and dangerous places."

"Oh. Candid fellow, Cope."

"He didn't know I was wise to the footprints on the track. His shoes were the same size and the soles rubber too. When I pointed that out, he flew off the handle."

"Conduct of Mr. Cope suspicious, yes. Motive of Mr. Cope for killin' Miss B. invisible."

"Excuse me, Mr. Fortune, there's the usual motive in sex crimes. She turned him down, and he saw red."

"Possible explanation of all facts. Bar one."

"Which one?"

"The other woman on the track," Reggie murmured. "Who was she? Could have been devoted Mamma. We'll have evidence from Rosalind some time. While you wait, cast your eye over shoes of Mrs. B."

Strode made a bleak departure. . . .

Several days passed before Rosalind looked up from her pillow at Reggie and thought his eyes were kind. She liked his hands, the long, gentle fingers that moved about her head.

He spoke in a slow quiet voice. "I'm the surgeon who has been attending you. You are better. But you must get a great deal better still. I want you to help me. Let's see if we can work out how it happened. You were found on Durley Ledge with the tide rising over you. You left home early that morning. What did you do between those times?"

"That morning," said Rosalind, "was a long, long while ago. I hardly remember." Reggie studied her face. Small features, wide brow, charmin' little mouth, some chin, childish and wise, brave and timid. She met his eyes.

"I will try," she said. "I walked towards Durminster so that I could go across Durley Tout, then went down by the cliff track to the shore. I remember going down quite a way, but nothing else. I don't know why I should have been found in the sea. I suppose I slipped and fell."

"Do you remember seeing anyone?"

"I remember a woman. She got off the Durminster bus. I didn't know her. I just remember a vague grayness though I saw her twice—once going up and then waiting near the top. I'm not sure, but I think there was someone else."

"Woman or man?"

Rosalind's hands twisted. "I am silly. I remember feeling uncomfortable, because the person seemed neither, just ghostlike."

"Not silly, no. Far otherwise."

He held her hands a moment, left her smiling with dim eyes. . . .

At the police station, Strode said he had been expecting Mr. Fortune and with grim visage asked: "How's the girl?"

"Might be worse. Done some work on the shoes of devoted Mamma?"

"I have, not that I saw any sense in it. Mrs. Bruce's shoes are a good deal larger than the girl's and high-heeled, so none of the footprints up and down the track can be hers."

"Mrs. B. has no shoes with low heels for cross-country walkin'?"

"She never walks any distance. I want to hear the girl's account of the matter, Mr. Fortune. When shall I get that?"

"Now. Secret and confidential. Miss Bruce remembers going up Durley Tout, and down by the track. She hasn't a notion what happened."

Strode growled, "We'll never prove attempted murder now."

"I wouldn't say that. Miss Bruce does remember seein' people. Unknown woman of indefinite appearance deposited by Durminster bus, went up Tout and was visible again near summit. Second person, seen summit region only, even more indefinite; uncertain whether woman or man."

Strode sniffed. "I suspect she's covering Cope, like girls do."

"Man could have been Cope. Suspicion she recognized him, grave error. And most unlikely anyone would fail to distinguish the large young Cope from a woman. Might look for the woman."

"There's nothing to go on," Strode objected.

"Durminster bus," said Reggie and bade him a plaintive good-by.

Reggie had been driven some distance beyond Bridcombe towards Durminster when he mumbled, "This'll do, Sam," and alighted and strolled back till he had a comprehensive view of Mrs. Bruce's house and grounds.

Victorian gentleman's residence, Peverel. Grounds also Victorian. Large formal garden, lots of glass. Designed when money and labor were easy. Well kept up. Vines, peaches and what not under glass. Devoted mamma must have money to burn. Where from? Interestin' question. And why burn it livin' a hermit life with adopted daughter? Where had she come from?

A woman came walking along the road from Bridcombe. A little short of Mrs. Bruce's gate she stopped and spoke to a man—farm laborer or such. She looked the perfect oldish country woman, sombre, neat. Could have been handsome once. Regular good features but gaunt. Vague feeling of familiarity. Seen her somewhere, some time?

"I wonder," Reggie sighed. "If I have, I forget."

He saw the woman enter a bus going to Bridcombe. The man disappeared up one of the hill lanes.

IV

IT WAS half-past six when Reggie's call got through.

"Hallo, Reginald!" Lomas answered with a chuckle. "I have something for you. The sooner you can come up and see me the better."

"On the way now," said Reggie.

Bridcombe is some hundred and fifty miles from London, so despite many bitter words from Reggie it was after ten when Sam brought him to Lomas's flat.

Lomas welcomed him. "Have you dined, Reginald?"

"G-r-r," Reggie gasped. "No."

Lomas led him into the dining room and he beheld cold salmon and a casserole and smiled faintly and sat down and was informed the casserole contained chicken fricassee.

"The grateful heart rejoices." He drank, he ate. "But you said you had something for me. Tell me, who was Mrs. Bruce, where did she come from and what of her money? How did her husband expire and what about her people?"

"Mrs. Bruce?" Lomas stared amazement.

"Oh, I say!" Reggie was horrified. "You heard of her from me weeks ago. Asked you to make the East Durshire police inquire into Mrs. Bruce's past. Haven't you made 'em?"

"Now you mention it, I recall your asking for inquiries about some East

[*Turn page*]

Durshire woman. I passed the question to the local police, though the name had escaped me. We haven't had a report on the woman."

"And you"—Reggie stammered and his voice grew shrill—"you rushed me up here so you could hand me that one!"

"Let it go, Reginald. I have something for you of real importance. Have you ever visited Manningham?"

"Never. Why should I? Why should anyone?"

"The Chief Constable has heard of Mr. Fortune. We had an S.O.S. from him this morning. He wants your opinion on a case. The sudden death of an old gentleman turned eighty."

"Well, well. Sudden death under medical treatment or how?"

"The old fellow had some kidney trouble and his doctor didn't expect he'd die yet awhile and was shy of giving a certificate. Other doctors take different views. The inquest was fixed for tomorrow but Chief Constable Curran had it put off pending your opinion."

"Oh. Which view does the Chief Constable take?"

"He thinks the case suspicious."

"Did Curran say what roused his suspicions?"

"There is a history behind the case. Curran joined the Manningham police thirty-odd years ago."

"Older than I am."

"Everyone is, confound you. Curran did so well that he was Chief Detective Inspector by Nineteen-Twenty-nine, the date of the Ward murder."

Reggie's eyes opened wide. "My ghost!"

Lomas was amused. "Am I to hear what the exhibition meant?"

"Blind and wild surmise." Reggie sat back. "Why bring up the Ward case now?"

"Curran conducted the investigations. The old gentleman who has just died suddenly was the father, Ebenezer Ward."

"Daniel Ward expired from morphia poisoning, or did he? And Mrs. Daniel found guilty, condemned to death but not hanged, reprieved and imprisoned for life, what? But a life sentence isn't normally lifelong. If Mrs. Daniel is alive, she should be out of prison by this time."

"She was let out last December."

"Four months. Where has she been, what has she been doing all this while?"

"Her movements are not yet known."

"Well, well. Chief Constable Curran believes she returned lately to kill old father-in-law same like she killed young husband. I wonder."

"You're unjust to Curran. You'll find he takes nothing for granted."

"Except that I'll go and help him. I will go. Provided you put a good man on the previous interestin' questions who was Mrs. Bruce of Peverel, Bridcombe, East Durshire, where did she come from, what's her history, how did her husband expire? One of your best men, please. With instructions he should not only get the goods on Mrs. Bruce but also look for strangers hangin' about, vague oldish female and a man. One or other or both might have arranged adopted daughter's crash into sea, and have been in communication with Mamma."

"I don't like butting in on local police," said Lomas, "but I'll send Mardale down."

"Mardale?" Reggie murmured. "Yes. Bright lad. Thanks. . . ."

A cheerless morning dawned over sodden country and Reggie beheld Manningham cloaked in fog.

A faint mutter broke through his lips. "The girl! Fog!"

After bath and breakfast, in the midst of murk and din he found a Victorian Gothic town hall. Its ample contortions provided unspacious space for police headquarters.

CHIEF CONSTABLE CURRAN grasped Reggie's hand in a crushing grip.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Fortune. Thank you."

"No need," Reggie answered plaintively. "Just doin' my job. Is this the usual Manningham weather, this fog?"

Curran bristled. "Manningham is no

more foggy than other places. Sit down, please. I take it Lomas gave you a general outline of the facts."

"He did, yes. Uncommon indefinite. Tell me all."

Curran began from the statement of Ebenezer Ward's doctor that the old man, aged eighty-two, had suffered from kidney trouble and repeated the sudden death, doctors' disagreement tale which Lomas had told.

Reggie listened, watching him with half-closed eyes. Big tough. Outsize head, long and wide, square jaw. Good or bad, a winner.

"There you are, Mr. Fortune," Curran stopped short, though Lomas said he would be frank.

"Oh, no. No. Didn't begin at the beginnin'. Years back, Daniel Ward, Ebenezer's son, was poisoned."

"I want you to approach this case without prejudice."

"Instruction unnecessary. Don't have prejudice, only pride."

Curran sprang up. "I'll run you over to the mortuary. . . ."

Late that night Curran's housekeeper heard the doorbell and reluctantly answered it. "The Chief Constable wants Mr. Fortune," said Reggie, "and here I am."

Curran marched out of a room. "Hallo, sir. Come right in." He led Reggie into a smoking room, all leather easy chairs and settees. "What'll you drink?"

"Seltzer water for choice. Don't drink hard drinks after dinner. Might talk business, what?"

"Are you through?"

"Got all there is to get from corpse. Speakin' medically, not a long job. Doctor who attended Ebenezer Ward made no mistake. Ebenezer had kidney trouble. Shouldn't have been fatal yet awhile. Progress of disease accelerated by morphia. Didn't die from poisoning, not enough morphia in body for that, but quite enough to make disease kill him. Morphia was not injected, must have been swallowed."

"I can't work it as a murder case on that evidence. Talk straight. Was it murder or wasn't it?"

"Haven't the slightest doubt it was murder. Can't furnish proof. Up to you. Proof may be found, if sought. How much would you cramp your style by bringing in the Ward family history?"

"I don't let anything cramp my style. I conducted the investigations into the Daniel Ward case and I worked out absolute proof his wife poisoned him with morphia. The woman was reprieved and got off with a life sentence. She ought to have been hanged. This Ebenezer Ward case is altogether different. You found very little morphia in the body, you can't swear it was the cause of death. No jury would give a murder verdict on that."

"Right verdict would be, death induced by morphia, evidence not sufficient to show how morphia entered Ebenezer."

Curran nodded. "There was any amount of morphia found in Daniel Ward. Counsel defending his wife took the line he'd been a morphia addict and given himself an overdose. One or two witnesses beside his wife said he used dope, but my men discovered two bottles of morphia solution in wife's room, none in his."

"Strongish case against Mrs. Daniel. How was the large amount of morphia put into Daniel?"

"He'd been keeping his bed some days. He was a weakly, lazy fellow. He'd had fruit for dinner and the doctors made certain morphia and fruit were mixed up inside him. The nurse noticed something queer about him at midnight and called his doctor. He died next day."

"Have your chaps discovered any morphia in Ebenezer's house?"

"No."

"So that's why you said the cases were different. But I found morphia in Ebenezer. Would you say he swallowed it somewhere away from home?"

Curran's hard face puckered. "According to the servants, he hadn't been outside the house this year."

"What about visitors?"

"One old crony. No relations ever

came near him. He didn't care for seeing people."

"Servants reliable?"

"They've all three been with him a long time."

"Yet he swallowed morphia at home. And simultaneously, fruit."

CURRAN swung forward half out of his chair. "The devil you say!"

"No possible doubt. Combination of morphia and fruit. Not altogether different from Daniel Ward case. What was Daniel's fruit?"

"Fruit salad."

"Well, well. Ebenezer didn't have salad. Only peaches. Rather think they were fresh."

"In April?"

"Grown under glass. Ever heard of a Mrs. Bruce in connection with Daniel and Ebenezer Ward?"

"Mrs. Bruce? Who is she?"

"She lives at Bridcombe, East Durshire, widow with adopted daughter. Has lived there for years."

"I don't follow. A woman who's lived in Durshire for years can't be Mrs. Daniel Ward."

Reggie smiled. "So you suspect Mrs. Daniel poisoned father-in-law same like she poisoned husband."

"Naturally I had some suspicion from the woman being let out of gaol last December and her father-in-law dying suddenly so soon after. My suspicion has been confirmed by your statement he was poisoned. Mrs. Daniel had revenge motives. Ebenezer did his best to get her hanged, and though he failed, she's been living in hell through all her best years. But I'm not jumping to the certainty she poisoned him. What I want is evidence Mrs. Daniel visited Ebenezer Ward's house about the time he was poisoned. But there isn't a trace of any strange woman getting in."

"Poisoners needn't have entered house."

"How else could the poison have been given him?"

"Put in peaches before they were sent to house. Several poisoners have syringed poison into fruit. Who sent the peaches to him?"

"I don't know. I didn't know the old man had eaten any peaches."

"Peaches not mentioned by faithful servants. Though out of season, hothouse fruit. Mrs. Bruce, the East Durshire widow, has hothouses wherein she grows peaches. Seen 'em myself. We might ask the faithful servants whence the peaches came."

"What is this Mrs. Bruce line?"

"Line without beginnin' or end. Only lots of middle. When we've found the beginnin' should see our way to the end. Happy or otherwise. Good night!"

Though the next morning was cloudy, sun broke through with occasional gleams on the house of Ebenezer Ward, a house encircled by old forest trees and dank modern shrubberies.

A shriveled parlor-maid conducted Reggie and Curran to a room with half the furniture Chippendale and Hepplewhite, half bloated Victorian.

The maid withdrew. They heard her call: "Miss Haig! It's the police again!"

"Housekeeper," said Curran.

An obese woman entered, wheezing: "How do you do, Mr. Curran. I thought you'd finished here."

"Not quite, ma'am. I have one or two questions to ask. Did Mr. Ward eat some peaches shortly before he died?"

"Yes, he did. He ate a peach or two the day before, and the day before that. The doctor never said he oughtn't to eat fruit. They were quite ripe, beautiful fruit. Mr. Ward had rare fruit sent him every once in a while."

"Where from?"

"I can't tell you. Everything that came for Mr. Ward, he was particular no one should handle but himself."

"You mean the peaches came by post?"

"They must have. A parcel delivered by hand I'd notice."

"Oh, I say!" The exclamation came from Reggie. "Never noticed postmark on parcel?"

She quivered indignation. "I don't do things like that."

"Did Mr. Ward write many letters?"

"It's likely I'd count them!" She

tossed her head. "Whatever letters he wrote he posted himself. So there!"

"Not there yet. But for what we have received, we are truly thankful. Come along, Curran."

Outside the house Reggie said, "On her don't-know-a-thing statement, he was a secretive fellow, was the late Ward. Yet he must have let someone know some secrets. Try his attorneys?"

Curran laughed. "I was going to. Edmunds, Walker & Edmunds. There's only one working partner, young Edmunds, and he's about ninety."

The office of the firm was on the ground fioor of a narrow squalid building.

YOUNG Mr. Russell Edmunds, a lank, bald, cadaverous man, rose stiffly, said: "Ha, Curran," looked blank at Reggie and, having been introduced, said "Ha," again and sat down.

"I require your assistance, sir," Curran told him. "Would you be surprised to hear that Ebenezer Ward's death was caused by poison?"

"I am unaware of any suspicious circumstance."

"You knew his son was poisoned. You won't deny it has occurred to you old Ward might have been."

"I cannot perceive the least similarity between the cases."

"Oh, yes," Reggie murmured. "Strikin' and painful similarity. Daniel Ward killed by morphia and—"

"That case of Daniel Ward was quite clear from the first," Edmunds said in his prim voice.

Reggie continued. "No possible doubt death of Ebenezer Ward caused by morphia, same like death of Daniel. Hence Ebenezer Ward's lawyer required to state—who'll gain by his death?"

"Such speculative questions are improper," Edmunds said quickly and over his pallid countenance a faint redness broke. "In no case could I answer any question concerning a client's affairs. It would be a breach of professional confidence."

"Oh. Ebenezer Ward not now your client. You act for other parties. Parties whom his death has benefited. Professional confidence broken wide open. Must take the offensive against solicitor concealin' evidence which might convict poisoners of late client."

"You misrepresent my position grossly," Edmunds said. "The Chief Constable is aware that my repute is such I am not to be charged with concealment that would obstruct justice. Mr. Ebenezer Ward was not only my client but my lifelong friend and my sole purpose is to protect his interests. Under his will, made many years ago, my firm became trustees of the Ward estate. I can tell you the manner in which we are required to administer the trust funds. The annual income will be divided, two thirds for Mrs. Naomi Bruce, one third for her daughter, Rosalind."

Curran nodded at Reggie, who murmured: "Interestin'. How much do they get?"

"Some fifteen thousand pounds a year between them."

"If one lady died what would happen to her share?"

"The survivor would receive it and in due course the whole estate."

"Who was Mrs. Bruce before she was Mrs. Bruce?"

Edmunds answered quickly: "She is Mr. Ward's niece, sir, the only near relation he had."

"Certain of that? What was her maiden name?"

"Miss Gill, Miss Naomi Gill."

"Who was Mr. Bruce?"

"I am unable to say. I believe he died soon after the marriage."

"Oh. Miss Bruce adopted, accordin' to Mrs. Bruce. Who is the real mother? Who is the real father?"

"You—you amaze me," Edmunds stammered. "I have no information."

"Your error," said Reggie. "Well, Curran, we're through with Mr. Edmunds, for the moment, what?"

As they drove away: "Full of tricks, isn't he?" said Curran. "We scared him and yet he kept dumb. He reckons there are big profits in holding his tongue."

"There could be," Reggie murmured. "And our Edmunds did not give us all

he knows. One reason obvious—to dodge inquiries about the Ward family history. From which we may infer Rosalind Bruce, Mrs. Bruce and the alleged Mr. Bruce are somehow connected with the poisoning of Daniel Ward. Had Daniel Ward a daughter?"

"You're right!" Curran exclaimed. "I don't know her Christian name. She wasn't much more than a baby when he died."

"Sixteen plus years back. Which adds up to Rosalind Bruce's age now."

"But I'd call it quite natural old Ward should have the orphan daughter adopted by his niece and wash out her real name."

"If niece decent woman. Where was niece at date of Daniel Ward's poisoning?"

"That's a hard one. It's a long time ago. I believe old Ward had a girl relation staying with him, though I can't recall the name and shouldn't know her if I saw her."

"Half truth Edmunds certified old Ward's niece Mrs. Naomi Bruce, née Gill, only near relation Ward had. Must have been she. Curious and suggestive she'd come to stay with Ebenezer while Daniel was poisoned."

"I don't get that. It's absolutely certain Mrs. Daniel poisoned him."

"My dear chap," said Reggie as they hurried to the murk and fustiness of Curran's room, "Daniel poisoned in fruit. Ebenezer poisoned in fruit. Mrs. Bruce stayin' with Ebenezer at time poison given Daniel. Poisoned peaches given Ebenezer sent by post. Mrs. Bruce grows peaches. As long as Daniel lived, Mrs. Bruce had no chance of touchin' Ebenezer's money. She must have obtained some for bringin' up the adopted daughter the expensive way she's taken, growin' hothouse peaches and what not. By the death of Ebenezer she won ten thousand a year. If Rosalind also dies, Mrs. Bruce wins fifteen thousand."

"I grant you, you've built up evidence against Mrs. Bruce, but it would fall down at a trial. You can't say morphia killed old Ward, only that morphia brought on death from his fatal disease. It's nowhere near strong enough for proof of murder."

"Not enough, no," Reggie sighed.

"I wouldn't mind asking the lady one or two questions," Curran exclaimed.

"Make the world safe for the girl? Great idea. Urgent need. And you're the man to do the job, Curran. When can you start?"

"The quicker the better. Are you coming along?"

"Not yet—must see a man about another job first. Look you up some time soon."

V

THE man Reggie went to see was Lord Pemberton, the judge who condemned Mrs. Ward to death. He had, after long service, retired to a house in the Cambridge fens.

Reggie was ceremoniously enthroned by the fire in a book-lined room. The old man's wrinkles deepened, the humor mellowed at Reggie's intent gaze.

"You did not need the commendation my brother Platt's letter offered," said Pemberton. "If any poor abilities I have can assist so eminent an expert, they are at your service, Mr. Fortune."

"Don't know how to thank you enough," Reggie sighed. "My trouble is there's been another Ward case. Hoped you'd help me."

"Another Ward case?" Pemberton repeated. "I saw an announcement of Ebenezer Ward's death in the newspaper. He was over eighty. Is not death at that age natural?"

"Old age doesn't exempt from murder."

"Are you suggesting Ebenezer Ward was murdered?"

Reggie sighed again. "Medical evidence for inquest on Ebenezer Ward—death from kidney disease accelerated by morphia, swallowed with or in peaches. Where morphia and peaches came from unknown. What view do you take, sir?"

"A competent coroner should direct the jury to return an open verdict."

"You haven't answered my question.

The first Ward case must affect your view of this second Ward case."

"Mr. Fortune, Daniel Ward did not suffer from any disease, the medical experts all agreed, and furnished undisputed proof that he was killed by morphia poisoning. The police found morphia in his wife's room. The woman had opportunity and certain motives. You tell me it is disputable whether disease or morphia caused Ebenezer Ward's death and the source of the morphia which he consumed has not been discovered. He had no wife and, I gather, no one in his house with a motive for hastening his death."

"No one in his house, no." Reggie studied Pemberton's hooded eyes. "But Mrs. Daniel Ward havin' been released from prison after many years, Ebenezer Ward is soon given morphia and fruit, same like Daniel Ward, and expires."

"You imply suspicion of Mrs. Ward."

"Circumstances compel suspicion. I have an open mind. Not satisfied she was justly convicted in the first Ward case. Are you?"

Pemberton smiled. "I might reply that the case was one of those in which it is difficult to determine how justice can be done, but I had better lay before you the facts."

"Hoped you would."

Pemberton spoke with slow precision. "As a young man at Cambridge Daniel Ward was of some promise in the subject he chose, physics. It is possible that if he had not been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, he might have done well. On leaving Cambridge he studied physical chemistry through some years, divided between London and continental laboratories. But he obtained no appointment, returned and lived in idleness provided with more than ample means by his father.

"At the age of thirty he married Amelia Hay, a Canadian he met in Paris, a marriage made in haste. I cannot believe the woman married him for his money. She was not destitute. Capital settled upon her gave her an income larger than his, apart from what his father allowed him. The allowance was not increased on his marriage, of which his father did not approve. It is hardly conceivable that settling down in the dreariness of Manningham under the eye of a disapproving father-in-law would seem an agreeable prospect to a woman who had seen the world and might live where and how she chose."

"Possible motive, pity for the man," Reggie murmured.

"Whatever Mrs. Ward's motives for marriage, she showed herself at the trial a woman without tenderness."

"Character could be hardened by unhappy marriage."

"The conjecture is plausible but remains mere conjecture. Within a year of the marriage Mrs. Ward bore a child, a boy named Lancelot. Three years later a daughter was born, named Rosalind. Both children were considered very like the mother and unlike the father, who exhibited little affection for them. Both father and mother avoided Manningham society. In nineteen twenty-nine Lancelot was five years old, a vigorous boy. On a misty autumn evening Mrs. Ward found him drowned in a small pond in the garden."

"Oh!" Reggie sat up and exclaimed, "Mist!"

"The mist would account for the boy falling into the pond but it is strange that he did not emerge from shallow water. A verdict of death by misadventure was given at the inquest. Some two months later Daniel Ward died."

"November, yes. Month of fog."

"Although, as I have said, Daniel Ward did not suffer from any disease, he had frequent attacks of indigestion, so he called them, during which he kept his bed, refusing to have a doctor, but nursed by the parlor-maid and by his wife. He had been in bed several days with one of these attacks when the parlor-maid took her usual mid-week afternoon and evening out and Mrs. Ward brought him his dinner."

MR. FORTUNE did not seem surprised. "Includin' fruit," Reggie mumbled. "Where did the fruit come from?"

"Counsel defending Mrs. Ward preferred not to raise that point. On the parlor-maid's return she was alarmed by Ward's peculiar breathing, his bluish color. She could not wake him. She sought Mrs. Ward, who had retired for the night, and advised her to call a doctor. Mrs. Ward objected that the master would not allow her. Thereupon the parlor-maid herself called the family doctor."

"Parlor-maid didn't love Mrs. Ward," said Reggie. "Sorry. Go on."

"The doctor was unable to revive Ward from the stupor, and early next morning he died. The doctor suspected death had been caused by some narcotic drug, so communicated with Ward's father, the coroner and the police. Ebenezer Ward hastened to the house and there was an unpleasant scene between Mrs. Ward and him which ended in his accusing her of misconduct and desire for his son's death. Police officers arrived to obtain a statement from Mrs. Ward. While they were engaged with her—she professed complete ignorance—Ebenezer Ward gave orders that Rosalind should be removed to his own house."

"Didn't Mrs. Ward object?"

"She did not. She seemed cold and callous. I omit the consensus of medical evidence which established that Daniel Ward was poisoned by morphia, the police evidence which stated that search discovered two bottles containing fluid morphia hidden under clothes in Mrs. Ward's bedroom. Another part of the police evidence deserves some attention. Behind the gas fire in her sitting room half-burnt letters were found and the fragments showed that the letters had been addressed to Mrs. Ward by a man and couched in terms of affection. His name, however, could not be made out."

"When did police search?" Reggie murmured.

"The next day."

"Curious Mrs. Ward didn't burn 'em completely. Curious she didn't put the morphia in Daniel's room."

"Mr. Fortune, counsel for the prosecution had a strong case. The parlor-maid testified to frequent quarrels between Mrs. Ward and her husband, that from time to time she went away for several nights, that he accused her of intimacy with other men, that she always came down to receive the morning letters herself."

"Hot hate by parlor-maid."

"It is possible. But the parlor-maid's testimony was in some measure corroborated by other servants and on the most important points by Ebenezer Ward. Mrs. Ward, giving evidence on her own behalf, admitted under cross-examination practically everything they said."

"Why did she?"

Pemberton looked into the fire. "I asked myself that question then. I have not yet found the answer, Mr. Fortune."

"What was her story?"

"It was short, inadequate and bitter. She declared that her husband had been taking morphia for years and that his drug habit made their marriage unhappy. She accused him of giving the boy Lancelot drugged sweetmeats and thus causing the boy's death. She denied that she had ever had any morphia in her possession or received the letters which were half burnt, or had improper relations with a man."

"Did you believe her?"

"Her cold, fierce answers displayed satisfaction in her husband's death. She appeared a woman capable of anything. In my opinion defending counsel should have called other witnesses before she told her story. Afterwards several old acquaintances of Ward swore that they had often seen him wildly exhilarated and heard him boast that morphia 'put him on top of everyone.' "

"Medical experts should have found some trace of morphia addiction if Ward suffered from one," said Reggie.

"Is their failure to find a trace proof there was none?"

"It all depends—not knowin' the particular experts, can't say."

"I myself have little doubt Ward habitually took morphia. But difficulties arise from such an opinion. If he

took morphia, why was the only morphia in the house hidden among Mrs. Ward's clothes? Am I to assume someone else administered the poisonous dose and hid the bottles where they would cast suspicion on her? It was administered while she alone was attending to her husband. She admitted she had strong motives to desire his death and did not suggest that anyone else had. No motive can be imagined for the parlor-maid murdering Ward. I allow she may have hidden the poison bottles in Mrs. Ward's room to ensure that the death should not be taken for suicide but murder by Mrs. Ward."

"Oh, yes, yes. Obvious possibility. Also possible she played tricks with the letters."

"You consider suicide probable?"

"Possible. Murder by person not Mrs. Ward also possible."

"You amaze me."

REGGIE laughed. "Who profited out of Ward's death?"

"There could be no material gain for anyone. Daniel Ward was entirely dependent on the income his father allowed him."

"So Mrs. Ward stood to lose by his death. But another person had a profit motive. Didn't anyone mention Naomi Gill at the trial?"

Pemberton frowned. "I think not, Mr. Fortune. Who is Naomi Gill?"

"Ebenezer Ward's niece. The elimination of Daniel made her Ebenezer's only survivin' relative, bar Rosalind. At the time Daniel was eliminated, Naomi Gill was in Ebenezer's house. Therafter she became Mrs. Bruce, adopted Rosalind and lived in ample style. But without husband. Now Ebenezer has also been eliminated by morphia his estate is divided between Naomi Gill and Rosalind, the survivor taking the whole. Would you expect Rosalind to live long, sir?"

Pemberton put his hand before his eyes. "I did not know," he said in a tone so quiet it could hardly be heard.

"Counsel for Mrs. Ward missed a lot."

"It is impossible that this woman, Naomi Gill, poisoned Daniel Ward. She had no opportunity, no access."

"Ebenezer Ward has just been poisoned by someone who had no access to him. Someone who sent him morphia in fruit."

"You are suggesting that the woman Gill murdered both Daniel and Ebenezer?"

"She's the only person with profit motive—she grows hothouse peaches—Ebenezer's morphia was put into peaches—and ripe peaches at this time of year are rare."

"Your zeal to prove Mrs. Ward innocent compels my sympathy. But profit is not the only motive for murder. Mrs. Ward had strong motives to kill her husband. As for his father, Ebenezer Ward lived safe through the years Mrs. Ward remained in prison but was poisoned soon after her release."

"Ebenezer wasn't murdered till Mrs. Ward's release because it would have been risky till she came out. Afterwards the murderer could work so that, if it was detected, she'd be found guilty again."

The wrinkles round Pemberton's hooded eyes deepened with a mocking smile. "Most ingenious, Mr. Fortune. Yet I can only say I am unconvinced."

"Though you are also unconvinced Mrs. Ward killed her husband."

"I have given you no reason to say that."

"Oh, yes. You told me justice couldn't be done in the case."

Pemberton spread out his hands. "There were ample grounds for the verdict of guilty which the jury returned and the Court of Criminal Appeal was right to uphold the jury's decision. But the evidence did not exclude the possibility that Ward might, by mischance, have given himself a fatal amount of morphia. Some doubt thus survived and Mrs. Ward was entitled to benefit by it. I so advised the Home Secretary. Nevertheless I was myself convinced of her guilt and I have never changed my opinion. This is why I told you justice could not be done." Pemberton lay back in his chair. "I fear I disappoint

you, Mr. Fortune."

"Yes. And surprise me. Several things have happened since Mrs. Ward's release which should change your opinion. Ebenezer murdered. The evidence suggests Naomi. Attempt to murder Rosalind which nearly succeeded. No possible motive for Mrs. Ward to kill her daughter. Strong motive for Naomi to kill co-heiress."

Pemberton exclaimed, "Can you prove that?"

"Not yet. But have decisive proof of murderous attack—by the woman Naomi—or the other woman, the parlor-maid—or the man in the case."

"What man?"

"Man who wrote half-burnt letters. Man who didn't appear at Mrs. Ward's trial. His absence the real reason justice hasn't been done."

Pemberton became grim. "Am I to understand you believe Mrs. Ward innocent?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Always believe all evidence. You've helped a lot, sir. Good-by."

Reggie went back to Manningham, sought the office of the local paper, and studied the battered volume which contained its turgid articles on the Ward trial.

Yes, the *Manningham Echo* would have hanged Mrs. Ward if it could. Obviously the *Echo* was a faithful echo of virtuous public feeling. But it played fair. Gave the parlor-maid's evidence verbatim. Which showed gaps Mrs. Ward's counsel ought to have broken through. Not a word about Ward's habits or the cause of his illness. The maid didn't explain why she stayed out till late at night, where she'd been; didn't mention Ebenezer Ward or Naomi Gill.

Why hadn't Curran seen the parlor-maid was framing Mrs. Ward?

The *Manningham Echo* printed a photograph of the maid, Bertha Smithson. Stock pattern domestic servant in opulent household. Correct, smug, knowing her place and other people's, incapable of error. Just the female whom policemen would trust.

HADN'T the precious paper given Mrs. Ward's photograph too? Not during the trial. Reggie turned back earlier pages.

"My ghost!" he moaned. "How could I forget?"

Attractive face. With some flaws. Regular features a trifle too bold, eyes too small. Acquainted with grief. But charming, compelling.

Face he'd puzzled over in the newspapers sixteen years ago. Face he saw become gaunt and fretted along the Bridcombe road and didn't recognize. Failure unpardonable.

He sketched portraits by which the parlor-maid and Mrs. Ward might be identified, then proceeded to the house in which Mrs. Ward and Rosalind had lived and Daniel Ward died. It had become small flats. But bars covered several top front windows. Rosalind's nursery. Her dead brother Lancelot's nursery. Not much different from a prison.

Reggie walked round the garden. Behind the house he came upon ancient rose bushes overhanging an oval concreted hollow. That must have been the lily pool wherein Lancelot was found dead. Practically invisible from the house under those rugosa roses even before the garden went wild. In a pond that shallow a five-year-old should not have been drowned. But anyone could have knocked him out and not been spotted. Long odds no help would come to the boy in time. Just the place for the planned murder of a child.

The garden was enclosed by an impenetrable fence, but there were gates at the rear as well as the front, and the house had several back doors. Too easy. The parlor-maid or Naomi might have got in without being noticed and doped Daniel's last supper and got away unobserved.

The front door of the house stood open and Reggie entered a gloomy hall. There wasn't anyone about. He discovered that the house had two staircases, one facing the front door, one from the back, and the passages on each floor turned sharp angles. Innumerable

opportunities for evading observation. Both staircases were dark.

The higher he went, the darker they grew and the steeper. Desperately dismal for children. Why did Mrs. Ward put her children so high? To keep 'em out of father's way? Yes. And in her uncommon case to keep 'em from father Daniel's dirty work.

Reggie attained the top floor, which was the darkest of all. Every flat there was occupied. But one door along the passage stood ajar. Door of cistern room, which contained worn-out toys, tattered books.

He picked up one of the books, the gaudiest one, and inspected it.

T . . . grim . . . tude . . . eam—Reggie made out from one fragmentary title page.

The Pilgrim's Progress in the Similitude of a Dream. Book much thumbed. Several illustrations were elaborately colored. Giant Despair had been given a purple beard and scarlet horns on his helmet. Towers of Doubting Castle raised tremendous tall, blurred yellowish-white amidst brown fog, sickly green over Christian and Hopeful in dungeon.

What child had those horrific color dreams?

The book might have been Rosalind's but she was only three when she left the wretched house forever. She couldn't have colored the illustrations. But her brother Lancelot could.

The toys suggested they'd belonged to a boy. Clockwork engine. Boat. Sword. Lancelot's possessions hustled out of sight into storeroom on his death.

Reggie went downstairs, taking with him the tattered *Pilgrim's Progress* and the broken sword, and drove off to London.

VI

DR. COPE often called on Rosalind at the hospital but Mamma didn't come. Rosalind yearned to be out of doors and the matron said she might walk in the grounds.

They gave her a prospect of sea and hills, and on one side a wood which shone with blackthorn blossoms. One afternoon she saw the bluebells had broken into flower. She must go and look at them.

She went slowly through the wood till she found a place to sit. Someone else was in the wood, walking from the far side. That woman she met on the Durminster road, who had waited and watched near the top of Durley Tout the day she fell down the track.

But then the woman had avoided her; now she actually hurried towards her and said: "I beg your pardon. Is this wood private? Am I trespassing?"

"Oh dear no."

"It seemed beautiful from outside and it is more beautiful than I expected."

Could she be the same woman? The woman on the road had stared horribly yet was mere vague grayness. This woman's eyes were soft and glistening. She wasn't gray, except her hair and her clothes; she wasn't the least pretty, but rather grand.

"Are you staying in Bridcombe?" Rosalind asked. "I think we met before."

"We met some time ago. You wished me good-morning on your way up the headland."

"Durley Tout. I thought I saw you again near the top."

"You must have mistaken someone else for me. I went to Bridcombe. Did you ever meet with an accident before?"

"Oh, no, I'm much too careful." Rosalind laughed.

"How charming these bluebells are! Is it permitted to pick them?"

"Of course."

The woman picked some and said: "Thank you. Good-by." She hurried off through the bushes.

Rosalind was bewildered. The woman had been inquisitive, yet attractive. How could she be both? Rather a forlorn creature. Rosalind stumbled to the conclusion she liked the woman and wondered why. . . .

Relations between Dr. Cope and brother John continued at fallen temperature. He knew she thought he should leave Bridcombe. She knew he had made up his mind he would not.

There was nothing to be done about it but make sure neither cramped the other's style.

So John abstained from any enquiry concerning Rosalind and from any attempt to see the girl. He walked the countryside all day, and heard the gossip on Rosalind's case and her progress.

No visitors allowed. Surgeon put up an absolute ban. But as matron let her sit in the grounds, easy to have a look at her.

At the point she always crossed between the hospital grounds and the bluebell wood, Rosalind stopped and doubted whether she wanted to cross. But she did go.

Soon she heard swift, light footsteps.

"Cheers," said John, confronting her.

"Mr. Cope!" Rosalind blushed.

"The name has become mud, Miss Bruce. What about you? Isabel goes all professional over her patients. She's dumb as an oyster. Miss Bruce, what sort of climb were you on the morning I missed you?"

"I wasn't on a climb. I walked up Durley Tout and came down by the track and somehow slipped and fell."

"That track is wicked loose," said John slowly.

Rosalind laughed. "The track is quite easy. I'm ashamed of myself."

"I've bought all the shame going. I talked cliff climbs, led you a little one to show off, gave you wrong ideas."

"You didn't give me any idea where I could go. I went the way I've gone a thousand times."

"I'd asked you to go another climb. I should have been on the spot, and watched out for you."

"It wouldn't have been the least use. No one could have been. May we stop arguing now? I hate arguing."

"What do you love?"

"The hills, the sea, springtime."

"But not people?"

"I like some people."

"Do you like Miss Bruce?"

"Miss Bruce is not interesting."

"There's the inhibition. You haven't found your real self so you don't care for it."

"Now I understand why you came here," Rosalind cried. "You came to make fun of me."

"We'll make endless fun of each other but not yet awhile. I came to own it's my fault you were hurt. And now I have the cheek to tell you I'm for you—the real you."

"Do you imagine you know what I am?"

"I know what you were made to be. Which is why I want you. So I can have your real self with me."

"You mustn't think it possible!" said Rosalind.

JOHN looked into her frightened eyes and grasped both her hands.

"Please go!" she cried.

"If you promise you'll be here tomorrow."

"I wont."

John kissed her hands and said: "Take care of yourself," and strode off.

Rosalind gazed after him till he was out of sight, then shivered and sank down among the bluebells.

He'd behaved abominably. His conceit, his impudence were disgusting. And yet the things he said, the way he looked and when he touched her—he almost made her believe he knew her and loved her and she wanted him. She didn't, of course. She didn't want any man. She never would.

She made haste to get back into the hospital grounds. The point where she always crossed an old fence was unusually difficult. Barbed wire entangled her, scratched arms and legs. Oh well, it didn't matter. Except that she had torn her stockings.

When she had toiled up to her room she had no strength left. She felt cold and numb, she felt dizzy, something like a sick headache.

If she lay down it should pass off. . . .

Inspector Mardale, a highbrow by nature and training, played the eccentric young intellectual all over East Durshire, but did not get results. He fished in vain for scandal about Mrs. Bruce. If anything was known of her lost husband it was kept dark. If a mysterious female

and male had been operational round Bridcombe, both successfuly avoided the native eye.

Mardale continued to search. The likeliest spots seemed near Mrs. Bruce's daughter and, or, Mrs. Bruce.

Late one afternoon as he patrolled the far side of the wood he saw a man come through it. The fellow vaulted the fence of the wood and hurtled up the road like a heavyweight boxer on a training walk.

Some distance above Mardale's observation post a woman came into the road from a footpath. She stopped. The fellow also stopped and they talked.

The woman had nothing of Mrs. Bruce's ineffable respectability but more than a little of the grand style. Mardale's taste declined to see in her the dubious female whom the dim outlines required. The inaudible conversation kept him uncertain whether she and the man knew each other or not.

John Cope found the woman's talk idiotic.

"I am afraid I have lost myself," she began. "I was wondering what that building was below the wood."

"Bridcombe hospital."

"Hospitals are not generally in such an agreeable situation. Has the hospital a good staff?"

"Good enough by all accounts."

The woman almost smiled and turned back into the footpath. John strode off up the hill.

Since it was impossible to trail both, Mardale chose the woman. Her footpath forked and forked again. The forks he took brought him to the bottom of the hill convinced she'd given him the slip intentionally. . . .

While Reggie struggled with Pemberton, Curran drove to Bridcombe. Inspection of Mrs. Bruce's garden from the outside assured him that she did grow peaches under glass. He walked through the garden and his ring was answered by a maid.

Curran marched in. "Tell Mrs. Bruce I must see her at once." He gave the maid his card.

She conducted him to a small, prim room.

When Mrs. Bruce appeared, he hardly recognized her, she'd made such an all-over change since she was Naomi Gill, changed from skinny, shrinking ugly, to sleek, neat, ladylike good-looker.

"Don't you remember me, madam?"

"Have we met before?"

"More than once. At the time you were staying with Mr. Ebenezer Ward I made certain enquiries you should recall."

"It is so long ago."

"Were you surprised by Mr. Ward's death?"

"The news was a painful shock. But my uncle's health had been bad for years."

"His death was unexpected by his doctor. There are circumstances which require investigation. When did you last send him fruit?"

She showed contempt. "I have sent none this year. Winter and spring are not the season for fruit."

"What do you grow in your hothouses?"

[*Turn page*]

"Flowers, grapes, figs and so on."

"The so on is peaches, isn't it?"

"Of course, among other things, I grow some peaches under glass, but they have hardly begun to ripen yet."

CURRAN nodded. "Some are ripe enough. Shortly before Ebenezer Ward's death he received a parcel of ripe peaches which he ate and which contained poison."

"Poison?" she cried. "Impossible! You must be wrong, Mr. Curran. What poison?"

"Leave it to the medical experts. Have any of the peaches in your hothouses been picked, Mrs. Bruce?"

"I told you, they're not fit to pick; they won't be for some time."

"Would you mind my seeing for myself?"

"I will show you them."

She led him down the garden to the hothouses.

"All the peaches I have under glass are in here"—she opened the door—"and you will see there are none quite ripe."

Curran passed slowly from tree to tree.

"Some are ripe enough, ma'am," he growled. "And I see where some have been picked though you told me none had."

"It is always necessary to thin out fruit."

"I'd like to talk with your gardener."

She smiled and called: "Matthew!"

An ancient hobbled into the hothouse.

"The gentleman wants you to tell him how you grow peaches."

Matthew touched his cap and muttered: "Aye, aye, aye."

Asked if he usually thinned out peaches, he said them as didn't wouldn't have none. And how many ripe peaches had he picked?

"I ain't picked none, cos there ain't been none yet."

"Look at that branch," said Curran. "It's stripped, and on the branch below the peaches are near ripe."

Matthew said, "Someone might have got in and robbed the tree."

"Thanks, old chap," said Curran, moving aside for Mrs. Bruce to go out first.

"You are observant," said she. "I should never have noticed some had been stolen."

"So you can't account for your peaches being picked when Ebenezer Ward received some with poison in 'em?"

She shuddered. "Oh, it's too horrible. My cousin Daniel Ward, Uncle Ben's only son, was poisoned. You remember. That dreadful woman, his wife."

"You said you'd forgotten."

"But you've brought everything back to me. Mr. Curran, that woman has been let out of prison. She hated Uncle Ben. She's a terrible woman. It's just like the way she murdered Daniel."

"I see. You mean she arranged things so that you should be suspected of Ebenezer Ward's murder. She made no attempt to throw suspicion on anyone in the Daniel Ward murder."

"She pretended he poisoned himself."

"Who gains by Ebenezer Ward's death? He was about the richest man in Manningham. Will Mrs. Daniel Ward get much of it?"

"She had no claim at all."

"Then who gets the lot?"

"I don't even know whether he made a will. He gave me the most generous allowance."

"Haven't you heard from his solicitor?"

"Nothing but the news of his death."

"That's queer. I've received information he left his estate to be divided between you and your adopted daughter, whichever survives receiving the whole. Further information has reached me the girl was dangerously injured just before Ebenezer Ward was murdered."

"Rosalind thinks she fell from a cliff track into the sea by accident. But she had seen some woman on the cliff above. The woman she saw must have been that dreadful Amelia Ward."

"Did you inform the police you were certain Rosalind's mother had attempted to murder the girl?"

"How could I? I never dreamed

Amelia Ward would attempt anything more till you told me Uncle Ben had been poisoned like Daniel."

"That's all for the present," said Curran. . . .

REGGIE raced the sunset to Scotland Yard and won.

Lomas had not packed up.

"Bless you," Reggie murmured, sinking into the easiest chair. "What have you from Mardale?"

Lomas laughed. "Negatives, Reginald. No local knowledge of Mrs. Bruce's husband, no scandal, no trace of dubious strangers. Mardale suggests he should stay on. I infer that he thinks well of Bridcombe as a place for a spring holiday."

"Don't fetch him back. Description of woman was indefinite. My fault. Send him these." Reggie produced the sketches he had made from the photographs. "Exhibit A—Mrs. Daniel Ward."

"Handsome woman."

"She was. Not so handsome after sixteen years' imprisonment. But she can still be identified from that portrait. I ought to have recognized her without it. Also I did see her near Mrs. Bruce's house. There she is for Mardale. Exhibit B—Miss Bertha Smithson, parlor-maid who valeted Daniel Ward until he was murdered. Let Mardale have her too."

"Why bring in the parlor-maid?" Lomas demanded.

"She was in, right in, before Daniel's murder. Without her evidence Mrs. Daniel couldn't have been found guilty. I've just got that straight from the trial judge, old Pemberton. The one miserable bit of luck Mrs. Ward had—Pemberton didn't know enough to see the evidence behind the evidence given in court."

Lomas burst out laughing. "Reginald, you have often scolded us for not accepting evidence. Now the most ruthless of experts has turned into counsel for the defense in a case with all the facts on the other side."

"Oh, no, no. Never was an avenger. I'm a doctor. Want to save what's left of Mrs. Ward, if possible. Must save Rosalind, her daughter."

"You mean the adopted daughter of Mrs. Bruce at Bridcombe?"

"Yes. Rosalind was taken over by Mrs. Bruce when Mrs. Ward was accused of his murder. Now then. Evidence given at trial, and evidence not given. Witnesses Pemberton called trustworthy swore they'd seen Daniel Ward under the influence of dope and heard him boast he took morphia. Mrs. Ward said he'd been taking it for years. But medical witnesses for the prosecution omitted to say whether Daniel was a morphia addict. Strong probability Daniel had the morphia habit. So he might have taken an overdose.

"Police swore they found morphia under clothes in Mrs. Ward's bedroom, which was not where Daniel would keep his dope. Strong probability emerges someone hid it in Mrs. Ward's room to cast suspicion on her. Parlor-maid's evidence. She'd been nursing Daniel, turn and turn about with Mrs. Ward. She took an afternoon and evening off and so handed herself an alibi. But even now Pemberton doesn't know there are umpteen ways she could have got into the house without being noticed, and doped the stewed fruit: which could also have been done by Mrs. Bruce, who was then Naomi Gill and stayin' with her uncle, Ebenezer Ward. Pemberton didn't know of her existence till I told him.

"In Mrs. Ward's bedroom the police found half-burnt letters there, not burnt enough to conceal they'd been written to her by a man in affectionate terms, but sufficiently burnt to obliterate his name and address. The prosecution assumed Mrs. Ward burned 'em. Pemberton didn't see that the half-burning smashes the case against her. She wouldn't have left her name and the affectionate terms legible while she burnt the man's name out. No possible doubt someone framed her. Probably Mrs. Bruce, probable executant the parlor-maid, who swore Mrs. Ward received secret letters and often went

away from home for nights. Parlormaid was all out to hang her."

"You've made an ingenious reconstruction"—Lomas smiled—"untrammelled by evidence."

"Supported by all evidence given and the crucial evidence ungiven. Key to the whole series of cases—Daniel Ward murder, Ebenezer Ward murder, attempted murder of Rosalind."

"Have you convinced yourself Mrs. Ward was innocent?"

"Oh, yes. Absolutely."

"You stand no nonsense from facts."

"Facts not ignored by me. Mrs. Ward's release made it necessary for someone to eliminate Rosalind. Mrs. Ward's release enabled someone to kill Ebenezer so that, if any suspicion of murder arose, Mrs. Ward would stand the racket again."

Lomas frowned. "What was the sudden necessity made by Mrs. Ward's release for your anonymous someone to kill Rosalind?"

"My dear chap! Mrs. Bruce didn't adopt Rosalind out of love. She was paid by old Ebenezer and well paid. The payments would have much diminished if Mrs. Ward removed the girl from her tender care. Moreover, Mrs. Bruce knew Ebenezer's will divides his money between her and Rosalind, leavin' the whole to the survivor. Mighty strong profit motive for Mrs. Bruce to wipe out both Rosalind and Ebenezer."

"The sequence seems suggestive. But your whole argument depends on the idea Mrs. Ward was innocent of her husband's murder. I am content with Pemberton's opinion of witnesses he saw and heard."

"Pemberton neither saw nor heard the man whose name someone burnt off the letters. Find Mr. Bruce."

"Good gad! You mean Bruce was the man? Why in the world should Mrs. Bruce marry Mrs. Ward's lover? And you've shown no cause to doubt Mrs. Bruce has been a widow for years."

"Think again. Man hoverin' round place and time of attack on Rosalind."

"If that fellow were found, we couldn't charge him with anything."

"We might save the girl. She'll never be safe while he's free to go for her."

The telephone buzzed. "Speaking," said Lomas brusquely. He passed the receiver to Reggie.

"My dear," said Mrs. Fortune, "there has been a call from Dr. Cope of Bridcombe. She asked if you would go down there. Rosalind Bruce has taken a sudden turn for the worse which she can't understand."

Reggie flinched. "I'll go right away, Joan."

Reggie put the receiver down. Face and voice hard, "The girl again," he told Lomas. "Ask Manningham where Curran is. I want him quick."

VII

PREPARED to go home, Inspector Strode was delayed by the station sergeant, who handed him the official card of the Chief Constable of Manningham.

Strode said carelessly: "Oh, I'll see the gentleman."

Curran marched in. "How d'you do, Inspector Strode. I've a rush job and, unless you can cooperate, I may get stuck."

"Whether I can or not depends on what you want."

"You know a thing or two. You'll have the Ward murder in mind. A Manningham case. It made one of the biggest sensations ever. Well, we've had another Ward murder in Manninghom; Daniel Ward's father poisoned like Daniel. Now you see why I want your cooperation."

"No, I don't. There aren't any Manningham people in Bridcombe."

"There's a Mrs. Bruce living here and she comes from Manningham. Mrs. Bruce is the niece of old Ward who has just been poisoned; his death means big money for her."

Strode looked uncomfortable. "I can only tell you Mrs. Bruce has the highest reputation and she never leaves home."

"So she couldn't have poisoned old Ward? The poison was sent him, hidden in peaches. Mrs. Bruce grows 'em under glass. I found some had been

picked and she told me they'd been stolen. Has she informed the police?"

"No report has reached me. When did you see Mrs. Bruce?"

"This afternoon."

"Ah. You came straight from Mrs. Bruce to me. The peaches have evidently only just been stolen."

"Evident nonsense," Curran barked. "Mrs. Bruce did her bally best to hide from me any of her peaches were missing. Why did she?"

Strode made a slow, careful answer. "There have been no robberies for a long time. But recently I've come across certain suspicious circumstances. About two weeks since Mrs. Bruce's daughter fell from a cliff track into the sea and was badly injured. She thought it was an accident but I searched the track and found indications stones were pushed down upon her. I also found footprints of a woman and a man. Miss Bruce remembered seeing a woman on the cliff, a woman unknown to her, though she talked to her, having met her on the Durminster road before going up the cliff."

"You're satisfied the woman who took part in this attempt to murder Miss Bruce was not Mrs. Bruce?"

"Mrs. Bruce never left her house all morning. And besides, the woman's footprints along the track are smaller than Mrs. Bruce would make. I verified a woman got off the Durminster bus that morning near where Miss Bruce went up the cliff."

"What have you got on the man whose footprints you found?"

"I originally suspected the brother of the woman doctor here. But now I rather incline to rule him out, having heard there's an uncommon queer character dodging round, balmy, half-witted. We've not picked him up yet."

Curran walked briskly away from the police station and on towards Mrs. Bruce's house, but before he reached it, he turned off the road into a field and took cover behind the hedge. Strode had tried hard to put it across that the attack on Miss Bruce was made by an unknown woman associated with a crazy man, but he was scared. He would see Mrs. Bruce pronto.

This expectation obtained more than complete fulfillment. Strode did come to her house, but before he came she drove away by herself. Curran, waiting behind the hedge till Strode passed out of sight, observed a man emerge from the thicket at the back of Mrs. Bruce's house. Rum clothes. Fancy-dress effect. Where the devil had the fellow gone to? He'd faded right out. . . .

REGGIE jumped out of his car the instant it stopped before the hospital door.

Dr. Cope hurried downstairs. Reggie ran up and met her and asked: "Well?"

"I don't understand it, Mr. Fortune. There is almost total collapse now—from severe shock apparently—but I can't account for that."

"Couldn't she?"

"When I first saw her she could only make faint answers, said she felt ill, supposed it was a sick headache. Now she can't say anything intelligible."

Rosalind gave no sign that she saw or heard them at her bedside. Her face was pallid and damp. Her pupils were dilated. Reggie found a feeble pulse and, counting it, observed scratches on hand and arm.

"Rosalind"—he spoke slowly, softly—"is there a tingle, kind of numb tingle?"

Her lips parted and twitched. "Yes," she gasped.

"That will stop," said Reggie. He waved Dr. Cope out of the room, followed, and said:

"She'd better have a shot of strychnine. Get it for me, please."

"Do you really think she will recover?"

"Not without hope. Know where I am. Know what I'm up against. I retain some small belief in myself."

The matron came up. "I have arranged for a special night nurse, Mr. Fortune."

"Thanks. Expect I shall be with the patient all night. When and where was

the start of her trouble?"

"The nurse who brought her dinner found her lying on the floor, conscious but helpless. She said she felt sick and dizzy. I had seen her about three and then she looked quite well. She was out in the grounds during the afternoon."

"Was she in the grounds the whole time between three and seven?"

"I can't say. She may have returned much earlier than seven."

"When you saw her lying helpless did you notice her eyes?"

"I did indeed. The pupils were much contracted."

"As after morphia?"

The matron stiffened. "Exactly. Do you think morphia had been given the girl in some form?"

"No. Pupils now dilated. Helpful fact, contraction followed by dilation. Not morphia, this case. Good-night, matron."

The night nurse thought Mr. Fortune an absolute lamb but peculiar. When the girl had settled down nice and quiet he examined her legs, then her arms. He spent quite a time over the frock she'd worn and over her stockings, too.

At the first gleam of dawn he went behind the window curtains and remained there looking out a long while.

He came round the curtains, inspected the girl and smiled. "Well, nurse?"

"I think her breathing is much better and she's quieter and easier now."

"Give her another go of coffee in half an hour. Tell your relief to carry on till I come back."

He went out into the grounds and made straight for the fence which separated them from the wood. There was no place but the fence and the wood where the girl could have bought those scratches.

He came to the point where the ground showed marks of a stumbling fall. Yes. Silk thread caught in the wire. Tiny fragments of skin. Something neither silk nor skin. Greasy substance. Silk and skin gathered, he studied the barbs and with minute care scraped flecks of grease from them into a metal box.

He returned to the hospital and made some experiments in the dispensary. The grease from the barbed wire, warmed with sulphuric acid, gave forth a fragrant odor. He dropped into the brew a reagent which turned it red. Two others darkened the red and produced purple crystals.

"What do you think of the smell?" he asked the dispenser.

"It's like balsam." She frowned upon the purpling crystallizing potion.

Reggie agreed. "But the color's wicked."

He let the flask cool, sealed it and went off with it. He was in the room the matron had assigned him when she knocked at the door.

"Mr. John Cope has asked if he can see you," she said.

"Send him along."

John came in heavy-footed and dull of eye.

"Hallo, Cope." Reggie contemplated him. "Here we are again. Why are we?"

"I want to know how Miss Bruce is. Tell me straight."

"Miss Bruce was in a very bad way last night. She's much better this morning."

"Will she come through?"

"Expect recovery."

John flushed. "But what was the matter with her?"

"Difficult question. Mustn't forget difficult questions arose over what happened to her before. Don't want any more should happen."

"I'll swear she was all right yesterday afternoon."

"Needn't swear. I knew. Quite all right when she went into the wood. Well. You saw her there. Did you see her go out of the wood?"

"No, I went first. Not much past four, I'd say."

"Well, well," Reggie said. "Speakin' roughly, Rosalind entered the wood something after three and a little after four you left her there quite fit. Subsequently, something happened which made no noise heard in the hospital, did not prevent her getting back to her room, did not draw from her any cry

for help but induced collapse by seven. John, had you ever met Rosalind in that wood before?"

"Never. But I'd seen her go into it of an afternoon and I jumped at the chance of meeting her."

Reggie murmured, "Rosalind's habit of afternoons in the wood probably observed by other persons. Notice anyone yesterday?"

JOHN gave a jerk of surprise. "When I was going back up the road a woman stopped me and asked what the hospital buildings were and so on."

"Inquisitive female."

"But she hadn't been near the wood and didn't go near. She came onto the road from a footpath the other side and she went off along the same footpath."

"Now, John,"—Reggie produced the portrait of Mrs. Daniel Ward—"look at that."

John looked and shook his head. "That's not the woman who talked to me."

"Ever seen Mrs. Bruce?"

"Shouldn't know her if I did see her."

Reggie was called away to the telephone. Curran apologized for dragging him out of bed.

"How wrong you are," Reggie moaned. "Where are you?"

"At the *Dolphin.* Make it quick. I have something."

"My dear chap! On the way now."

He had hardly put the telephone down when it rang again. The secretary took it up. She covered the receiver with her hand and whispered.

"A Mr. Mardale asking for you."

Reggie took the phone. "Mardale? Yes."

"Sorry I'm late, sir," said Mardale. "Could you be at the *Packhorse* round twelve? A little tavern, Kenmouth end of the village."

"Splendid," said Reggie.

At the *Dolphin,* the lordly old inn, Curran gave Reggie a full account of his dealings with Mrs. Bruce and with Strode.

"So it's practically certain Mrs. Bruce poisoned the peaches and sent 'em to Ward and she has Strode in her pocket."

"My dear Curran! You have gone big."

Curran grinned. "Practically certain isn't good enough. Though I've got Mrs. Bruce on the run, the scent's a bit faint and she's a cunning vixen."

"Could be more than one vixen. Could be fox also."

"Strode? Or the fancy-dress bloke I spotted dodging away from Mrs. Bruce's house?"

"Strode thinks himself no end of a fox. His error. But there is a nasty one about. Remember the attempt to kill Rosalind, Mrs. Ward's daughter? Another attempt was made yesterday and came near success. Too dam' near, Curran."

"I thought you were keeping the girl in hospital?"

"And I thought she was safe there. Underratin' vixen and fox."

"What was done to her?"

"Poison administered."

"Morphia again?"

"Not morphia. Aconite. Most virulent."

"But how the devil was it given her?"

"On barbed wire."

"You have me beat."

"One side the hospital grounds there's an old fence topped by barbed wire. Rosalind had been goin' over into the wood beyond. Fox or vixen tangled the wire so she'd get scratched and put on the barbs dollops of grease charged with aconite. Rosalind received injections through scratches—and all but passed out."

"The rottenest trick ever," Curran growled.

"Difficult to get aconitine, a fraction of a grain could be fatal, the chance anyone could detect it in the body after death minute. Now come on to the *Packhorse.* There's a bright young spirit waitin' for us. Inspector Mardale of the C.I.D."

As the car swirled round the last corner before the little *Packhorse* a man crossed the road.

"Strike me pink!" Curran whispered. "That bloke is the fancy-dress merchant

I saw dodging round the back of Mrs. Bruce's house."

Reggie stopped the car and said: "Jump in, Mardale. Chief Constable Curran wants the name of your tailor." Reggie drove on towards Kenmouth.

"You look like anything on earth but what you are," said Curran.

"Mardale would black himself all over to play Othello." Reggie surveyed him sideways. "My only aunt! What part are you dressed for?"

"The pride of the unintelligentsia."

"You show up in the country two-hundred-per-cent odd," said Curran.

"That was the idea. I show up so much the natives don't worry what I'm after, pumping them and going places."

"Any results?" Reggie asked.

"I haven't found a trace of the man. As for the mysterious woman, I took a long shot at a woman yesterday afternoon near the hospital, talking to a hefty fellow. But the description didn't fit. She was more than somewhat handsome. I trailed her. She gave me the slip."

REGGIE said nothing, drove on. Mardale's hefty fellow was John Cope. Therefore the mysterious woman had been walking by the wood about the time the barbed wire was poisoned. Reggie took from his pocket the sketch of Mrs. Ward and gave it to Mardale.

"This is the woman I watched," said Mardale. "She is much more handsome and distinguished than it shows. But the same woman."

"The devil it is!" Curran exclaimed.

"Yes, Mrs. Daniel Ward." Reggie's voice rose shrill and plaintive. "Want some more. Lots more. Mardale, havin' lost Mrs. Ward, you tried Mrs. Bruce. With what results?"

"All quiet on the Bruce front when I arrived. Some time elapsed. She drove away towards Bridcombe. I'd had to leave my bike a safe distance from the house. I couldn't catch up with her. She didn't come back till about eleven."

"My ghost!" Reggie muttered. "Kenmouth."

"What's the big idea?" Curran demanded of him.

Reggie drawled: "Mrs. Bruce—right through Bridcombe—along this road—the one place of size is Kenmouth—which is twelve miles—yet she didn't get back till eleven. Give me the registration of her car."

Mardale did, and Reggie purred, "I wish you'd deal with the Durminster end."

"What is there to deal with?"

"My dear chap! Mysterious woman came by bus from Durminster. You now have Mrs. Ward's portrait. You might find bus people, other people who know where she resides."

They left Mardale at the Packhorse yard gate.

As they arrived at the Dolphin Curran invited Reggie upstairs.

He assured Reggie there were a good many things he wanted to know.

"Same or similar want by me," said Reggie.

"First of all, what's your idea about Mrs. Ward now? There was strong probability the morphia old Ward ate came from Mrs. Bruce. My interrogation of her made it all but certain. Now we're thrown right back to the start; Mrs. Daniel Ward, convicted poisoner, was near the spot at the time poison was placed for the girl to get it."

"Which will not suffice to convict Mrs. Ward once more."

"I know it won't. The only motive Mrs. Ward could have for killing her daughter is wild hate because the girl was her husband's child. Mrs. Bruce had a big profit motive. I'd like to know what your real line is, Mr. Fortune. Your bright lad Mardale fell for Mrs. Ward at sight, yet you handed him the job of tracking her down."

"I want her and I want her quick. So she shouldn't slip through our fingers and something else happen."

"You blew up at Mardale's losing Mrs. Bruce."

"He didn't lose, he found. Proved Kenmouth was the only place she could have gone and her sudden journey there was compelled by the alarmin' activities of Chief Constable Curran."

Curran smiled. "I certainly did frighten the lady. Well then, suppose we assume Mrs. Bruce rushed off to Kenmouth because she worked the poisoned-peach trick in concert with someone there; who is the someone?"

"I wonder. Possibly the vague man, observed before the first attempt on Rosalind, since unobserved. Possibly a person of scientific knowledge. Possibly person known but hitherto ignored. Thought of goin' to Kenmouth myself. If you wouldn't mind puttin' more and heavier pressure on Mrs. Bruce. Might use one point of evidence given at Mrs. Ward's trial."

"Which point?"

"Did you see Mrs. Bruce's servants?"

Curran was annoyed. "I saw a cheeky young maid and an old gardener."

"Could be more than a couple. Parlor-maid who hated Mrs. Daniel." Reggie gave Curran the copied portrait of the parlor-maid. "The smug Miss Bertha Smithson as she appeared at the Ward trial. Might inquire when Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Bruce's cheeky young maid and ancient gardener saw Bertha Smithson last."

Curran glowered. "Do you suppose Smithson is in service with Mrs. Bruce?"

"Could be. Might put one more question. Why did Mrs. Bruce ring the hospital this morning and ask if her daughter was seriously ill. She hadn't been told of the change for the worse."

They left the Dolphin by different doors and took different directions. . . .

VIII

UNWILLINGLY the maid who had admitted Curran the afternoon before told him Mrs. Bruce was not at home. Curran gave her a ferocious scowl, walked round the house, and sought the ancient gardener.

"How's yourself, old boy?"

"Mustn't complain."

"You're a marvel. How's Mrs. Bruce? I thought I'd have found her with you."

"Her? She ain't been in the garden today. She's a lady, she is, none of them bothering stirabouts."

"You remind me. I ran into a stir-about some time ago." Curran opened his wallet and took out the portrait of the parlor-maid. "I have heard tell she came down to these parts." He displayed the portrait. "Ever come across her anywhere round here?"

The old man looked, muttered, "'Struth! She's the worse for wear since that there was drawed."

"Do you see her often?" said Curran carelessly.

"Why, o' course I do! She's Mrs. Foot."

Curran showed no surprise, no interest. "Is her husband going strong?" he asked.

"She ain't got no husband; leastways she never brought none here."

"Where does she live?"

"She lives here, o' course. She's the housekeeper, and Mrs. Bruce thinks no end of her."

"Some people are born lucky," said Curran.

He hurried to the house and rang the bell again.

The door opened at once. "Mistress has not come in, sir," said the maid.

"But I'm coming in," Curran answered, and acted on his words and shut the door. "Now take me to Mrs. Foot."

"Mrs. Foot?" the maid repeated. "Mrs. Foot isn't here, sir. She's gone away for a holiday."

"When did she go?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Before I called, while I was with Mrs. Bruce, or not till I'd left the house?"

"I couldn't say."

"Are you the only other woman servant?"

"There's cook."

"Take me to cook—at the run."

Curran encountered comprehensive rage from the cook.

"Laura Philp, how dare you bring a strange man into my kitchen?"

"The girl's done quite right, ma'am," said Curran. I'm a police officer."

"I don't care who you are, you've no business in my kitchen."

"You'll find I have, and if you obstruct me the law will deal with you. Where is

Mrs. Foot?"

The cook breathed hard. "How should I know? It's not for me to watch the housekeeper's comings and going."

"You know Mrs. Foot came from Manningham."

"I know nothing about the place."

"What time was it Mrs. Foot left the house yesterday?"

"I never heard her go."

"Are you deaf and blind? Or are you telling me Mrs. Foot is still here?"

The cook smoothed her apron. "It's the honest truth, I never noticed she was gone till this morning, and Mrs. Bruce mentioned her going for a holiday."

At the sound of a car driven into the garage, Curran hurried from the kitchen to the hall and there met Mrs. Bruce.

"Good morning, Mr. Curran." Her tone was calm and amiable, her face showed its normal self-satisfaction. "Pray come in." She conducted him to the small prim room of his first visit. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Some time. Have you informed the police ripe peaches were taken from your hothouse some time ago and you suspect Mrs. Daniel Ward stole them?"

"That terrible woman!" Mrs. Bruce quavered. "I thought you would tell the police about the peaches. I'm sure she poisoned Uncle Ben, as she poisoned Daniel and tried to kill Rosalind. I'm sure Rosalind won't be safe, I shan't be safe myself, with Amelia Ward near. It's for you policemen to protect us, find her and convict her again."

"Why did you go out yesterday evening?"

"I wanted some fresh air, so I went for a drive."

"Where to?"

"Just round the country."

"Why weren't you back before eleven?"

"I was, long before. I'd finished supper by ten."

CURRAN rubbed his chin. "Now, this morning. What gave you the idea your adopted daughter had suddenly got worse?"

"Mr. Curran, Rosalind is all I have. I am dreadfully anxious. I am afraid. All I've heard from Dr. Cope is that Rosalind mustn't be disturbed and unless I ask the hospital people they never tell me a word about her. This morning they wouldn't say anything definite. Is she worse?"

"I believe the doctors see their way through. Mrs. Bruce, what has become of Bertha Smithson?"

Mrs. Bruce repeated faintly, "Bertha Smithson?"

"You knew Smithson when she was parlor-maid with Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Ward. Do you tell me you don't know what place she took after that?"

"I had forgotten her maiden name. She married so long ago."

"Why stall? Giving out her name was Mrs. Foot, you've had Bertha Smithson for your housekeeper a long time."

"There is nothing strange in that." Mrs. Bruce recovered composure. "She is a most capable housekeeper."

"Was she much surprised by your Uncle Ebenezer's sudden death?"

"She was indeed; not only surprised but shocked and distressed. Uncle Ben had been kind to her."

"What's Mrs. Foot's view of your missing peaches?"

"She is quite sure Mrs. Ward stole them."

"Is she! Why did you shove Mrs. Foot out of my sight? Why didn't you inform me you had the parlor-maid who gave evidence against Mrs. Daniel Ward, as housekeeper?"

"It never occurred to me she could assist you."

"Where is she now?"

"She has gone for her spring holiday. Where, I don't know. She generally goes to London. She will be back the week after next."

"That's not good enough," said Curran. "She went off for this alleged holiday without saying a word about it to your other servants, without leaving an address, and she went immediately after I'd spotted the peach trick. You also went out soon after in your car. Did you pick up Mrs. Foot on the road?"

"I did not. If she had wanted to be driven anywhere I should have taken her from the house."

"Where did you go this morning."

"I went to consult Dr. Cope."

"The journeys you made will soon be traced. So will your relations with Mrs. Foot. You may expect me again shortly and you'd better not try her game of bolting."

Mrs. Bruce answered with a disdainful stare.

Curran proceeded to the police station.

"How about it, Mr. Strode?" Curran inquired as he sat down in Strode's room, some minutes later.

"About what, sir?"

"Mrs. Bruce."

"She has not communicated with me as to the robbery of which you spoke. I called at her house yesterday but she was out and she hasn't troubled to ring me. I think there must be some mistake."

"There have been plenty, but I've made none. What can you give me on her dodging you last night and today?"

"There was no dodging. Mrs. Bruce had gone out in her car before I arrived at her house. I've not made any inquiries where she went, there being no reason to do so." He flinched under Curran's angry eyes and protested: "If there is any more I could do I should be glad."

"Why wouldn't you hand me Mrs. Foot's record?" said Curran.

"Mrs. Foot?" Strode looked blank. "She has no record I know of."

"She suddenly disappeared yesterday, round about the time you called on Mrs. Bruce, soon after I'd informed you of the ripe peaches lately taken from Mrs. Bruce's hothouse."

"If you'd informed me you suspected Mrs. Foot," Strode retorted, "I'd have asked for her. When you say she has disappeared, what do you mean?"

"I mean the Manningham police want her and require you to find her. Will you circulate her description right away?"

"Certainly I will, sir."

Curran nodded. "Pull her in quick. Try the railway office first. See you again soon."

The sky had grown dark, the sun had vanished above sea fog rolling in upon the hills before Strode finished his elaborate plans for a search throughout the county.

He left the station for another call on Mrs. Bruce. But Mrs. Bruce had just gone out, to see Dr. Cope and look in at the hospital.

* * * * *

After a late lunch Reggie prescribed for himself sleep and took some.

The voice of the matron brought him back to consciousness and his feet. "I am sorry, Mr. Fortune, Dr. Cope says she must see you."

Swiftly but silently Dr. Cope glided into the room. Reggie, contemplating her troubled face, murmured, "There's more light than there was."

"Is there?" Dr. Cope asked. "I have had an extraordinary visit from Mrs. Bruce. She was demanding to see Rosalind, was threatening."

Reggie smiled. "Begin where she began, Doctor, and continue to the end whereat she ended."

When Dr. Cope finished Reggie purred, "Extraordinary interestin' and helpful. Your treatment was perfect. Under pressure you applied the woman let out she knew a second attempt had been made to kill Rosalind. Which she could not have known unless she made the attempt herself or contrived it with others. There is one more little point. Did she drive or walk to your house?"

"She walked. As I drove home she nearly walked under my wheels."

"Splendid. Come round this evening and have a look at Rosalind."

Dr. Cope promised and glided out.

Reggie lay down again and slept and waked to hear that Mr. Curran said Mr. Fortune expected him.

"Oh, yes, yes." Reggie yawned.

Curran marched in.

"Much lighter, yes." Reggie sat up. "Give me all there is."

Curran recounted his interrogations at full length.

"My dear Curran!" Reggie broke into

applause. "You're great. We haven't hard evidence yet, but there's strong probability Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Foot conspired to poison Ebenezer, no doubt whatever Mrs. Bruce had guilty knowledge of the second attempt to kill Rosalind. Hard evidence could be obtained from search now proceedin' with Mrs. Bruce runnin' round in frantic circles and Mrs. Foot pushin' off or pushed off by Mrs. Bruce some place. There's no safe cover for 'em now. Either may turn King's evidence against the other."

Curran nodded. "The best clue is Mrs. B.'s car. Your guess she went to Kenmouth is confirmed."

"Been there myself today. Saw a dark blue Craven sixteen. Don't know where it came from or where it went. Left my chauffeur in Kenmouth. He'll trace Mrs. B.'s car if there hers has been. And she told you she hadn't been anywhere in particular. But though she had her car she arrived at Dr. Cope's house walking, emphasized the walk, by a near miss of Dr. Cope's driving. Trickful female. If you hadn't seen her come home she might have got away with the trick she didn't use the car this morning. She's got away with umpteen tricks in her time. We must catch the female now and end her wicked time on earth."

"But we're not near getting her yet," said Curran slowly. "We're held up by Strode, blast him. I thought he was just a swollen-headed fool, now I'm pretty sure he's been bought by Mrs. Bruce. He's doing everything he can against us."

"Rather not go tiger huntin' with Mr. Inspector Strode. But Mrs. Tigress Bruce can be hunted without him. And fear inspired by you he also will be hunted could turn him against her."

Curran nodded. "I'll give Strode another grilling at once." He departed.

Reggie gazed out through the surging fog, which one moment formed eddies swirling low, and the next piled-up towers of gloom.

Spectral figures appeared. Four men, five, and a woman. The four carried something flat. Stretcher. Casualty being conveyed to the hospital by hand. Road accident? The fog could have made driving dangerous—for jay walkers and jay drivers.

Dr. Cope rushed into the room. "Mr. Fortune! Do come and examine Mrs. Bruce."

"My ghost! Mrs. Bruce was the casualty?"

"Inspector Strode found her near my house wounded and unconscious. Mr. Strode said Mrs. Bruce had walked over from Peverel for another consultation with me. I can't understand why. But her injuries are serious and shock and loss of blood have produced collapse."

"Oh, *help!*" Reggie sighed. "Another attempted murder! With Mrs. Bruce the victim. And I thought things were growin' light. Fog began this afternoon. Come along, Doctor."

Dr. Cope conducted him to the room where Mrs. Bruce lay in bed, the matron and a nurse busy over her.

Body and limbs were motionless. Wounds about the heart had been cleaned. Hands and face were smeared with blood and dirt.

"The breathing is slower than it was," said Dr. Cope.

"Pulse?" Reggie asked.

"Feeble now. And she has become cold—almost clammy. Her skin was rather dry and quite warm."

REGGIE moved the lamp over the bed, then drew back both eyelids and looked into the small pupils of eyes unaffected by the lamp shining upon them.

"Wash out the stomach with permanganate—give her some caffeine and keep her warm."

"But the wounds, Mr. Fortune?" said Dr. Cope earnestly.

"Seen worse wounds. The obscure point is how they were inflicted. Leave her to you now—takin' over from you before the night is far spent."

Reggie's meditative walk out of the room was halted by Strode. "Look here, Mr. Fortune. It's my duty to make inquiries about Mrs. Bruce's condition and your duty to inform me."

"Don't know the first thing about

Mrs. Bruce's condition. You should. You found her."

"I'm not a doctor. Be good enough to inform me how she was wounded."

"I haven't the slightest idea."

"Do you think she'll die?"

"Prospect obscure."

"Is she likely to speak?"

"Not a chance at present. Others might. Come along and speak with Chief Constable Curran. Much could emerge."

Strode's reluctance was plain throughout their fogged journey to the *Dolphin*.

Curran sprang up from the fireside of his bedroom.

"Hallo, Mr. Fortune! What have you got?"

"Inspector Strode," Reggie sighed.

"Have you traced Mrs. Foot, Strode?" Curran asked.

"I haven't had time, have I?" Strode protested. "I've arranged to circulate her description. There's been an absolutely new break. This afternoon I found Mrs. Bruce stabbed and unconscious near Dr. Cope's house."

"The devil you did. What took you there?"

"Mrs. Bruce's maid said she had gone to see Dr. Cope."

"So when you should have been searching for Mrs. Foot you were searching for Mrs. Bruce."

"I couldn't search for Foot myself," Strode complained. "I hoped Mrs. Bruce would give me information concerning Mrs. Foot."

"So you ran from me to Mrs. Bruce," said Curran. "She ran away from you. You followed her and you caught her."

Strode glowered at Curran. "I said I found her. Wounded, helpless."

"You said stabbed," Reggie murmured.

"She'd been wounded in several places."

"Notice anyone anywhere?"

"If I had, I should have stopped him."

"Him?"

"Obviously it was a man's job. No woman could make such wounds."

"Who was the man?"

"Today, Mr. John Cope got no end of a scolding from Mrs. Bruce for annoying Miss Bruce."

"Who told you?"

"They met at Dr. Cope's and quarrelled there. A tradesman's boy going his round heard a lot."

"So you've only one kid witness to put it on Cope," said Curran. "I see much better reason to put it on someone else."

"We have the strongest reason to believe Cope pushed Miss Bruce from the cliff."

"Oh, no, no!" Reggie sighed. "Man who did that couldn't have been Cope. Woman concerned in that could have been Mrs. Foot."

Strode exclaimed: "Out of the question, Mr. Fortune! I ascertained Mrs. Foot was indoors all that day. And you remember Miss Bruce saw a woman she didn't know, a woman who got off the Durminster bus. Cope has been to Durminster several times since and he went in that direction after his row with Mrs. Bruce. So you see, Mr. Curran, the facts confirm my taking the line Cope assaulted her and the old Durminster woman accessory again."

"Tell me where Mrs. Foot was at the time of the assault," said Curran.

"I'm not taking orders from you, and I've finished with you," Strode roared. He marched out.

"Crooked fool," said Curran. "But he has something."

"Oh, yes, Inspector Strode is full of push and go," said Reggie. "Mrs. Daniel made scapegoat for guilty parties by guilty parties."

"You've now given me to understand the attack on Mrs. B. was a fake. I want the medical evidence."

"Bafflin' and perplexin', Mrs. Bruce's condition. Three chest wounds, rather cuts than stabs."

"Strode said she'd been stabbed."

"Hasty fellow, Strode. Wounds from sharp instrument. Small knife. Some loss of blood, no great quantity. Wounds did not penetrate deep enough to be dangerous or to account for her condition, which is total collapse. But she

exhibits symptoms that could have been caused by narcotic poisoning.

"The same old game," Curran exclaimed. "Mrs. Daniel used morphia to poison her husband."

"Evidence she did so was Mrs. Foot's. Who poisoned Ebenezer? Mrs. Bruce. With or without assistance from Mrs. Foot and someone else. However, Mrs. B. would not give Mrs. Daniel a chance to poison her. Also we might learn more about the real cause of Mrs. B.'s symptoms. Come with me and you'll hear Dr. Cope's opinion."

IX

LIGHTS shone through the fog from the hospital. Reggie hurried on and in up to Mrs. Bruce's room.

Dr. Cope answered the silent inquiry of his eyes.

"The caffeine produced some improvement. But she remains unconscious, and is distressed and restless."

Reggie drew the eyelids up from Mrs. Bruce's eyes. The pupils were still contracted and unaffected by light.

She groaned. "It hurts, it hurts."

"What kind of pain?" Reggie asked.

She seemed to see no one. "Sore," she gasped. "Sore—numb—tingling."

Reggie waved Dr. Cope out of the room and followed. "Come and tell Curran," he said, and preceded her downstairs.

"How are things, Doctor?" Curran asked.

She looked anxiously at Reggie and said: "Mrs. Bruce's condition seems the same as Rosalind's was."

Curran also turned to Reggie. "The old Mrs. D. line, eh?"

"Not the old one," Reggie murmured. "Mrs. Bruce is doin' all she knows to make her condition seem same like Rosalind's. And she knows a lot. But Dr. Cope observed decisive differences. Mrs. Bruce exhibited unmistakable symptoms of morphia poisonin'. Dr. Cope gave her the best treatment for a morphia case, which brought her back to consciousness. Then she said she had other symptoms which morphia couldn't produce. Numb tinglin' soreness. Typical symptoms of aconitine, which could not produce morphia symptoms.

"Before Mrs. Bruce was wounded, she took morphia in order to collapse like Rosalind after wounds and thus furnish evidence the same person attacked and poisoned 'em both with aconitine. Sold us clever tricks I have not bought. They prove she knows a lot more than she could know if she were straight. Knows aconite was scratched into Rosalind. Absolute proof Mrs. Bruce contrived the injection herself or arranged it with someone else."

"Mr. Fortune," Dr. Cope cried, "do you really think Mrs. Bruce capable of —of such things?"

"Not a nice woman," Reggie answered. "My dear Doctor, hard day for you. Go home now."

"I'll take you home, Doctor," said Curran. "It's a nasty night. Get your things on."

She hurried away.

"How good do you think Mrs. B.'s chance of recovery?" asked Curran.

"She will recover—from her present state," Reggie drawled.

"What's your opinion of her wounds? Could she have stabbed herself?"

"Oh, yes. Wounds could have been self-inflicted."

"I must push off," said Curran. "Dr. Cope's ready. See you tomorrow."

Reggie sat down by the fire and lit his pipe.

Quaint game, Curran's. Purpose obvious. Getting Dr. Cope to himself would only get him her guess at the place where Strode showed her Mrs. Bruce collapsed. Even if Strode did show her the actual spot, Curran hadn't a chance in the fog.

Still and all, first-class fighting man.

Reggie blew a final smoke ring, went to Mrs. Bruce's room, beckoned the nurse out, and whispered:

"Please make sure she stays put. There are chances she'll try what she shouldn't."

"I understand," said the nurse.

Reggie went along the front corridor,

met the night nurse on duty there and said:

"Watch Miss Bruce's door, please. She could have a bad break."

These careful precautions taken against Mrs. Bruce making an attempt to reach Rosalind, Reggie retired for the night satisfied with them but not with himself. Should have seen through things. Short on intelligence. . . .

The fog had not extended to Kenmouth. But of all unlikely spots to trace Mrs. Bruce's car the most unlikely must be the old-fashioned streets, too narrow for a car to be left in them.

Sam started from the Bridcombe end of Kenmouth. He chatted with every garage man and car-park attendant and chauffeur he encountered, but failed to extract recollection of Mrs. Bruce's number, ZYW .00325. He dropped the car chat and discoursed on women. Give him a woman good and ripe. The only one he'd see in Kenmouth must have been a visitor. He elaborated Reggie's brief remarks upon Mrs. Bruce into description of neat middle age.

At length he observed a listener, hanging on his words. He drew off. The listener followed him and spoke. He had often seen the lady the gent wanted to click with. She drove over every once in a while and had a cup of tea at Lumb's, the high-class confectioner's.

Sam bestowed half a crown and asked the way to Lumb's. He found the shop, went in.

An oldish woman appeared, and Sam hoped he wasn't too late to have some tea and a piece of cake.

The tables were all vacated before she brought him his tray. Sam ate like a schoolboy. She hovered round him. Sam laughed. Talk about a piece of cake! In Bridcombe, he heard some lady often drove over to Kenmouth just for the sake of having tea at Lumb's. He was jolly glad he took the tip.

THE OLDISH waitress informed him the only Bridcombe lady known there was Mrs. Bruce. She did come often, but more often than not a gentleman joined her. A chap who lived in Church Street, Mr. Aubrey.

Sam paid the waitress double the bill and departed.

Aubrey! What a fool name! He got Mr. blooming Aubrey's number from a postman. Number seven.

A woman came out, charwoman by the look of her, and bustled away. Somebody else came out. Woman or man? In the half-dark Sam couldn't be sure, the figure didn't show under a loose shapeless coat. The blighter turned into a mews, got a car out and drove off.

Sam caught nothing but a glimpse—pale face, large car—make and number invisible. No use ringing Fortune. No hope of getting more in the blasted dark. . . .

Mardale had a pleasant afternoon. Durminster amused him. A real country town, real country all round. Mrs. Daniel Ward couldn't have chosen a better place to cover her tracks. She might live anywhere in the town or round about and nobody but the people near her house would take any notice of her.

The one fixed point was the Bridcombe bus—and she might have got on that outside Durminster. Some buses had girl conductresses. Mardale employed his fascinations on the girls.

Chaff about the way women stopped buses and got in and out made the girls laugh. He flung them a careless but accurate description of Mrs. Daniel Ward's clothes. He'd bet they'd never seen a woman dressed in that fashion on any bus they worked. What would he bet? Mardale said twenty-five Turkish if they smoked—or kisses if they didn't. One rasped she'd picked up an oldish lady just like he said several times at the toll-gate stop.

"Sweetheart," Mardale chuckled. "I'm a bit of a liar myself. But you're a good one." He handed a pack of cigarettes, strolled away.

Out of sight he turned into the Bridcombe road. The toll gate was half a mile outside Durminster.

Why should a woman walk that distance to stop the bus? Probably Mrs.

Ward lived somewhere near the stop. Mardale quested up the nearest by-road and descried several bright, colorful cottages, lichened thatch green and orange, white and red and yellow walls, and the heath spangled gold with gorse and broom blossom. Real England. Mrs. Ward would be right away from it all there.

Children were playing round the cottages. Mardale asked a girl what the village was called.

She scorned him. There wasn't a village, it was Durminster Heath.

The kids round the cottages spread out. Mardale saw a woman pick up a little girl and mother her. Tall woman — rather handsome — unforgettable woman—Mrs. Daniel Ward. She had come from a primrose-yellow cottage all by itself.

Thus assured of Mrs. Ward's location, Mardale went back to Durminster, asked house agents about the heath cottages and learnt that the yellow one had been rented by a Mrs. Bancroft. . . .

Mr. Fortune was in the hospital corridor listening to the night nurses before seven.

They reported an almost untroubled night. Mrs. Bruce had made an effort to go out of her room, she'd been put back to bed without difficulty, she seemed not to know what she was doing.

Miss Bruce didn't wake till six. She was much better.

Reggie smiled and passed on; just careful enough, Reginald, but only just. If Mrs. Bruce had got to the girl!

He went into Rosalind's room. She was gazing out at the clear blue sky.

"Needn't wish you good morning." He sat down beside her. "It's come."

"Yes. It is delightful."

"Fog all gone," said Reggie. "Soon have you up and out again. Where did you go the other day?"

Rosalind supposed she shouldn't have gone beyond the grounds. But the bluebells were fascinating. Reggie agreed. Pity people picked 'em.

Rosalind hesitated. She had seen a lady walking in the woods who picked a few bluebells. She thought the lady was the woman she had met on the Durminster road the day she fell, and yet not the woman who went up the Tout. Rosalind couldn't imagine how she ever supposed they were the same person, how she ever thought the woman on the road a vague, grey creature. In fact the lady wasn't vague at all, distinguished, rather noble, charming.

Reggie left Rosalind, and made a meditative breakfast.

Obviously Mrs. Ward couldn't bear the idea of Rosalind thinking she'd contrived the cliff fall, Mrs. Ward knew it had been contrived, therefore had to tell Rosalind she was not the woman on the cliff top. No doubt the truth.

Possibly suspected both Mrs. Bruce and Mrs. Foot. The woman must have been Mrs. Foot. Had Mrs. Ward realized that and decided she must wipe out Mrs. Foot to save Rosalind?

CURRAN broke in upon Reggie's rueful efforts with a story of his own.

"Well, Mr. Fortune, I got Dr. Cope to show me the exact place she found Mrs. Bruce and this morning I've given the whole road a close examination. There are spots of blood over some distance. No footprints, so we can't establish that the place Mrs. B. was found is the place she was assaulted. It rather looks as if she'd staggered quite a way after being wounded. Assailant hasn't left a trace. No weapon anywhere about. So wounds can't have been self-inflicted."

"Nice point," Reggie murmured.

Curran grinned. "I don't care for it myself. If someone stabbed her she'd scream and struggle. But never heard a sound. Yet Strode pushed on me and you the stabbing was a murderous assault. He won't put that over. He's doing his most to conceal she stabbed herself to escape suspicion of the attempts at murdering Miss Bruce and arranging Mrs. Foot's disappearance. Strode had ample time to remove the weapon. But we've nothing like hard evidence against Mrs. B. nor Strode. They've been too smart for us, and still are."

"I wonder," Reggie murmured.

"Has Mrs. B. talked?"

"Oh, no, no. She tried to get at Rosalind in the night."

"The devil she did!"

"Rather devilish woman. Attempt havin' been expected was prevented."

A maid announced that Inspector Strode had called to see Mr. Fortune. Strode marched into the room.

"Hallo!" said Curran. "Have you brought the weapon?"

Strode drew himself up. "Has Mrs. Bruce recovered sufficiently to make a statement?"

"If she chooses." Reggie sighed. "Come on and ask her to make a statement."

"I'd rather see the lady alone, Mr. Fortune."

"No doubt you would," said Curran. "But we've had enough of your lone-hand tricks."

Mrs. Bruce's dark little eyes glanced from one to other of the three.

"I do hope you feel better this morning, ma'am." Strode was nervous. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but it is for your own sake. I want a statement from you of how you were attacked."

Her hands plucked at the bedclothes. "I thought I was killed."

"You were unconscious when found," Strode agreed. "Try and remember what happened before."

After some moments she spoke. She was going to consult Dr. Cope about Rosalind. The fog came over. She hadn't reached Dr. Cope's house when a woman sprang at her and struck her. Then she fell and everything died into darkness.

Curran said sharply: "Are you sure about the person who stabbed you?"

"Yes, quite sure," Mrs. Bruce answered.

"Was she Mrs. Foot?"

"Oh, no!" Mrs. Bruce cried. "It was Amelia."

"Who is Amelia?"

"Daniel's wife."

"Mrs. Daniel Ward, eh?" Curran grunted. "Her appearance must have changed, but in spite of the fog you recognized her."

"She has not changed."

Curran turned to Reggie. "We can get on now, Mr. Fortune."

"On and on," Reggie murmured. "Strode leadin'."

"Well, gentlemen," Strode triumphed, "Mr. Curran owes me an apology. The statement you heard from Mrs. Bruce made the facts clear. They show your idea of her stabbing herself utter nonsense. There's no doubt Mrs. Bruce was stabbed by that Mrs. Daniel Ward who murdered her husband, and as soon as she was let out of prison came here to run her old hate against the Ward family."

"You're the perishing limit, Strode," said Curran, and went after Reggie, who had gone down to the hall. "It's our show now, Mr. Fortune."

"Always was," Reggie sighed.

"What's the best first move?"

"Seein' Dr. Cope and matron, tellin' 'em send Mrs. Bruce home good and quick, keepin' Rosalind safe from her and makin' Mrs. B. worry how much we know."

Dr. Cope's conscientious earnestness gave him some trouble, but the matron was eager to be rid of Mrs. Bruce. As this conference ended a phone call switched from the office to the matron's room asked for Mr. Fortune.

"Speakin'," said Reggie.

"Sam 'ere, sir."

"Go ahead."

THE CHAUFFEUR cleared his throat and began:

"I got the goods on the lady. Mrs. Bruce 'as been driving over to Kenmouth reg'lar for to neck with a rum cove, name of Aubrey. I seen 'im close, this morning. 'E's oldish, mop o' w'ite 'air, face thin and wrinkled and yellow, you'd easy take 'im for an old woman if you didn't see 'is trousers. And 'e goes about in one o' them old-time loose-shape coats that 'ide a man's shape. I spotted 'im first leaving 'is 'ouse last night. A woman as looked like a char 'ad come out a bit before.

"'E buzzed off at 'igh speed, slid into one o' them little garages and drove a

big car away. I tried 'is 'ouse. All pitch dark, but some big car came from the corner just as I got there. I got a constable to help me and we watched the 'ouse from different sides. Some time after Mr. Aubrey returned, and the constable saw him come up soft-footed. Evidently he put 'imself to bed. So I chanced my 'and and 'is garage. The car was there, a Vernon, black, number ZYW o-o-four-o-one. The Durshire registration and the figures show he registered near the time Mrs. Bruce registered her Craven sixteen.

"Early this morning I went to 'is 'ouse again and saw the blinking 'ouse 'as a side door round the corner. So you can take it Aubrey drove straight from the garage to the side door, entered the 'ouse and pushed off again quick. Mr. Aubrey didn't show 'imself till just now 'e slipped down the street into a visitors' club."

"Splendid," said Reggie. "Keep contact with his car, havin' motor bike or car ready to follow fast."

Reggie hurried away and reported to the impatient Curran.

"What next?" Curran demanded.

"I wonder."

"How much do you go on this Aubrey?"

"Who is Aubrey, what is he that Mrs. Bruce requires him? Her alleged defunct husband whom we've sought in vain? Could be. Could also be the vague man Rosalind once encountered near the cliff, the man who arranged the fall and dragged her into the sea. Mr. Aubrey wears old-fashioned clothes makin' him look like a woman. The sole reason he could have for murderin' Rosalind is profit from Mrs. Bruce inheritin' the whole Ward estate. Therefore conclude Aubrey and she both took part in poisonin' Ebenezer and in the first and second attempts to kill Rosalind."

"What about the woman spotted coming out of Aubrey's house last night? It's a good bet she was Mrs. Foot."

"I am not betting," Reggie drawled.

The matron interrupted. There was a call for Mr. Fortune.

"Mardale here," said the telephone. "Please drive over at once to the Durminster Heath bus stop. I'll meet you."

X

HUSTLED out and deposited in Reggie's car, Curran grumbled: "Why the devil couldn't the fellow say what he'd got for you?"

"I haven't the slightest idea." Reggie lay back and drove furiously.

As they approached the bus stop Mardale emerged from the by-road.

"Turn down that road, Mr. Fortune." He jumped into the car. "Mrs. Daniel Ward, under the name of Mrs. Bancroft, has been living since March in a cottage on the heath. About ten this morning two children found a dead woman under bushes near the cottage. I examined the body. There were no visible injuries. The police arrived while I rang you."

Reggie was affectionate. "Couldn't have done better, couldn't have been quicker."

He drove straight into the police activities and Curran jumped out of the car.

"Where's Inspector Strode? Not here? Why the devil isn't he? I'm Chief Constable Curran of Manningham with Inspector Mardale of the C.I.D. and Mr. Reginald Fortune. We required Mr. Strode to search for a certain woman and you've just happened across this one."

"I am in charge of this district, Inspector Bowles," a heavyweight answered.

"Let me see the woman."

Her face was pallid, damp, distorted.

Curran studied it for several minutes before he whispered to Reggie: "I'll swear it's Bertha Smithson, though much aged, so she is Mrs. Foot. See what you think. Look at her eyes how they glare."

"Pupils are dilated, yes," Reggie murmured and contemplated the body. "Been moved."

The police surgeon, Dr. Gule, introduced himself to Mr. Fortune and was

sorry he'd had to move the body.

Reggie sighed. "Where was body when first seen by you?"

"Hidden among those bushes." Dr. Gule pointed.

"Oh. Not so completely hidden it couldn't be discovered. Were all limbs bent as they now are?"

"Yes."

"What did you infer?"

"It appeared to me a normal death contraction."

"Bears on time of death. Limbs not now rigid. Rigour don't commence till hours after death. Which fixes the time of death before yesterday morning. Now tell me the cause of death."

"I have found no clear indication, Mr. Fortune. I should be very glad if you would examine the body."

Reggie knelt, drew clothes aside.

A car roared into sight coming from Durminster. Curran met it.

"You're a fine searcher, Strode. Kids find the woman you couldn't."

"That's enough, Mr. Curran!" Strode barked.

Curran laughed. "My lad, I warned you you must find the woman quick, and you've let her be murdered."

"Murdered, was she?" Strode sniffed and turned to Inspector Bowles. "What does the surgeon say?"

Bowles shook a sullen head. "Dr. Gule hasn't said anything. He has Mr. Fortune with him."

Strode made for them. Reggie looked up with plaintive eyes.

"Was she murdered?" Strode cried.

"Woman could have been murdered."

"How?"

"Could be poison."

"I thought as much!" Strode exulted, and went off to the cottage. A buxom girl opened the door at his knock.

"Mrs. Bancroft!" he shouted.

"Mrs. Bancroft ain't to be disturbed," said the girl.

A quiet voice spoke from the cottage. "Let the men in, Peggie."

Peggie reluctantly admitted them to the pleasant room where her mistress sat knitting.

"I am Inspector Strode, madam," Strode announced.

Curran was studying her face. "My name is Curran, Chief Constable of Manningham."

"Pray sit down."

Curran admired her. Handsome woman. Rather above things and far away. Didn't need anything on earth nor fear anything.

"Why did you take this cottage here, madam?" Strode roared.

"Because I liked it."

"Why did you call yourself Mrs. Bancroft?"

"Because Bancroft was my mother's maiden name and she wished that I should.

STRODE scowled. "Your real name is Mrs. Daniel Ward, isn't it?"

"I was Daniel Ward's wife long ago."

"And you were convicted of murdering him?"

"I was sentenced to death. I was kept in prison for years."

"As soon as you were let out you took this cottage near Bridcombe, where Mrs. Bruce and Miss Bruce reside. What was your object?"

"I hoped I might see all going well with them."

"Why didn't you tell 'em you were here?"

"Because it would have been cruel."

"Cruel, eh?" Strode sniffed. "Soon after your release from prison your father-in-law, Ebenezer Ward, was poisoned. Have you any idea who poisoned him?"

Mrs. Ward's fingers stopped knitting. "I am surprised to hear he was poisoned," she said.

Strode glared. "You've been seen hanging round Mrs. Bruce's house. You met your daughter Rosalind several times. She was subsequently found unconscious from attempts to murder her. What do you say about that?"

Mrs. Ward's knitting fell off her lap. "Are you sure? Has Rosalind's life been endangered again?"

Curran cut Strode out with the quick reply, "No one's going to have another chance at Miss Rosalind. She's in safe

hands and she'll be kept safe."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Ward. Her eyes closed.

"Come on now," Strode snapped. "Tell me how you handled Mrs. Foot."

Mrs. Ward looked bewildered. "Who is Mrs. Foot?" she asked.

"You know who she was," Strode answered. "The woman found by your cottage this morning stone dead. A very old acquaintance of yours."

Curran interrupted: "The woman was Bertha Smithson, Mrs. Ward. Your parlor-maid. Under the name of Mrs. Foot she was taken on by Mrs. Bruce as housekeeper."

"Housekeeper? With Naomi and Rosalind? I should have thought—" Mrs. Ward stopped. "There is nothing more I can tell you."

"Then I must send you to the police station where you will be detained for enquiries," Strode said. "Put a few things together, what you need at night."

Mrs. Ward," said Curran, "you've the right to consult a lawyer before answering any further questions."

Mrs. Ward thanked him and went upstairs.

"What was the idea of that interference, Curran?" Strode asked.

"A man who doesn't play fair gets interference from me every time."

"You've no business to meddle."

Mrs. Ward came down with a little dressing case. Strode bustled her out into the police car. Curran remained in the cottage and Strode, coming back, asked angrily if he meant to stay.

Curran grinned. "Crack along with your search. I'm here for the duration."

Strode moved round the room, opened cupboards and table drawers, turned over the contents. Empty-handed, he entered the kitchen.

"What's been burnt here this morning?" he asked Peggie. "What papers?"

"I ain't used no paper for the fire only the bit o' newspaper as it was laid with last night."

"Has your mistress been out this morning?"

"Not till you took her away."

"Did she go out during the night?"

"No, she did not. You're wicked to say such."

Curran chuckled. "Where do you go from here, Strode?"

Strode went out of the kitchen, into the garden. Curran sat down on a bench and smoked, watching Strode pace to and fro.

Strode came to a shed and pried about the faggots and coal inside. Curran was at his elbow the moment after he picked up a knife and a small wide-mouthed bottle.

Reggie came down the garden.

"Hallo, Mr. Fortune," Strode cried. "Give me your opinion of this knife."

"Well, well," Reggie murmured. "Surgical."

"Was Mrs. Bruce stabbed with a knife like this one?"

"Wounds of Mrs. Bruce could have been inflicted by stabbing with this or similar knife."

"Strode also found a bottle," said Curran.

"Here you are." Strode displayed it.

Reggie gazed about the shed.

"Where is precise spot you discovered bottle and knife?"

"By these faggots," said Strode.

REGGIE glanced from the shed to the hedge. "That bein' that," he drawled, "bottle for me. Must test contents."

"You think the poison that killed Mrs. Foot was in the bottle?" said Strode.

"Presence of bottle where found, otherwise idiotically purposeless." Reggie sighed. "Dr. Gule wants me in Durminster. Give you a lift?"

"In a minute," said Curran.

He crossed the garden to the kitchen, smiled at Peggie's wrathful face.

"Have you been in your wood and coal shed lately?"

"I got coal and kindling for to lay the fires last night."

"Did you notice anything uncommon there?"

"There wasn't anythink."

"Has your mistress been down the garden since?"

"That she hasn't. If there is anythink wrong in the shed now, she didn't have nothink to do with it. I can swear she didn't—"

Reggie drove off with Curran and Mardale.

"The knife and bottle were obviously placed in the shed to provide evidence against Mrs. Ward," said Curran. "I take a poor view of Strode finding 'em."

"An easy throw from the hedge would have landed them in the shed," said Mardale.

"Anything else?" Reggie drawled.

"The woman was placed where she was found during the night," said Mardale. "The body wasn't there yesterday evening. This morning sand patches showed tire marks which were not there yesterday, Ludlow Royal Balloon."

Reggie smiled.

"So Mrs. Foot was brought in a car," said Curran. "Mr. Fortune, would you say Mrs. Foot was dead before being put near Mrs. Ward's cottage?"

"No shadow of doubt Mrs. Foot dead long before."

"Was she stabbed with that knife Strode picked up in the shed?"

"Neither blood nor wound apparent. Visible mark on arm from syringe injection. Probable hypothesis—aconitine."

"And you think the shed bottle contained the same dope?"

"Expect test will prove lots of aconitine put into the grease bottle contains."

"It's evident the crimes are linked," said Curran, "and Mrs. Bruce has lied throughout, but it's impossible Mrs. B. took part in dumping Mrs. Foot's body or in planting the knife and bottle. She couldn't get out of the hospital."

"Look back into other years," Reggie murmured, "and see in bright array operators providin' evidence Mrs. Ward murdered her husband—poison that killed him found in her room—so now poison administered to Rosalind, poison that killed Mrs. Foot, found in Mrs. Ward's shed, but this time you've proved Mrs. Ward had nothing to do with the poison found. Mrs. Ward has been framed for Mrs. Foot's murder. Who framed her? The people who employed Mrs. Foot to frame her for her husband's murder. They were putting Ebenezer Ward's murder and the attempts to murder Rosalind on Mrs. Ward and we didn't buy it. You scared Mrs. B. you'd get 'em through Mrs. Foot. So they killed her quick. And used the old tricks so Mrs. Ward should be their scapegoat again. But they underestimate our humble capacity. Action through Mrs. Foot would get the goods quickest."

Curran looked blank. "How the devil can we act through Mrs. Foot now she's gone?"

Reggie explained. . . .

"Mrs. Bruce is not at home, sir." The maid Laura flinched under Curran's grim eyes. "They're keeping her in hospital."

"I know all about her. Show me Mrs. Foot's room."

"Gracious goodness!" Laura said, but scurried upstairs and along the first-floor passage. "Here, sir, this was Mrs. Foot's, this and the next."

"Run away."

The rooms were handsomely decorated and furnished, altogether beyond the usual for a housekeeper. Mrs. Bruce had done Mrs. Foot proud.

Curran opened cabinets, drawers, wardrobes, discovered nothing significant, but many clothes, so many Mrs. Foot couldn't have taken much with her. Marks on the sitting-room wall showed where a picture must have been removed lately. A smaller mark on the bedroom wall and ashes in the coal scuttle proved something had recently been burnt there.

Curran examined the ashes. Not burnt letters. Photograph of somebody Mrs. Bruce had to destroy lest it give her away. Perhaps two photographs.

A car arrived. The cook and Laura helped Mrs. Bruce into the house. Laura scurried upstairs and gasped:

"Mistress has come back and she's ready to see you now."

The cook fled past him as he went into the room.

"You've recovered quickly, Mrs. Bruce."

WRAPPED in a fur rug, she lay upon a settee, her face shadowed.

"I am still weak and in much pain," she answered. "But I wished to come home."

"Naturally. Since Mrs. Foot has been found."

"Has she, indeed? Where had she gone?"

"We found her dead. She was murdered."

"Murdered?" Mrs. Bruce cried. "Who killed her?"

"Tell me who had a motive for killing her."

"I don't think anyone could have any motive. Oh, but there is Amelia Ward. I suppose it was Amelia again."

"Do you? When Mrs. Foot left your house there were two photographs in her rooms. What have you done with them?"

"I have not been in her rooms since she went away. She may have taken them."

"Oh, no. The two were destroyed."

"Then Mrs. Foot must have destroyed them herself. It is not unusual to get rid of old photographs."

"Getting rid of awkward evidence is a very common trick, Mrs. Bruce. Who was the person of whom Mrs. Foot kept two photographs, the person she had her eye on all the time?"

"I cannot imagine. It might be her father or mother or husband."

"That is nonsense," said Curran. "So I shall take other measures, Mrs. Bruce." He grinned at her, marched ponderously out.

But outside the house he stopped and listened and soon heard her voice. She was on the phone. A Bridcombe number. Police station. Getting Strode quick.

Curran hurried away, but not to the police station, to the Bridcombe banks. There were three. The manager of the second admitted that Mrs. Foot had an account there.

Curran leaned across the manager's table. "Mrs. Foot has been found dead and the police have reason to believe the unfortunate woman was murdered. So I must ask you, had she deposited any papers in the bank?"

The manager said Mrs. Foot left a deed box. He could not say whether it contained papers.

"Of course you couldn't," said Curran. "And of course you won't allow any person access to it. You'll wait for instructions from your chief, keeping everything strictly secret. Thank you very much. . . ."

Strode jumped up as Curran entered his room.

"Cheerio, my lad," Curran said. "Mrs. Foot's papers are in a bank and I've arranged no one shall get at 'em. You may now run round to Mrs. Bruce and advise her."

"My time is fully occupied with enquiries concerning Mrs. Ward alias Bancroft. And you have no right to make arrangements Mrs. Foot's papers should be kept secret."

"I've beat you to it, Strode, you and Mrs. Bruce and all."

Curran swung out. . . .

At four o'clock Curran was the sole occupant of the Dolphin smoking room he preferred. Then Reggie looked in to sit down beside him with a plaintive greeting.

"Could you have tea, tea and toast, lots, and cakes?"

"You mean high tea," said Curran and ordered it.

"Not high, no. Only ample. However." Eyes closed, Reggie continued: "Opinion of Dr. Gule, Mrs. Foot's death caused by injected aconitine. My opinion also. But proof difficult. Aconitine in dead body may evade tests. Other test has proved bottle stuff to have big percentage of aconitine. Same like the grease with which Rosalind's arms and legs were scratched. That makes it practically certain one operator able to obtain rare poison in large quantities operated on Rosalind, on Mrs Foot and against Mrs. Ward. Moreover, Mrs. Bruce knew so much she decided she must cover herself, shamming the oper-

ator's special poison was stabbed into her by Mrs. Ward.

The laden tea tray silenced and occupied Reggie.

When the waitress left them, "I've not done too bad either," said Curran. He related his action and the reactions of Mrs. Bruce and Strode.

"Now we should not be long," Reggie purred. "Papers of Mrs. Foot could provide deliverance from affliction and a happy ending. As to Mrs. Bruce phoning Strode, what do you think he answered?"

"His answer could only have been a play for time. I scorched him so hot he is now in a flaming funk. He may be backing her, she backing him in the same escape story. That depends on neither seeing a chance to get off at the expense of the other."

THE waitress announced a telephone call for Mr. Curran. He summoned Reggie and whispered: "Mardale."

"Is that Mr. Fortune?" Mardale asked.

"Speaking. Where are you?"

"Kenmouth. I've traced the car. It has Ludlow Royal Balloon tires. The owner, Aubrey, Church Street, took it out of the garage this afternoon to have it filled and put it back in the garage. Sam is waiting with a sports car."

"What can your motor bike do?"

"I've done up to seventy-five."

"Pass the chap when he quits the town and keep ahead out of his sight. Sam will tail him."

Reggie told Curran what Mardale had said and murmured: "Strode not the only person Mrs. Bruce phoned."

"You mean she phoned this Kenmouth fellow?"

"No other conclusion possible. Our Mr. Aubrey conveyed Mrs. Foot, poisoned and dead, from his house in Church Street and planted the corpse, also knife and poison bottle, where they would indicate another murder by Mrs. Daniel Ward. But this last time he's failed to put it across. Mrs. Daniel couldn't have murdered Mrs. Foot."

"I know," said Curran. "Yet it's nothing like proof Aubrey and Mrs. Bruce are connected."

"Obvious, demonstrated, indisputable link—Mrs. Foot—Bertha Smithson of the Daniel Ward murder suddenly slaughtered when you and I alarmed Mrs. Bruce. She accused Mrs. Ward of the slaughter, Aubrey providin' the evidence."

Curran frowned. "You can't say it amounts to more than a guess Mrs. Bruce has been in contact with Aubrey."

"My dear chap! It was not till you'd given Mrs. B. the works Aubrey took his car to a gasoline pump. Why didn't he fill up earlier? Because he thought he was safe. She must have phoned him you were hot on the track, and if he didn't do something you'd get 'em both. So our Aubrey prepared for a long run."

"Have you any idea who Aubrey is?"

"Could be alleged defunct husband of Mrs. Bruce."

"If you're right," said Curran, "he has a strong motive for murdering Ebenezer Ward and Miss Rosalind."

"Oh, yes. Release of Mrs. Daniel gave them chance to kill again."

"You expect Aubrey to attempt a break-away by himself or with Mrs. Bruce?"

"Oh yes. Practically certain."

"And you've fixed him between Mardale and Sam." Curran grinned.

"Could settle everything. But we must keep Mrs. Bruce under observation from now."

XI

OCCASIONAL rifts in the clouds speeding over the night sky showed stars gleaming from velvet dark. There was no sound but the rustle of wind and the surge and faint roar of the sea upon beach and cliff.

Reggie walked past Mrs. Bruce's house. One or two upper windows showed light; the rest were black.

Something stirred in the hedge. "Hang it all!" said Curran.

Reggie took cover with him and asked: "Not even Strode?"

"No one. And from the look of the

windows Mrs. Bruce and the servants have gone to bed. Still we might wait awhile."

"Oh, yes. Till daybreak."

From the garden the night air bore mingled fragrance of hawthorn, lilac, lilies. A distant flash shone, moved swiftly, vanished. Reggie whispered to Curran, "Stand fast," and crept on some way beyond him.

The throb of a motor engine, the glare of a headlight drew near. Reggie stopped. The headlight discovered him. A motor bicycle coasted to him and Mardale said:

"Call it two hundred yards' lead of Aubrey."

"Put bike in hedge and follow me close."

Two side lights glimmered. A big car purred. Glimmer and purr died into the rustling dark.

Mardale followed Reggie's stealthy return to Curran.

"Rum figure, shapeless, gone down the garden," Curran whispered. "There's another gate just below here."

Sounds, movement from the house were faintly audible. Two figures loomed, speaking together, both shapeless.

Beams of light from the road pierced the gloom.

"Hold it, Sam!" Reggie shouted.

A woman's voice whimpered. Sam's car lamps cast a livid light upon her terrified face.

"Good evening, Mrs. Bruce," said Reggie.

The other figure moved behind her. Curran dragged into the light a man wearing a loose caped overcoat, a man of hollow, wrinkled cheeks.

"Oh, yes, yes," said Reggie. "Mr. Aubrey."

"I've been wanting Mr. Aubrey for some time," said Curran. "The way Mrs. Bruce got him here does me proud."

Aubrey struck at her throat.

She clung to him and cried: "David, dear, dear David!"

He struggled a moment, one hand at his own mouth; they fell and lay clasped together shrouded in darkness.

Curran flashed a torch on them. Blood was coming from her neck, from a wound in which a knife remained.

"Man's collapse is genuine," Reggie murmured. "I should say he swallowed poison. Must rush her to hospital."

* * * * *

Reggie was at breakfast. The open window admitted sounds of conversation. He saw Curran and Mardale and called: "Come right up."

But the matron came first. "Inspector Strode has telephoned, Mr. Fortune, enquiring about Mrs. Bruce. He seemed annoyed."

Reggie smiled and as Curran and Mardale came in asked: "Seen Strode?"

"Not yet," said Curran.

"Our Strode rang matron. He wanted her view of Mrs. Bruce."

"How is the woman?"

"Dead. Mr. Bruce also dead. Which matron has not told Strode. You might tell the coroner and arrange for immediate autopsy. Mrs. Bruce's death was caused by knife severin' spinal cord. Cause of Bruce's death probably aconitine."

Reggie went into the grounds. Sam made for him, listened to instructions to take Miss Bruce for a drive after lunch and where to take her.

Turning towards the hospital, Reggie observed Curran and Mardale walking towards him.

"Look what's broken," said Mardale.

Strode was in a hurry. "Mr. Fortune," he cried, "What have you been doing with Mrs. Bruce? Why didn't you answer my inquiries?"

"Mrs. Bruce case in other hands now. Passed to coroner."

"Is Mrs. Bruce dead?" Strode faltered.

"When did she hear from you last?" Curran asked.

"Well, I—I rang her yesterday evening, just to ask her what she knew of Mrs. Foot's papers—"

"The devil you did! You actually induced her murder."

STRODE gaped. "Mrs. Bruce—murdered?"

"She was. You blabbed, scared her and her husband and brought him over to murder her and commit suicide."

"But Mrs. Bruce was a widow years before she came here."

"You put that story across. You're responsible for all the Bruce crimes."

"I wouldn't say responsible," Reggie murmured. "Blind and obstinate. Tools in the hands of the Bruces. Are you still detaining Mrs. Ward?"

"She is at the police station," said Strode slowly.

"My stars!" Curran exclaimed. "Come right with me and let her out. I'll take her home, Mr. Fortune."

"Please," Reggie murmured. "Must see Dr. Cope before I go to post-mortems."

Reggie wandered out of the hospital grounds. . . .

Reggie gave Dr. Cope the news of the Bruce deaths in a skeleton story.

Her earnest eyes were horrified. "I can hardly believe it," she said. "I didn't like Mrs. Bruce but I never thought her capable of—of such things. Are you sure the man was her husband, Mr. Fortune?"

"Not yet. Let it go and consider Rosalind. She mustn't hear of Mamma's death."

Dr. Cope agreed.

"Is John about?" Reggie asked. "Thought I'd put him wise."

Dr. Cope said she had not intended to tell John, but if Mr. Fortune did—she hurried out, returned with John and left them.

"This is between you and me, Cope," Reggie began and gave him a complete account of the Bruce murder and suicide. "Your sister doesn't know all that. Rosalind doesn't know the first thing. Can't let her know until we've made her well enough to stand up against it. Rosalind's drivin' over the hills this afternoon. If you were at the Durley Beacon cross you could try something."

"I'll be there," said John. . .

The hills had gone gay, turned themselves into light, changing forms and colours made of sunshine.

Sam drove sedately to the Beacon cross and stopped. There's a good view from 'ere, miss," he announced. "The 'ills look real 'andsome this afternoon."

Rosalind's view of the hills was impaired by John. He came to the car. "My lucky day. I've had a long wait for this one." He took her hand. "How are you?"

Rosalind thanked him, and asked: "Do you often come here?"

"Rather. The Beacon's unforgettable."

Sam slid out of the car and effaced himself.

Rosalind gazed at the Beacon summit.

"It's exquisite," she cried.

"A bit dim and visionary."

"Oh, no! The hills are realms of light."

"I suppose I meant that. I'd say a vision of matter, all the more real, if you like, the ultimate reality."

"Heavens!" said Rosalind. "Were you being scientific or philosophising?"

"Thinking great thoughts."

"How absurd! The hills are never the same and yet always the same."

"How human!"

"Do you never change?"

"Always growing and getting more sure of myself. Which is life."

"I should like to believe that," said Rosalind.

"The real self is sure through everything."

"I don't feel sure," Rosalind answered slowly. "I wish I did."

"You'll have your wish," said John.

"But you are very different at different times." She smiled. "The first time you were rather inquisitive. The second time you took great pains with me, the strong man teaching a girl. But then in the wood—I never met anyone who talked to me as you have."

"And I never met anyone but you I couldn't help talking to this way. So there we are, each for the other."

"I am not," said Rosalind, shrinking from him.

Sam arrived discreetly and remarked that the matron was particular about getting back early. . . .

In the bank manager's office next day Mrs. Foot's deed box was opened, her papers submitted to Curran and Strode.

Only Strode showed surprise.

"She seems to have owned several houses," he said.

"She would," said Curran.

"This must run into thousands," Strode complained.

"She'd done well for herself," said Curran. "But she couldn't take it with her. Let's see what else she left behind."

NOTHING remained in the box but a dingy crumpled envelope, held by bands of tape. Curran took from the envelope several letters.

The first was an unheaded half sheet with three lines scrawled.

Daring Daniel,
This for your week end. No limit next.
Dionysus.

"What's the meaning of it?" Strode cried.

The other letters were also unheaded except for dates but they were on full-size sheets and lengthy. The writing was the same as that of the scrawl to "Daring Daniel." One started "Angel Naomi," the second "Naomi aimée," the third "Naomi, beautiful one." Intimate love letters, excessively conceited, impudent, and all signed "Ever Dionysus."

Curran picked up the letters and told the manager, "I must take all these, sir," gave him a receipt and marched out.

"Well, Curran." Strode caught up. "Where are you now? Mrs. Bruce's Christian name was Naomi and Mr. Bruce would naturally write her love letters and there's nothing out of the way in an old servant having come across 'em and kept 'em. They don't support your idea you can put Mrs. Foot's death on Mrs. Bruce."

In gloom, Curran walked away from Strode to the hospital, found Reggie in his room and gave him Mrs. Foot's envelope.

"That's what the ruddy woman had locked up, blast her."

"My dear chap!" Reggie purred. "Envelope Mrs. F. received—while Bertha Smithson and Mrs. Daniel's parlor-maid—from another woman—could be from Mrs. Bruce—then Naomi Gill. Do you know Mrs. B.'s writing?"

"It's easy to get proof."

"Oh, yes, yes. Letter from Mrs. B. envelope must have conveyed, Mrs. F. abolished. But kept scrap to 'Daring Daniel' from 'Dionysus.' Daring Daniel obviously Daniel Ward. Can assume 'this' sent and unlimited supply promised were morphia and Dionysus was Bruce—though Mrs. B. called him David."

Curran looked glum. "I don't understand why he signed himself Dionysus."

"Dionysus, purveyor of drugs. Dionysus Bacchus, David Bruce. Sportive scoundrel. Shouldn't wonder if he taught Daniel Ward the morphia habit. Had grand fun ruinin' the man, settin' him against his wife, then arrangin' his murder so the wife would be convicted, and sharin' the profits with Naomi."

Curran swore vehemently. "Read his love letters."

Reggie turned the pages. "Did you expect nice love letters from Bruce?"

"I didn't expect any love letters at all. Did you?"

"Expected goin' through Mrs. F.'s papers would show she had a blackmail hold on the Bruces. Ever seen David Bruce's writin' elsewhere?"

"My eyes" said Curran. "The half-burnt letters found in Mrs. Daniel's room—same intimate terms, same scrawly writing. The only difference is name Amelia—could have been taken from other letters and mixed up with Bruce's love letters to Naomi Gill. You've been hinting all through Mrs. Daniel was innocent. And it's my blame she was convicted."

"My dear Curran. Not your blame. With the materials allowed you, couldn't have done better than you did. And finally you have cleared up everything, saved Rosalind, saved her mother, eliminated the killers."

"But that doesn't make good the injustice Mrs. Daniel suffered."

"Oh, no, no. No earthly means of restorin' her lost past."

"She must be told we've discovered the truth," said Curran. . . .

Next afternoon Reggie told John and Dr. Cope as much as he thought fit. He did not tell them Rosalind's mother was Mrs. Daniel Ward and they asked no awkward questions. Their minds were united upon one urgent duty, to protect Rosalind from shock and scandal.

"Might see the girl soon," said Reggie, and left them.

Rosalind was walking in the hospital grounds, a nurse beside her. When Reggie offered his arm, she took it.

"You seem very serious," she said.

"On account of something that shouldn't have happened. Did you ever hear Mrs. Bruce mention Mr. Bruce?"

"Never. Mr. Bruce died long ago."

"It was a mistake. He came to her house the other night. Some quarrel arose and they were found unconscious. Everything possible was done but nothing could keep Mrs. Bruce alive—or her husband."

"Mamma!" Rosalind cried. "Mamma dead!"

"Yes. She didn't suffer."

"She took care of me such a long time. I can hardly imagine being without her."

"You've a life of your own to live."

ROSALIND gazed at him. "Yes. But I can't understand. Mamma never quarrelled with anyone. She was so quiet and self-controlled."

"Cause of quarrel at husband's sudden reappearance may have been connected with Mrs. Foot. She disappeared a few nights ago and died in mysterious circumstances—body found quite a long way from here. Did Mrs. Bruce show great respect for Mrs. Foot?"

"Yes, indeed!" Rosalind cried. "And Mrs. Foot was absorbed in Mamma, constantly at her side."

"Explains that Mrs. Bruce and her returnin' husband might quarrel over how Mrs. Foot should be treated."

"I suppose Mr. Bruce might," said Rosalind slowly. "I don't know him at all. But if he were gentle, he wouldn't have let Mamma live like a widow."

"Not a nice man."

"Though Mamma seemed content. I didn't really know Mamma. I tried. She lavished care upon me and I was grateful. But I could never come near her."

"Reserved, secretive woman. Her secrets have no earthly importance now.

Lookin' at the future, out of darkness into the light."

Reggie kissed her hand, led her back to the hospital and sought Sam.

Rosalind had tea with the matron, whose flow of amiable anecdotes streamed placidly, uninterrupted till Dr. Cope and John arrived. The matron swiftly provided for the Copes and told them she must go.

Dr. Cope supposed Rosalind would like to leave the hospital.

"Oh, yes," said Rosalind.

Dr. Cope agreed she required a complete change. She must go right away from Bridcombe. Dr. Cope would advise a quiet holiday in the Lake district. Dr. Cope's mother lived in the Lakes—

"Not actually in," said John. "Mother's not a trout, Rosalind. She'll be delighted to put you up."

"I don't know anything about the Lakes," said Rosalind.

"Wordsworth and all that," said John. "He made no mistake picking the Lake country. 'Austere, magnificent, remote, their majesties of Cumberland.' Not Wordsworth though." John looked at his sister. "How soon?"

"Well, Rosalind," said Dr. Cope. "Mr. Fortune is satisfied you are fit to travel whenever you choose now. We might start on Thursday morning."

"Cheers," said John, and he and his sister departed briskly.

They meant well, of course, they meant to be kind, and they were really, but they were so certain they knew best. Could she go? Would she like to? Still, there were mountains. Considering everything, Rosalind decided to go—considering John would go with her. . . .

Mrs. Ward sat by her cottage window sewing.

A car drove up to the door. Her maid brought a card. Mrs. Ward looked at it, nodded, and Reggie entered.

"Mr. Fortune?" she asked, steady eyes inspecting him.

Reggie bowed. "There's nothing more to fear, Mrs. Ward. Rosalind is safe from her enemies and yours. False evidence exposed, truth established."

"I presume you mean the deaths of Naomi and David Bruce were consequent upon Bertha Smithson's—Bertha Foot's death, so the police will not accuse me of murdering them."

"I meant a lot more than that." Reggie smiled. "Goin' back on the distant past, also lookin' forward."

"How much have you told Rosalind?"

"Nobody's yet told Rosalind she is your daughter."

"I am under a great obligation."

"Nor that you were falsely accused of your husband's murder. But it's for Rosalind's mother to decide how much Rosalind should be told."

Mrs. Ward drew a long deep breath. "It would hurt Rosalind to think of her mother being punished as I have been. You believe I was innocent, Mr. Fortune?"

"Your innocence proved by papers Mrs. Foot kept to blackmail the Bruces. Those will clear your name."

"My name is now Bancroft," said Mrs. Ward. "Mr. Fortune, pray believe that I realize how much I am indebted to you. But you must not bring up the Ward case again anywhere. I did kill Daniel."

Reggie murmured, "Oh, my ghost!"

Mrs. Ward went on quietly: "I had no idea the morphia Daniel took came from David Bruce. The habit made Daniel utterly vicious and cruel, he stupefied Lancelot with his morphia and drowned the boy. I knew he would treat Rosalind the same way if he lived. So I gave him morphia with his food, all the morphia he had. I have never regretted that I did, I never shall. I am indeed exceedingly obliged for your proof those vile letters were written by David Bruce to Naomi. I only knew him through his acquaintance with Daniel and considered him a feeble harmless creature. I hadn't any idea he was intimate with Naomi till I came out of prison and learnt that Naomi called herself Mrs. Bruce."

MR FORTUNE sighed. "Any idea on Bertha Smithson, alias Foot?"

"I thought she cared for no one but Daniel."

"Cared for no one but sweet self. Hid extra morphia and half-burnt Naomi love letters in your room to get you convicted of Daniel's murder, the others havin' arranged he'd die from morphia habit. Then Mrs. Foot blackmailed 'em so they ultimately had to kill her and, bein' detected, wiped themselves out. But you saved Rosalind from Daniel. We shouldn't have been able to save her from the Bruces if you hadn't come here."

Mrs. Ward shivered and said: "My coming was the reason the Bruces attempted her life again and again."

"Oh, no, no. Profit was the reason. Profit their motive every time. Your comin' here started new police action by me and Curran. We shouldn't have been quick enough if you hadn't set the Bruces and Mrs. F. panickin'."

"I had no right to come," said Mrs. Ward.

"You've a good right to look after Rosalind."

"Is she quite well, Mr. Fortune?"

"She will be soon. You can see her."

"No, I can't. I can't let her know who I am."

"Like that," Reggie murmured.

Mrs. Ward said good-by.

Getting in his car, Reggie softly murmured:

"Yes. Sacrificed herself to Rosalind. Loves Rosalind. Yes. . . ."

On Thursday morning Mrs. Ward saw John help Rosalind into the nine o'clock train.

"Did you see that woman?" Rosalind asked.

"Friend of yours?"

"She talked to me in the bluebell wood one day. She was rather strange but a charming person. I don't know just who she is. Look—oh, she has gone away now."

The Literary Criminal

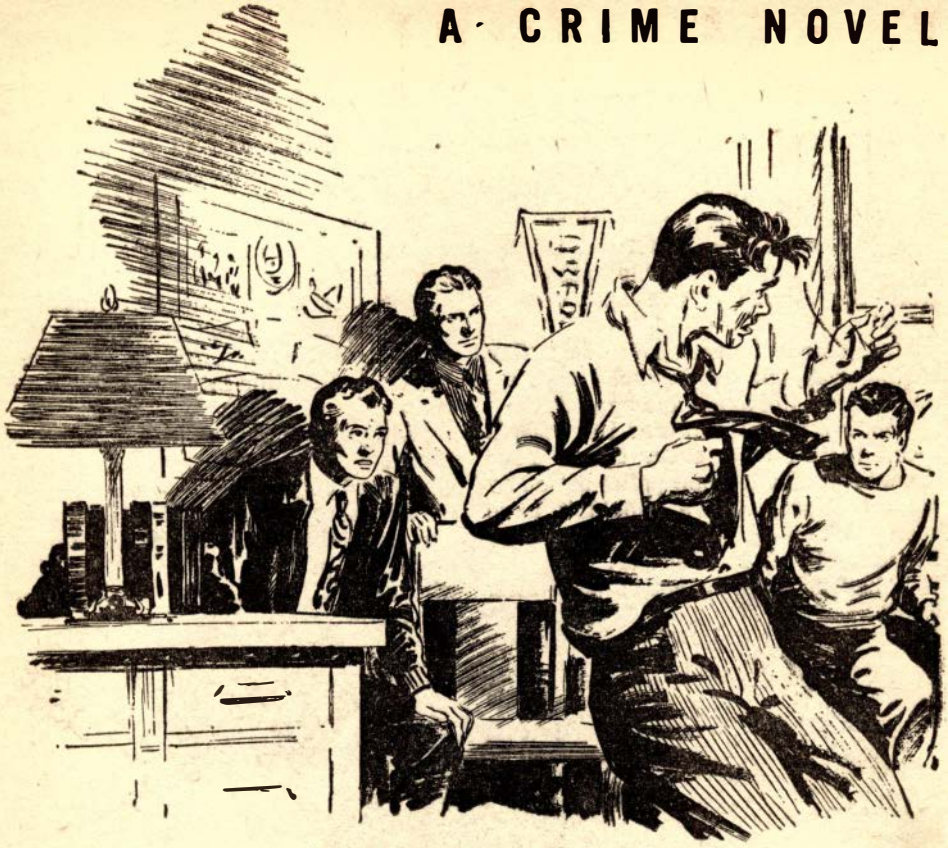
SOME twenty years ago a French novelist in search of "authenticity" read up on criminal methods and set out personally to test them. In a period of two years he committed fourteen thefts that netted him more than $200,000. With the police totally baffled, not a shred of evidence leading suspicion to the writer, he retired to a small town in the south where he hoped to write a novel about a gentleman burglar.

The finished novel was of course completely autobiographical. The first five publishers to whom it was offered turned it down as too far fetched. There couldn't be such a character and he couldn't get away with half the deeds reported! A sixth publisher took a chance and when the book emerged the literary critics and criminologists declared themselves a field day. They ridiculed the preposterous methods and events related in the book. They cited case histories to prove that the writer knew nothing of crime or even of people. The novel was a failure. Less than 2,000 copies were sold.

Only one person was impressed by the book, a minor detective of the Paris police. His associates scoffed at his theory, but the suspicious detective dug back into the records and compared them carefully with the text of the novel. Dates, events, modus operandi dovetailed. He arrested the novelist and presented his evidence, which was so conclusive that the writer confessed and was committed to prison for ten years.

—*Simpson M. Ritter*

A CRIME NOVEL



how like a god

I

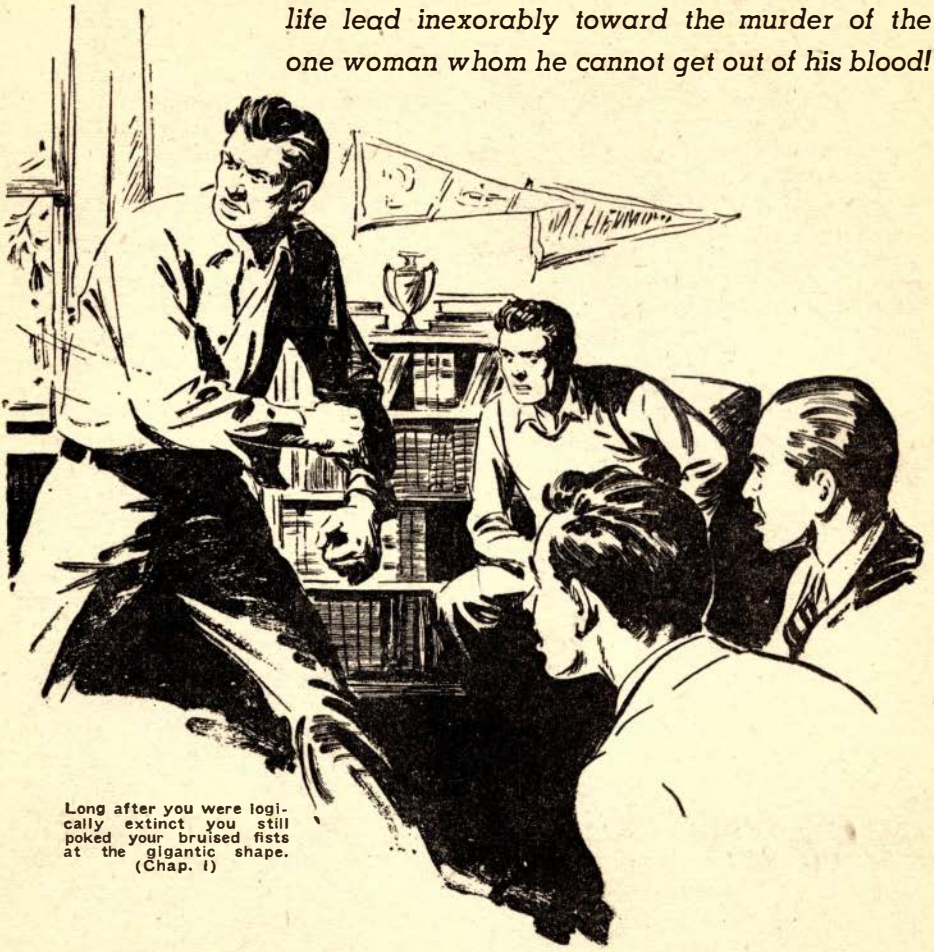
He had closed the door carefully, silently, behind him, and was in the dim hall with his foot on the first step of the familiar stairs. His left hand clutched the key to the apartment two flights up; his right hand, in the pocket of his overcoat, was closed around the butt of the revolver. Yes, here I am, he thought, and how absurd! He felt that if he had ever known anything in his life he knew that he would not go up the stairs, unlock the door, and pull the trigger of the revolver.

She would probably be sitting in the blue chair with many cushions, reading; so he had often found her.

His mind seemed suddenly clear and intolerably full, like a gigantic switchboard, with pegs in all the holes at once and every wire humming with an unwonted and monstrous burden. A vast intricacy of reasons, arguments, proofs —you are timid and vengeless, you are cautious and would be safe, you would be lost even if safe, you are futile, silly, evil, petty, absurd—he could

BY REX STOUT

Step by step, all of the threads of Bill Sidney's life lead inexorably toward the murder of the one woman whom he cannot get out of his blood!



Long after you were logically extinct you still poked your bruised fists at the gigantic shape. (Chap. I)

not have spoken in all his years the limitless network of appeals, facts, memories, that darted at him and through him as his foot sought the third step.

He heard them all. . . .

YOU are timid and vengeless.

When you first saw that word you were in short pants and numberless words in the books you read were strange and thrilling. Many of them have long since been forgotten, many more have lost their savor; but this word has escaped both fates through the verses you wrote, using it in the first line of each stanza. Afraid of your father's and mother's good-natured criticism, you showed them only to Mrs. Davis, the Sunday-school teacher.

"Vengeless," she said, "is not used for men and women, only for impersonal things."

That was before she invited you to her house in the afternoon, but already she was smiling at you. You were mor-

tified at having misused the word and tore the verses up.

That was timid, and you hated yourself for it without really knowing it. The most blatant and poignant timidity of those young Ohio days, though, was when, with the boys down on the lot below Elm Street of a summer afternoon, you would try to steal second base. Why did you ever try it? That was peculiarly not your dish. You always knew that and yet forever you tried it.

But during this period that vague and oppressive timidity had its usual seat at home, at the little house on Cooper Street. Probably its unknown focus was your sister Jane, for your father and mother were from first to last nebulous and ill-defined; they seemed to float around you; and your other sisters and brothers existed only as pestiferous facts. Larry was only five, and Margaret and Rose were being born or at least were scarcely out of the cradle.

With your father there was timidity too, but as you see now perfumed with contempt. The first dream you dreamt that was in touch with reality came when his business and his health lost step together and you were shocked and pleased to find yourself taken seriously as a member of the family.

"Bill, it's up to you," said your father, after your mother's tears were dried and the younger children had been sent from the room. "Doc's crazy. I'll be at it again in a month. You're nineteen, and big enough to handle two real drug stores, let alone that little hole in the wall. Nadel can do the prescriptions, and with all the afternoons and Saturdays you've had there. . . ."

"He can't do it," said Jane, home for the summer from Northwestern. No, she was through then, and was teaching Latin in the high school. "It's not your line, and anyway you're too young and it's not fair. I'm the one for it, and Dad will have to let me."

Your father, curiously persistent, had Mr. Bishop come in and empowered you to sign checks, but no one was fooled by that empty symbol except your mother. You resented Jane bitterly as she competently kept patent medicine salesmen where they belonged while you mixed ice cream sodas and washed the glasses. It was then that Mrs. Davis went to Cleveland—ah, you still wonder, how much of that did Jane know? At all events, the whole world was dark. But your father, to the pleased but professionally discomfited surprise of Doc Whateley, pulled on his trousers again, "slightly disfigured but still in the ring" as the editor of the weekly Mail and Courier put it, and you went off for your second year at college at Westover.

That was the year that saw your legend created and made you a man of mark. You have never understood that episode; it was an astonishing contradiction of all timidities and inadequacies. What would have happened and where would you be now if Mrs. Moran had not done your washing and sent little Millicent to fetch it, and deliver it, twice a week? It was on her second or third visit that you became intensely aware of that pale child. It was indefinable and incredible; she was exactly ten, half your own age, pallid and scarcely alive, barely literate. . . .

IT MUST have been three months later that there happened to be a crowd in your room when she came. By then you were always making sure to have candy for her and to be always there when she arrived. That day you didn't want to give her the candy with the other fellows present, and without even a glance she somehow let you know that she understood perfectly and sympathized.

When she had gone, Dick Carr, known as the Mule, made some remark, and you called him a name. The words wasn't so bad, among friends, but your tone and attitude made the others gasp. The Mule, a seasoned halfback with nothing left to prove, was contemptuously surprised but undisturbed. Blindly you slapped him in the face.

There wasn't a lot of excitement at first because it was taken for granted that the Mule would hit you once and

then watch you bleed. The Mule certainly did hit you and you certainly bled; but long after you were logically extinct you still poked your bruised fists somehow at that gigantic shape, which must be annihilated before you went down to stay.

Kept in bed for a week, you were visited on the third day by the Mule himself; and not long after that you began to call him Dick instead of Mule, specifically at his own request, and thus became a man of note not only for having stood up to the Mule, but for being chosen as chief intimate of by far the richest man in the college.

All the spring semester you were inseparable, and when you went home in June you had promised to visit him during the summer. You had not been in Cleveland twenty-four hours before Mrs. Davis was entirely forgotten.

You fairly trembled with timidity that first afternoon in the garden when Dick introduced you to his sister Erma. Yes, you were always timid with Erma Carr. Partly perhaps it was the house, the servants, the motor cars, the glistening fountains, the clothes-closets lined with fragrant cedar? Perhaps, but Erma herself was enough.

By the end of the third week she asked you to marry her. Yes, she did, though she may have left the question marks to you. How many times you have wondered why Erma picked you out of all that were offered to her. It is amusing, your irritated concentration for more than twenty years on that trifling *why*.

You were driving with Erma along the lake shore the afternoon the telegram came, and when you returned it was waiting for you. When you got home, after midnight, your father was already dead. The question of the future arose, and with the perfection of tact Jane considered and felt the difficulties of your position.

"You've got to finish college. I can run the store for a couple of years; it'll pay better than ever; you'll see. Please, Bill, you've simply got to finish."

You felt strongly that the counter of

His hand came out and the revolver with it. (Chap. VII)

that drug store was the place for you, but the real truth is that you shrank from so formidable a task! Jane undertook it blithely, as one goes for a walk, and you packed up and went off for your third year.

Only one thing was then in your mind. You had accepted Jane's generous offer, and you had bowed to the necessity of postponing the fulfillment of your own responsibilities, only because you were going to have a career as an author. That winter you did write two or three stories, and one day read one of them to Millicent, with whom you were by now enmeshed in a strange and peccant intimacy. When you had finished she said:

"I like it, but I'd rather . . ."

She was never verbal.

A leap of nearly two years to the next marked and fateful hesitation. You and Dick Carr were seated in a café on Sheriff Street in Cleveland, having just come in from a ball game.

"It would mean giving up my writing," you protested for the hundredth time. You had two stories published in a Chicago magazine.

DICK went into details. "I'm going to be the works down on Pearl Street, but I want you along. If Dad hadn't died when I was a kid I suppose I'd be going to Yale or taking up polo, but that's out. I see where the real fight is, and I'm going to be in it."

"You don't have to fight so hard, do you, if you're worth five million dollars?"

"You bet you do. Old Layton at the bank told me yesterday that the business had been going back for two years. He said young blood was needed. Right. I've got it. So have you. There's going to be the devil to pay when I start firing those old birds down there about a year from Thursday. I want you in on it.

"The set up down there is that I own half the stock and Erma owns the other half. She's more than willing to let me run the thing, provided her dividend checks come along. I'm going to be elected to the Board, and President of the company, at the meeting next week. What I want to do is get the whole thing right in my fist. I'm going to spend most of the winter in the plant at Carrton, and meanwhile you'll be picking up all you can here at the office. You can start in at any figure you want within reason—say five thousand a year. Later you can have any damn title there is except mine."

In his brusque and eager sentences Dick was already the Richard M. Carr who is now on forty directories. And already he was saying *within reason*—but that's unfair, for his offer was generous and uncalculating. A hundred dollars a week was to you affluence.

It was like Erma not to have mentioned the garden episode again. At the time of her first trip to Europe she probably still intended to take you eventually—possibly not. One of your longest sustained curiosities was to see that unlikely husband of hers, whom she claimed to have picked up in a fit of absent-mindedness on a beach somewhere east of Marseilles.

Then one December morning she unexpectedly opened the door of your private office in New York. By that time you were Treasurer of the Carr Corporation.

"Here I am," she said. "Isn't it silly? To come back from Provence at this time of year! I must be getting old, I honestly think it was the thought of Christmas that brought me."

It became apparent though that Erma had another motive. She had not been in New York a week before she told you that she was "fed up with that *'sieu-dame* stuff," and it may have been as simple as that, but that did not explain why she again selected you. By that time you had become much more articulate than on the day of the famous garden scene in Cleveland, and on the morning that she made the announcement, you put it up to her squarely.

"I haven't the faintest idea," she replied brightly. "Do you mean that you feel yourself unworthy of me?"

To end the argument she took things into her own hands, and the following

autumn there was an effective climax to what the newspapers called a youthful romance. This whole thing had been consummated without your having reached a decision of any kind.

This is scarcely the picture of a man who would execute a desperate enterprise. What are you doing, making another gesture in a last effort to impress yourself? The woman up there doesn't believe in it. Last night she said:

"I'm afraid well enough. But not that you'll hurt me that way. Call it contempt, it doesn't matter what you call it. We've been fitted for what we've done together, but I've been me and you've been you. There's nothing changed now if you don't bring words into it. You know I have always lied to you and always will. It isn't the truth you look for in me."

II

Not halfway up the first flight, he stopped and listened. That was the basement street door closing. Mrs. Jordan putting out the milk bottles. He almost called to her. She would have called back, what d'ye want, in a tone that advised him to want as little as possible.

His right hand left his overcoat pocket and took hold of the rail; when it left the handle of the revolver it felt as if it were letting go of something sticky and very warm. The wires hummed and buzzed in his head.

JUST what is it you expect to accomplish? You, who have all your life been tied to your sister's apron strings. The fact is, Jane has always been the woman for you; all the security and peace you have ever known.

You've never thanked her for it; it has always been futile. The time you went home from Cleveland for your things, having definitely agreed with Dick, Jane listened quietly to your grandiose plans along with the rest of the family.

The following morning Jane came into your room while you were packing.

"Bill, I'm afraid you're being driven into this by your feeling that you've got to do something for the family. You shouldn't. The store's doing better than ever and the way this town's growing we can sell it for a lot of money in a few years. Meanwhile it can keep all of us nicely. What if you don't make much by your writing for two or three years?"

Futile. In your pocket was the five hundred dollars Dick had advanced, more than you had ever seen before.

She tried again four years later, when the store was sold and you went down to help take the sucker off the hook, as Jane put it in her letter. In reality there was nothing for you to do but sign papers; Jane had made an impeccable deal.

"I'm going to New York and take Rose and Margaret along. Mother wants to stay here with Aunt Cora. Thanks to your generosity Larry can go to college next month without anything to worry about."

As neat as that. And you longed inexpressibly to say: "Take me to New York with you. Let's be together. I'll write or I'll get a job or I'll do anything. Maybe some day you will be proud of me." But you did not.

Even more to the point by way of futility have been your own efforts at Larry, who bounded out of the West into New York one day like a calf arrogantly bumping its mother for a meal.

Larry was pleasantly impressed but not at all overawed by your elaborate office. "Have you decided where I'm to start blowing up the buildings?" he laughed.

He was leaving it all to you, and you were thrilled by this, unaware that it was only because to his youthful eagerness and ardor details were unimportant. Also it has already been decided. Dick had been extremely decent about it.

He spent six months in the plant in Ohio, six more in the Michigan ore mines, some few weeks in New York. He proved himself. Young as he was he rose in importance by his own ability and force, but during all those months

that became years you felt a vague uneasiness about him.

The explosion came at a difficult moment, and unexpectedly. Only the previous week Larry had won new laurels by bringing to a successful close the Cumberland bridge negotiations, down in Maryland. The difficulty though had come through Erma, whose pretty teeth had shown themselves for the first time the night before in a most inelegant snarl. When, immediately after you and he had been seated at the usual corner table in the Manufacturers' Club, he announced that he was going to leave the Carr Corporation, you were at first merely irritated.

"Of course you don't mean it. What's the joke?"

"There's no joke. I'm going to chuck it. This is not the life for me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I've got a good deal saved, thanks to your and Dick's generosity, and I may buy the Martin place out in Idaho where I went last summer. He'll sell cheap."

"Going to raise cattle?"

"Perhaps. Or get a job in the forest service. I don't know."

Evidently he had been considering it for some time.

That evening you went to see Jane, at the house on Tenth Street where you expected to find the usual crowd. You intended to take Jane off somewhere and persuade her to bring Larry to his senses. But when you arrived the rooms on the ground floor were dark, and proceeding brusquely upstairs, you found Jane and Larry alone in Jane's room.

"I suppose Larry's told you of his contemplated renascence," you said to Jane.

"Yes."

"We've just been talking about it," Larry said. "Jane thinks it's all right."

Jane put her hand on yours. "You run away, Larry," she said, "and let Bill and me talk. Please. Go on."

HE WENT, observing that he would see you in the morning at the office. "Meanwhile that you'll smooth out my childish irritation," you observed.

"Yes," she agreed unexpectedly, pressing your hand. "It's a darned shame. This was bound to hurt you. I told Larry so the first time he spoke to me about it."

"So it's been cooking for a long while. I like the picture of you and Larry calculating the chances of my eventual recovery."

There was no reply. You looked up, and saw tears in Jane's eyes.

"You're the only person I've ever cried about," she said finally. "I seem to feel more touched by what things mean for you than by what they mean even for myself, let alone anybody else."

A month later Larry was on his way West. If Jane had been futile with you, how much more futile had you been with him!

You could dance around in that cage forever. Futility begins where? With you, though, it has almost certainly arrived by the time you went to the home of Mrs. Davis. You were fifteen, seventeen, no matter.

One winter Monday afternoon found you on her porch with an umbrella which she had left on some previous day at old Mrs. Poole's on the other side of town. She herself opened the door.

"How do you do, William. Thank you so much." Then, as you flushed and twirled your cap, "Won't you come in a little while? Mother is spending the week in Chicago and my husband won't be home for hours."

You had several times previously crossed the moat of the lawn and advanced as far as the pure white portal, but never before inside the castle itself.

"We can sit here on the couch and go over next Sunday's lesson." She was probably watching your face, for she added almost at once, "Or would you rather just talk?"

You blurted out, "just talk," and sat down on the edge of the couch beside her.

The second time you went, invited without the excuse of an errand, she told you all about her husband. It

"Don't go in there" she said, putting out her hand. (Chap. XIII)

seemed that although he was a fine man, he had more or less deceived her into marriage by concealing from her girlish ignorance some of its more difficult and profound aspects.

You nodded, trembling; no word would come.

"Sit down by me. Here, put your head in my lap, like that. Don't you like to be near me and put your head in my lap? You are a very dear boy, only you are nearly a man. Why not pretend you are a man, and kiss me?"

You discovered then that the girls at school knew very little about kissing, and you yourself, as a matter of fact, knew less.

Granting all your neat formula of futility, it is strange that you were never curious as to the nature and depth of Mrs. Davis's attachment to you. Was it for her an episode among a hundred, or was it all that her avowals declared?

III

What if Mrs. Jordan had heard him come in? Or even seen him? She might very well have been standing by the grill, her hands full of milk bottles, when he went up the stoop. His hand still on the rail, he half turned about there on the stairs, undecided. Timid, futile, vengeless, actionless. . . .

THERE has not been one major experience in your life in which you were the aggressor. The Davis affair was her doing. It was so again with Lucy Crofts. And each crisis in your economic and business life, which means the Carr Corporation, has been so little guided by you that you might as well

have been at home asleep. Throughout the first months, and even years, you served as an information channel between Dick and the intricate parts of the vast organism he was getting into his fist. For that function you were well-fitted and you fulfilled it excellently.

Dick would get in from the Carrton plant usually on Friday evening, late, and you and he would go to the café on Sheriff Street, because he said he could relax there more easily than at home.

Dick, having ordered a three-inch steak, would gulp a stein of beer without stopping, lick the foam from his lips, settle back in the big leather chair and sigh contentedly. By the time the steak arrived you would be reading from sheets of memoranda neatly arranged on the table before you.

Meanwhile, the social side of life he entirely ignored, refusing even to appear at Erma's Sunday teas, and you were pulled along with him.

"You'll both die of ingrown dispositions," Erma would observe indifferently. "Damon and Pythias, victims of the Iron Age."

"Go on and deposit your dividend checks," Dick would reply with equal indifference.

Gradually, after Dick's return to Cleveland, you began to find time on your hands. One evening you looked through the little red memorandum book and found Mrs. Davis's Cleveland address, placed there six years before from the only letter you had ever received from her.

The next afternoon you telephoned, and there she was. You were made aware that you were more deeply interested than you had suspected by the excitement.

Would she—that is—how about going out to dinner?

"Well, you see, I'm afraid I can't. There are so many things always to do, and I always eat dinner at home with my husband. . . ."

Idiotically, you asked after Mr. Davis's health.

You perhaps remember so vividly because it was so characteristic of your absurdity, your futility. There have been other examples, only more extended, like the winter devoted so completely to Lucy Crofts, or like the summer, only four years ago, which you and Erma spent at Larry's ranch.

It was Erma's idea, suggested by a rodeo she saw in New York, and impelled of course by her constant restlessness. She and Larry seemed to hit it off; she was given the best horse on the place, and usually she was out riding the range with him. At times you suspected that he was being a bit harried, but you had been chronically suspicious of Erma for so long a period that this was merely the continuation of a state of mind.

One evening at the dinner table you noticed that Larry and Erma scarcely spoke to each other. All you got out of it was a faint amusement for you had long since grown accustomed to Erma's talent for creating tensions with almost anyone when she was in certain moods.

Sometime in the dead of night you awoke out of a dream, suddenly aware that something was wrong. You kicked out a foot. Erma wasn't there. You heard a noise somewhere, a faint mumbling trickling through the thin bare walls. You got out of bed and groped your way to the door and softly opened it.

The mumbling instantly became voices, loud enough to be recognized. You tiptoed in your bare feet down the narrow hall to the door of Larry's room.

"You're a little fool," Larry was saying. "Can't you take a hint?"

Then Erma, somewhat louder and much more calmly.

"Come, Larry, you're the fool. Why do you pretend I'm not attractive to you? Such conceit. Don't you know that I made you kiss me the first time I decided it was worth the trouble?"

"The first and the last. You've no sense of decency, Erma. Now go."

"It would be nicer to kiss me now—like this."

You heard a quick movement, and another. Larry's voice came, "I tell you to go, I mean it," and immediately you heard something that you would have given a great deal to see—a loud sharp slap, the smack of a heavy open palm.

You tiptoed swiftly back down the hall. What if it were Erma up there now in that room; imagine yourself here on these stairs, equipped, desperate, with death in your heart! Bah, you couldn't even slap her as Larry did that night.

IV

He stood there, trying to force his brain to consider and decide the instant problem, whether to call to Mrs. Jordan. He was completely confused. If he called to her, that settled it; but if he did not call to her, how was he to know whether she had heard him come in, or seen him?

He stood there without moving a muscle, still less than halfway up the first flight, and all at once he heard a voice from a great distance calling to him, well, aren't you coming up?

You fool, he told himself. . . .

YOU fool, to stand here on the edge of hell.

So you did stop on the stairs, though, that night in Cleveland many years ago, and so did Lucy Crofts call down to you as you stood hesitating.

"Well, aren't you coming up?"

At that time you would rather hear Lucy's voice than any other sound in the world.

You decided, after the fiasco of your call to Mrs. Davis that the thing to do was to find a nice Cleveland girl and take her for a mistress. You went over your scanty list of friends and acquaintances; there was no one.

Of a late afternoon, as you walked from the office in Pearl Street to the Jayhawker Club, the sidewalks were filled with girls. Working girls, high-school girls, fur-coated girls. You knew that three out of five of these girls could be picked up, for Dick had said so.

The easiest way would be with the car. You began to leave the office a little early, get the car and drive around the Square, up and down Euclid Avenue, through the narrow crowded cross-town streets. You had often seen it done; one drove slowly, against the curb, and at just the right moment, one said in a low tone, rapidly, but clearly, "Hello, want to ride?"

But you never did actually pronounce those words.

Late one rainy afternoon in April, you were driving the car slowly along Cedar Avenue, aimlessly aware of the wet glistening pavements in the gathering dusk, the clanging street cars, the forest of bobbing umbrellas on the sidewalk at your right. Suddenly there was a sharp cry ahead, and other shouts of alarm as you automatically jammed your foot on the brake. You jumped out. Almost under your front wheels a girl was being helped to her feet. In an instant you were there beside her, helping another man hold her up.

"It's my fault," the girl was saying. "I'm not hurt. I stepped right in front of the car. Where's my music?"

A search disclosed a black leather roll lying in a puddle of water against the curb. You picked it up and handed it to her.

"I'm terribly sorry," you said. "That's the first time I ever hit anybody."

"I don't think you really hit me, I think I just slipped. Goodness, I'm soaked too. I'd better get a cab."

"I'd be glad to take you if you'll let me," you offered hurriedly.

She looked at your face, and down at her dress. "I suppose I'll have to go back home. It's quite a distance."

"I haven't a thing to do," you assured her. "I have all the time there is. I was just fooling around watching the rain."

She gave you a quick glance and sank back into a silence which was scarcely broken during the long ride. You wanted to talk but were afraid of making a false step. She was quite young, you guessed not over eighteen, and very pretty.

Finally you drew up at the curb in

front of a large house set behind a wide lawn. It was still raining.

"My name is Will Sidney," you said abruptly. "I'm the assistant treasurer of the Carr Corporation. I wonder if you would care to go to the theater with me sometime?"

She looked directly at you and said promptly and simply: "I'd like to very much." Suddenly she smiled. "You know I've been arguing with myself the last ten minutes whether you'd say something like that to me."

"How did it come out?"

"I didn't decide, only I thought you might. I really would like to, only it wouldn't be easy, because I live here with my uncle and aunt and they are very strict with me."

"You could tell them we met somewhere."

She frowned. "I don't know. I could tell them something."

It was arranged. You wrote down her name, Lucy Crofts, and the telephone number, and the name of her uncle, Thomas M. Barnes. Next day, at the lunch hour, you went to the Hollenden and got tickets for a play the following week; but you waited four days before telephoning her, as agreed.

WHEN she took off her hat at the theater, and patted her hair and looked around at the audience, you realized that she was even better-looking that you had thought, and a little nearer maturity. But on the whole the evening was a disappointment. She didn't care to go to supper afterwards, and driving home through the spring night she talked mostly of her father's farm near Dayton.

A day or two later, receiving through Dick an invitation to a dance at the Hollenden, you phoned Lucy and asked her to go. That was more like it. She danced well, and so did you; and Dick danced with her once and afterwards observed to you:

"If she needs her shoes shined or anything and you're too busy let me know."

On the way home Lucy said: "I had a wonderful time. This is the latest I've ever been out. Of course I'm only nineteen. Mr. Carr dances very well, but not as well as you. You dance much better than I do."

You took her to the theater again, several times, and to another dance or two. On one of those occasions you were invited by Mrs. Barnes to dine with them. You were no longer inventing fancies about her or imagining easy triumphs; with her the pose of a triumph had become absurd.

Towards the end of May Lucy began to talk of going home for the summer. In two weeks, she said, her music teacher would leave for Europe, and she was going home to the farm to remain until he returned in the fall. Or perhaps she would then go to New York; she supposed that was really the best thing to do, if her father could be persuaded.

"I've heard of a place down south of here," you said. "Down near Cuyahoga Falls. A deep canyon, with walls two hundred feet high, quite wild. Let's go down there next Sunday. We can drive it in two hours, easy."

Her aunt and uncle didn't like the idea, but they knew that a whole generation was against them, and early Sunday morning saw you off with a huge lunch basket and a thermos bottle of coffee. But it rained most of the day, and early in the afternoon you surrendered and returned to a roadhouse just outside the city, wet and chilled and hungry. Lucy didn't seem to mind it, but you were unduly miserable, and when she asked you what was the matter you observed gloomily that it was only a little more than a week before she would be gone and you would be alone.

"Alone!" she exclaimed. "You have more friends than I ever heard of."

"I haven't a real friend, anywhere, except you."

She was silent.

"Where are you going this summer?" she asked suddenly. "Would you care to come down to our place?"

This was surprising; it hadn't oc-

curred to you even in your numerous fancies; but now that she said it, it was so natural and obvious that it almost seemed as if you had deliberately planned it.

"But I couldn't," you protested. "Your folks never heard of me."

"Oh, I've told them all about you. There won't be anyone there except Father and Mother. They'd love to have you."

You knew that of course you were going. It meant nothing to you but that you would be with Lucy, which was enough. You took her in your arms and kissed her.

"That's the first time anyone has ever kissed me," she said quietly.

"Not really?"

"Of course." Her grave grey eyes shone a little humorously. "I guess it's the first time anyone ever wanted to."

When you told Dick you would like to take a month away from the office he was completely indifferent to your intentions until their specific probabilities amused him.

Dick's eyes opened wide. "The hell she did! Why you old Romeo. You'd better watch out, Bill. She's the kind that gets chronic."

"Maybe she already is. I've told her I'll come."

"You'll go all right. I'm not so sure I wouldn't like to go there myself, if I were asked but I'd get sick of it in a week."

He grinned, and went on: "You know, she turned me down flat. Out at the Hampton Club, about a month ago, you remember, you brought her of course, I asked her to go to dinner and a show, and she said flatly she just didn't want to. She handed the same package to Charlie Harper."

So Dick had tried to take her away. And that big bum Harper . . . well, that was all right. Nor was there any code which warranted the resentment you felt against Dick, but you felt it.

"It will be all right then for the first of July?" you said.

"God bless you. If you ask me I think you're hooked. Not that she'd insist on your marrying her. That's just the way it works."

That evening, the eve of her departure, you told Lucy you would come for the entire month of July.

V

He was still conscious of an irritation at Mrs. Jordan's persistent noises below, but he found that he had mounted another step, and another. His eyes were now level with the first landing, one flight up, the floor where the two art students lived. Another step, and he could see the grey plaster figure in the niche in the curved wall, beside the flimsy little electric lamp that always got knocked off when he passed it with his overcoat flapping.

He looked at it, really looked at it, as if he had never seen it before, and yet he did not now see it. His ears acutely registered the movements of Mrs. Jordan, and yet he did not hear them. He did hear himself, in his brain somewhere. Do you realize that you are going on, going ahead? Do you realize that you don't at all know what you are doing?

YOU HAVE felt like this before, less acutely, that day for instance you ate dinner at the club with your son more than two years ago. Paul, his name is. You called him Paul.

That didn't seem real either. Nor did that note, on a square piece of blue paper, which you found on your office desk one morning in the pile of personal mail.

"Dear Mr. Sidney," it said, "if you can spare me an hour, some day this week, I would like very much to ask you about something. It was a long time ago, but I believe you will remember my name. Sincerely, Emily Davis."

At the top was an address and telephone number.

When she was shown into your office, you were genuinely shocked. She was an old woman now. As she looked at you pleasantly, you could see anxious years in her eyes, and a present anxiety too.

"Little Will Sidney," she smiled.

"Now that I see you, I know I was foolish to take so long to make up my mind."

You escorted her to the big leather seat in the corner, and took a chair in front of her. She seemed to know a good deal about you, the year you had come to New York, the date of your marriage with Erma, the fact of your having no children. She told you, briefly but completely, of her own journey through the many days. Mr. Davis had practiced law in Cleveland, never very successfully, for seven years, then they had moved to Chicago. There it was even worse, he never squeezed more than a scanty living out of it; and there was nothing but a modest insurance payment for her and her little son when one winter he took pneumonia and died. Mrs. Davis managed to get a position as a teacher in the Chicago public schools, which she still held; she was in New York only for a visit, having come, it appeared, expressly to see you. She had somehow kept her son Paul fed and clothed to the end of high school, and he had worked his way through the University of Chicago.

"It's Paul really I came to see you about. He graduated from the university two years ago; he's twenty-four now. He's a good boy and I thought you might help."

"Where is he?"

"In New York. He has a job now and then, but he thinks he wants to be a sculptor. He studied in Chicago a while and won a prize; now he works at it so hard, he can't keep a job very long. What he wants more than anything else is to go abroad for two or three years."

You considered.

"If he has real talent he certainly should be encouraged," you agreed judiciously. "I might speak to Dick—Mr. Carr—about it."

"I thought you might do it yourself," she said. "You see, you're his father."

You stared at her.

"I wasn't going to tell you," she went on, "but after all, why shouldn't I? Jim's dead, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. He was born a few months after we got to Cleveland. That was really why we went away."

You stammered, "Can you—that is—I don't see how you can know—"

"I know well enough."

"What does he look like?"

"Not much like anyone." She smiled. "You'll just have to take my word for it; it's funny, it never occurred to me that you might doubt it."

"Well." You got up from your chair.

You walked to the window and looked down into the street. "Of course he doesn't know?"

"Good heavens no! There's no reason why he should."

"None at all," you reassured her. "It was a foolish question. Of course he mustn't know. As for helping him—yes, of course. I'd like—" You hesitated. "I'd like to see him," you said.

SHE AGREED at once. Two days later you met him in the lobby of your club. You knew him at once, and hastened over and extended your hand.

"Mr. Davis? I'm Mr. Sidney."

Later, seated in the dining-room with soup in front of you, you examined him critically. He was rather poorly dressed; his hands were big and strong and not too clean, and his coat-sleeves were too short. His hair and eyes were dark. You thought that he resembled you a little, particularly in structure.

"Your mother tells me you would like to study abroad," you observed.

"Yes, sir. I would like to. It's almost essential."

"Are there better teachers over there than in New York?"

He explained that it wasn't so much a matter of teachers, it was the stimulation, the atmosphere, the tradition, the opportunity to see the great works of the masters. He talked of all this at length, in a sensible and straightforward manner.

"I suppose," you observed, "you could make out over there on three thousand a year."

"Less than that," he replied quickly, "surely much less. I should say two thousand would be ample. That's forty

dollars a week." Then he added, a little awkwardly, "Of course, if there really is a chance of your helping me out, you would want to find out if I'm likely to deserve it. I haven't much stuff, a few figures and a group or two, but if you could come down some day and look at them. . . ."

It wasn't much of a studio—a small room with an alcove on the top fioor of an old house in one of those obscure streets west of Seventh Avenue, below Fourteenth. Apparently he both worked and slept there, and perhaps ate too. Clay and plaster figures were scattered about; there were two marble groups, one, quite large, of workmen lifting a beam. It seemed to you very big and impressive.

"I worked nearly two years on that," Paul said, "and it's all wrong. See, look here."

You listened attentively and nodded your head from time to time. After he had finished talking about it you still thought the group big and smooth and impressive. He brought out some portfolios.

"By the way," he said suddenly, "I almost forgot. Here's a letter from Mother."

You opened and read it. She thanked you, and said she knew she need never worry about her son, and bade you goodbye.

You looked at him in surprise. "Where is she? She hasn't gone?"

He nodded. "Back to Chicago. Yesterday. You see she only had a week off."

He opened one of the portfolios and began turning over the sketches, pointing and explaining.

He finished with the portfolios and stood in front of you.

"Mother suggested something before she left," he said doubtfully, "but I don't know whether you'd care about it. She thought I ought to stay on a month or two and do a bust of you. You have a fine head and a strong face, not at all ordinary. Quite interesting."

The sittings began the following Monday.

You told no one about Paul, not even Jane, though you were at that time seeing more of her than you had for years, on account of the recent illness and death of your mother, the journey to the funeral in Ohio, and Margaret's difficulties.

You and Jane and Margaret and Rose had gone out on the same train, and Larry came from Idaho, his first trip east since his departure, five years before. Everything was done before you arrived, nothing was left but the dismal role of polite mourner.

SO ON the evening after the funeral you all left for New York. You had engaged a drawing-room for the three girls and a compartment for yourself and Larry, who, having got as far east as Ohio, had been persuaded by Jane to come on to New York for a visit.

"What's up between Rose and Margaret?" asked Larry. "They act as if they'd like to bite chunks out of each other."

"They would," you replied. "There's a hell of a row on. Margaret's going to be a corespondent and Rose doesn't want her to."

Larry, stooping to get a magazine from his bag, straightened up to stare at you.

"Don't ask me," you went on hastily. "I really don't know an awful lot about it, but we're both due to find out. Jane asked me to come back, and bring you, as soon as we got settled."

Your ring at the door of the drawing-room, and your entrance in response to Jane's summons, evidently interrupted Rose in the middle of a speech. Margaret, on one of the cross-seats, made room for Larry beside her, and then turned her eyes again on Rose.

"Say it again, so the head of the family can hear you," she drawled with a glance at you. She turned to Larry. "I don't really know you, though you're my brother, but you look like a nice man."

"Count me out," said Larry so hastily that everybody laughed.

"As far as that's concerned, me, too,"

you put in. "There's no occasion to dig at me, Margaret. I'm the head of nobody's family. We came back because Jane asked us to."

"Bill may not be the head of the family," said Jane, "but he's got a better head than any of us."

"Thanks," you said. "I don't know what it's all about anyway, except that somebody's wife is going to get a divorce by proving that Margaret stole her husband, and Rose is sore, because if her sister's name is dragged in the mire, she may have trouble marrying a noble scion of the wholesale leather trade."

This produced a double explosion. Rose shouted above the train's roar that her fiancé wasn't a businessman at all, but that he was of an old and fastidious family; while Margaret declared that she had stolen nobody's husband, and that he wasn't just somebody. Dr. Oehmsen was an internationally known scientist and a great man.

"Sure," agreed Rose, "that's why it's such a mess. What the tabloids won't do!"

"They make the mire, we don't," returned Margaret.

"They put you in it, and me too," Rose appealed to all of you. "I'm not asking her to give up her great man. Though if you could see him. . . ."

Margaret exploded, "You're a selfish outrageous little beast!" and began to cry.

You marvelled at the turmoil and fury. In a way you envied them. Do you envy them now? Ah, that would be more than tolerable now, that would be blessed, to be again frozen with indifference! What will Rose and her fastidious family say when they hear of this? What will Margaret and Larry? What if they were all here now, what if they suddenly appeared on the stairs around you?

VI

He stopped, and again stood still, and his lips moved as though he were talking to the little parchment-shaded lamp, and pronouncing Jane's name.

He turned and looked behind him, downstairs, and started at sight of a dark form against the wall in the hall below, but saw at once that it was the side of the high black frame of the mirror and coat rack. He had avoided looking into the mirror as he passed, and he wished now that he hadn't; he wanted to know what his face looked like; in the street he had felt that people were staring at him.

There were still sounds of Mrs. Jordan in the basement, but now he thought he heard another noise, above, and he turned quickly to look at the door facing the first landing. It was closed; there was no light under it. Those girls, he reflected, were always out at night. That was one of the things he had counted on.

You counted on, a bitter voice said to him; yes, you might count on that; you might count on anything except yourself. . . .

YOU HAVE always betrayed yourself, most miserably at those moments when you most needed the kind of fortitude that can neither be borrowed nor simulated. Yet it was not fear, exactly; more an avoidance and a denial. Certainly you weren't afraid of Lucy, nor were you afraid of the delights she gave and promised.

You felt pretty sure you were going to marry Lucy, that day while the train roared its way through the flat fields towards Dayton, where she was to meet you. She had left Cleveland twelve days before, and they had been empty days for you.

She, alone, met you at the Dayton station, and in a little dark blue roadster drove you west, into the setting sun, some fifteen miles from the city. You were surprised at the extent of the farmhouse and buildings; you knew that Lucy's father, publisher and editor of a newspaper somewhere, had at middle age suddenly given it up and purchased a farm and begun raising thoroughbred stock, but you hadn't expected to see anything so elaborate.

Of all the people you have known, you have understood Lucy's father and

mother least. They were obviously healthy and happy, on excellent terms with life, yet they gave the impression of having no contact with it. Their attitude towards Lucy had none of that rubbing intimacy which is always associated with parenthood. She might have been a privileged summer boarder. You were courteously made welcome; beyond that you were strictly Lucy's business, it seemed no affair of theirs.

You rode a great deal, you on her little mare Babe, Lucy on one of the more unmanageable beasts from the general stables; you played tennis, read, picked berries, went fishing once or twice. The fishing was no good.

"I don't understand it," said Lucy. "Just last summer it was full of sunfish as big as your hand. This is all on our land, and no one ever comes here."

You sat beside her on the bank, idly throwing pebbles into the pool. "Does your father own clear down to here?"

She nodded. After a silence she said:

"I read a book last summer that said that nobody ought to own any land."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't know," she frowned. "I don't see what right anybody has to tell us what we ought to do."

"I've got a right to tell you you oughtn't to pull my hair, haven't I?"

"You have not. You only have a right to pull mine back—if you can."

Quickly she reached down and grabbed a handful of your thick brown hair and gave it a sharp tug. You yelled and seized her wrist, and straightened up, and struggled and clinched. You ended sitting on top of her, holding her down, dipping your hand into the water and trickling it onto her face from the ends of your fingers, and demanding surrender.

"I like that, it's nice and cool," she said, lying quietly; but for some reason you got up and moved a little off and sat down again on the grass. She too sat up and patted at her hair and pulled her dress down, and then got on her knees and dabbled in the water with her hands.

There followed a couple of rainy days; you drove into Dayton and back, and in the evening you tried a game of chess with Mr. Crofts but found him much too good for you.

A few days later, on the last day of July, Lucy drove you to Dayton to catch the afternoon train for Cleveland. Her father came along, having some errands in town. You were expected back at the office the following morning.

Nothing had happened, and you couldn't understand it. What did you want, what were you waiting for? You said to yourself that Lucy was interested in her music, that what she wanted was a career, but you knew that was twaddle.

Was Lucy in love with you? Yes. No. What would you say if you asked her, do you love me? Probably that she didn't know, and then if you asked her to marry you she would say at once, yes, of course I will. You decided you would write and ask her, and have it done.

At the office next day Dick's secretary entered and handed you a letter.

"I've attended to most of Mr. Carr's private mail," she said, "but there didn't seem to be anything I could do about this. I've sent a wire to Mr. Carr, but he may not get it for a week."

The letter was from Erma, mailed in Vienna. She said she was leaving for America, and after spending a week in New York would continue to Cleveland and probably spend the fall and winter there. Would Dick, like a good brother, give the necessary orders to have the house got in readiness?

The next morning there was a telegram, saying that she would arrive on Thursday. You immediately drove out to Wooton Avenue to see that your instructions of the day before were being executed.

ONE of your most vivid memories of Erma from the early days is that August morning in the dingy old Cleveland railroad station. She came down the board platform like a fairy princess in lace and flowers borne on a breeze, surrounded by porters loaded with bags and parcels.

"Bill—how nice of you!"

You explained that Dick was out of town. She kissed you on the cheek, and you felt yourself blushing.

"I've got to kiss someone," she declared, "do you mind? Anyway, you look so nice you should be kissed. I think Americans are better-shaved than Europeans, they always look a bit stubby."

She was gorgeous, distracting, overwhelming. You rode out to the house with her and spent some time explaining the arrangements you had made, regretting that the time had been too short to see them all carried out, and finally you stayed and lunched with her before returning to the office.

Late one afternoon, about a week after Erma's return, called to the telephone, you heard her voice. It was raining, she was lonely, she needed intelligent conversation, would you come out for a tête-à-tête dinner?

You would.

It is difficult to recapture the impression that Erma made upon you then. Certainly you were flattered by any attention she gave you; just as certainly you were not in love with her. You always tell yourself that, with Mrs. Davis, with Millicent, with Lucy—then you have never been in love? No, has anyone?

She was very nice to you that evening; she can be nicer than anyone else when she wants to. The dinner was perfect, and you both drank enough wine—just enough. Afterward you sat in the little room beyond the library and talked, and listened, and admired Erma's fine white arms and graceful neck and her pretty fluttering nervous gestures, when all at once she stopped and looked at you and said:

"There's one thing I've admired you for a lot. Do you remember that we were once engaged to be married?"

It was without warning, but you managed a smile.

"No," you said, "were we?"

"And you've never even told Dick, at least I don't suppose you have—"

"I haven't."

She kissed her finger and touched your lips with it.

"You're a darling. I hate explanations. Of course, it may be that you were glad to be out of it."

"Unspeakably. I was going to be a great writer and was afraid it would take my mind off my work."

She pretended to shiver a little. "Ugh. Don't. That sounds as if it were decades ago. Good heavens you're only twenty-five, and I'm twenty-seven. We were both too young."

"Twenty-six next month."

"Yes? We'll have a party and make everybody bring you a present."

After that you received many invitations from Erma—teas, dinners, dances—and you accepted most of them, but you were careful; you had been scorched once by that tricky flame and were shy of it. Then one afternoon she telephoned to ask you to come to dinner, early; she emphasized it, early; and when you arrived and had been shown into the library she entered almost at once and explained:

"Dick's coming. He phoned and especially wanted to come, so I suppose he intends to talk about business. I regard you as my business adviser, and I confess I'm a little overpowered by darling Dick's Napoleonic dash, so I want you to be here too."

You were aghast.

"Good god, Erma, I can't do it. Don't you see how impertinent and impudent it would seem to him?"

HER EYES tightened a little; that was the first time you saw them do it.

"Impudent!" she exclaimed. Then she laughed. "I don't need you to withstand Napoleon, Bill dear; it won't be necessary and if it is I'll attend to it. But I'm ignorant, and you know things. Really I insist."

When Dick arrived a little later he didn't bother to conceal his surprise and annoyance at seeing you. Nor did he trouble to lower his voice when he said to Erma:

"I thought you said you'd be alone."

"I'd forgotten about Bill," she said

carelessly. "He often comes out to relieve my loneliness. If it's really so confidential—"

No, Dick said, it didn't matter.

It was the first time the three of you had been alone together since the summer of your second visit. At dinner you talked of that, and of Dick's fishing trip, and of other inconsequential things. You were relieved that Dick had speedily forgotten his annoyance at your presence.

"I'm surprised that you can get Bill out to this end of town so often," he said to Erma. "Who does he leave to guard his shepherdess? Not that she needs it."

Erma glanced at him, and at you. "Have you got a shepherdess?"

"What, haven't you met her?" asked Dick. "I don't know where he found her, but he brought her to a couple of dances last spring, and she darned near started a riot." He turned to you. "You haven't fried and eaten her?"

You explained that Lucy had remained at the farm for the rest of the summer and wouldn't return to Cleveland for another week or so.

"I thought you told me all your secrets," said Erma reproachfully, "and here you've got a beautiful shepherdess that I never even heard of."

"It's no secret," you said shortly, "and I haven't got her."

"The hell you haven't," said Dick.

After dinner you wanted to leave and were busy devising a suitable excuse, when you caught a glance from Erma which said plainly that she read your intention and that you might as well discard it. Dick moved to a chair next to Erma and began telling her his errand.

The recent death of old Meynell, the lawyer, he explained, made necessary a new arrangement regarding Erma's stock. "The stock should be represented at the next annual stockholders' meeting," Dick went on, "and that's really the point. Of course, you can attend the meeting yourself if you want to, there isn't anything technical about it, electing directors and so on. What I wondered was if you would give me a proxy and let me vote your stock along with mine. That would be simplest."

Erma sat comfortably sipping black coffee. "If I give you my proxy you'll vote the whole thing, won't you?" she asked.

"Of course. I own the other half."

"How long is a proxy good for?"

"As long as you want to make it. Usually there is no stated term. You can recall it whenever you want to, or make a new one."

"Then I guess I'll make a proxy, it sounds important. Only I think it would be piggish for you to vote the whole thing, so I'll give my proxy to Bill, if he'll promise not to elect the shepherdess a director."

You were flustered; you felt yourself blushing.

"Really, Erma," you protested, "you're putting me in a false position—"

"I don't see anything false about it," she declared. "It seems to me very sensible. You two can run things just as you want to, and two heads are better than one. Anyway, this just happens to appeal to me."

"You're a damn fool," said Dick.

But you really did mean it; she stuck to it, airily but inexorably. You walked all the way home, in the mild September night, feeling alternately humiliated and elated.

But one thing was a fact; at twenty-six, not quite twenty-six, you held the voting power for one-half the stock of a ten-million-dollar corporation. You would be on equal terms with Dick—but even your fancy balked at that. You would scarcely be on even terms with Dick, not if you had a hundred proxies.

VII

He became suddenly aware that his hand was again in his overcoat pocket, closed tightly over the butt of the revolver. His hand came out and the revolver with it, and he stood there with his forearm extended, the weapon in plain sight, peering around, downstairs and up, like a villain in a melo-

drama. If the door of the landing had at that instant opened and one of the art students had appeared, he would probably have pulled the trigger without knowing it.

His hand returned to his pocket and then came out again, empty, and sought the railing as he mounted another step, and then stopped once more.

Oh you would, would you, he said to himself, and he felt his lips twist into a grimace that tried to be a smile. No you don't, this time you go ahead, if it's only to point it at her and let her know what you think she's fit for.

You go ahead. . . .

YOU said that to yourself, over and over again, that night in Cleveland when Lucy was going away. Go ahead, go ahead, you repeated, what are you waiting for?

But you did neither. You dangled on the peg of your irresolution and cried like a baby.

She had not been back long, it was towards the end of October, when one evening you were dining at Winkler's Restaurant and she suddenly said:

"It looks as if I'm going to New York soon. Mereczynski has opened a studio there and Mr. Murray says he can get him to take me. I don't know if I'm worth it; I've written Father about it."

You felt at once that she intended to go, that she would go. You were panic-stricken; not till that moment had you been aware that underneath her simplicity and her quietness was a strength which made her immeasurably your superior. Had you misjudged also your own importance to her?

"How soon would you go?"

"I don't know, probably a couple of weeks, as soon as Mr. Murray can make the arrangements. If I am to go at all it might as well be at once."

"In two weeks," you said, and then were silent. When you spoke again, it was almost desperately.

"I've been wanting to ask you to marry me. Of course you know that. If you go to New York that will be the end of it." You hesitated, then finished more desperately and rapidly: "Unless you'll promise to marry me before you go."

But Lucy laughed! And said:

"Well, you did ask me after all."

"I've wanted to since the first day I saw you," you declared. "I took it for granted you knew. But I've never known what to say to you. I don't know even now how you feel about me—"

She stopped smiling, and her voice was more serious than you had ever heard it:

"I don't either. I never have known how we feel about each other. I like you so much, much more than I've ever liked anyone, but there's something in you I don't like, and I don't know what it is. Though if you'd asked me last summer I'm pretty sure I'd have said yes."

She was to take a sleeper on a Wednesday night. On the Tuesday evening you dined again at Winkler's. After dinner you drove her home and, arriving there and observing that it was only ten o'clock, it was suggested that you stay a while. Finding the library and parlor occupied by Aunt Martha and a bridge party, Lucy said you could find refuge in her room, and ran upstairs ahead of you.

She had some snapshots, taken during your summer visit, which you had not yet seen, and you helped her dig them out of the trunk; and she sat cross-legged on the bed, propped against the pillows, while you sat beside her and took the pictures from her one by one. You hardly saw the pictures.

A picture fell from your fingers into her lap. You reached for it together, and your hand closed upon hers. She looked at you, and her eyes widened and her face became suddenly still as marble. You leaned forward and kissed her. You kept your lips on hers, put your arms tight around her.

"My love, O Lucy my love," you gasped. "Kiss me, please kiss me."

She was silent, but she kissed you, again and again. She held you close with strong and urgent arms. "My love, my dear love," you whispered. Awk-

wardly your rough embrace tightened around her. She shivered, suddenly and violently, withdrew herself, pushed you away.

"I think you tore my dress," she said, feeling at it.

You swung yourself around, got onto your feet, on the floor, and stood there, betrayed and ridiculous, fumbling in your pocket for your cigarette case. She too got up and without saying anything went to the dressing-table mirror and twisted herself about.

"I'm sorry if I tore it," you said from across the room.

She came over and stood in front of you, quite close, and put her hands on your shoulders. She tried to smile and you tried to look at her troubled eyes.

"I'm almost crying," she said. "I can't figure it out. It's not the dress, or that I'm afraid of anything we might do. But something was wrong. It was just no good!"

"I'm sorry," was all you could say. "I'm awfully sorry, Lucy." As she stood there with her hands still on your shoulders you thought to take her again in your arms, but she moved away and began picking up the scattered pictures.

The following summer you took your vacation early in order to spend two weeks at home while Jane was there. You had of course mentioned Lucy in letters, but at arm's length, making phrases. Now you spoke of her in detail and with feeling; you gave Jane to understand that it was a case of a grand passion unaccountably thwarted by the tragic vagaries of obscure fate.

"I certainly intended to ask her to marry me," you declared. "It seemed foreordained. She clearly expected it too. Surely we were made for each other if any two people ever were. And yet it was no go, there was something somewhere that made it impossible. I honestly think I was in love with her—I must have been. Yet somehow unconsciously I must have felt that it wouldn't work, at least that marriage wouldn't. Remember she's a musician, she's an artist, she has that temperament. Maybe—"

To your shocked surprise Jane laughed. She said suddenly:

"Are you going to marry Erma?"

You were a little startled. "Not that I know of," you replied. "No, not even if I wanted to, which I don't. She's a grand lady, much too grand for me."

"Not too grand to put you in control of her property."

You laughed. "I'm not in control of anything. She can recall that piece of paper whenever she wants to, which might be day after tomorrow. No, she's out of my class."

"You'll marry her, you'll see."

VIII

"Is that you, Mr. Lewis?"

It was Mrs. Jordan's voice, from the basement.

Had she then seen him come in? Not necessarily. Perhaps she had heard his footsteps on the stairs; or, since that was unlikely on account of the carpet and the pains he had taken to mount softly, possibly he had knocked the revolver against the rail when he took it out of his pocket or as he put it back.

"Is that you, Mr. Lewis?"

He trembled from head to foot. He turned his head and looked behind him and down, sidewise, looking at nothing, like a treed coon. Well, he thought, use your brain if you've got one. Either you answer Mrs. Jordan or you don't.

It was only three or four steps to the first landing. He suddenly ran up them, quietly and rapidly, trying to make no noise at all. At the top he whirled around the corner, and as he did so, the tail of his overcoat described a wide semi-circle. There was a rattle and a clatter as the little lamp with the parchment shade tumbled to the floor onto the bare wood, beyond the edge of the carpet. It banged against the wall; then silence.

He jumped as if shot. Now he thought, what are you going to do? Are you going to answer her or not?

YOU might as well.

Calmly, calmly. You were quite calm three nights ago when you told her that it was intolerable, you could stand

it no longer, you were being pushed into insanity, and the only way out was to kill either her or yourself or both. Has she told anyone of that threat? You were a fool to threaten her, but she doesn't talk. If she has mentioned it to anyone that would be fatal. Do you see what thin ice you're skating on—if she has happened to breathe a word of it, to anyone, no matter who, your goose is cooked. Anyone, the woman at the corner delicatessen, for instance.

They say there are a thousand other ways too that things like this are traced. Through the weapon, for instance. But they'd have a fine time trying to trace the revolver, in case you were suspected.

"Take it along," Larry had said, when you were starting out for a day's fishing, one morning on his ranch, the summer you went to Idaho. "You might have some fun popping at jackrabbits or a coyote."

You tried it a few times, but never hit anything. You chucked the revolver away and forgot all about it; discovered it, to your surprise, when you were unpacking after your return to New York. You meant to write Larry about it, but never did. For four years it has been in that old bag in the closet; certainly no one knew of it, not even Erma.

They'll try to get you a thousand different ways if they suspect you. They'll want to know everywhere you went and everything you did. "Where were you, Mr. Sidney, between ten and twelve Thursday night?" Dare you ask Jane to do that? "I was at my sister's house on Tenth Street; I spent the entire evening with her." That would fix them. "She was alone, and I spent the entire evening with her."

As a matter of fact, it might work. You didn't show any signs of anything at the office; you ate at your usual table at the club, everybody saw you; and when you went home to get the revolver, it was still early not yet nine o'clock. But you've got to remember that they'll ask the servants about every little thing. All right, the servants saw you enter and leave. "What did you go home for?" What did you go home for. The whole thing may hang on that, that shows how ticklish it is. Very well, then, you went home to get something for Jane, something you wanted to take to her—any little thing, like a book for instance. "What was the name of the book?" You'll have to talk it all over very carefully with Jane, and get every point decided so you won't contradict each other.

Then you walked away from the house. The doorman saw you walk away, and fortunately you happened to turn south. You'll say you were in no hurry to get to Jane's. You just walked a few blocks and then picked up a taxi on the avenue.

It is vital to remember exactly where you actually did go and whether anyone saw you. You didn't walk on Park Avenue very far; you turned at one of the side streets, somewhere in the Forties, and went over to Broadway, where you turned uptown again. You stayed on Broadway quite a distance, maybe Seventieth Street, then went to Central Park West, and turned west again on Eighty-Fifth. Then you were here, in front of the house, across the street. Almost certainly no one saw you. From the time you left Park Avenue you haven't spoken to a soul.

But how are you going to get out? You'll just have to stay until you're sure no one heard the shot, and then come downstairs and beat it. If you do get away, if you really do get clean away, get to Jane's house and later go home, it's even possible that you'll never be connected with this place at all. Nobody around here knows you except as Mr. Lewis. There's nothing with your name on it anywhere here, no photographs, no letters—

There's that damned statute!

William the Conqueror. The masterful man, your true character. The artist revealing what everyone else is too blind to see. Erma would enjoy this. Trapped by that piece of junk! Oh no, not on your life. You can take a hammer and knock it to pieces. You should have done it long ago. You

should have done it the evening you went home and found Erma decorating it.

They'll hunt, they'll look everywhere.

There's a lot of numbers on the back of that phone book; they'll jump on that: Chelsea four three four three. Maybe your own too; you've never noticed. That one would be enough—straight to Jane! Tear off the cover and burn it; or erase that number. Then they examine the spot with a microscope, and you might as well have left your card. All right; take the book away; take it home and hide it somewhere.

WHAT are you going to do with the gun? If you could just leave it there, put it down and leave it there—but of course you can't. Wrap it in a newspaper and leave it on the subway train? Throw it in the river. That's it! When you get off the subway at Fourteenth Street go straight to a pier and throw it in.

What if they arrest you, how good are you going to act? The thing to do is send for a lawyer and not say anything till he comes. Send for Dick and tell him to bring a lawyer, ask him to bring Stetson, he's the best of that bunch. What will you tell Stetson? You won't dare tell him everything; all about the last two years, yes, but not that there's been any difficulty. Shall you tell him about Grace? What if you don't, and he finds out and questions her? How much does she know? Then he'll suspect everything you tell him. You've got to be as careful what you say to your own lawyer as if he were after you too. For the Dick part of it, you'll have to leave it to Dick; you'll have to see Dick alone first and put it up to him.

You've never shot any kind of firearm to amount to anything, except that little twenty-two rifle you used to hunt rabbits with. It was never much fun; you couldn't bear to get your hands bloody. Red Adams used to string them on his belt by the hind legs, so that his overalls had a ring of sticky blood around the knees. Jane would always help you skin them and hang them up on the back porch to freeze. She's never been squeamish about anything. If only there's nobody there with her! If once you get it over, and get out, and get to her house and find her there sitting in the back room reading, as she often is, you'll be safe. What about the maid? Leave it to her, she'll attend to it somehow.

Suicide's a funny thing. You're afraid to think of it, but once you do think of it there's nothing to be afraid of. You stand there in the bedroom, in the middle of the room, and put the barrel in your mouth and point it up towards the top of your head, and there's nothing wrong with you; you can do whatever you damn please, you can take it out again and go and eat your supper. Or you can pull the trigger, just simply press your finger down, that's all, finish. . . .

She'll be sitting in that chair, now, when you go in. You will close the door behind you, and deliberately take the revolver from your pocket and take off your scarf and wrap around it. What will she do? She'll sit and watch you. Will she be startled or frightened, will she cry out or plead with you or otherwise finally admit your existence as a force, needing to be considered? She won't believe in it. She might, though, she might scream. You don't know what's in your face; you are doing something she thinks is not in you, and if your face gives it away she might scream and shout for help. Ah, if she does! You'd like to hear that once. But then you might fail.

All right. Go on up. Go on and get it over with.

You might have known you'd knock that damn lamp off.

IX

He reached down, and quietly and precisely picked up the lamp and set it back in its niche, trying to make the shade hang straight. "Yes, it's me, Mrs. Jordan," he called down.

"Knocked the lamp off again."

Her voice came:

"Oh—I thought maybe it was someone to see Miss Boyle. If you break it you'll have to pay for it."

A door in the basement opened noisily, then banged shut; Mrs. Jordan had returned to her room. Silence. Still he stood—the idea of movement was hateful—he felt physically exhausted, and completely indifferent to all things. He told himself, you might as well be a dead leaf hanging on a tree. . . .

DO OTHER people feel like this? If they do why do they live? A dead leaf blown in the wind. It isn't so much the helplessness; you could stand it to feel yourself pushed and pulled, here and there, if only you knew what was doing it and why. You called yourself a weakling and a coward because you let Lucy go, but that was silly.

In November, two years after Lucy had left, Erma suddenly decided to go to Europe. You had never heard from Lucy or written to her. In your room was her photograph; for a long time it stood open on your chiffonier, then, one day, just after you got back from your visit home when you told Jane all about it, you took the photograph down and put it away—in a drawer. It's probably still around somewhere.

Throughout those two years it was obvious that everyone, including Dick, expected momentarily to hear that you and Erma were engaged. You yourself wouldn't have been surprised if some morning at breakfast you had found an item on the society page of the Plain Dealer: "Miss Erma Carr announces her engagement to Mr. William Barton Sidney."

You did in fact find information in the society column one morning, but it was to the effect that Miss Carr would leave shortly for an extended stay abroad. All day at the office you expected to hear from her, and when at five o'clock no word had come you telephoned to Wooton Avenue.

"How long are you going to stay?" you asked.

"A winter, a month, ten years! Why don't you come over next summer? Meet me in Brittany or Norway or somewhere. You ought to have a real vacation anyway. We could stay over there forever, and you could run back once a year to attend the stockholders' meeting."

You were puzzled and irritated. Was this a proposal of marriage, or was it a polite hint that she would like to change her business arrangements?

"By the way," you said, "now that you're going away maybe you'd prefer to turn your proxy over to Dick. Seriously, I think it would be a good idea. You don't know how long you'll be gone, and after all who am I? I'm in an anomalous position. You can be sure that Dick doesn't relish having a mere employe dressed up like an equal."

"Has he been nasty?" she asked quickly.

"Lord no. I'm not complaining. It's just that there doesn't seem to be much sense in it, and naturally I feel a little ridiculous."

"You don't need to. You shouldn't. As for the proxy, keep it if you please." She hesitated, then went on, "I didn't intend to mention it, but the other day Tom Hall insisted that I make a will, and if I fall off an Alp or drink myself to death you'll be able to celebrate by buying a yacht."

You've always been curious about that will. What exactly did it say? Surely not the whole to you; yet with Erma you can't tell. There was no one else but Dick, and she wasn't apt to swell him up. The whole thing! Under certain circumstances, then you could have given Dick something to think about. Was it changed later when she married Pierre? Perhaps, no telling; if so, has it again been changed to you?

It was more than a year before you got a letter from her, a note rather, and then another year to the next. When she got married she didn't write you about it at all; you learned of it from a letter to Dick.

It is amusing to speculate on the probabilities in Pearl Street if you had not had that proxy in your safe deposit

box. Though that's not fair either; why must you constantly pretend that Dick tried to choke you off?

One day he said to you:

"What do you think of this New York thing? We might as well decide it. I was thinking last night—I say yes, at once. Gustafson says that England alone will place half a billion in six months. If we handle it right, and if those idiots keep on fighting a year or two, there'll be no limit—hell, anything's possible. I'm uncomfortable every minute I'm away from those boatloads of easy money. What do you think?"

"I think I'll go home and pack up," you laughed.

The next day you went to New York to find offices, and paid a fortune in premiums to vacate leases. Within six weeks the entire organization, sales and administrative, was moved and installed. Exhausted by your labors, you were nevertheless stimulated and refreshed by the interest of the new activities and the new scene. The tempo everywhere was quickened. As for Dick, he plunged into the boiling middle of it, his mouth shut but his eyes open, grabbing with both hands. You reflected that he was making himself and his sister two of the richest persons in America, but certainly it never occurred to him; he was much too busy to think about it.

Then Larry came, was welcomed graciously by Dick, and sent off to the Carrton plant, and you began to feel a solidity in life; you were catching hold of an edge here and there. Above all, one particular edge.

ON ARRIVING in New York you had suggested that Jane and Margaret and Rose leave the little flat in Sullivan Street and set up a household for you, in any part of the city they might select. This was your most cherished gesture and the thought of it warmed you for months.

Jane said no. The others were more than willing, but she vetoed it flatly. She said that you might want to get married, and that you should assume no such encumbrance. You protested that you were only thirty-one, and that you wanted never to get married, anyway. No, she wouldn't do it. You remained in your little two-room suite at the Garwood.

You were a great deal with her, more than at any period before or since. You took her to plays and concerts, subscribed to the opera, and persuaded her to use the accounts you opened at two or three of the stores. You met a lot of her friends—a strange assortment, there were none you ever really liked except young Cruickshanks, then just a boy, writing verses on the back of menus and grandly offering them to the restaurant manager as payment for his meal. You thought Margaret was in love with him. And you liked Victor at first; no use denying it, you thought him agreeable and likable. He seemed to you more normal and balanced than anyone else in that crowd.

One Saturday in May, lunching with Jane downtown, you insisted that she drive with you the following morning to look at a house somewhere north of White Plains which you had been told of by one of the men in the office.

"There are nine rooms, two baths, everything modern, and it's at the edge of a wood on top of a hill overlooking one of the reservoirs," you told her. "Sounds like the very thing we want. I think you'd like it."

"I know I would," said Jane warmly, too warmly. "It sounds perfect. But it's impossible. You see, I'm going to be married."

"I thought—I thought—" you stammered.

You stopped. You couldn't say that.

"Who is it?"

She smiled. "Victor, of course. You really didn't know? You must have. I've been as silly as a schoolgirl."

You lost your head and almost made a scene there in the restaurant. You pretended to no power of veto, but by heaven, if you had it you would certainly use it on Victor Knowlton—a half-baked writer and lecturer, coarse-

grained, opinionated. You had heard curious tales about him which had amused you at the time, but which, remembered now, convinced you that he was no man to marry your sister.

"No man is expected to be a saint," you concluded, "but neither should he be a promiscuous pig, if he expects a decent woman to marry him."

"I don't think I need defend Victor against the charge of being a promiscuous pig," said Jane slowly. "That's a little strong, isn't it? Anyway it's his own affair, just as my own checkered past is mine. And from your own standard you must admit it's decent of him to want to marry me after having had me for nearly a year. Of course it's true that I've argued against it, but now that we've decided to have children—"

You stared at her. This couldn't possibly be your sister, your dear Jane. You wanted to yell at her, shout some insult at her, but you felt suddenly weak, done in, and frightened. Well, it's all over, that's that, you told yourself, standing on the narrow Fulton Street sidewalk, after she had parted from you at the restaurant door and hurried off to the subway.

Any man who expects to get anything from a woman is a fool, or if he does it's just an accident. No matter who she is, she takes what she wants, and a fat lot she cares about you. Erma would agree with you all right; she's at least honest about it. Mrs. Davis didn't hurt you any maybe; she used you; what did she give you? A son; a hell of a favor that was, he ate a dozen dinners at your expense and made an ass of you with that joke of a statue—though he may not have meant it—and he's spent over seven thousand dollars of your money hanging around Paris and Rome.

Lucy—Lucy wasn't a woman, she was Lucy. It would have been the same with her—no. No! That was like a raindrop that never falls from the cloud —is whirled upward instead, to float above the atmosphere eternally, finding no home.

The most savage and insolent feast though was that of little Millicent, in that room with the afternoon sun lazing at the window, long ago, as she went silently back and forth collecting things from your closet and dresser and piling them on a chair, and finally turned and came towards you. . . .

Abandoned, bitter, with nothing anywhere in reach to hold onto, you were not surprised that the old familiar fantasy returned; you accepted it, and felt her hands again for the first time in many months, the night after Jane left you standing in front of the restaurant.

X

He turned and walked over the strip of dingy carpet to the foot of the second flight of stairs. Above was semi-darkness, drifting down almost to the foot of the stairs like a threatening fog. He hesitated before it, dully, enveloped in silence. Nothing could be more ordinary or familiar to him, yet he hesitated, feeling a strange new quality in the dim dreariness.

That was the time to fight it, he told himself, so plainly that he thought it was muttered words, though his lips did not move.

Then you might have beaten it and come free. . . .

JANE had been married nearly a year; you had decided to tolerate Victor, but you saw them infrequently, partly because you felt that Margaret and Rose were trying to use you for a good thing and you didn't intend to stand for it. Especially Rose. Jane, trying to manage a baby and a job at the same time, was too busy to notice it.

You sat there that night in Erma's elaborate bedroom, wondering what was up. It was her first big dinner and dance at the house on Riverside Drive, and had been marvelously successful; she could do that sort of thing so easily, almost without thought. But why had she asked you to stay after the mob had left?

The door from her dressing-room opened, and she entered, fresh and charming with no trace of the night's fatigue, wearing a soft yellow negligee. She stroked your cheek with her hand.

"Poor Bill, you're tired," she said.

You were somewhat disconcerted. "Not so very," you said.

"Neither am I," she replied, "put your arm around me."

You held her close, at first mechanically, like a conscientious proxy; then, approaching excitement, on your own account. A strange night that was. Like watching yourself from the top of a mountain, too far away to see clearly. . . .

In the morning it astonished you that she arose when you did and insisted that you have fruit and coffee with her; and there, at the breakfast table, she announced her opinion that it would be a good idea to get married.

"Since we've known each other over twelve years," you said, "that suggestion, at this precise moment, is open to a highly vulgar construction. I can't think why you propose it."

"I'm tired of being *Veuve Bassot*. I want to invest in a husband."

"At least you're frank about it."

"You ask why, and you insist. Perhaps I'm still curious about you, which would be a triumph. Or, maybe, I merely want a screen inside my bedroom door, in case the wind blows it open. . . ."

You lifted your coffee cup, whipped into silence by her smiling brutality; and doubtless you looked whipped, for she pushed back her chair and came around the table and kissed you on top of the head.

"Bill dear, I do want to be your wife," she said.

All day long at the office, and the night and day following, you pretended to consider what you were going to do, knowing all the time that it was already decided. You had supposed that she would want a starched and gaudy wedding, but it was in a dark little parsonage parlor somewhere in South Jersey, with Dick and Nina Endicott as witnesses, Erma made her marital investment less than one month later.

It was Larry who introduced Major Barth to you and Erma; brought him out one evening for bridge. There was nothing impressive about him, except his size—almost massive, well-proportioned, with a little blond mustache that looked like a pair of tiny pale commas pasted couchant, pointing outwards, against his youthful pink skin. You would not have noticed him at all, among the crowd, but for the subsequent comedy.

The big handsome major began to be much in evidence, but still you took no notice; Erma's volatile and brief fancies in the matter of dinner guests and dancing partners were an old story to you. Then, returning home one evening at nearly midnight, on mounting to your rooms on the third floor you saw light through the keyhole as you passed Erma's room on the floor below, though John had told you that she was out and would not return until late.

IN THE morning you arose rather later than usual, and you were in the breakfast room with your emptied coffee cup beside you, just ready to fold up the *Times* and throw it aside, when you heard footsteps at the door and looked up to see Major Barth enter, twinkling and ruddy.

"Good morning," he said pleasantly; and added something about supposing you had gone to the office and wishing he had one to go to.

It so happened that that evening you and Erma were dining out. As usual she came to your room and tied your cravat.

"Tim interrupted your breakfast, didn't he?" she smiled.

In front of the mirror, with your back to her, you arranged your coat.

"And is he—that is—are we adopting him?" you inquired.

She was silent. Then she said:

"Sometimes you frighten me, Bill. You feel things too well, much too well for a man. How long have we been married, a year and a half? Yes, eighteen months. We've had dozens of house guests, some under rather peculiar circumstances, like the Hungarian boy last winter, and you've never lifted an eyelid. But you feel Tim at once; you're much too clever."

You were now dressed, and stood by the chair looking down at her, your hands in your pockets. "And after last night I am supposed to breakfast with him and discuss yesterday's market? Not that I'm pretending any personal torment, but when that jackass walked in on me this morning I felt like an embarrassed worm. What do you want me to do? Shall I go and live at the club? Do you want a divorce?"

"Come on," said Erma, "we'll be late."

It petered out to no conclusion.

It was a few years after that you moved to Park Avenue. You had been married five years!

"I've never lived in anything between a hotel room and a house," said Erma. "The word apartment has always sounded stuffy to me. If we don't like it we can probably sell without much loss."

"I think we may scrape along somehow," you remarked drily, "with nineteen room and eight baths."

The arrangement was ideal, with your rooms on the upper floor, at the rear; and the night you first slept there you complacently accepted Erma's suggestion that all knocking should be at your door. It had already been so, in effect, for two years; this merely formalized it.

She must have spent close to half a million furnishing that apartment. More than ten years of your salary. You figured it up with her once, but that was before the hangings had come over from Italy and the pictures and stuff she bought later in London. Why? She hadn't gone in for the big show after all; there were too many rules to suit her. You never knew who you might find when you went home to dinner—anybody from that French duke with his cross-eyed wife down to some bolshevik professor. A whole tableful. Then for a month at a stretch you'd dine at the club, preferring that to a solitaire meal at home, while she would be off chasing restlessly after something which she never found.

Nor did you; you weren't even looking for anything. Though you did one evening see something that stopped you and set you staring in the whirling snow. After a too ample dinner at the club you had gone out for a brisk walk in the winter night and, striding along Fifty-seventh Street, were suddenly in front of Carnegie Hall. A name on a poster caught your eye: Lucy Crofts. It was a large poster, and her name was in enormous black letters.

The date was in the following week.

Twelve years ago, you thought, it seems incredible. She's nearly thirty. Over thirty! Lucy, Lucy! Yes, call her now. If you could get her back as she was—you don't want much, do you? Let her come in now and run up the stairs to you, and you take her up and introduce her, politely—Lucy, this is—

XI

He was moving up the second flight, into the semi-darkness, slowly and wearily. Involuntarily his left hand went into his trousers pocket and came out holding a ring with two keys on it, and still involuntarily his fingers selected one of the keys and turned it to the correct position for insertion in the keyhole.

He felt the key in his hand and looked down at it, wondering how it had got there. . . .

THAT evening at the recital the expectation was dead before you saw her. You arrived early, to be sure of not missing Lucy's entrance, and the two sturdy matrons on your right told each other all you didn't care to know. One of them had heard her play in Vienna and had later met her in Cannes; the other had known her husband, who had left his estates in Bavaria to be with her on her American tour. Never had there been so devoted a husband, she declared.

And so on.

She was very beautiful, superbly dressed, perfectly composed. The audience loved her at once. You were thrilled for a moment as she stood at ease, graciously inclining her head to the applause; then as she sat down and began to play you felt bored and indif-

ferent. This trained woman playing Mozkowski to a full house—what a place to come to, to find Lucy!

After the first intermission you did not return.

That winter Erma suddenly took it into her head to give Margaret and Rose a lift. She and Jane have always been funny together—in a way they genuinely like each other, but from the first they've always backed off a bit, as much as to say, you may be all right but just keep off my grass if you don't mind. She didn't get far with Margaret either—Margaret's a strange kid and a good deal of a fool, thinking she's in love because Doctor Oehmsen has articles in the American Science Journal.

But Rose jumped at Erma's first gesture. Erma soon got fed up with her clever tricks, but Rose held on till she got what she wanted.

At first you thought she was after Dick, and maybe she was, but if so she soon found that Mary Bellowes was ahead of her. Mary Alaire Carew Bellowes—it looked very imposing on the announcement, almost as imposing as one of her grand entrances into a drawing-room. Instantly Erma was on to her the first time Dick brought her around.

Later, after they had gone, you told Erma that Dick deserved better, and that as an older sister it was up to her to save him from so unpleasant a fate. She replied that the remark was your record for stupidity.

The wedding was as different as possible from your and Erma's rustic nuptials; no Jersey parsonage for Mary Alaire Carew Bellowes. You were best man, and when at a solemn moment Erma made a grimace and winked at you, you almost dropped the ring. They took a mansion on Long Island and four or five floors on the Avenue, and for the first time Dick began to take an interest in the private ledger. But even her furious assaults could not greatly disturb the serenity of those colossal columns; and they were restored again to assured security within the year, when Dick declared to you one day at lunch: "Bill, every woman alive ought to be locked up in a little room and fed through a hole in the wall."

You decided that it was not a propitious moment for sounding him on a proposal that had occurred to you that morning. Only a few weeks previously you had returned from Ohio, from your mother's funeral, and to your surprise Larry had not only accepted Jane's invitation to come to New York for a visit, but had apparently settled down for an extended stay, having moved recently from Jane's house to a couple of rooms on Twelfth Street. He had told you nothing of his intentions, but you thought it possible that five years of Idaho had been enough for him and that he might welcome another chance at the career he had once started so well and abandoned in disgust. You decided to ask Dick whether Larry was wanted and if so on what terms.

The project was temporarily set aside by the sudden appearance from nowhere of Mrs. Davis and your son. Day after day you went directly after lunch to the bare little room overlooking the dirty little West Side street, and sat there while he worked on your bust. You wondered what you would do with the darned thing when it was finished, until one day Paul said:

"The Greenwich Galleries over on Eighth Street would like to have this for a month or so, if you don't mind; they're going to have a little show of modern American sculpture."

"When?"

"Around the first of April."

It was arranged, with the proviso that your name should appear neither in the catalogue nor on the card. Before the end of March it was finished and delivered; and Paul, with several hundred dollars of your money in his pocket and an account opened for him in a Paris bank, was gone.

No sort of intimacy had developed between you; he was too shrewd and intelligent not to attempt to conceal how utterly you were to him merely a lucky find.

Twice you visited the Eighth Street

galleries to see your head and face in marble publicly displayed, and to watch others looking at it, while pretending your attention was elsewhere. Then the confounded idiots, forgetting entirely the careful instructions given them by Paul, that it was to be kept there until you called for it, on the very day the show ended had it delivered to your address on Park Avenue. When you got home from the office there it was in the middle of the big table in the library, with a wreath of ferns and red roses around its brow and a circlet of yellow daisies hanging from its neck.

ERMA, having apparently just finished this decorative effort, was seated at the piano. When you entered she crashed into the Polonaise Militaire. You tried to laugh, but it was too much for you. Suddenly she left the piano and came towards you, towards the table.

"I tried to fix it up as nice as I could," she said, reaching over and pretending to adjust the daisy necklace. "There have already been three men after it for the Hall of Fame, but John and I chased them. Bill dear, it's marvelous —that indomitable will, that gallant fling of the head—I've decided to call it William the Conqueror."

You turned and left the room, and the house; got a taxi and went to the Club, and spent the night there. But by the following afternoon you felt better about it, especially about Erma. She might be cruel and pitiless, even malicious, but she was right. You went home, and entering, called out:

"*Vive* William the Conqueror!"

She chose to be semi-serious about it, after you had explained its origin and reason of being and she had poured you a cup of tea.

"Your young sculptor is either very stupid or a first-rate satirist," she said. "I'm sorry he's gone; why didn't you bring him to see me? He made gorgeous fun of you, Bill. It saddens me."

"There are masterful men," you observed.

"None with a sense of humor," she replied. "And, besides, you aren't masterful at all."

That evening William the Conqueror was stowed away in a corner of your dressing-room. But you couldn't resist the impulse to show it to Jane, swearing her first to secrecy. You pulled it out nearer the light and introduced it derisively as William the Conqueror, explaining that it had been christened by Erma. She looked at it from all sides and then sat down on the floor in front of it and looked up at you.

"It's extremely good," she said, "but it isn't you."

"No? Why not."

"It's too—" she hesitated. "It's too stupid. It's what you would be like if you went around bumping people off of sidewalks."

That was the evening of your birthday party—your fortieth birthday—another of Erma's unlikely gestures. Lord, families are jokes—look at that bunch around that table! Jane, Larry, Margaret, Dick, Victor. Mary Alaire Carew Bellowes Carr was there, too. And Rose. . . .

Rose, you reflected, knew what she was about better than most; she's the only person you've ever seen work Erma successfully, by sheer impudence. She had her way with Margaret too, you learned that evening. Up in your room, after the party. Jane told you she had that morning had a final interview with Mrs. Oehmsen and arranged definitely that the divorce proceedings should be postponed until autumn. October at the earliest. Rose's wedding was set for the middle of September; so Margaret could be a maid of honor a full month before she became a corespondent; and Rose, off on a European honeymoon, would be three thousand miles from tabloids.

"How did you persuade her?" you asked.

"I told her that if she didn't promise to wait Margaret would go off to the South Seas, and Dr. Oehmsen would follow her, and she'd lose all her fun."

You reflected that Rose, whom you

actively disliked, was the only member of the family who had got any considerable thing out of you. It was at your wife's house that she had carried on her campaign and captured her husband. Jane and Margaret, nothing; Larry. . . .

That wound had been reopened, but with less loss of blood. One day at lunch you said to Dick:

"By the way, I'm wondering about Larry. He seems to be hanging on here for no particular reason, and it's just possible he's fed up out there and would like to try his hand again at selling a few carloads of bridges. If he should ask me about it I'd like to know what to say. How do you feel about it? Would you want—"

You were stopped by the surprise on Dick's face. He said:

"I'm buying Idaho and Larry's going to run it. Hasn't he told you?"

From the explanation which followed you gathered that shortly after Larry's arrival in New York he had gone to Dick with an ambitious and carefully formulated proposal for buying an enormous tract of land, practically the entire valley in which his present modest ranch was located, and engaging simultaneously in cattle-raising and dry farming on a large scale. Dick had agreed to furnish over half a million cash capital, and the plans were now almost complete.

You were humiliated and furious. When that night you went to your room to undress, you observed that the maid's carelessness had left William the Conqueror out of his corner, pushed out away from the wall. There he was with his gallant head facing you, smiling and confident. In a sudden fit of rage you hauled off and gave him a kick, and nearly broke your foot in two.

XII

The voice came faintly from above, through the closed door at the front of the upper hall, not yet within his eyes' range:

"I can't give you anything but love,
baby,
That's the only thing I've plenty
of . . ."

It was thin and colorless and it could scarcely be called a tune. Not a monotone, rather three or four false and mongrel tones, alternating crazily into a petty and exasperating chaos. There was a long pause, and then it came again:

"Happiness, and I guess . . ."

It stopped.

He trembled violently, then controlled himself with an effort, and remained motionless. The voice sounded once more, more faintly than before. So, he thought, she isn't seated, reading. She's moving around doing something. Can't hear her footsteps, probably she has on those slippers with the felt soles. . . .

SHE always sings it like that; she doesn't know the rest of the words. Except that second *baby*. Why the hell doesn't she put that in at least? If you can call it singing. Long ago, back in the old days, long ago, her voice had a thrill in it—maybe it still has—something has, but it can't be her voice.

It did have, though, that first night you heard it again.

You got to the theatre after the curtain was up, as usual when with Erma. It was the evening before her departure for the Adirondacks. Soon after the curtain fell, at the close of the first act, you heard a voice directly behind you:

"I guess I left my handkerchief in the ladies' room."

The effect was curious. You didn't recognize the voice, it didn't even occur to you that you had heard it before, but it stirred you amazingly. Not turning your head, you let some question of Erma's go unanswered and waited breathlessly for it to sound again. A man's baritone had replied:

"Shall I lend you mine?"

Then the first voice:

"Yes, I guess you'll have to."

You turned like lightning and looked rudely, directly into her face, and recognized her at once.

"Maybe the woman found it," she was saying. "I'll go back after the second act and see."

When the curtain fell again you mumbled an excuse to Erma and were out of your seat and at the rear of the orchestra before the lights were on. She came up the aisle on the arm of her escort, a tall thin man in a brown suit, and you stood aside as they passed. Then he went one way and she another, and you darted after her and touched her on the shoulder.

"I beg your pardon, but aren't you Millicent Moran?" you said.

She turned and looked at you calmly.

"I used to be, but now I'm Mrs. Green," she replied. You saw by her face that she knew you before her sentence was ended, but characteristically she finished it before she added in slow surprise:

"Why, I remember you."

"Battling Bill," you stammered.

"Will Sidney," she said. "It's awfully nice to see you again."

You felt suddenly foolish and uncertain, at a loss what to say, but a wild and profound excitement was racing through you. You hesitated. . . .

"Maybe we could meet some time and talk over old times," you said. "I have no card with me, but you can find me in the phone book. William B. Sidney."

"That would be nice," she agreed.

"And if I could have your address—"

She gave you her address and phone number and you planted them firmly in your mind. Then she said goodbye and was off, presumably to the ladies' room to find the lost handkerchief.

Throughout the last two acts and intermission you were fearful that she might say something to you there in the seats, forcing you to introduce her to Erma and dragging in the escort, who you supposed was Mr. Green.

That night you could not sleep. You recalled how she had looked, standing before you in the theatre: her slim, slightly drooping figure in its plain dark dress, her dull light brown hair, her level slate-colored unblinking eyes, her pale unnoticeable face. You would have said that whatever passion her blood might have held had been washed out long ago.

You finally got to sleep.

She did not write or telephone, and one morning, about a week after Erma's departure, you called the number and after a prolonged ringing her voice answered, sleepy and muffled.

"I'm sorry if I got you out of bed," you said.

"Yes," she replied, "I don't usually get up till noon."

Would she have dinner with you? Yes. This evening? Yes. Should you call for her at seven? Yes. You hung up, wondering if she had been too sleepy to know what she was saying.

THOSE first few times with her you did succeed in dragging forth, gradually and bit by bit, many of the details of the past twenty years. Not that you were especially interested, but there seemed to be nothing else she could talk about at all. She and her mother had gone to Indianapolis, she said, where an uncle lived, and there Mrs. Moran had resumed the profession of washerwoman and continued at it for eight years, until Millicent graduated from high school. On the very day of high school commencement Mrs. Moran took to her bed, and died three weeks later.

"No, I didn't cry," said Millicent. "I never have cried but once."

She wouldn't say when that was.

She had gone to live with her uncle, and got a job filing papers in a law office. This was not to her liking (too dull, she said!) and she soon gave it up and through her uncle, a floor-walker, got a place at the stocking counter of a large department store. All this was merely preparation for her real career, which began when at the age of twenty-one, three years after her mother's death, she was offered a position at the cigar-stand of a big hotel—as she said, the swellest hotel in Indianapolis. For four years she stood there peddling cigars and cigarettes to the cosmopolitan world of Indianapolis notables, commercial travelers, visiting lecturers and barber-shop customers, until one day Clarence Green, covering Indiana and Illinois for the Rubbalite Company, a

middle-aged widower, asked her to become his wife.

They were married at once, and when shortly afterward he was transferred to eastern territory, came to New York and established themselves in a flat. Here the story became so vague as to be almost incoherent. It appeared that toward the end of the first New York summer she had returned from a week in the country with her friend Grace something-or-other to find the flat bare, stripped of everything except her personal belongings. At some stage or other there was a divorce and an award of alimony amounting to a hundred and fifty dollars a month.

"He's very prompt with it," she said. "It's never been more than four days behind time."

You were in her room, late at night. She was on the couch against the wall with the two skinny pillows behind her, and you sat in the rickety wicker chair.

"I'll probably go up to the Adirondacks the end of the week," you said. "My wife is wondering why I stay down here in this furnace. I haven't told her I've met an old college friend."

"How long will you be gone?"

"The rest of the summer probably. I don't usually come back until after Labor Day. Maybe even later."

"Your wife is very rich, isn't she?"

You nodded. "I'm worth a good deal more than I ever expected to be but I'm a pauper compared with her. When I remember how I used to cut down on cigarettes so I could buy candy for you—"

"I still like candy," she said.

"Then I'll have to bring you some, for old times' sake. A bushel basketful, just to show off."

She was silent. You looked at her and saw that her motionless eyes were regarding you steadily, fixedly. "Come here," she said in a low dead voice, without moving, not moving even her lips, it seemed.

You got up instantly, but without haste, and went and sat on the edge of the couch beside her.

That first night you didn't stay long; you finally became aware that she was running her hand through your hair and was saying, "It's so late I guess you'd better go."

The next day at one you telephoned. She was sorry, she couldn't see you that evening, she had an engagement. Tomorrow evening, then. No, she was sorry.

"Maybe we could make it Friday," she said.

FRIDAY evening it was raining and was much cooler, so you gave up your plan for a drive into the country and took her to a theatre instead. You went directly from the theatre to her room on Twenty-second Street. You had decided not to go in, but you went. At two in the morning you were still there, propped against one of the skinny pillows smoking a cigarette.

"I bought a car the other day," you said. "It will be delivered tomorrow morning. I thought it would be fun for us to drive out of town some of these hot nights."

She sat munching the chocolates you had brought, with the same old gestures, methodical as some automatic engine of destruction.

"It must have cost a lot of money," she observed. "I don't see why we couldn't use one of your wife's cars, if she has so many."

You explained again the risks which a man of your prominence must avoid.

"I couldn't stay away all night," she declared. "If I did and Mr. Green found out about it. . . ."

You were glad that her concern for her alimony imposed caution upon her too, but you wished she'd stop calling her husband Mr. Green.

"No, we couldn't do that," you agreed. "I meant to drive out in the country for dinner, maybe sometimes have a picnic lunch in the woods somewhere."

Her eyes closed slightly, as they had a little before, as they have a thousand times since.

"It would be nice to be in the woods with you," she said. "Last summer I used to go with Mr. Gowan out on Long

Island. And Mr. Peft had a boat in the Hudson River—that was two years ago."

"You know a lot of men, don't you?"

She chuckled. "Wouldn't you like to know though," she said.

"What does Mr. Gowan do?"

"He runs taxicabs. He doesn't run them himself—he owns thirty-seven of them—the brown ones with a little bird on the door."

"That's funny."

"Why?"

"Oh nothing, only he didn't look to me like a man who would run a fleet of taxicabs."

"How do you know what he looks like, you've never seen him."

"Sure I have, that night at the theatre."

She turned her head; you felt her chin rubbing against your hair; then she bent down and softly bit your ear.

"That wasn't him," she said.

"Who was it then?"

She chuckled. "It was Mr. Green."

Her husband! Of course not. You gave up, exasperated at her petty infantile obscurantism.

It was a week or so later, after you had been out several times in the roadster, that you found courage to speak to her about her clothes. You weren't sure how she would take it, and you didn't know what you might be letting yourself in for.

"I've never paid much attention to clothes," she said indifferently. "Even if I had money, it's so much trouble."

Later, when you gave her money to buy things herself, underwear and nightgowns, she carefully gave you the exact change the next day, with the cash slips and price tickets in a neat pile, added up. She's always been straight about money, presumably because she doesn't care much about it. You might have known better when she handed you that bunk about Dick, though of course that's not the same thing. Nor the alimony either; there's no finding out anything she wants to hide; you don't know to this day whether she actually did get alimony from her husband, nor for that matter whether she was ever married.

Your first suspicion of that came the day up at Briarcliff when you proposed a trip somewhere, and suggested central Pennsylvania as a locality where you would run slight risk of meeting anyone who knew you. When you asked her about that she seemed not at all concerned.

"But not so long ago you were afraid to stay out overnight," you reminded her.

"Yes. Well . . . it doesn't matter."

"We can stay a week, or two, or a month, just as we like. What say?"

"I think it would be very nice."

All right; that was settled. From the eminence of the Lodge you looked out across the expanse of woods and meadows to where a strip of the Hudson was flashing in the distant sunshine, and wondered why the devil you were doing this.

You have continued to wonder to this minute.

XIII

Another step or two and his eyes would be on a level with the floor above, and he would be able to see the light in the crack under the door.

He removed his right hand from the rail and thrust it into his overcoat pocket where it closed once more around the butt of the revolver. His other hand, holding the key, rested against the wall; but as he moved up another step and the hand came suddenly into contact with a nail that had been driven into the plaster he jerked it away nervously, and dropped the key, which fell to the edge of the wooden step.

He glanced upwards quickly—had she heard it—of course not—and then stooped and picked up the key, gleaming dully in the dim light.

The voice from the room was no longer heard, but his head seemed more than ever full of voices . . . it's you who are the rat . . . timid, vengeless, actionless. . . .

YOU'RE no good. You're no good any more for anything. That's what you told yourself the afternoon you left

the office and went to Eighty-fifth Street, the day she moved here. You're in for it now, you thought, you've let this thing ride you into a hole there's no getting out of.

She was there, moving chairs around and arranging rugs, with a silent concentration that made you laugh in spite of yourself. She changed them back and forth with an intense seriousness that was new to you, while you sat on the divan against the wall, smoking cigarettes and pretending to join in her earnestness. Later you understood that with her when a thing was once placed it was there to stay.

When she agreed, on your return from the Pennsylvania trip, to leave Twenty-second Street and take a place with you as Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, she wanted it to be a furnished flat. It would cost too much, she said, to buy furniture, and would be too much bother. You were pleasantly thrilled, that first time you came up these stairs and opened the door with your key. In a plain clean gingham dress Millicent looked quite domestic, normal, just a woman like any other woman, rather homely to be sure.

"It's going to be nice here," she said.

You nodded. "Aren't you glad we went ahead and bought our own furniture?"

"Yes, it wasn't as much trouble as I thought it would be. It must have cost a lot of money."

That was in September—a year ago September. It seems like a hundred.

It was only a few days after you moved in that she said there ought to be more vases and things. In fact you hadn't bought any bric-a-brac at all except two bronze bowls. The next afternoon you went to a department store and got some candlesticks, and some more vases, and two or three little bronze figures. She tried them here and there and finally got them arranged to her satisfaction.

"It's very nice," said Millicent finally, standing in front of you and looking around to view the effect, "but there ought to be something big for the table. A statue or something. I saw one over on Broadway yesterday of some girls, with some bunches of grapes, that was only seven dollars."

"Ha, a statue!" you exclaimed.

"Yes, for the table."

"I know the very thing. Beautiful white marble, and just the right size. I'll get it tomorrow."

The next day you went to Park Avenue, wrapped a piece of paper around the head, and carried it to a taxi. Half an hour later, panting after the two flights of stairs, you let it down in the middle of the table, removed the paper and invited Millicent to admire.

"It's very modern, a fine piece of work," you said. "Its name is William the Conqueror."

She stood and stared at it solemnly. "It looks like you," she chuckled. "I think it looks exactly like you." She turned and looked at you appraisingly. "If you were really like that," she said, "you wouldn't be afraid of me."

Startled and astonished, you exclaimed, "Good lord, I'm not afraid of you!"

"Oh yes you are. You think I'm wicked. All men do, just because I'm not ashamed of anything. That's why they don't mind if I'm not pretty."

"Who told you that? Somebody told you that."

She dismissed the question with a shake of her head.

She had taken all the flavor out of your irony, and you wished you had left it at home in its corner.

The next evening you came in and up the stairs, and let yourself into the front room, and at the first glance around you sat down on the nearest chair, with your hat and coat still on, stared incredulously, and roared with laughter. How you laughed! Millicent sat in the blue chair, reading, and on the table beside her stood William the Conqueror with a string of little yellow chrysanthemums around his neck!

"No, it's too damn good!" you choked. "It isn't possible! Erma darling come and look at it!"

Millicent, unmoved and unsmiling, merely said:

"I don't think it's so funny. I think they look nice there."

You looked at her suspiciously and helplessly; the laughter was gone. But you felt no resentment, it was too vastly comic, even considered as a mere coincidence. Who could be more unlike than the brilliant cynical articulate Erma and this little dumb drab insect? Yet observe the parallel! What hidden centuries of preparation led up to that identical gesture?

When Erma returned from the Adirondacks the daily arrangement of your movements presented a little difficulty. You had always kept yourself pretty well at Erma's disposal, when she was in town, for bridge, dinners, theatre, opera, concerts, dances. Of course there had been frequent and extended periods when you were, so to speak, on vacation, but their nature made it impractical for you to expect the convenience of a notice in advance. You had a telephone installed at Eighty-fifth Street and told Millicent that whenever possible you would let her know during the afternoon whether you would be able to come for dinner—not that it mattered particularly, since you always went to a restaurant.

Seemingly, she took it all quite cheerfully. You would telephone her from the booth in the cigar store on Broadway, not wanting to call from home or the office:

"I'm sorry, Mil, I can't make it today or tomorrow, or Thursday either. I'm pretty sure I can Friday."

"All right," her voice would come.

"Won't you miss me?" You would despise yourself for each word as you uttered it.

"Of course I will, but Grace will go to some shows with me. You might send up some more books."

BEFORE returning to the office you would go across the street to Donaldson's and order a dozen novels sent, any novels.

The week preceding Christmas was filled with duties which couldn't very well be avoided. Erma had a lot of new people on the string, and it seemed to you that she was becoming increasingly insistent on your presence and assistance. Certainly she was becoming curious about your tendency to find excuses to be away.

"Just when I begin to think you are at last explored you take on a new mystery," she said. "You never objected to the Hallermans before. You always were able to tolerate bridge at least twice a week. You are developing a positive distaste for the theatre. Have you found a pretty mistress or are you learning to swim?"

"I already know how to swim," you laughed.

"Then it's a mistress!" she exclaimed. "And you took her to Pennsylvania and went berry-picking with her, and by now the only question is whether it will be a boy or a girl. Bravo!"

She came over to you, smiling.

"Please have it a girl, and call it Erma, and I'll be godmother and give her a million dollars," she said. "Seriously, Bill, I think it might buck you up to be a father; though," she added, "I must say that the prospect doesn't seem to be helping you any—you look more done in than ever."

You shrugged your shoulders. "I'm worrying for fear it will be twins."

"Then you aren't going to tell me?"

"There's nothing to tell."

"All right. But you aren't very amusing lately, you know. It rather frightens me for my old age."

You went off to the subway, bound for the office; but on arriving downtown you went first to the cigar store and telephoned Millicent. She answered in a sleepy voice; you had got her out of bed, as usual when you phoned in the morning.

"I'm sorry," you said, "but I can't make it today or tomorrow. And Wednesday there's an all-night party at home, and Christmas Day we're going out to Dick's place on Long Island."

"All right," came her drowsy voice.

"I'm sorry about Christmas—I don't know what you'll do, all alone—"

"Oh it will be all right. Perhaps Grace and I will do something."

Christmas morning, not having got to bed till after five, you turned out sleepily at eleven in response to the summons you had told Allen to give you, and hurriedly bathed and dressed and had orange juice and coffee. You were not expected at Dick's until three and could drive it easily in two hours. Leaving a message for Erma that you would be back in time to leave at one o'clock, you left the house and took a taxi to Eighty-fifth Street. You hadn't seen Millicent for three days. This was Christmas Day and she was all alone.

The present was in a large package beside you on the seat; you had been glad to get it out of the house. For Erma had unfortunately seen you bring it home the preceding afternoon; you had evaded her curiosity, which would have been considerably increased had she known that it contained a woman's fur coat.

You had seen them so rarely in the daytime that the street and house seemed unfamiliar. Asking the taxi-driver to wait, for you expected to stay only a few minutes, and taking the bulky package under your arm, you ran up the stoop and up the two flights of stairs and let yourself in. The room was empty; you glanced around, called, "Hello, Merry Christmas" and, leaving the package on a chair, started for the passage leading to the rear room. You heard nothing, but all at once there she was, in her nightgown and bare feet, confronting you at the entrance to the passage.

"Merry Christmas," she said, smiling. It was the smile that betrayed her; you had never seen her try so hard to smile. You continued straight ahead, as if to go with her or past her to the bedroom.

"Don't go in there," she said, putting out her hand. "Grace is still in bed."

You grasped her by the arm and brushed past her, took two steps down the passage. From there you could see that there certainly was someone in your bed, against the right wall, hidden under the covers. A shifting of your glance showed you, on the floor at the bed's foot, a pair of shoes that were assuredly not Grace's; and, thrown across the chair by the dressing-table, a shirt and a pair of trousers. You took another step forward, then wheeled sharply and returned to the front room.

"If you had telephoned—" she began in a slow and quiet voice.

"Shut up!" you said. You were feeling nothing whatever about her; your sick rage was for your place. The temple, not the priestess, was violated.

The package on the chair caught your eye and you nodded towards it. "That's a fur coat," you said, "you're welcome to it. You're welcome to everything. I hope I see hell before I see this place again."

"You should have telephoned," she said.

XIV

In his overcoat pocket the fingers of his right hand, closed tight around the butt of the revolver, released their hold and tried to straighten themselves out, stretching within the confines of the pocket; then clutched the butt again, tight, tighter. Again the fingers opened, and they felt moist and sticky; he took his hand out and rubbed the palm up and down on his overcoat, several times, then brought it close to his eyes and looked at it; it seemed very white, and the fingers very short, in the dim light. He thrust it back in his pocket, and it stayed there beside the revolver, touching it, without taking hold of it.

You're afraid, that's what's the matter, he told himself. Timid vengeless hell! You're just plain scared. . . .

AND not only because you're standing here on the stairs with a gun in your pocket, either. You're always afraid when it comes to doing something. You're even afraid of words if they're the kind that make things happen. Bloodless rhetoric. Bunk. "I hope I see hell before I see this place again." Surely you didn't think it up all alone?

The next day at the office there was

no word from her; you thought there might not ever be any; you hoped not. But you were worried about your clothes and things; and a little after five you left the office and took a taxi straight to Eighty-fifth Street. Held up more than you expected by the traffic, you didn't get there till a quarter to six and were afraid you might arrive too late to see her go out, but to your relief there was a light in the front windows. You had the taxi stop almost directly across the street, and sat there in its corner, in the dark. Only a few minutes had passed when the light in the windows was extinguished, and a few moments later the street door opened and she came out and down the stoop, alone, and started west toward Broadway. She looked droopy.

As soon as she was out of sight you rapidly crossed the street and ran up the stoop and the stairs and let yourself in. You called out, "Hello, anybody here?" and went to the bedroom. The beds were neatly made; you approached yours and pulled the blankets and coverlet back and saw that the sheets and pillowslip were clean and fresh; and from under the pillow peeped the edge of your folded pajamas.

"The hell you say!" you remarked aloud.

To save time, so as to get in and out as quickly as possible, you had written the note at the office on the typewriter: *I'm taking everything I want. The enclosed five hundred is my going away present. I don't want to hear from you. Goodbye.* You glanced in the envelope to make sure the bills were there, then slipped it under her pillow. On the floor you spread the newspaper you had brought along, and hurriedly made a bundle of the few articles you decided to take. Then you took the envelope from under the pillow and added a postscript to the note: *You can have William the Conqueror. Let him sleep in the guest bed when there's room.* You put on your hat and coat and gathered the bundle under your arm.

A minute later you were down the stairs and in the cab on your way to Park Avenue.

"Well that's that," you said aloud, and repeated it, "That's that."

The first call was the next afternoon. "Mrs. Lewis on the telephone."

"Mrs.—Tell her I'm not in. Gone for the day."

The following morning she phoned twice.

When a third call came shortly after lunch you decided it wouldn't do; you took the call.

"Well."

"Oh—is it you, Will?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"Why I just want to know if you're coming tonight—"

"Forget it. And cut out the telephoning."

"But I have to telephone if you—"

You took the receiver from your ear and with her voice still faintly buzzing in it slowly hung it on the hook. After a minute or two you removed it again and spoke to Mrs. Carroll:

"Please tell the operators that if that Mrs. Lewis calls me again I'm not in. Or a Mrs. Green—Green. At any time. And don't bother to send me a slip on it."

Surely that was final enough you thought. That was the way to do it. Erma would say, you should fold your arms and look masterful.

You and Erma spent New Year's with friends at Dobbs Ferry and the next day you didn't get back to town in time to go to the office.

The day after that, about the middle of the afternoon, the phone rang and you heard:

"Mrs. Lewis is calling."

You were momentarily confused and replied, "I thought I told you if she phoned I wasn't in."

"No, not on the telephone, Mr. Sidney; she's here, in the reception room."

"Oh. Well. Tell her I'm out, gone for the day."

"Yes, sir."

So. She was there in the reception room just a few feet away. . . . sitting there. . . . in a minute she'd be gone. . . .

BUT presently the phone rang again; this time it was your secretary, Miss Malloy, speaking from her little room back of yours.

"That woman, Mrs. Lewis, told Miss Dietrich in the reception room that she saw you come up in the elevator and knows you're here and that she's going to wait till you see her."

"Yes. Thank you. All right."

You were going over some figures with two accountants at the time. It dragged along for another hour. When at length they had gathered up their papers and departed you pressed the buzzer, and Miss Malloy came in at once.

"I have to ask a favor of you," you said. "Will you please go to the reception room and tell Mrs. Lewis I will not see her, now or at any other time, and escort her to the elevator."

"If she won't go?"

"She will. Don't make a scene. Just tell her that."

"Yes, sir."

Matter of fact and business-like, with no sign of a knowing look in her intelligent brown eyes, she went. Almost immediately the door opened again and she reappeared.

"She is talking to Mr. Carr," Miss Malloy said, "so I thought I'd better wait."

"What! To Mr. Carr!"

"Yes, sir. They are sitting on one of the settees, talking."

"The dirty little—I beg your pardon."

"Yes, sir," Miss Malloy smiled.

You walked to the window, and to your desk and sat down, and then got up and went to the window again. Finally you turned to her:

"Please tell Miss Dietrich to send Mrs. Lewis in here as soon as she gets through with Mr. Carr."

"Yes, sir." She went to her room.

Many minutes passed; were they going to talk all afternoon? On the phone you asked Miss Malloy if she had delivered the message to Miss Dietrich. Yes, she had done so at once. At that moment the door opened and Millicent entered; from without the blue uniformed arm of the attendant silently closed the door behind her. She came directly across to where you sat at the desk.

"You made me wait a long time," she said.

For a moment you gazed at her speechless, helpless. Then suddenly your temples contracted and you savagely demanded:

"What did you tell Dick?"

"I didn't tell him anything," she replied.

"You were talking to him for an hour."

"Why no, I don't think so. Only a few minutes. I was sitting there and he came through and I saw him glance at me and I stopped him and said, pardon me, aren't you the Mule? He guessed who I was right away."

So that was it, an accident. Fine piece of luck. He didn't pass through that room more than once or twice a day. Was she lying? You could find out.

"So he sat down and we talked about old times. I don't think he's changed a bit. He's very handsome."

"What did you tell him you were here for?"

She chuckled. "I told him I was having a hard time, and I happened to meet you and I thought you were going to help me out."

"If you need some money, anything within reason, you can have it."

"I don't want any money."

"Then what do you want?"

"Well, of course I've got to have a little money. I've got to have something to live on." She paused. "We ought to have a long talk about it."

"What about your alimony?"

"He's quit paying it."

"How much do you need?"

"We ought to have a talk," she repeated. "Can you come uptown tonight?"

"No. Not tonight or any other night."

SHE raised her shoulders and dropped them; deep in her eyes you saw a momentary flash like a point of white fire.

"You'd better come," she said quietly. "You might as well come—you know you're going to come." She added in a tone of deadly finality that overwhelmed you: "What's the use of fighting about it?"

What had she really told Dick? you asked yourself. If you did go up there—well, there was no way out of it. If you didn't go, what would she do?

"I'll be up after dinner," you said. "Around nine."

You had said you would be there around nine; it was a quarter to when you dismissed the taxi and started up the stoop. There was no plan in your head; you were floundering in a jelly of indecision.

In the blue chair, under the reading-lamp, she sat. It was your first view of the blazing purple cheap velvet negligee, with the white ostrich feathers around the neck and cuffs and down the front hems, the dark brown felt slippers.

"Why don't you let me alone, Mil?"

She returned your look without replying, and you went on, "Having a man here was stupid and indecent, but it's not only that. I was ready to quit anyway. We've never really cared for each other. So why don't you let me alone? If it's more money why don't you be honest enough to say so—"

"I don't want any money," she said.

"You said you did at the office. You said you had to have something to live on."

"Well, I was just trying to scare you."

"Then what do you want?"

She chuckled. "You're very funny, Will. I'm sorry about that man—truly it was the first time anyone was ever here and he said it was Christmas Day and he didn't want to go home and Grace was out in Jersey to her aunt's. He's no good anyway. It was Mr. Martin—don't you remember, he sells insurance, I told you about him one day."

"I don't care who he was. You haven't answered my question: what do you want?"

In a new tone she said all at once, in a breath:

"I want my big brother."

Startled, you looked at her, uncomprehending; then in a sudden swift flash you remembered that she had said to you one day, long ago in your room at college, "Most of the time we're just like a brother and sister. You're my big brother."

You meant to say ironically, "So you're in love with me," but the words wouldn't come, they seemed too absurd and incongruous. Instead you said, "So it's me you want?"

She nodded. "And it's me you want." She said it not as a challenge or a claim; she just said it, calmly, a fact.

"Like hell I do!" you shouted. "Listen, Mil, we may as well be frank. I can't stand you any more. Now I'm done. I was done before I found that man here; you were driving me crazy. I was getting so that when you touched me, it made my flesh creep." You tried to keep your voice calm, but gradually it had raised until you ended with a shout, "I'm done, do you hear! I'm done!"

She gazed up at you, steadily, without saying anything, and again you shouted, shouted that you had never wanted her. You bellowed at her, pacing up and down the room. At last you stopped.

Her voice was quite steady, with all its usual thin dullness:

"You've said some awful things."

"Well. . . . I've felt some awful things."

"It's not me that's awful."

"Oh yes it is. It's both of us."

She shook her head. "You're just afraid. I don't mind what you say. I know you can't ever really leave me, I know how you act, I know what you think." The deep, veiled flash came and went in her eyes. "I know how you feel, too, when—" She chuckled, and added, "Big brother!"

XV

Only two or three steps from the top, he could see, ill-defined in the dim light, his own door at the end of the hall.

There was a soft yellow glow through the shade which covered the small, single electric light. Standing quietly, he could hear from the kitchenette the recurrent faint plop of a single drop of water from the leaky faucet into the sink, a full two seconds' interval between; and somewhere from outside came the yowl of a wandering cat.

Plop . . . plop. . . .

IN THE morning, when you were ready to leave she was still sound asleep.

You were not long in suspense about Dick, for the afternoon of that same day he suddenly said:

"By the way, what about our old college friend? Did you see her yesterday?"

"Yes, she said she'd seen you," you replied prepared.

"Did she tell you that cock and bull story about her husband?"

"Why . . . yes . . . she's been married."

"Married hell! Did you fall for it?"

"Sure." You managed a grin. "I'd fall for anything."

"Funny." He turned back from the door. "I'd better be careful though, you smashed me over her. Remember? Battling Bill." He laughed. "Funny woman—homely as hell and yet, she has a look in her eyes that makes you curious. You'd better look out, Bill. What does she want?"

"Money, of course."

"Sure, but how much? You'd better be careful how you give it to her. Do you want me in on it?"

You could read Dick like an open book; it appeared certain that he suspected nothing beyond a compassionate gesture to a woman in trouble, for old times' sake.

A year ago, almost; yes, actually nearly twelve months of hours and minutes since that night, each day confronted with the next, an ordeal not to be tolerated. "It wasn't very nice of me to have Mr. Martin here," she said that night, "I won't do that any more." So utterly weary that the force of gravity itself seemed overpowering and irritating, you were relaxed, a dead weight, in the leather chair. Whereas formerly you had shrunk only from her, only in her had felt an alienness and a threat, henceforth all was foreign, each thing there was an enemy.

Erma was too preoccupied with herself to take much notice of you, and when she suddenly decided to go to Florida, around the last of January, it was at first a great relief. But soon you were considering that the important thing was to get rid of time somehow, even disagreeably, and wishing her back again.

You moved to the club, and still you seldom went to Eighty-fifth Street. And you never went without phoning in advance, and you never phoned without a feeling of unreality, a feeling that you were doing something too implausible to be believed in. Put to the torture, you could not have answered the question, why do you do this? She was homely, vulgar, illiterate. She was false and treacherous. She was evil. That's why! She is evil, and you get a kick out of it. No. You get revulsion, disgust, hatred. Bitter and burning hatred. But you have harbored her for twenty years.

She always seemed to be afraid of words; she wouldn't even answer questions if she could help it. Like the day you asked her about Dick. That was in late spring, around the middle of May. Erma had returned from Florida and was talking of going to Scotland for the summer, and wanted you to go along. You and she had dined with friends and, allured by the mild May air, she had suggested a walk. As you were crossing the avenue at Fifty-seventh you got caught in the center and stood there at the edge of the solid slow-moving traffic, glancing carelessly at the cars as they crept past; and suddenly your careless glance became a stare as you saw Dick and Millicent side by side in a taxicab not ten feet away. They were looking the other way and obviously had not seen you, nor had Erma seen them.

"How far are we?" said Erma. "I'm getting tired. Come along to Scotland and we'll ride around on ponies—we're

too old to walk."

You were conscious of no particular emotion, except curiosity. It was not conceivable that Dick—and yet he had married Mary Alaire Carew Bellowes. This was rich—Oh this was juicy!

The next day was Saturday and Dick didn't come in. In the evening you went to Eighty-fifth Street early, before dinner, and after you had glanced through the evening paper you found an opportunity to say casually, with your eye on her face:

"Have you seen Dick since that day at the office?"

She displayed not the slightest change of expression.

"Dick? You mean Mr. Carr?"

"Yes, I mean Dick Carr. Have you seen him?"

"Why yes, we saw him that evening at the theatre, don't you remember?"

"No. It wasn't me. You were probably with Mr. Peft or Mr. Gowan or Mr. Rockefeller."

She chuckled. "I remember now, it was Grace. She thought he was very good-looking."

"Well, have you seen him since?—Oh what's the use. I just wondered how you would handle it. I saw you and Dick in a taxicab on Fifth Avenue last evening. I suppose you were on your way here?" you sneered, trying not to.

SHE was standing the way she so often does, her arms hanging at her sides, her head languidly erect. "I'm sorry you saw us," she said. "I didn't want you to know until it was all done."

"Really!" You put the paper down and stared at her. "Really!"

"I think he is going to give me a lot of money," she went on. "I've only seen him twice, and we don't do anything you wouldn't like. Even if I would he wouldn't want to. He said he wouldn't. He used to give me money a long time ago—when I knew you. He's just sorry for me, and he's so rich. . . ."

"I thought you didn't care for money."

"I didn't say that. I said I didn't want money from you. I'd take all I could get from him. I think he's going to give me one hundred thousand dollars. He says I could live on the interest."

"Where were you going last night?"

"We ate dinner at a restaurant downtown to talk it over, and he was bringing me home. He didn't come upstairs though."

"What restaurant?"

"Why, I didn't notice. He took me."

"Where did you meet him?"

"At the corner of Broadway and Fulton Street."

You got to your feet, shoved your hands into your pockets, and walked to the window and back again.

"I don't believe a word of it," you said.

She didn't reply; but after a long pause, seeing that you weren't going to speak again, she said, "It's all true. I wouldn't lie to you about Mr. Carr."

Always before that, in your occasional conversations about him, she had called him Dick.

Of course, you got nothing more out of her. Late that night, walking home, as you often did, you considered the amazing fact that, while you might not have been greatly affected by an admission from her that Dick was sharing her favors with you, you were furiously humiliated by the idea of his making a princely gift that would mean financial independence for her.

Did you know that Dick had been here, in the apartment? No, you don't know it even now for a certainty, though for a while you thought you did, that evening you found the inscription on the statue. That was June, late in June, just before Erma sailed for Scotland. You had been here before dinner, and for an hour or two afterward, before you noticed it; you saw it when you went over to take a book from the table. There it was, printed in big black sprawling letters on the rough unpolished marble of the column: BATTLING BILL.

"Who did that?" you demanded.

"I did, this morning, I just happened to think of it," she replied.

You approached her chair. "Why?"

"One of the girls downstairs that's

studying art gave me the crayon. She said it was art crayon. I guess that's what made me think of it, I wanted to use it on something."

Still you thought it must have been Dick; she didn't have wit enough. Was it Dick, had he been here? Probably; but just as probably not. There's no telling—

With that trivial episode something seemed to break. You knew you must do something. Finally and inescapably you must do something. Go to Scotland with Erma? Huh! Go to Paul, in Rome; he was your son, tell him so; what was a son for? Bury yourself in his life—sure. It didn't take long to dispose of that.

All right, but you must do something . . .

You were afraid to tell Millicent you were going to leave her and never see her again, afraid of the unconcerned disbelief you knew you would see in her face. You told her merely that you were going away alone and didn't know when you would be back, but she must have remarked that your manner of saying it was odd. When you told Dick, briefly, that you needed a change and were leaving for an indefinite period he didn't seem surprised, but was considerably concerned; and you didn't even write to Jane, who was at the seashore with the children. Even if you had wanted to you couldn't have replied definitely to Dick's anxious questions, for beyond the first step you had no plans.

One evening around the middle of July you went to the Pennsylvania Station and got on a westbound train. You were running away, a beaten coward, but that didn't trouble you. Where you going and what were you going to do? You were going—from nothing into nothing. You were running away from what would never be left behind—it was there with you, tenaciously and eternally; it was buried in your heart, in your flesh and bones.

There was no imaginable way out. You sat there in the train, ashamed and afraid, wondering in sober earnest if you were going mad.

XVI

The cat yowled again, and in the silence that followed he heard again the plop of the water dropping into the sink, as he stood in the middle of the hall under the dim wall light. Through force of habit rather than necessity he stood close under the light and looked at the key in his hand to make sure that it was the one with the two large teeth at the end, the other was for the street door downstairs. A sound came from the front room, the muffled sound of a chair being dragged across a rug; and he thought, she's pulling it closer to the table, to read; that's good, she'll be sitting down.

He thought, what do you mean that's good. What's the difference? Go on in. . . .

GO ON in. Yes, she'll be sitting down, and you'll take off your coat and hat, and she'll say, "You're late, did you remember to bring some candy?" and you won't answer, you'll stand and look at her and presently say, "Mil, this time I'm going to get the truth out of you."

In a vague sort of way that's what you thought you'd say, and didn't, the night you returned from your flight. She was there, alone, in the purple negligee, sewing on buttons and drinking lemonade.

"Hello," she said, "you should have sent me a telegram, I might not have been here."

That was two months ago, two months to a day. By the following morning nothing seemed to have changed; instead of ten weeks you might have been gone overnight. Yet there was a change. You couldn't have put it into words, not indeed feeling it, except as a vague sense of a concluded fate. Hope was gone, and with it irony.

Another winter; in a month it will be Christmas again. You'd better get her another fur coat and bring it Christmas morning. You will at that. If you're here. Erma says you look like hell and that you've got a disposition like the camel she rode that time at Ghardaia. She says you ought to go abroad for a year. Why not? Dick has mentioned

it too, three or four times, though he seems to be embarrassed about it. Is he trying to get you out of the way? Not likely; that's not like him. You should ask him about it, straight, and then you'd know; you should have asked him this morning, when he came in your office and then didn't seem to know what he'd come for. He said something about Jane's good judgment. Does Jane know?

If not Dick, why couldn't you ask Jane? Does it matter so much? But you must know if they know. You're not going on like this, like a helpless imbecile, with them discussing you behind your back, trying to decide what they'd better do about you. . . .

Exactly what did she say? Did she say she had seen Jane? Yes. Night before last—seems a year ago. You came up after dinner, rather early, and she wasn't back yet. There was a telephone call you had to make, and as you sat waiting for an answer, with the phone book lying upside down on the table, in front of you, you noted indifferently the chaos of numbers scribbled in pencil all over the cover; it was a habit of Millicent's that had at one time amused you; and suddenly you saw among that chaos a number that riveted your attention: Chelsea 4343. You hung up the receiver and grabbed up the book and looked at it closely; of course you hadn't put that number there; but it was quite plain, unmistakable, Chelsea 4343.

It was half an hour before you heard her key in the door. You waited till she had got her hat and coat put away, and then held the book in front of her.

"Did you put that there?"

She looked at it without replying. "Look here," you said, "if ever you told the truth you'd better tell it now. Did you write that number there?"

She nodded. "Yes, I remember now, I wrote it one day—"

"Whose number is it?"

She didn't glance at it again; she looked steadily at you, and finally shook her head, "I don't remember."

"You might as well sit down, we're going to have this out," you said, and took a chair in front of hers, close to her. "You'd better be careful what you tell me, because this is something I can check up on. I want to know when you telephoned my sister Jane, and what for."

"I really had forgotten it was your sister's number," she said.

"All right. Go on."

IT TOOK an hour to get it out of her, and before she was through she had told it a dozen different ways. Was Erma in it? Sometimes she was and sometimes she wasn't; anyway she hadn't seen her. At first she said she'd seen Jane twice and then she said only once. It was mostly Dick. As long ago as last spring, Dick had sent for her and offered her fifty thousand dollars if she would let you alone, go away somewhere, and not let you know where she was. When she wouldn't take it he had doubled his offer. This fall, just recently, he had been after her again; this time when she refused the money he threatened her. Then Jane came, and begged her.

"She begged me all afternoon," she said. She took a day to think about it, and she put that number there only a week ago, when she phoned Jane that she had decided not to go.

At first you believed it. After you had got all you could out of her and tried to piece it together and decide how much of it was true and how much she had invented, you put on your hat and coat and started for Tenth Street. She didn't ask where you were going or whether you'd be back; she just sat there, solemn, quietly watching you. Probably two minutes after you left she was reading a book. You never got to Jane's house; you walked past it, but you didn't go in. You couldn't decide what to say.

And then, yesterday, like a coward you didn't go to the office at all. You packed trunks! And you found the revolver and sat on the edge of the bed for an hour, holding it in your hand and looking at it, as if that was going to put

muscles in your insides.

Last night Millicent was surprised to see you. Of course, you hadn't telephoned, but she was surprised more than that; you could tell by the way she looked at you, though she didn't say anything. You told her you hadn't asked Jane and Dick about it, but you were going to, and if you found she'd been lying you'd make her pay for it. She said you wouldn't ask them. She said it as if it didn't make any difference one way or the other, "You won't ask them about it." Then she said, with no change at all in her voice:

"Anyway, I made it all up."

And at the end, after all that, after you'd made a whining fool of yourself, she actually thought she could touch you. Her eyes looked like that, not really starting to close, just ready to, tightened up a little. A thousand times you've seen them like that. Then they do begin to close, and her lips get straight and thin and very quiet, and her eyes get narrower and tighter. . . .

There goes her chair again, pulled across the rug. Now would have been the time, now that you know she's sitting down. Go across to the windows and pull down the shades. You pitiful paltry coward. Last night it sounded like she was telling the truth. If she wasn't, if Dick and Jane—begging her—no matter. What do they matter? If they came up the stairs right now and all three of you went in together—ha, that would be the way to do it. Erma too, the whole damn outfit. You could sit in a corner and listen to them, and they could keep it up all night and all day tomorrow, and forever, and they wouldn't get anywhere. Begging her.

Oh cut it out. Cut it out! Steady. . . .

Steady. . . .

XVII

He turned the key in the lock and opened the door; and, entering, quietly closed the door behind him. Millicent, with a magazine in her hand and a box of candy in her lap, was in the blue chair, close to the table, under the reading-lamp. That's funny, he thought, the blinds are already down, she must be getting modest.

"You're late," said she from her chair. "You didn't telephone, so I nearly went to a show. Take off your hat and stay a while."

Then, as his left hand went into his trousers pocket and out again, returning the key, and as his other hand suddenly left his overcoat pocket and hung at his side, she said in the same even tone:

"What have you got there?"

His right hand lifted, and a tremor ran through him from head to foot as he realized that the revolver was in it. He was watching her face; he had not said a word; but now he spoke:

"What does it look like, huh? What does it look like, Mil?"

At the same moment he was saying to himself, be careful, why did you take it out, you don't know what you're doing, what's the matter with you? And also, he was going towards her. He stood in front of her chair, almost touching her.

"Are you trying to scare me?" she said, her eyes level and unwavering.

He said, "You don't think I'll shoot, do you?"

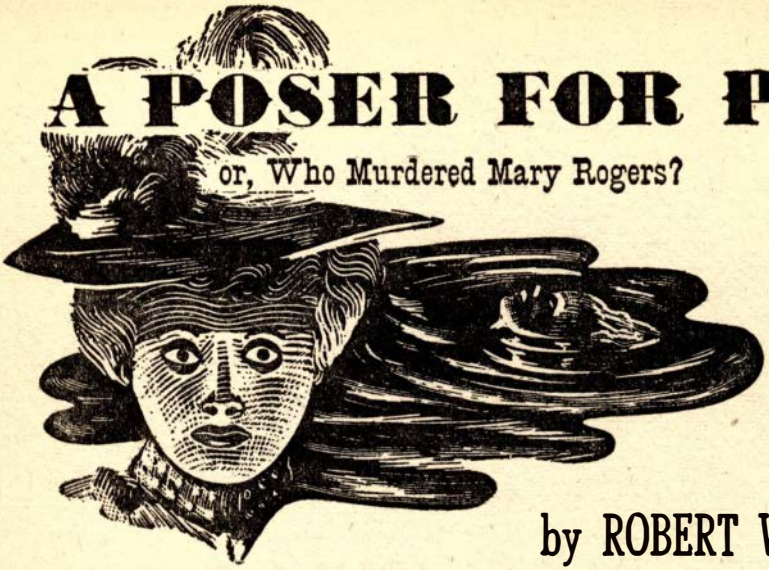
"Yes, I think you might." Without letting her eyes leave his face, she moved her hand to indicate the marble head, glistening white, on the table beside her, and added slowly, "Why don't you shoot Battling Bill? You hate him so."

He moved his eyes to look at it, and then, without replying, but with a senseless vast relief surging through him, he deliberately pointed the revolver at the thing and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening report; the statue faintly tilted and came to rest again with its nose splintered off; the revolver fell from his hand and clattered to the floor. Like a flash Millicent stooped and then was erect on her feet beside him, the revolver in her hand. She looked at him and chuckled; and hearing her chuckle and seeing the gun in her hand he suddenly smashed his fist hard into her face; she staggered against the chair with a little cry, and he hit her again, and she fell to the floor; and then, with a swift and terrible precision, he reached over and seized the heavy statue as if it had been made of cork and, lifting it high

(*Concluded on page* 161)

A POSER FOR POE

or, Who Murdered Mary Rogers?



by ROBERT WALLACE

COLLECTORS of murder tales can hardly have overlooked Edgar Allan Poe and his story "The Mystery of Marie Roget," which was one of the earliest attempts at a genuine detective story. In this pioneer yarn, Poe's detective, Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, was so brilliant that he never even visited the scene of the crime, solving it off-hand from the newspaper accounts.

Less generally known is that Marie Roget actually existed. Her name was Mary Rogers and the scene of her demise was New York in 1841. It is ironic that the real Mary Rogers should be practically forgotten, while her fictionized counterpart, Marie Roget, has been more or less immortalized in a mythical French setting by an American writer.

Mary Sells Tobacco

Mary Cecilia Rogers was a very beautiful girl and one of the early career girls. She worked in a tobacco shop at Broadway and Thomas streets. New York was then a budding metropolis of some three hundred thousand, but in many respects had retained its small town flavor. Everyone knew "the beautiful cigar girl." Among Mary's regular customers were such giants of letters as James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and Mr. Poe himself.

Mary was popular, but had a good reputation and it was something of a surprise to all when she disappeared for a week, leaving her mother and employer both frantic and baffled. She returned as mysteriously as she had gone, with the flimsy story that she had visited a relative's farm for a rest.

Ah-ha! A Love Nest!

The usual rumors and whispers began, of course, and the most persistent was that Mary had kept some kind of a love nest tryst with a fetching naval officer. Bear this in mind, for it was later considered important by Mr. Poe.

Shortly thereafter, Mary quit her job and assisted her mother in opening a boarding house on Nassau street. The mother was quite old and the son had gone off to sea, so it was Mary who ran the place.

Among the boarders were two young males who were soon in ardent competition for Mary's attention. Alfred Crommelin (whom Poe readers can identify as Monsieur Beauvais of the Marie Roget story) lost out. Daniel Payne (the Jacques St. Eustache of the Poe story) won Mary's affection.

Her choice seemed hardly dictated by what is popularly known as common sense, for Crommelin was far more reli-

able. He was hard-working, attractive enough and sober. Payne on the other hand was a sot, with no visible ambition.

Crommelin, having lost, took dramatic leave of Mary and urged her, hopefully, to call upon him if ever she needed help. Then he left.

On Sunday morning, July 25th, 1841, Mary Cecilia Rogers left her house, telling Payne that she was going to visit her cousin Mrs. Downing, who lived in Jane Street. Payne was to meet her at the stage station at seven that night.

Mary Rogers was never again seen alive. Payne spent the day in a bar, but around seven a violent thunderstorm broke, and feeling sure the girl would not travel, he went home and to bed instead of meeting the stage.

Next day Mary had still not come home. Payne went to Mrs. Downing's, to be told that she had never been there at all! Now there was no doubt that something was very rotten in Manhattan. But there was no police force at the time, no Missing Person's Bureau. For want of anything else, Payne put an ad in the *Sun* asking for information.

Crommelin Rows to Jersey

Alfred Crommelin, the rejected suitor, saw the ad. He took up the search himself. On a hunch, he got a boat and had himself rowed across the river to Hoboken. This suburb was then a wooded and meadowed countryside—the picnic area of New York. There were taverns and shaded walks and lovers' lanes galore. It was a logical spot for inquiry.

Crommelin was asking questions when some men came in to shore in a skiff. They brought the body of a drowned girl. One look and Crommelin knew he had found Mary Rogers.

Mary Rogers had not died of drowning, however. A strip torn from her petticoat was twisted about her neck to throttle her, and was still imbedded in the soft flesh. Her wrists had been tied behind her and another strip of cloth, torn from her dress, had been tied about her body to serve as a handle in carrying her. She had been criminally assaulted.

Investigation in those days was a hit or miss affair. A citizens' committee offered $500 reward and the Governor added $750 for information leading to her murderers. Stimulated by the smell of money, the crackpot stories came in.

A stage driver said he had picked up Mary Rogers with a tall dark man and driven them to Hoboken. Mrs. Loss, a tavern keeper of Hoboken, reported that Mary and a man had stopped at her place for lemonade. Two men reported seeing her in a boat with six men. A man named Morse was suspected and pursued to Massachusetts, but proved that we was only fleeing his own wife.

Poe Makes Deductions

The investigation bogged down. Then arrived Mr. Poe and his deductions via the French version. He noticed that the strip of cloth which had been tied about the girl's body was tied, not haphazardly, but in a sailors' bowline.

Harking back then to the original rumor that Mary had spent a week with a naval officer, Poe came up with the triumphant conclusion that the murderer would be found to be this same seagoing Romeo! Which nice bit of reasoning had only one flaw. No missing naval officer was ever discovered.

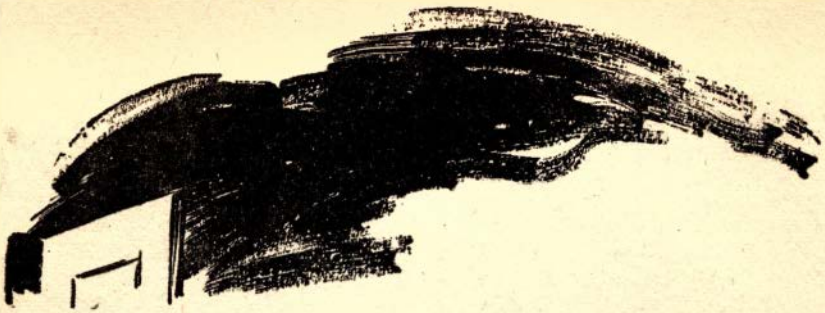
In the woods near Mrs. Loss's tavern was discovered a parasol, a petticoat, a silk scarf and a handkerchief, embroidered with the initials M.R. But this was a blind trail too. The clues led nowhere and the scene provided only a stage for the exit of the grief-stricken Daniel Payne who died, not so much a martyr to love as to a violent nudge from John Barleycorn.

The cigar store owner for whom Mary had worked died some time later and the story went around at once that he had known the identity of the murderer. Tracked down, his relatives said it was true. He had known. Mary's ghost had come to him in a dream and told him. But since the information was confidential, he had never told anyone!

The murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers remained unsolved and unavenged, in spite of Mr. Poe and his triumphant detective, Monsieur Auguste Dupin. But Mr. Poe may have been on the right track after all. Whom did Mary Rogers go to meet that Sunday morning when she told her fiancee she was visiting a cousin? If we knew that we might indeed have the name of her murderer.

fear death by water

When the officers from the police car arrived, Miss Withers was calmly seated at the telephone. (Chap. VII)



A HILDEGARDE WITHERS NOVEL

BY **STUART PALMER**

I

FAR off there was thunder, in spite of the summer sunshine which blazed down on Pat Montague who walked along the curving highway. Ahead of him danced a midget tornado of dead leaves and dust.

Pat kept on walking; not that he had to walk. There was a fat wad of mustering-out pay in his pocket. It was only that he felt more at home afoot. Walking gave him more time to brood about the clipping in his billfold.

Too, walking gave him more chance to change his mind. Until he had actually rung the doorbell he could turn around and head back to town. He wasn't at all sure he was going to ring that doorbell, because when he tried to think about Helen his mind went round and round.

Men forced into the monastic routines of training camps and troop carriers usually had tried to stop thinking about the opposite sex. The pin-up girls were taken down after the first month or two. But Helen's picture had been with him always, because it had been printed on his mind in indelible colors.

On a gusty afternoon like this, with warm sunshine pouring down and yet with squalls over the Sound, it wasn't hard to convince himself that things are bound to come right in the end.

Even though the girl was married. The newspaper clipping had forcibly reminded him of that:

Mrs. Cairns, the former Helen Virginia Abbott of New York City and—

But that was quite in the classical tradition too, Pat reminded himself. The other Helen had been married to some meatball named Menelaus. So had Guinevere, and Isolde.

All, all married, to men they didn't love.

So with a quick-frozen dream in his heart and a large chip on his shoulder Pat Montague marched along an elm-shaded roadway in a very expensive section of Long Island, drawn by the most powerful magnetic force known to mankind. He walked, without realizing it, almost in the center of the road and was

When the schoolteacher sleuth tries to clear Pat Montague of a murder charge she forces the real killer to strike once more—with consequences most disastrous to herself, Inspector Piper, and some wholly innocent tropical fish!

nearly clipped off at the pockets by a small convertible which came roaring around the curve behind him. It was close, then Pat flung himself toward the edge of the road and safety.

Suddenly he came around a turn and saw the salmon-colored house silhouetted against the Sound, big and new and imposing. Pat knew this was the right place, because only Huntley Cairns would create a thing half Riviera villa and half Los Angeles Moorish.

Pat climbed up on the tree bank along the crest of the hill so he could look down on the place. There must have been ten acres of it.

THERE was a barrier fence of split logs bright with whitewash, and beyond that the green lawns sloped away, studded with round flower gardens, littered with rustic benches and pebbled walks.

Farther still was the glimmer of green-blue water. Pat walked on a few steps so that he could see, between the buildings, a narrow glimpse of an oval swimming pool bordered with bright-colored tiles.

Beside the pool, which must have been a good quarter of a mile away from where he stood, there was a flash of white, which disappeared immediately. He started to climb the fence, the blood pounding in his temples. Helen's bathing suits had always been white.

He hurried down to the bathhouse and stopped. There was nobody here, nobody at all. The swimming pool was a peaceful turquoise green, troubled only by the sprinkle of rain.

Then a disreputable station wagon pulled into the service driveway and stopped. From it emerged a wiry, spare man of about sixty, clad in filthy blue overalls, with a sack of manure on his shoulder.

He looked toward the pool, dropped the sack, and started hurrying. Pat Montague, kneeling beside the pool, looked up, his face gray and pasty. He had been prodding into the water with a garden rake.

"Lose something, mister?"

Pat did not answer, and the old man came closer, squinting into the greenish depths at the deep end of the pool, under the diving board. Staring back at him was the round white face of his employer, Huntley Cairns, under two fathoms of carefully warmed and heavily chlorinated water.

Somehow the two men raked and tumbled the body out onto the tiles. It was dressed in some weird and outlandish garment which seemed to be a combination corset and underdrawers, stiff with stays and tight elastic.

Pat whispered through stiff lips: "He may not be dead."

The old man shook his head brusquely. "You get in there and phone for an ambulance, do you hear?" He was pointing to the open door of a dressing room in the white bathhouse.

Pat ran into a long bare room which he vaguely noticed was furnished with wooden benches and wall hooks. A towel and a wet suit lay in a puddle on the concrete floor, and a bathrobe and some men's clothing were on a bench.

The extension telephone hung near the shower. Pat grabbed the receiver, jiggled the hook feverishly, then heard the door slam shut behind him and the sound of a key being turned in the lock.

Even then Pat didn't have the slightest idea of the trap into which he had walked. But when he put the instrument to his ear he could hear the cracked, excited voice of the gardener.

"Yes, Searles! I work days for Mr. Cairns. I said he was *murdered*—I caught a young fellow in the act, I tell you!"

The voice at the other end of the line was calm. "Somebody'll be right out there. Can you keep him?"

"Sure, sure. I got him all right! But make it snappy."

Pat stood there, a foolish, frozen grin on his face. It was he—Pat Montague—they were talking about!

He threw himself breathlessly at the locked door. Nothing happened. Then he froze as the lock clicked. Light struck him in the face, and a girl stood

there. A girl whom Pat had not seen for years.

Lawn, Lawn Abbott. Helen's changeling kid sister. She wore riding clothes, jodhpurs, which flattered her straight, almost feral young body. They were soiled and wet.

Of all people to find him here, Pat thought bitterly, it would have to be Lawn, who had always hated him and done her level best to spoil his romance with her sister!

Pat started making explanations, but the girl just stared at him. Her eye-

Hildegarde Withers

brows, the V-shaped, satanic eyebrows, were barely lifted.

In some odd way she seemed to be enjoying this moment.

Then she suddenly caught his hands in her hard, small brown ones, pulled him through the door, and thrust him down the hill.

"That way!" she cried. "Keep where you can't be seen from the house. There's the path I take to the stables, only you cut left just before you get to the shore. You'll come out on the third tee of the golf course, then keep right. The village is about a mile and a half."

Pat tried to mutter something, but she caught him short, as if possessed by some inner rage. He started running, not pausing until he reached the trees far below. . . .

"I suppose that was my fault!" the girl at the wheel of the convertible exploded, turning toward her husband.

Midge Beale shrugged his narrow shoulders. "You'd better stop," he told her.

"Why, for heaven's sake? I didn't hit him, did I? And if you think I'm going to pick up every hitchhiker on the road —" Adele's mouth tightened. "Probably just another discharged veteran thinking he's entitled to free transportation."

They came out on the crest of the hill. Spread out before them was a vast panorama of water and sky, with white fleecy clouds scudding north toward Connecticut.

"I only suggested stopping because I thought I recognized that fellow you almost hit," Midge said slowly. "He looked a lot like old Pat Montague."

"Pat? But he's in Germany or Austria or somewhere."

"It may come as a great surprise to you," Midge told her, "but they are even letting first lieutenants out of the Army now."

"You're probably just imagining things, darling. And if it was Pat, I'm glad we didn't stop. Do you think I'd want to appear at Helen Cairns' housewarming with her old heart throb in tow? That would be just a little too-too!"

Midge pointed out that he hadn't wanted to appear at all. "If we have to get drunk, why can't we do it quietly at home?"

"Don't be stuffy, darling," Adele snapped. "Nowadays you can still dislike a man and drink his liquor. Otherwise our social life would be pretty limited, wouldn't it? Besides, Huntley has a lot of connections, and he could help in getting you a different job."

The Cairns' place, salmon-pink and imposing, suddenly presented itself, and Adele turned in through the gateway.

"Now, darling," she begged, "don't go shooting off your mouth. It probably wasn't Pat at all, but just somebody who looked like him."

Midge promised. He was forcibly re-

minded of that promise a few minutes later, when he heard his wife's clear voice from the other end of the drawing room, trilling at their hostess:

"Helen, my dear! Just guess who Midge thought he saw today right here in Shoreham! Pat Montague!"

Helen took it without even batting her wide, sleepy aquamarine eyes. "Really? Dear old Pat. Was he still in uniform or—"

Helen picked up a martini mixer and refilled somebody's glass. Then, with the greatest of poise she proceeded to set the massive crystal cylinder down on thin air about six inches from the edge of the coffee table.

After the deluge it was Adele who sounded off with the first "Ohs" of sympathy. Adele and Midge were the only people here who had known Helen when she was Helen Abbott, the only ones who realized how Pat had once fitted into the picture.

Them, and Thurlow Abbott, and Lawn of course. But Helen's father didn't count; he hadn't counted much since the days when bootleg gin had done something to his vocal cords, ending his career as a matinee-idol tenor in musical comedy. At this moment he was down on his creaky knees, mopping at his daughter's hostess gown with a napkin coyly painted in silver, "Helen and Huntley."

Adele moved away, and Midge came up behind her. "That was a nice fox pass," he said in a low voice. "It's a good thing Cairns isn't here yet."

Adele glared. "He's coming now, I think," she said, and turned to Harry Radebaugh, the young surgeon who'd opened his clinic in the village about a year earlier.

Midge saw his host, Huntley Cairns, hurry into the room through the front doors.

"Sorry I'm so late, but better late than never," Cairns apologized. "Been working like a dog all day and I'm dirty as a pig. Drink up, everybody, and I'll be back as soon as I get cleaned up."

He was a little man, broad in the beam, with the breast pocket of his neat pin-stripe blue suit crammed with gold pens and pencils.

"Bet he comes down togged out in something sharp and two-toned, probably with suede shoes," Midge said to himself, and looked toward the stairs.

Huntley Cairns was turning to the right at the landing. It must be true, then, that he and Helen had separate bedrooms, for she had turned to the left when she rushed up to change. Midge felt suddenly sorry for his host. Money wouldn't buy everything, at that.

Midge finally found a haven in the library, a long narrow room lined almost to the ceiling with books. There was a large fireplace faced by a divan. The cushions were stuffed with real down. He sank into them and promptly dozed off.

HE JERKED wide awake some time later, to hear voices near by.

". . . and it could be a blind," said somebody in a hushed, male voice. "Cairns is foxier than he looks."

"Nonsense. Look, here's 'The Dark Gentleman,' and two of Terhune's collie stories."

Midge recognized this voice as that of Jed Nicolet, a hot-shot lawyer with offices in the Empire State, who always spent his summers out here in a big house half a mile down the road.

"He could have let somebody else pick 'em out," replied the first voice. "Not his wife—I don't think Helen ever reads anything except maybe the ads in *Vogue*. But her sister—"

"Lawn Abbott doesn't read anything except modern poetry," Nicolet said. "I wish she'd show up. There's a girl who—" He stopped short. "Say, look here, Bennington! Listen to this—the book just fell open!"

Bennington. That would be Commander Sam Bennington, who'd retired from the Navy six months ago to sit on his big behind and help spend his wife Ava's money. He was still talking.

"Or he could have ordered his books by the linear foot, to match the color scheme."

"Sam, I said look here!" There was

Somehow the two men tumbled the body out onto the tiles. (Chap. I)

something in Jed Nicolet's voice so compelling that Midge couldn't resist poking his head up above the back of the divan. Both men were eagerly bent over a slender red volume. "Listen to this!"

"Wait!" Bennington suddenly said.

He started toward the divan. Behind him Jed Nicolet hastily whipped the book back into the shelves. Then he, too, converged on Midge.

"Spying on us, eh?" Bennington growled unpleasantly. "Get up!"

"Take it easy, Sam," Jed Nicolet put in. "Look, Beale, this is a little awkward. We didn't know you were here."

"That goes double. I didn't even expect to see you at this party, not after the trouble you had with Cairns."

Nicolet hesitated. "Sure, why not? Helen is—well, she's Helen. And Lawn is a good friend of mine. After all, why hold a grudge? The vet did pull Wotan through. He limps a little on one leg, that's all. But I thought it over and I realized that Cairns may not have seen him after all—a black Dane on a dark night."

Commander Bennington snorted. "I still say a man should know if he ran his car smack into a two-hundred-pound dog. Look, Beale. To go back to what we were talking about."

Helen's cool, sweet voice interrupted them.

"So here you all are! My nicest guests, hiding out from the party!" She took Midge's arm in hers. "Come with me, young man. I'm just dying to dance and we've got a lot of new rumba and samba records."

So Midge gladly suffered himself to be led along. But it soon became clear

that she did not really want to dance. She wanted to ask him something. It took them one turn around the room before he could guess, because she barely hinted at what was on her mind.

"Oh!" Midge said. "Well, of course I'm not at all sure it was Pat. I just had a quick glimpse of his face as we came past. You know how Adele drives."

"You—came *past?*"

"About halfway up the hill. Pat, or whoever it was, seemed headed this way. Look, Helen," he whispered, "is anything wrong? I mean is there anything I can do?"

"You can get me a drink," she said, but when he came back with a double martini in each hand she was gone.

He looked for her in the drawing room, in the playroom, in the dining room and hall, and finally downed both drinks. A pleasantly pink fog began to close in upon him. He had memories later of trying to play ping-pong and of losing the ball, and of looking for Adele and not being able to find her either.

When the fog lifted he was in the kitchen, drinking milk out of a quart bottle and singing with Jed Nicolet, Doc Radebaugh, and the colored houseboy, who had a fine deep contra-bass. A dirty old man in overalls was screaming at them to shut up so he could use the kitchen telephone, and the quartet moved into the serving pantry. But even there they were suddenly silenced by the screaming of police sirens.

Then Lawn Abbott, her face white as chalk, came to tell them that Huntley Cairns' body was lying at the edge of the swimming pool.

II

SERGEANT FISCHER and Officer Ray Lunney were waiting at the Cairns' house when Sheriff Vinge arrived.

"We're taking bows tonight, Sheriff," Fischer said cheerily. "The case is all washed up and put to bed. We've got our man tied up in the back seat of the radio car, ready to take into town."

The sheriff nodded. "Good, good. Er—who is it?"

"Joe Searles, Sheriff. The old codger that drives around in an old station wagon loaded with junk, talking to himself. He's the gardener here."

"Oh! Yeah, I know him. Lives alone in a shack down by the wharf. Why'd he do it?"

"There wasn't any actual quarrel that we can prove," Fischer explained. "But it's natural that the old man would have a grudge against a man like Cairns, who made a lot of money overnight and bought this place. The house that used to stand here was originally built by Joe Searles' own grandfather. Besides, Cairns seems to have complained about the size of bills old man Searles was running up at the nursery and the feed store. I don't think Searles will hold out for more'n two or three hours of questioning."

"That makes sense," the sheriff said. "Go on."

"Well, we figure it like this. Mrs. Cairns—that's the pretty, plump girl who used to be Helen Abbott—had sent him to buy fertilizer and stuff, and when he came back he saw Cairns splashing around in the swimming pool. On a homicidal impulse he took a garden rake and held him under, right against the bottom of the pool. When he was sure that Cairns was through breathing he dragged the body out and then rushed to phone us a crazy story about how he saw somebody else doing it. He claims he locked this guy—the usual tall, dark, powerful stranger—in the men's side of the bathhouse down there, but of course when we unlocked it there was nothing inside but some of Mr. Cairns' clothes."

Sheriff Vinge nodded. "No witnesses?"

"Lawn Abbott—that's Mrs. Cairns' younger sister—came up the hill past the pool a few minutes after Searles rushed into the house to phone us, but she was too late to see him at work, which was no doubt lucky for her."

"Guess so. Well, as long as I'm here I may as well look at the body."

"On the service porch. I'll show you."

Sergeant Fischer snapped on his electric torch and led the way around the house. "We brought it up here so Doc Radebaugh could make his examination. Don't suppose there was any harm moving him."

"I got no objection, anyway," said the sheriff drily. "And I don't guess Cairns has." He looked down upon the uncovered body of Huntley Cairns. "Good God, what's that thing he's got on?"

"An athletic corset, the doc called it. To keep his stomach in."

Vinge shook his head. "Bet you it was uncomfortable." He turned away. "Funny thing Searles would pull the body out of the water before he phoned. Oh well, let's talk with Doc Radebaugh. Where's he now?"

"With the other suspects, in the living room." Sergeant Fischer added hastily, "Well, you know Lunney. Before I could stop him he'd told everybody that they were material witnesses and they had to stay until you said they could go."

Their detention had made the people in the Cairns drawing room as jittery as water on a hot stove. They all started talking at once.

"Take it easy!" said the sheriff. "We'll have this all straightened out in a few minutes. Don't anybody need to get upset. Now, first of all, Dr. Radebaugh, just when did the deceased meet his death?"

Harry Radebaugh, stiff and professional, stood up as if called on to recite in school. Cairns had come in on the five-o'clock and had arrived at the party about twenty minutes after. He'd gone right upstairs and, presumably, almost straight down to his new swimming pool.

"Roughly he died between five-thirty and six-fifteen, because it was six-twenty when Miss Abbott found the body on the tiles, covered with a man's blue denim jacket."

"Searles' coat," Sergeant Fischer put in.

The sheriff nodded. "And the phone call from Searles came in at sixteen minutes past six. That all matches right enough." He consulted a list of names which Officer Lunney had handed to him. "Next—Miss Lawn Abbott."

LAWN tapped at her riding shoes with a slender whip. "I'd been out for a ride," she said. "I have a hunter hack that the Boads keep for me in their stable until Huntley—I mean until Huntley could build a stable here. I was later than I realized, and I didn't get up to the party until just before the police arrived. I saw the body as I came past the pool."

"On your way up the hill did you see anything going on at the swimming pool?" She shook her head. "That's all," said the sheriff. "Next is Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell Beale."

"I was in the library for a while," Midge began with a sidelong glance at Commander Bennington. "Then I danced a little, and after that I played ping-pong. Later I wandered into the kitchen. I didn't go outside."

"I didn't leave the living room," Adele put in. "Except once or twice to go up to Helen's room. Once I was looking for her because she was taking so long to change, and once I wanted to fix my hair. I went out on the balcony outside Helen's room to get some air because I felt a little swacked."

"When you were out on the balcony did you see anyone down at the pool?"

"You can't see the pool from the house because the bathhouse stands right in the way."

Sheriff Vinge then turned his attention to the Benningtons. Thurlow Abbott and Jed Nicolet were questioned next. That ended that list, to the obvious relief of the sheriff.

"We already got statements from the hired help," Sergeant Fischer told him in a whisper. "Name of MacTavish, Jeff and Beulah MacTavish, colored. They been with the Cairnses about four months, and they don't know nothing and they ain't saying nothing, except that they got along fine with Cairns. And here's another list, of people that were here earlier but left before the body was discovered."

Sheriff Vinge glanced at the second list, perfunctorily. "I guess," he said, "I ought to have a word with the widow."

"My daughter's up in her room, completely collapsed," Thurlow Abbott said hoarsely.

"All I was going to ask her was if her husband was in the habit of taking a swim before he changed for dinner."

Nobody answered. Then there came the sound of a thin, strained voice.

"How could Huntley have any habits?" cried Helen from the head of the stairs. "Remember, we'd just moved into this house, and the pool was only filled day before yesterday!"

Everybody stared, but Helen was her own mistress again. She came into the room like a determined sleepwalker and sat down.

"We weren't going to bother you, Mrs. Cairns," Vinge said. "But now that you're here—we were wondering why your husband went swimming in a sort of corset thingamajig?"

"A—a corset?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes ma'am. He was wearing it when he was murdered."

Helen stood up suddenly, her soft mouth drawn. "Did you say—" She tried to catch herself, but her voice spilled over. "You mean it wasn't accidental? Are you saying that Huntley was actually murdered?"

Sheriff Vinge's voice was gentle. "I'm sorry, ma'am. But that's the way it looks. The story the gardener tells won't hold water. He made it up to cover himself."

"What does Searles say?" Helen demanded.

"Oh, he claims to have seen a strange young man in a blue suit bending over the swimming pool, killing your husband. According to his story, he locked the killer in the bathhouse."

"Then it *was* Pat!" Helen cried. "He did it—he must have!" She whirled on Midge and Adele. "You saw him on his way here, didn't you?"

The room was so silent that they could have heard a pin drop. And did hear one, as the heavy silver polo-mallet clasp which held Lawn's scarf suddenly came apart in her fingers.

Sheriff Vinge looked at Helen. "Mrs. Cairns, just who is Pat?" Helen was biting her lip now. "You'll have to tell us. Now that you've said this much. . . ."

IT WAS a bad night for young men in blue suits and for first lieutenants. All over the metropolitan area of New York, unhappy youths were swept into the police dragnet and charged with being Pat Montague.

Meanwhile Pat himself perched glumly and alone on a bar stool less than two blocks from the Shoreham police station, wearing no disguise except a dazed expression and a highball glass which he held most of the time before his face. All the same he had a presentiment of what he was going to be in for.

He went straight up in the air as a heavy hand descended upon his shoulder.

"Relax," a voice advised. "I know who you are from the description. I'm a friend of Helen's."

Pat froze. "So?"

"So they tipped me off to look for you around the bars, and there are only three in town. It looks as if you need some legal advice."

The man produced a business card.

"Jed Nicolet," Pat read. "Did Helen send you?"

Nicolet nodded. "Only it was her sister who spoke to me when the police finally let me leave. Helen wasn't free to do anything, with the house full of police." He paused. "You may as well trust me, fellow. Why not break down and tell me just how you fit into all this?"

Pat said quickly, "I didn't kill him!" Then he stopped. "I can't explain."

All the same, he tried explaining through fifteen minutes and two more highballs. Nicolet nodded judicially when it was all finished.

"So that's it. It isn't easy to advise you. You could, of course, walk into Sheriff Vinge's office and tell him the story. You could say you went up to

the Cairns' house uninvited because you wanted just one look at Helen, the girl who didn't wait for you while you were overseas. You thought you had a glimpse of her by the pool, so you climbed down. When you got there you happened to look down into the water, and it wasn't Helen, it was Huntley Cairns, and he was dead."

"As a lawyer, give me your opinion."

"As a lawyer, I must confess I don't believe it myself."

Pat flushed and started to slide off the stool.

"Sit down," the other man said firmly. "Personally, I think that anyone who killed Huntley Cairns ought to be given a key to the city."

"Maybe," Pat said slowly. "But I didn't kill him. You've got to accept that or we don't go on talking. Not that I didn't threaten to knock his ears down if we ever met. I did it the night he met Helen. He was on the make then, over three years ago."

Jed Nicolet nodded. "Okay. I've had clients who were innocent, now and then. Anyway, I'll see what can be done, for Helen's sake. You didn't even get to see her, did you?"

"I haven't seen her in three years. Her kid sister gummed up the works. Lawn used to be a little vixen. But she did let me out of that bathhouse trap today."

Nicolet was sympathetic. "I'm afraid that was no favor. It was bad break Number Two. If you hadn't run away we'd be in a much sounder position. Circumstantial evidence is all against you. You had the motive, the means, and the opportunity to kill Huntley Cairns. The police will grab you and mark the case closed, unless—"

"Unless what?"

Jed Nicolet didn't answer for a moment. "This is an unusual situation and calls for unusual measures," he said at last. "Suppose it got out that you had called in a private detective, a big-time expert in murder cases. If we do that, the police won't dare let the case drop. The chances are they'll call in outside help and eventually turn in the killer.

Pat Montague went out of the cottage handcuffed to the thick wrist of a policeman. (Chap. III)

And in the meantime we're planting a wedge of doubt that I can hammer home to the jury. Come on, I'll drive you down to the hotel. This detective I was telling you about is staying there in one of the hotel cottages on a hide-away vacation."

PAT SUFFERED himself to be led outside, and they drove through the village almost to the shore, turning in past the Shoreham House, a rambling Victorian firetrap.

"The angle to take," Jed Nicolet warned, "is strictly Young Love."

"What kind of detective is this?" Pat demanded, but Nicolet only led him around the main building to a row of little whitewashed cottages.

"Here we are," the lawyer said cheerfully, and leaned on the bell.

A moment later a woman faced them, a lean and angular person who would never see fifty again and whose face seemed vaguely to resemble someone Pat had known or seen in the papers. After a moment he realized it was Man o' War.

Nicolet held out his hand. "Well, if it isn't Miss Hildegarde Withers! You remember me? Jed Nicolet, the counsel for the defense in the bridle-path case. I want you to meet my friend Pat Montague, who's just out of the Army and into a mess of trouble. . . ."

Miss Withers watched Pat closely as he told his story.

"The last time I saw Helen," he was saying, "we had been out dancing, and she wore a white dress or maybe it was a suit. It was daylight when I brought her home, and she came out on the little balcony outside her father's apartment to wave down at me. Somehow she's still waving at me. But I guess you wouldn't understand."

"Don't be so sure," Miss Withers snapped. "I may be a schoolteacher but, believe it or not, I've had my chances. Go on."

"I read in the paper that Helen was living out here in Shoreham," Pat said, "and that she was giving a housewarming. I thought I'd crash the party. At least I could see her and find out if she was happy and hear it from her own lips if it had to be good-by. . . ." He talked on and on and finally stopped.

Miss Withers sighed. "It is one of the saddest things in this life," she said, "that two people rarely fall out of love at the same time."

Pat insisted doggedly that he didn't believe Helen had ever fallen out of love with him. Her father and her sister had been after her to marry that fat kewpie, Cairns. Pat had been in camp, and something went wrong with his letters and telegrams, but that must have been Lawn Abbott's work.

"The Wicked Sister, eh?" Miss Withers smiled faintly. "The rest of it seems like an unfortunate coincidence, with the gardener leaping to an erroneous but natural conclusion." Suddenly she was silent. "Just a minute. Did I understand you to say that Huntley Cairns was *fat?*"

Both Pat and Nicolet admitted that Cairns was a tub of a man, not over five feet six and weighing around two hundred pounds. Miss Withers nodded.

"And when you saw the body it was at the bottom of the deep end of the swimming pool?"

Pat Montague nodded.

"Excuse me just a minute," said the schoolteacher. "I must make a telephone call."

She went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her, and busied herself fluttering the pages of a number of extremely thick and solid volumes. She found what she wanted, nodded, then picked up the phone.

In the living room Jed Nicolet was reassuring his client. "She's on our side, and the police won't be so quick to try to hang a murder rap on you."

Then the door opened and Miss Withers appeared.

"Before we go any farther, gentlemen, there is something you ought to know. I just called up the Shoreham police and reported your presence here."

Jerked to their feet, both Montague and Jed Nicolet goggled. But there was no compassion in Miss Withers.

"It serves you right," she told Pat Montague, "for trying to take me in with a cock-and-bull story. I happen to have read that a fat man has considerably less specific gravity than a thin man—and even a thin man will usually float when first drowned. So you see? Huntley Cairns couldn't have been dead at the bottom of his own swimming pool, not unless you were holding him down."

"But wait a minute," Nicolet began to argue. "The man had drowned, and his lungs were full of water!"

"Not necessarily. In many cases of drowning death comes by asphyxia almost immediately, and little or no water enters the respiratory tract. Look it up for yourself in Webster, or Sydney Smith, or Glaister. Smith also points out that in the case of a newborn child, where there is an excess of fat, the body will usually refuse to sink at all!"

Pat Montague, dazed but dogged, shook his head. "I don't care what it says in the books, I've told you the truth. He was at the bottom of the deep end of the pool."

"It all sounds convincing," Miss Withers snapped. "But you stick to your story and I'll stick with Sydney Smith."

III

IT WAS sometime later when Pat Montague went out of the cottage handcuffed to the thick wrist of a policeman. He was followed by Jed Nicolet.

"And that," said Miss Hildegarde Withers to herself, "is that. I've kept my promise to Oscar not to meddle in police matters, and I've handed over a criminal to justice."

There was nothing to worry about. And she still had her tropical fish. She turned back gratefully to the aquarium, where she had found it very soothing of late to lose herself in that lambent green fairyland.

The neon tetras were glowing with their eerie brilliance; the head-and-tail lights had their signals all turned on, fore and aft. The blue moons were shining, the hatchet fish skipped about on the surface, and catfish and snails, at the bottom of this social structure, went about their scavenging peacefully. It was a peace, however, not entirely shared by Miss Withers, and when at last she sought her couch, something—perhaps a conscience of the New England variety—kept her tossing. She finally took a bromide, sinking after a while into a semi-slumber in which one nightmare followed another, overlapping like a montage.

She was still under the surface of the water swimming frantically, when her doorbell buzzed. According to the little red leather traveling clock which Inspector Piper had given her once for Christmas it was not quite ten in the morning. She climbed wearily into bathrobe and slippers, to find a girl standing in the doorway, a girl in a white blouse over riotous tropical slacks.

"I'm Lawn Abbott," the girl announced in a low, husky contralto. "I must see you. Jed Nicolet called up last night and told me all about being here and—"

Miss Withers suddenly became very wide awake indeed.

"Come in, child," she said. "But I tell you in advance that I won't be able to help you."

The girl sat down on the chair Miss Withers indicated, then immediately rose and started pacing up and down, and biting her nails. Finally she spoke.

"Miss Withers, have you seen the Sunday papers?"

"Naturally not, my dear. You awakened me."

"Well, it's time that somebody woke you up!" Lawn's voice did not rise, but there was a thin, metallic ring to it. "Because you don't know that there was a ragged tear in the shorts that Huntley was wearing when he died! The police at first thought it must have been made by the rake which, according to their theory, held him under when he was drowning—"

"I'm really not very interested."

"But you've got to be interested! Pat is innocent as a newborn babe. If I can prove it to you will you help me

convince the police, so they'll let him go?"

Miss Withers sniffed. "I'm afraid it would take a good deal to convince the police that Pat Montague isn't their man."

"Oh, nonsense! Only last night that sheriff was positive he had it all pinned on poor old Searles, and now he's had to let him go. Tomorrow it may be somebody else—Jed, or Father, or me. I just want Pat out of jail, that's all."

"There would have to be some new evidence," Miss Withers said.

"How about this?" Lawn dramatically held up her right hand, showing the index finger covered with adhesive tape. Underneath was a deep, ragged cut. "They're draining the pool this morning, but I didn't wait for that. I sneaked out before daylight, and I dived down into the corner where they found Huntley's body. I caught my finger on a jagged bit of metal—part of the circular cap that goes around the outlet. It must have been damaged in putting it in. Anyway, if Huntley's shorts were caught on that hook, wouldn't his body have stayed at the bottom until somebody pulled it loose?"

MISS WITHERS frowned.

"I'm afraid that it is possible, as you indicate, that I drew my conclusions on insufficient evidence. But I think what you really want isn't just to get Pat Montague out of jail. You want him completely cleared, and that can't happen until we find the real murderer. Are you sure that will make you happy?" When Lawn hesitated, she added: "You wanted your sister to marry Cairns, didn't you?"

Lawn looked puzzled. "I certainly wasn't opposed to it."

"According to what I have heard, you did your best to break up Pat's romance with your sister so that she would fall into Huntley Cairns' waiting arms." The girl's pale, masklike face showed no expression. "It is true, isn't it?"

"Truth!" Lawn suddenly exploded. "Please forget that I came here. Just forget the whole thing." And she went out, leaving the door open.

"Well!" murmured Miss Hildegarde Withers. She closed the door, bringing back with her the New York morning papers.

SHE could not resist turning to the somewhat meager stories about the Shoreham murder. There was a photograph of Huntley Cairns, evidently taken some years ago. He looked placid and pleased with himself. There was also a picture of what this particular paper at least had decided upon as the murder weapon, a garden rake held firmly in the hand of Officer Ray Lunney.

There was another photograph of the strange, torn garment which the dead man had been wearing.

Miss Withers pushed aside the newspapers. She had given up detecting, she reminded herself. Crossing the room, she turned on the light over the aquarium and dumped some powdered food into the feeding triangle, watched as the fish wildly gobbled at it. Only one neon tetra was in evidence and, try as she might, Miss Withers could nowhere catch a glimpse of the glowing, living light which should have been its mate.

Then, with a start of horror, she caught sight of a spot of grisly activity in the rear of the tank. A midget skeleton moved erratically on the sand, whirling end over end. Two busy Japanese snails and a spotted eel-like king do-jo were fulfilling their ghoulish task of cleaning up the tank. The dead fish was disposed of, all except skull and spine.

As Miss Withers turned away, feeling faintly ill, the doorbell summoned her once more. This time a girl in black stood in the doorway. Behind her, fidgeting slightly, was a much older man.

"Miss Hildegarde Withers?" Thurlow Abbott began. "We owe you an apology for breaking in on you like this—"

"Oh, stop it, Father!" The girl in black was coldly angry. "We want to

know what lies Lawn has been telling you!"

"You must be Helen Cairns," Miss Withers said. "Please come in and sit down."

Helen shook her head. "My father and I can't stop. But we want to know what Lawn said to you."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Cairns, but—"

"As if we didn't know already!" Helen exploded. "She wanted to make my husband's death look like murder, didn't she? She's got the idea that you have some sort of connection with the police, and she's trying to frame poor Pat."

"You don't know me, Mrs. Cairns," Miss Withers said with a sniff, "but I am not easily used. Why should your sister try to do all these things?"

FATHER and daughter exchanged a look. "Lawn's motives have always been a mystery to me," Thurlow Abbott said hoarsely. "Sometimes I have thought that, just as some girls have a vocation for the Church, she has a vocation for *evil!*"

The schoolteacher's eyebrows went up. Then she turned back to Helen. "Mrs. Cairns, did you know that Pat Montague telephoned you twice last week from the separation center at Camp Nivens?"

Helen shook her head. "I didn't know until last night that Pat was within two thousand miles of here. Lawn must have answered the phone, because Beulah would have taken a message. Lawn could have answered in a stage colored accent, the way she does sometimes, with a 'Mistah Cyains' res'-dence'."

"Lawn is a clever mimic," Thurlow Abbott explained. "She inherits some of my talent."

Miss Withers frowned. "Suppose we leave, just for a moment, the subject of the Wicked Sister," she said. "Just who, Mrs. Cairns, do you think killed your husband—if it wasn't Pat Montague? You're not, of course, trying to suggest that Lawn might have done it?"

HELEN CAIRNS suddenly broke into laughter.

"*Lawn?* Lawn murder Huntley? She never liked him much, though she enjoyed the allowance he gave her and the nice soft life she had with us. But do you imagine for a minute that she would kill him—and leave *me* free, with Pat coming back?"

"You see," Abbott put in, "my daughter has a theory that Lawn has been secretly in love with Pat Montague since she was sixteen."

Miss Withers thought that over. "Well, eliminating Mr. Montague, and your sister, and the gardener, and everybody else—then who did kill Huntley Cairns? Am I correct in supposing that you are here to ask me to try to find out?"

"Why, yes," Thurlow Abbott replied.

"But on second thought," Helen said firmly, "it might be better after all to let the police handle it. Besides, there can't be much doubt but that Huntley was swimming in the pool and got caught on a bit of metal so that he drowned accidentally." She turned to go.

"Can't there, though!" murmured Miss Withers as she leaned from her front window and watched them drive away in a long, sleek sedan. "This is murder, if I ever saw it. I'm very much afraid that in spite of all my good resolutions I am going to have to exercise a woman's privilege and change my mind."

But first there was something to get straight with Inspector Oscar Piper. . . .

Downtown in the grim environs of Centre Street, Inspector Piper sat at his battered oak desk in the inner office of the Homicide Bureau. As it was Sunday, only a skeleton staff was on duty, so Miss Withers was able to barge in with a minimum of delay.

"Oscar," she said, "I want you to relieve me of a promise I made you some time ago."

"Oh-oh! You're weakening already, huh?"

"It's not quite like that. I want to meddle in this particular case because

so many people have made it clear that they don't want me to. And especially because a young man appealed to me for help last night and I let him down. It's that swimming-pool murder out at Shoreham, so it won't be in your territory and I won't be in your way."

The wiry little Irishman stood up suddenly. "She says she won't be getting in my way!" he cried. "This I have got to see!"

"Now, Oscar!"

"Don't you now-Oscar me! For your information, I just got word from the Commissioner. Sheriff Vinge, out at Shoreham, feels that he is getting a little over his depth and has requested help from the Department. Guess who is the lucky boy?"

"Oh, dear!" murmured Miss Hildegarde Withers. Then an elfish smile illuminated her long, horsy face. "Hold onto your hat, Oscar. Here we go again. . . ."

In the living room of the Beales' house at Shoreham later that day, Miss Hildegarde Withers was sitting on one of the wicker chairs, her feet firmly planted on a Navajo rug.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Beale, for disturbing you," she began. "But when murder strikes in a little town like this we are all involved until it's settled."

"If murder did have to strike, it was just as well it landed on Huntley Cairns, who is so easily spared," Midge said.

"In my opinion it was only an accident anyhow," Adele cut in. "I'm sure that Midge and I know nothing about it. You're wasting your time, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps I am. I have plenty to waste. I'm quite sure that neither of you had anything to do with the murder. But could we please start at the beginning? Do either of you think that Pat Montague could have murdered Cairns?"

"Nope!" Midge said quickly.

"Yes!" cried his wife. "Because if he didn't, then who did?"

Miss Withers hesitated. "You say that you think Pat did it, and a moment ago you said you thought Cairns died by accident."

"I only meant—"

"Never mind. If it was murder, Pat Montague may be guilty, but not for the reasons I thought last night. That is why, since I was responsible for his being dragged away to jail, I am now trying to get him out." She beamed at them. "Come now, can't either of you suggest somebody else who would want to kill Huntley Cairns? The commander, for instance, or Jed Nicolet?"

Midge laughed. "Sam Bennington might haul out a pistol and blaze away at some poor unlucky guy that Ava had lured into her bedroom, but I can't see him drowning anyone. And Jed Nicolet is a lawyer, and lawyers are too smart to commit murder. Besides, Jed is supposed to have a crush on Lawn, not Helen."

MISS WITHERS digested that.

"I don't know about the rest of you," Adele spoke up suddenly, "but I'm going to have a snort."

Miss Withers declined a pickup with thanks, and rose.

"There's just one question I want to ask, Mrs. Beale," she said. "Of course you don't have to answer, but it might help in clearing Pat Montague and putting an end to this investigation. Who, of all the people involved in the case, do you consider most capable of committing murder?"

"Lawn!" Adele said. "Lawn Abbott."

"But why?"

"Oh, she's sort of poisonous, somehow, and I know she tried to break up Helen and Pat."

"And what did Lawn ever do that was on the wrong side of the ledger?"

Adele shrugged. "Well, when she was in school, some swanky place near Boston, a poor little music teacher with a wife and three children got kicked out of his job for being caught kissing her. And three years ago she was supposed to have run away down South somewhere—nobody ever knew why. Then, two summers ago, a boy at Bar Harbor tried to kill himself because she wouldn't run away with him. Besides, she hasn't any women friends, and she

doesn't want any!"

The schoolteacher nodded. "Perhaps that is why Lawn didn't show up at her sister's housewarming until the last minute. Well, I must be getting along. Thank you both for your help."

Midge Beale walked to the door with Miss Withers.

"If my opinion is worth anything," he said, "you won't get anywhere asking questions of Bennington and the rest of them. You should have seen the fuss Bennington and Nicolet made at the party when they thought I was eavesdropping on them in the library. And all they were doing was having a huddle over Huntley Cairns' taste in literature."

Miss Withers, about to head down the steps toward her taxi, stopped short. "Literature? You mean they were interested in his library?"

"That's right. There was something Nicolet found in a thin red book that he was going to read out loud, only Bennington stopped him because I was there."

"Thank you," Miss Withers said. "It doesn't seem pertinent at the moment, but you never can tell. Good night, Mr. Beale."

She climbed into the taxi. She would have given anything for a talk with Pat Montague in the jail. But Pat would be in no mood to see her, even if she could get by the barriers.

"The hotel, please," requested Miss Withers wearily.

She dined alone, then marched back to her cottage and unlocked the door.

"Merciful heavens!" cried the schoolteacher. "The room is a shambles!"

The place had been hastily but thoroughly searched. Cushions were askew, the tacks along the edge of the carpet were all pulled out, and books had been taken out of their shelves. Even the cover of the aquarium had been removed and replaced so that it did not quite fit.

She picked up the phone and gave crisp and definite instructions to the man at the desk.

"Get me the local police station. I want to talk to Inspector Oscar Piper. I'm going to report that my cottage was broken into this afternoon and turned topsy-turvy."

"Yes, I know," sounded a quiet voice behind her. "I ordered it done."

She whirled, to see the Inspector himself standing in the front doorway.

"Oscar!" she cried. "Do I understand you to say—"

"I sent Sergeant Fischer over," Piper confessed as he sank into her most comfortable chair. "Relax, and I'll tell you about it. You see, Huntley Cairns' wrist-watch was missing. We had to make sure that young Montague hadn't taken it off the body and secreted it here when he knew he was going to be arrested."

"But you didn't find it, did you?"

THE Inspector looked at her with a leprechaunish smile.

"Oh, sure we found it. But not here. They finally got around to draining the swimming pool this afternoon, and it was buried in the mud and stuff at the bottom. Here it is." He showed her the tiny, glittering thing. One link in the flexible platinum band was broken. "It's a clue, anyway."

"The law," said Miss Hildegarde Withers, "puts too much faith in clues and weapons and alibis, and not enough in the imponderables. Now what else did the majesty of the law uncover up at the scene of the crime, if I'm not too inquisitive?"

"It's a funny setup," he admitted. "When I first arrived at the Cairns place I could see that nobody was especially anxious to cooperate. The old man is a phony. The widow is supposed to be crying her eyes out with grief, but if you ask me, she's more scared than sorrowful. The kid sister doesn't care a whoop for anybody, and the servants retreat into, 'Ah sho'ly don' know nuffin.' "

"Defense mechanism," the schoolteacher put in. "Didn't you stumble on anything unusual?"

He scowled. "We went all through the place, particularly Cairns' desk in

the library, but we didn't find much except receipted bills. The only queer thing was that in Helen Cairns' closet she kept a week-end case packed and ready. But she explained that she had packed it six months ago, after she had an argument with her husband about plans for the new house, and she had never unpacked. Nothing else incriminating around the place."

"There wouldn't be," said the schoolteacher. "This is an odd sort of murder, Oscar, and I can't help feeling that either the wrong person was murdered, or it was at the wrong time, or—or something!"

He looked at her. "Well, Hildegarde, I'll go this far. Nobody planned this murder ahead of time because nobody could know that Huntley Cairns would be so excited about his new swimming pool that he would leave his guests and rush out for a quick dip. This murder was done on the spur of the moment."

IV

NEXT morning Miss Hildegarde Withers arose early and set about removing from her little cottage all traces of the police search. This accomplished, she sat down with a pot of coffee and a plate of molasses cookies to study the morning papers.

The local sheet, unfortunately, had almost nothing at all. "Tragic Accident Mars Cairns Party" was the head. The news story gave the impression that the police investigation into Huntley Cairns' death was a mere formality and that a verdict of accidental death would most certainly result from the coroner's inquest, scheduled for today.

As for the Manhattan dailies, it was immediately clear that they hadn't been able to get much out of the Inspector, though most of them went as far as they dared in hinting at the triangle between Pat Montague, Huntley Cairns, and Helen. They intimated that, while Montague was held only on charges of suspicion of homicide, it would probably be merely a matter of hours before he would be booked and held for the grand jury on the charge of first-degree murder.

Montague had her to thank for that. She gathered herself together, clamped upon her head a hat which somewhat resembled a frigate under full sail, and took off. Ten minutes later her taxicab deposited her at the gateway of the Cairns house.

A short time later Inspector Oscar Piper was likewise deposited at the gateway by a police sedan. Officer Lunney, at the door, nodded meaningly.

"How many?" the Inspector asked.

The officer held up one stubby forefinger. The Inspector went on into the house. He tiptoed across the broadloom carpet, slid through the library doors, and stopped stock-still.

"Judas Priest in a bathtub!" he roared. "Don't you ever stay home?"

Miss Hildegarde Withers, who had been carefully studying a row of books, straightened up with a small squeak of alarm.

"Oscar! What in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm here because everybody thought I'd be at the inquest, and I had a sort of trap baited, with that fool of a Lunney half-asleep out front and the rear door open and unguarded, hoping somebody—" He stopped, shaking his head angrily. "You'd better tell me why you're housebreaking."

"I was just looking around," Miss Withers said.

"So I see." The Inspector nodded toward the strewn papers around the big library desk.

"I hope, Oscar, that you don't think I'm responsible for that!"

"But you're responsible for scaring away whoever *was* searching this room!"

"Then," retorted Miss Withers triumphantly, "Pat Montague is cleared. Because if he's in jail he couldn't have sneaked in here—"

"I didn't say it was him. He could have sent somebody."

"Why? He was never inside the house, so he couldn't have left his cuff buttons or anything behind. Besides,

the only friends he has are Helen and Lawn, and they wouldn't need to sneak in to do any searching."

"I still say it's a simple triangle," the Inspector insisted. "Two men who wanted the same woman. It's A B C."

Miss Withers shook her head so hard that the frigate almost let loose a spinnaker.

"No, no, Oscar! It isn't a triangle. It's much more complicated, and it would be much simpler if I could find that book young Beale says Commander Bennington and Nicolet were so excited about. However, I've peeked into every book with a red jacket in this library, and I don't see anything for anyone to get steamed up over. Look for yourself."

Inspector Piper obediently took up the volumes one by one, and ruffled the pages. "Nothing here," he agreed, finally. "Well, Hildegarde, is there anything else you'd like to look for before we get out of here?"

The sarcasm went over her head. "There is," said Hildegarde Withers. "I'd like to look for the murderer, or whoever it was that was here. Because he's probably lurking somewhere in the house, waiting for a chance to continue his job of ransacking the place."

"Okay," the Inspector said. "Let's go." And he searched the Cairns house again from top to bottom, Miss Withers tagging along, but nowhere did they discover any other human being, or, indeed, any sign of a book with a red jacket.

"So that's that," said the Inspector, as they came out of the last of the bedrooms.

"We've settled one thing, at least," the schoolteacher announced. "Adele Beale was right. From none of these windows, not even Helen's, is the swimming pool visible."

THE INSPECTOR said he already knew that. None of the guests at the party could have known that Huntley Cairns was alone at the pool. They went downstairs again, where the Inspector said:

"I want to get back down to the inquest before it's over. I'll give you a ride home—and will you please stay there and keep from throwing monkey wrenches?"

Miss Withers pulled away, heading back toward the library. "Just a minute, Oscar. I have an idea—a wonderful idea. It'll take only a minute."

Grumbling, he followed her. "What's this, a retake?"

"Listen, Oscar. It was late in the afternoon when Mr. Beale and the others were in here."

"Suppose it was?"

"It must have been quite dark, so the lights would have been on, wouldn't they?"

"Suppose they were?"

She pulled the Venetian blinds, drew down the shades, and turned on all the lights.

"Now!" cried Miss Withers. "Don't you see, Oscar? Artificial light brings out colors that aren't there by daylight. A book jacket that looked yellow-orange by day could look red at night. We will have to look carefully . . . There! I see one now!"

She pounced upon a thin volume on one of the middle shelves and then stopped, her eyes clouded with disappointment. The reddish-orange jacket bore the title "Oriental Moments" and a drawing of a well-proportioned Chinese dancing girl without any clothes on, but the book inside turned out to be something else entirely. It was "Fitz on Contract—300 Hands Analyzed."

"And if that's a clue," remarked the Inspector unpleasantly, "then I'm a monkey's uncle. Unless you think that somebody drowned Huntley Cairns because he led from a king or left his partner in a secondary suit."

Miss Hildegarde Withers stared at the treatise on contract bridge then slowly replaced the book on the shelf.

"Perhaps I'm wrong," she admitted. She was meek as she followed the Inspector toward the front door, but far back in a corner of her mind an idea was beginning to take shape.

Miss Withers was just being aided

into the police sedan by the Inspector when a taxi pulled up and deposited Lawn Abbott. She stopped short, staring, then came forward, looking stranger and paler than ever.

"Just exactly what is going on here?" she demanded bluntly.

"Er—you see—" began Miss Withers.

"I get it!" Lawn said. "Miss Withers, you're being arrested, aren't you?" She whirled on the Inspector. "What's it for? I demand to know!"

He stared at her, straight-faced. "Now if you're really demanding you may as well know that this lady's been laying herself open to a charge of breaking and entering."

"Is that it?" Lawn Abbott drew herself up. "Then let me tell you something, Mister Policeman. Miss Withers had every right to be in the house!"

"Just why?" asked the Inspector gravely.

"Because I asked her! Only yesterday morning I called her into the case because I could see what a botch the police were making of it. Now let's see you arrest her and make it stick!"

The Inspector, containing himself with difficulty, bowed.

"Under the circumstances I haven't any choice," he admitted. "Miss Withers, you have been sprung, and how!"

"I certainly have, haven't I?" murmured the schoolteacher.

Lawn grasped her hand. "Please come on back in. I want to talk to you."

"I think maybe I'll come, too," suggested Inspector Piper wickedly.

"You'll come with a search warrant tucked in your hot little hand, and not without it!" Lawn drew Miss Withers toward the front door.

SHE LED the way into the living room and threw herself down on a big divan.

"I suppose," she said, "you think I'm an odd person. Maybe I am. Maybe you're a bit odd too. I guess I shouldn't have rushed out of your place yesterday— had no business to have hurt feelings. But please tell me what's going on and what's going to happen. I left the inquest early when I saw that the verdict was going to be 'death at the hands of person or persons unknown,' but Helen and Father will be along shortly. We haven't much time."

"It is later than you think," the schoolteacher agreed. "They used to inscribe that on sun dials, so it must be true."

"I'm truly sorry I blew up yesterday," Lawn repeated. "I guess I'm just the moody type. But I'd just had a scene with Helen and Father. Never mind that. I hear that you are doing your level best to get Pat out of jail, and I want to know how I can help. By the way, if it's a question of money—"

"Dear me, no," Miss Withers assured her. "Snooping is for me a labor of love. As for the progress I'm making, all I can say is that I've tripped over a number of threads. I don't know just where they lead, except that they do not lead toward Pat Montague. One of them, by the way, has to do with a book in a red jacket, a book that seems to have mysteriously disappeared from the library and which somebody must have been searching for at the time I dropped in."

Miss Withers was watching Lawn's face closely, but the girl only looked blank.

"Who'd want to take one of the books?" she said. "Neither Huntley nor Helen were readers, and the whole library was bought in bulk, just to fill up the shelves. So there couldn't be anything of the slightest value."

"I doubt," observed Miss Hildegarde Withers, "if this murder was committed for money. Nobody benefits financially but your sister, and she had everything already."

The girl smiled wryly. "Everything," she agreed, "except Pat Montague."

"In your opinion, would Helen have run away with Pat Montague if he'd asked her to?"

Lawn thought about that. "She's too conventional. Besides, Pat wouldn't have asked her to—not after he'd actually seen for himself that she was married to somebody else. Pat's the soul

of honor."

"Too honorable to hold a successful rival under water until he drowned, at any rate?" Miss Withers nodded. "What was the final autopsy report?"

"The autopsy surgeon backed up everything that Harry Radebaugh had diagnosed Saturday night. Huntley died from something called 'syncope,' which means he strangled all at once, from shock."

"Did you testify?"

"Just about the snag at the bottom of the pool. I don't know how much stock they put in what I said. I tried to point out some other things to them, but they cut me off short. I guess they thought I was just trying to protect my sister and her guilty lover, which is a laugh. The whole police theory is ridiculous. Come on, I'll prove it to you."

Lawn leaped suddenly to her feet and drew Miss Withers out through the rear of the house and down the path which led around the bathhouse. Before them lay the big concrete-lined hole in the ground which had once been the swimming pool, with only a few puddles of murky water at the bottom.

"It was here that they found him," Lawn said, pointing toward a corner at the deep end.

Miss Withers could see the exit of the drainpipe, and fancied she could make out the jagged bit of metal which had caught and held the body of Huntley Cairns.

"Dear, dear!" she said.

"Now look, Miss Withers," Lawn said abruptly. "Do you know how long a garden rake is?"

"When I was a girl," the schoolteacher said, "there used to be a riddle about how long is a piece of string, but I forget the answer."

"This is no riddle. Because garden rakes are all approximately the same length. Wait a minute."

The girl disappeared around the corner of the building and in a moment was back with an ordinary rake. She held it erect on the tiles so that the teeth came almost but not quite to her forehead.

"You see? They don't make rakes any longer than this. And yet Pat is supposed to have murdered Huntley by holding him under with a rake, like this."

LAWN took the tool to the edge of the swimming pool, reached down with it as far as she could.

"You see? The pool was just ten feet deep here, and the rake handle is barely five. If you allow a couple of feet for the width of the body, then the murderer must still have reached down a good three feet into the water in order to hook Huntley's shorts onto that projecting bit of metal."

The schoolteacher inclined her head gravely. "Your mathematics seem correct," she admitted.

"Well, then! Pat's sleeves were wet a little at the wrist only, when I let him out of that dressing room Saturday night."

"And how about Searles' sleeves?"

"I didn't see him. But it wouldn't matter, even if he was dripping to the shoulder, because he did most of the work hauling the body out, remember. He must have had to reach down as far as he could to hook the rake—" She stopped, biting her lip. "What a grisly business this is!"

Miss Withers was inclined to agree with her. They headed back for the house by way of the tool shed so Lawn could replace the rake. The flagged path led them almost to the kitchen door, and then the schoolteacher stopped short, pointing a lean finger.

"What's that?"

Lawn hesitated. "It looks like Helen's white bathing suit. I guess Beulah hung it out."

"A little odd, isn't it? I mean, the pool has been dry since yesterday morning, so she can't have been swimming." The schoolteacher looked at the brief lastex garment and noticed that the laces had been tied tight and then torn instead of being untied.

"Helen never takes any care of her things," Lawn informed her.

They came into the kitchen, where

the colored girl was cleaning up.

"Yassum," she said in reply to Miss Withers' question. "I hanged out Mis' Cairns' suit. It sho' woulda mildewed fast, tucked down into her laundry bag all wet like she left it."

"When," asked Miss Withers softly, turning to Lawn, "was the last time your sister wore that suit that you know of?"

Lawn shrugged. "I don't know. She may have tried the pool out Friday, the day before the party. They'd filled it then."

"I see. I thought for a moment—" Miss Withers shook her head. "I wonder how long it would take a man to remove his coat and shirt and then whisk them on again after he had done —well, whatever it was."

Lawn's eyes narrowed. "Still aiming at Pat? A man, I know, has lots of buttons on his shirt, and then there's a necktie and all that. But—but a woman! It would be easy enough for a woman, because women usually wear loose sleeves that could roll to the shoulder in a jiffy."

"You mean, darling, sleeves like the ones on the dress I wore at the party?"

They both looked up with a start to see Helen, a symphony in black, standing in the door of the dining room. Behind her was Thurlow Abbott.

The two young women faced each other, and for a moment Miss Withers could see a resemblance between them, which flickered and was gone.

"Why, yes," Lawn said slowly. "Helen, I want to talk to you."

"It wouldn't be any use," Helen said. "You see, I know what you're up to. You've failed to pin this mess onto Pat, and so you've decided on me."

There was a long silence. "You're so beautiful," Lawn told her. "And so good. It's a shame that you couldn't have been just a little brighter!" The girl turned toward Miss Withers. "Please excuse me. It's getting very, very stuffy in here. I'm going to change my clothes, then go down to Mame Boad's stable. That's where I keep my horse, you know." She ran out of the room.

"My daughter Lawn," said Thurlow Abbott in his croaking voice, "gets more difficult every day. By the way, Miss Withers, may I ask just what it was you wanted?"

"To find out how and why your son-in-law was murdered, and who did it!"

"But it wasn't murder!" Helen cut in. "Didn't you know? The police are being awfully slow and stupid about it all, but I thought you would see. When they drained the pool yesterday they found Huntley's wrist watch at the bottom. He must have missed it when he was dressing after his swim and rushed out just as he was. In trying to reach it, he fell in and was drowned."

"Huntley was, I'm afraid, a very weak swimmer," Thurlow Abbott chimed in.

"And that watch was his pride and joy," Helen added. "He'd have gone almost out of his mind if he'd looked at his wrist and seen that it was missing."

"Was he so proud of it," Miss Withers probed gently, "that he'd have gone swimming without noticing that he'd left it on?"

Helen thought he might. "You see, except in the tub, he never took it off, not even when he slept. It was waterproof and shockproof and everything-proof."

V

THE schoolteacher stilled an impulse to ask if the watch had been equipped with an outboard motor too—so that it could travel from the shallow end of the pool, where a poor swimmer like Cairns would presumably have been disporting himself, down to the deep end, fifty feet or more away. But for the moment that could wait.

"There is just one other thing I must ask you now," she said. "Whatever became of the book—the book with the red jacket. 'Oriental Moments' was the title, I believe."

She had great hopes of that shot in the dark, but it fizzled out. Either Helen and her father had never heard

of the book, or else they were far better dissemblers than she had given them credit for being. She shrugged.

"Well, perhaps it will turn up when we least expect it. Like your white bathing suit."

Helen froze. "My what?"

"Your white bathing suit that your maid found in your laundry bag in grave danger of mildew."

"I don't understand." Helen was frowning. "I used the suit Friday, but I'm sure I left it in the dressing room."

"Did you really? Well, thank you very much, anyway. I'm on my way down to the jail now, in hopes of seeing the proper authorities and getting young Montague released. He couldn't have drowned your husband, Mrs. Cairns. The rake wasn't long enough. Would you have any message for Pat, in case I get in to see him?"

Helen looked quickly at her father. "Why, no." But she walked with Miss Withers through the house, almost to the front door. Making sure that they were alone, she produced a thin packet of letters tied neatly with red string. "Just give these back to him, will you, before the police find them." Helen turned and went back toward the stairs, half running, and with a handkerchief pressed to her mouth.

Miss Withers stood stock-still, looking after her. Then she saw Thurlow Abbott coming toward her, his face strained and drawn.

"I hope you'll take anything Lawn says with a grain of salt," he said. "And I hope you'll make allowances for Helen. She is the sentimental feminine type. Not at all like Lawn."

Miss Withers could agree with him there, at any rate. "Your daughters do seem rather unlike, for sisters."

"Half sisters," he confessed in his sepulchral voice, and came a little closer. "You see, Miss Withers, Helen's mother was a choir singer, a very sweet and gentle person. After her tragic death in a motor car accident on Long Island I traveled for a few seasons, and there in vaude—I mean, in concert—I fell in with a very fascinating woman. The Princess Zoraida, Egyptian mystic, she called herself. Her powers were, to tell the truth, unusual. She was Lawn's mother."

"Really! And she abandoned you with the babe in your arms? It sounds a little like 'Way Down East' in reverse."

"It was on Pan-time, in Seattle," Abbott corrected her. "Of course the Princess and I had gone through a ceremony, but I had reason after she walked out on me to think that she already had a husband or two scattered throughout the theatrical profession."

"How very unfortunate. It cannot be easy for a man to try to bring up two children."

He bowed. "I had hoped, of course, that they would carry on the Abbott name in the theater, but it was not to be. Helen has the beauty but not the temperament. And Lawn—I'm afraid that the consciousness of her dark heritage has embittered her. She has never felt that she belonged." Thurlow Abbott sighed heavily. "You understand, of course."

"I think I'm beginning to," admitted Miss Withers, and took her departure.

Back in town, Miss Withers visited the local bookstore. A clerk approached her, and she asked for a copy of "Oriental Moments." The young man gave it as his opinion that she wouldn't be able to buy a copy in Shoreham.

"It came out last year, I believe, but there wasn't much call for it," he told her. "It's probably out of print now, but we could try ordering it for you. Or there might be a copy in our rental library if it isn't out."

There was, and it wasn't. A moment later, at the price of library membership and upon her promise to pay three cents a day for its use, Miss Hildegarde Withers came into temporary possession of "Oriental Moments," red jacket and all.

THE schoolteacher went out into the street with her nose buried in the volume, expecting the worst because of the provocative Chinese damsel depicted undressed on the cover. But the

book turned out to be a series of notes and impressions of life in Chungking by a State Department employee stranded there during the time it was the temporary wartime capital. What it could possibly have to do with the murder of Huntley Cairns, or anything else, Miss Withers was at the moment unable to tell.

Crossing the street, she was about to enter the Shoreham police station when she heard a shrill whistle behind her and turned to face Lawn Abbott. The girl was wearing, in addition to jodhpurs, a worried expression.

"Wait, oh, please wait," Lawn cried, "before you go in! It's very important."

Miss Withers smiled and nodded. "Important to whom?"

"To—to Pat. Listen, Miss Withers, did my sister give you some old letters to return to him? If so, you mustn't."

"And why not, child?"

"Read them," Lawn said bitterly. "I have. I suppose you wouldn't consider it strictly honorable, but I found them in an old cook book, where she had them cached. Those letters were mostly written to Helen after she was married. Pat was overseas and very bitter. He said a lot of things about Huntley and what he'd like to do to him, things that the police could twist—"

"But your sister didn't say anything about my giving them to the police!"

"She thought perhaps you would, though. Or maybe she asked you to slip them to Pat in jail, where ten to one they'd be discovered and taken away from him. I have my own ideas about why Helen did it. It couldn't be that she was just trying to get rid of the letters or she could have burned them."

"At any rate," Miss Withers decided firmly, "the letters can stay right where they are for the time being." She patted her capacious pocketbook firmly. "At the moment I'm much more interested in something else. Have you ever seen this book before?"

Lawn stared blankly at "Oriental Moments." Then she shook her head. "But why—"

"I don't quite know why," Miss Withers began, and broke off as the door beside them opened and Jed Nicolet came out, hurrying a little. He recognized Lawn, and his sharp, vulpine face brightened.

"Hello-ello!" he said. "What's up? Are you two hunting together now?"

"I was about to make an effort to see the prisoner," Miss Withers admitted. "How is he taking it?"

The lawyer shrugged. "How should I know?"

"But I thought an attorney could always get in to see his client."

"He can, according to the law, if he has a client. Only it seems that our friend Pat has decided that he doesn't want a lawyer, and if he does have a lawyer he doesn't want me." Nicolet started to laugh a little nervously. Then he stopped laughing and choked.

"What's the matter?" Lawn demanded.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Nicolet said. "See you later," he called over his shoulder, and went hurrying down to the sidewalk.

"Whatever in the world!" gasped Miss Withers.

"Jed isn't himself at all," Lawn murmured softly. "Do you suppose . . . He seemed to be staring at that book in your hand."

"I noticed that, too."

"But why should he turn white and run off as if somebody were after him?"

"It is just remotely possible," observed the schoolteacher, "that somebody is!"

Lawn thought about that remark for a long moment. "I think I see what you mean," the girl said. "That would change everything, wouldn't it? I mean, if the triangle idea was all wrong and the police had to start looking . . . Well, I'd better be getting home before my sister gets more furious at me than she is already. Good night, and good luck."

Miss Withers stared after her. Somehow, she decided, this did not seem an opportune time to return a packet of love letters to their author, or even to

talk with Pat Montague in what was apparently his present frame of mind. . . .

BACK at home, the schoolteacher went directly to her aquarium, as a clairvoyant to her crystal ball. Through pale jade water the jeweled fish still moved in their pathless ways. All except one of the rosy tetras, which now floated belly-up against the farther side of the tank, behind the thermostat. As the schoolteacher retrieved the tiny corpse with the aid of a dip net, she saw that the tail fin had been bitten away.

Down in the lower corner of the tank the female *betta* followed her mate as always, goggle eyes admiring his peacock perfection. In the jade distance behind the pile of rocks the two angelfish floated serenely, their long antennae sweeping back, their mouths moving in what seemed to be a silent whisper. One of them, however, had a slight list to starboard.

"I'd like to be a mermaid for about five minutes," Miss Withers said grimly. "I'd get to the bottom of this business."

But since that metamorphosis seemed out of the question, the schoolma'am sat down and tried to find out something closer to the realms of possibility.

"I'm a fine one," she told herself, "to attempt the unraveling of a murder mystery when I can't even fathom this epidemic of cannibalism in my own aquarium."

Somehow, in spite of all reason, a strange sort of parallel was taking shape—between the midget murders among her tropical fish and the greater problem which had disrupted the placid little town of Shoreham. She had a completely unreasonable feeling that if she solved one she would solve the other too.

Which reminded her that she was rather behind on her reading. "Oriental Moments" came first, and it was not until she was well into the fifth chapter that she found anything which could possibly have any bearing on the matter at hand. She put the little book back into her handbag with a nod of satisfaction.

Then she took up the packet of letters written to Helen by Pat Montague and untied the string.

"I do hope," she said to herself, "that I am doing this out of pure scientific necessity, and not just being a meddlesome old maid."

They were strange, bitter letters, saying much but leaving more unsaid. Huntley Cairns was mentioned only once, and that when Pat wrote that early that morning he had mowed down three German engineers with a BAR, and that it had helped him to kill them to think that they were Cairns, each of them.

"Oh, dear!" murmured Miss Withers. "What Oscar Piper—and the sheriff—could make of that!"

She tied up the letters carefully and put them back into her handbag, looked up an address in the classified section of the telephone book and then put on a hat, took up her umbrella, and set forth into the thick, muggy afternoon.

She walked halfway across the town and turned into a doorway which bore a sign, "Small Pet Hospital," and beneath that, "D. M. Harvey, Veterinary Surgeon."

Dr. Harvey's eyebrows went up a notch when she told him what had brought her here.

"Well, aren't tropical fish small pets?" she demanded.

The vet laughed. "I guess you got me there, all right. But I'm sorry to say that I haven't had much practice with fish, except for a few trout that I manage to kill when I get away over to Jersey. However, I've got a lot of reference books. Some of them might help us. Wait a minute."

Dr. Harvey left her and returned after a few minutes with a heavy tome.

"There seems to be one chapter in Malden and Larrier that applies. Let's see—here we are. 'Fungus Diseases in the Small Aquarium. Parasites, Microscopic and Larger. Hazards of the Community Tank.' " His thick, chemical-stained finger marked a page.

Miss Withers read:

Not all tropical fish can be successfully kept in a community tank, for it must be remembered that all fish are naturally cannibalistic. In most cases, however, the whole problem can be resolved to a matter of size, as fish do not ordinarily prey upon other fish, of whatever species, who are of approximately half their own bulk or more. However, even among the same species, fish will without hesitation eat or attempt to eat any other fish of less than half their size, even in most cases including their own young. Most tropical fish remain in their desired miniature size in an aquarium, one exception to this being the *scalare* or angelfish, which grow even under those conditions, and which should be removed from the tank as soon as they reach the size of a half dollar.

SHE SNIFFED. "That doesn't apply —my angelfish are only the size of quarters." She read on:

Two male *bettas*, or Siamese fighting fish, will of course battle to the death if kept in the same tank, and the female *betta* has an unsavory reputation for attacking other females. Likewise the red-bellied dace and the black-banded miniature sunfish have been known to transgress. It must further be remembered that any tropical fish other than the scavengers or soft-mouthed varieties may become a killer in a community tank, and having once acquired the habit will continue until caught and eliminated. Only trial and error will assist the fish fancier in this matter.

She closed the book.

"It seems to boil down to this—that all fish, like mankind, were murderers in the wild state and have a tendency to revert." Miss Withers consulted the gold watch which was pinned to her bosom. "Dear me, I had no idea that I had stayed so long. Forgive me, Doctor. I know you must have more important problems than mine."

He accepted a two-dollar fee with modest reluctance. "Oh, we're not so busy now," said Dr. Harvey pleasantly, "as we were when we had the dog-poisoning epidemic here. We lost forty-six dogs here in Shoreham, a pretty good percentage of the canine population."

"As many as that? I suppose, Doctor, that you performed autopsies on the poisoned animals? What was it—the usual strychnine?"

He shook his head. "Arsenic, at first. then carbon tetrachloride and pyridine. And finally, three or four of the dogs that I examined showed no traces of poison at all. The cause of death was really peritonitis—simple perforation of the peritoneum."

"By a sliver of bamboo?"

"Now how did you find that out?" he demanded. "Either somebody has been talking that had no business to talk, or else—"

"Oh, I get around," Miss Withers told him, and hastily got out of the place.

The particular avenue which opened up in front of her might be, she realized all too well, only a blind alley. But it was one of the smoothest, straightest alleys, and downhill all the way.

"Now's the time," she said to herself, "to send a monkey to pull the chestnuts out of the fire."

Or was it a cat that burned its paws in the fabled operation? She had never got it quite straight. At any rate, she needed help in baiting a certain little trap that she had worked out in her mind. . . .

The phone rang three times and then was answered by "Miz Cyains' res'dence," spoken in a chocolate-syrupy voice. There was a brief pause, then a giggle, and Lawn Abbott dropped into her own voice.

"Speaking," she said. "Oh, don't mind me, Miss Withers—I was only clowning. What's up? Did you get into —I mean, did you see him?"

"I—er—thought it better not to try. There's something I'd like you to do for me though. Are you . . . I mean, can you speak freely?"

Lawn's answer came promptly. "Free as the breeze. Helen is in her room taking a beauty sleep, and Father has retired with a bottle and a book of his old press clippings. What is it? Do you want me to come into town? Because if you do, I can catch a ride in with Searles." Then the girl listened for a while. Finally she said, "Yes, but I don't get it."

"Just call all of them," came the schoolteacher's clipped Bostonian accents. "The Benningtons, Dr. Rade-

baugh, and Jed Nicolet. You know all those people well."

Lawn's voice was excited. "Of course," she said. "It takes a lot of crust, but I'll do it. If you think it will help Pat."

Miss Withers sounded pleased. "And may I suggest that you do the telephoning where you can be sure of privacy?"

"That will be easy," Lawn promised. "Dad and Helen are avoiding me as if I had leprosy anyway. I'll report my results later, okay?"

Miss Hildegarde Withers waited beside the telephone. Having dropped a stone into the pool, she sat still and let the ripples spread out to engulf her destined victim. Or was it victims?

To pass the time she picked up a magazine which contained a fascinating treatise on the genetics of tropical fish, particularly of two varieties whose normal habitat was the jungles, the *tierra caliente* of southern Mexico. The article made clear how easy it would be to develop wagtails, albinos, comet platys, and something known as the black-bottomed wagtail platy, all from the crossbreeding of the wild swordtail and the platyfish.

She put down the magazine and wondered if the murder instinct could be bred out of mankind. When highly developed tropical fish mated at random the offspring reverted to the original types. Yet of course all humans mated at random, or at least according to the dictates of happenstance.

Helen Abbott, lonely and confused and unwilling to wait for a sweetheart in uniform, drifting into matrimony with the first man who asked her. Her father, a widower, marrying the Princess Zoraida.

Yes, Miss Withers thought, the impulse to murder must be a recessive trait in all human beings. Why was it, then, dominant in a few? Of course Bertillon and Lombroso had believed that murderers differed in appearance from other people, but the schoolteacher knew to her sorrow that this was not true. There was no sign, like the overlong tail fin of the swordtail cropping up in a litter of comet platys, to mark the throwback.

VI

GETTING up, the schoolteacher made herself a lettuce sandwich and drank a glass of milk, still carefully keeping her eyes from the telephone, on the old theory about the watched pot. But the telephone didn't even ring once.

"This is silly," decided Miss Withers, finally. She went over to the phone, gave the Cairns number to the operator at the desk, and waited.

Lawn Abbott answered immediately in her natural voice. "Oh," she said. "Well, I didn't call you back because it was no dice. I called them all, over and over again."

"You mean they won't come?"

"Nope. Nobody home anywhere."

"I see." Miss Withers' plans swiftly rearranged themselves. "It would appear that the group is holding its own convocation. I shall still try to crash the party."

"But how can you?" Lawn cried. "You don't know where to go."

"They will be at somebody's house," the schoolteacher told her. "I shall simply climb into a taxicab and go exploring. Anyway, thank you for your help. Let's hope that tonight will see the end of all this trouble. . . .

According to the Shoreham *Standard:*

> Among the most gala social events of the summer season are the justly famous evenings around the barbecue pit at the delightfully informal home of Commander and Mrs. Sam Bennington, and invitations thereto are much sought after.

On this particlar evening, however, only five people were gathered together around the charcoal grill at the foot of the garden. There was no tinkle of ice in the tall julep glasses, no rich, sizzling scent of charcoal-broiled beefsteaks. Nothing was being served by Ava Bennington this evening except worry.

The schoolteacher thrashed through

the last of the rosebushes and came out on the stone flagging.

"I'll skip all explanations and apologies," she said. "We may as well come to the point at once. If you good people are having a meeting to decide which of you murdered Huntley Cairns, I'd like to get in on it."

There was a long, ominous silence. It was Commander Bennington, true to Navy traditions, who recovered himself first.

"My good woman," he began, "you appear to be under the impression—"

"I am," Miss Withers assured him. "Very much under the impression. And before we go any farther, or before you have me thrown out of this conclave, let me say that I have a pretty fair idea of everything that has been going on, with the exception of the detail of who actually murdered Huntley Cairns. I know why you accepted invitations to the Cairns' housewarming and why two of you were huddling in the library shortly before he died. You were looking through his books for some clue as to his tastes and inclinations, all of which mystified Mr. Midge Beale very much at the time. I found all this out by roundabout methods."

"The book," Jed Nicolet remarked. " 'Oriental Moments.' "

"Exactly." Miss Withers removed the rental library volume from her handbag and opened it to the place she had marked. "I read from Chapter Five, page sixty-two," she said. "Quote: 'It was at this dinner party at General Choy's that Manya Werenska made her classic suggestion for dealing with the Japanese in case they ever actually occupied the city. All the officers, she insisted, should be invited to lunch and then fed meat balls filled with sharp splinters of bamboo rolled up tightly and bound with some animal fiber such as bacon rind. It was a method of poisoning wolves in the Pekin hills, dating back into antiquity. When the digestive juices acted on the fiber, the bamboo splinter would open up and—' "

"That's enough!" cried Ava Bennington.

"It would seem to be plenty," Miss Withers agreed. "There is no need to go into the grisly details. For your further information, I was, until last fall, a dog owner myself. My wirehaired, Dempsey, died—but he died of old age."

THE circle suddenly closed more tightly about her.

"Can you understand," Dr. Radebaugh asked quietly, "how a man feels who brings up an English setter from puppyhood so that it's his best friend and only immediate family, and then watches it die in convulsions?"

"Your dog came home to die," Jed Nicolet said softly. "Wotan lay in the gutter all night where a hit-run driver left him."

"You refer, I presume, to the late Huntley Cairns?" Miss Withers pressed.

"He ran down my dog," Nicolet reiterated. "I proved there were black dog hairs on his front bumper and even started suit. But he settled out of court, and for plenty."

"No doubt that made you all focus your suspicions on Cairns," Miss Withers pointed out. "But isn't there quite a difference between running over a dog in the dark and setting out to poison all the dogs in a township?"

Bennington shook his head. "Don't forget that the book was in Cairns' library. Jed Nicolet took it away with him, and he'll bear witness that there were dirty smudges on that particular page, too. My wife's poodles were saved the first time, when we pumped the arsenic out of them, but two weeks later somebody shoved some meat through a slit in the top of the car door, and that was the end of them. Peritonitis works fast, and Dr. Harvey found a sliver of bamboo in each dog."

"Bamboo—at least an American cane that has the same properties—grows as far north as this," Dr. Radebaugh pointed out. "There's a clump of it on Cairns' property."

Miss Withers nodded. "So you all brought in a mental verdict against Huntley Cairns! For that matter, none

of you remembered that other people in the Cairns house could have read that book, including the gardener. And now," she went on, "you are all gathered here because you believe that one of you took the law into his own hands last Saturday—after the discovery of this book in Cairns' library—and drowned him then and there in his own swimming pool." She cocked her head. "True or false?"

Nobody needed to answer.

"Which explains," went on Miss Withers, "Mr. Nicolet's effort to help Pat Montague, the innocent bystander. You are all reasonably nice people, and you wouldn't like to have an innocent man suffer for the crime you are sure one of you committed." She paused for a dramatic moment. "The sad part of it all, however, is this. If any one of you did murder Huntley Cairns, you got the wrong man!"

They stared at her, but nobody spoke.

"Cairns was a dapper, fastidious man," Miss Withers resumed. "Why should he have left smudges in the book? Isn't it more likely that someone else with access to the house picked up that volume, then stumbled on the handy, vicious method of killing animals? As a matter of fact, the same person searched the Cairns house this morning for that book, hoping to destroy it, but of course Mr. Nicolet had carried it away the other evening for evidence."

Jed Nicolet shrugged. "Suppose I did! Why are you telling us all this?"

"Simply because I think that you know, or suspect, which one of you murdered Huntley Cairns. Up to now you have kept quiet out of a mistaken loyalty, in the belief that the murder was justified. I'm telling you that it was not—that somebody else poisoned the dogs of this town—and I have a very good idea who it was!"

"Such as?" demanded Ava Bennington breathlessly.

"I'm not mentioning any names. Observe the motive—and consider who it is in all the world that has a perpetual grievance against the whole race of dogs."

"Someone who raises cats, of course!" said Ava Bennington.

"Maybe someone who was bitten by a dog in early childhood and grew up with an abnormal phobia," suggested Dr. Radebaugh.

Miss Withers shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps. But in that list you should include a landscape gardener whose days are spent in one never-ending feud with the whole canine tribe! Class dismissed. . . ."

FOR once the officer at the police station desk seemed glad to see her.

"Oh, Miss Withers! The Inspector's been trying to phone you. We called your hotel, but you weren't there."

"Well, I'm here now," she said.

There was some delay in locating the Inspector, but finally he came down the hall.

"Well, look who's here!" he greeted her.

"I understand that you telephoned me, Oscar."

"Sure. Didn't I promise that you'd be the first to know?"

She peered at him. "Oscar Piper, what are you talking about?"

"Montague's confession, of course."

"His confession of *what?*"

"Everything. The works."

The world was spinning around her. "With a promise of clemency I suppose?"

"That's up to Loomis, the Knight's County district attorney. He's here now, and he says he won't ask the death penalty anyway, as there's no premeditation that can be proved."

Miss Withers looked displeased. "Sometimes I think that we're slipping back into the dark ages of the eighteenth century, when all the police ever tried to do in solving a murder was to torture a confession out of somebody."

"Relax, Hildegarde. There wasn't any of the rubber-hose-in-the-back-room stuff used on Montague."

"Just a two-hundred-watt bulb right in his eyes, and everybody taking turns yelling at him. Oscar, I don't know what to say. This changes everything."

The Inspector looked surprised. "But I thought you knew it and that you'd rushed down here to congratulate me! It was all announced on the radio around eight o'clock—a little prematurely, but Sheriff Vinge likes to stand in well with the press and the radio newscasters, so he handed it out."

"What I actually came down here for, Oscar, was to ask you to rearrest Joe Searles."

"The Cairns' gardener?" Piper thought that was funny. "When did you get that bee in your bonnet?"

"Never mind. I've been thinking things over, that's all. If you won't arrest Searles, won't you at least assign a detective to watch him?"

"Relax, Hildegarde! We've got a confession."

"And you think it will hold up?"

He hesitated only a moment. "Honestly, Hildegarde, I don't see why not. The district attorney is in there with Sheriff Vinge now, and we're going to give Montague a lie-detector test based on his confession."

"And is the prisoner willing to do that?"

"He's willing to do anything and everything. I never saw a man bust up into so many pieces under a load of guilt. Take it easy, Hildegarde, and don't talk yourself into thinking that this is necessarily one of those twisted, complex cases. Remember that Pat Montague had a motive to kill Huntley Cairns, and so far nobody else did. Not even your friend the gardener. Now, I've got to run along. We've got to work out a list of questions to throw at Pat Montague when he's hooked up to the lie detector."

"Then ask him one for me," suggested the schoolteacher tartly. "Ask him if he thinks a gentleman is in honor bound to confess himself right into the electric chair for the sake of a lady he used to be in love with!"

She stalked out of the place, slamming the screen door behind her, and was morose all the way back to the hotel. Arriving at her cottage, she turned on all the lights, including the fluorescent lamp over the tank of tropical fish, but for once that watery wonder world had no power to distract or inspire her. Another fish or two seemed to be missing, but she was past caring about that.

"It must be that I have lost my grip," she said out loud, and on a sudden impulse picked up the local telephone book.

Sure enough, there was the name—"Searles, Joseph—Lndscpg—24 Pier Lane—4439." Evidently he needed a phone in his business. She could, she thought, find out if the man was at home, explaining the call by saying that she needed some rosebushes pruned.

MISS WITHERS gave the number to the hotel operator and waited. But the lie about the rosebushes was not to yet rest upon her conscience.

"They don't answer," the operator said. "You want me to keep on trying?"

"Never mind," said the schoolteacher, but an hour later she tried again.

"Hold on until somebody answers," she asked the operator, and counted as she heard the ringing sounds—eleven—twelve—thirteen. . . .

Then, miraculously, there came a click at the other end of the line and a gruff "What?"

"Is this Mr. Searles? This is Miss Withers speaking. I have some rosebushes—"

The voice at the other end of the line said briefly what she could do with her rosebushes, and the instrument was hung up with a crash.

"Well!" said Miss Hildegarde Withers to herself. "That nasty old man ought to have his mouth washed out with green soap!" She stalked across the room and back again. "I certainly never in my life—"

Then she sat down suddenly in a chair and drew a deep breath. What if her bombshell dropped among the group at the Benningtons' had not proved to be a dud after all? What if it had bounced right into her own lap? Her accusation of Joe Searles had been almost purely rhetorical, to prove her point. But gardeners did have access to all sorts of poisons, and Searles was a dirty old man

whose thumb might very well have smudged any book he was reading. Moreover, she had never in her life heard a gardener speak a good word for dogs, who were always befouling lawns.

But granting all that, then why not take the next, obvious step? Suppose that Huntley Cairns had suspected his employee, or even found him out? A man with a wholesale disregard for canine life might not stop at taking human life. And who but a gardener and household handyman could easier assemble some neat little device which would splice one rake handle onto another, forming a shaft that would reach far down into the water, to the very bottom of the deep end of the swimming pool?

Then he could have slipped away to dispose of the gadget and return to discover the body—only with the added luck of discovering Pat Montague on the spot? The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that Searles had killed Huntley Cairns in order to protect himself from exposure and arrest as the fiend who had brought death to half the canine population of Shoreham and aroused the furious owners.

This was, she decided, too big a thing to handle alone. She grabbed the telephone and put through a call for the Inspector, but was told by the man at the police station desk that Piper was in an important conference and could not be disturbed. They would tell him that she had called.

And that was that. Miss Withers stalked up and down the room for a few moments, then reached again for the telephone and called the Cairns place. Lawn Abbott answered.

Miss Withers' voice must have sounded strained. "Anything wrong?" Lawn asked.

"Almost everything," Miss Withers admitted. "Among other things, Pat Montague has confessed."

"That's a lie!" came the girl's voice in an angry whisper.

"I'm afraid not," Miss Withers said a little stiffly. "I had it straight from the best sources."

"I mean the confession is a lie, no matter what Pat said!" Lawn was fiercely confident.

"Oh. Well, I agree with you. I think that the murderer lies in an entirely different direction. I was just about to start out, in the hope of making a surprise attack. Care to play Watson to my Sherlock?"

"Love to. But where, and how?"

"I intend to call on Mr. Joe Searles at once," Miss Withers told her. There was a strange gulp at the other end of the wire. "What?"

"Nothing. I just swallowed a damn. You see, I'm afraid I can't get into town. Helen and Father went off somewhere earlier—I think they took both cars, and if they didn't, still Helen has the keys to the roadster. I could try to catch a ride, or—"

"Never mind," Miss Withers said.

"But I'd like to . . . Oops! I hear somebody coming. More trouble." The receiver clicked.

" 'So I'll do it myself,' said the little red hen," observed the schoolteacher.

EMERGING from her cottage, she found both taxis away on calls. Searles' address, however, should lie within walking distance, almost on the edge of town and near the shore. She set out sturdily, her sensible heels tapping on the sidewalks like drumsticks.

It was a pleasant, reassuring sound at first, and then it seemed to grow louder in the stillness, so that the repetitious *tap-tap-tap* filled the narrowing streets and echoed from the walls and buildings. The street lights seemed to grow dimmer and farther apart.

The street lights ended but the street kept on, and so did Miss Withers. Pier Lane turned out to be an unpaved alley leading off to the right, but she determinedly trod its sandy ruts, beneath ancient signs promising "All Kinds Baits" and "Used Marine Hardware and Gear," until she was brought up short against a whitewashed picket fence. There was a station wagon parked in the side yard, its dead headlights softly

reflecting the lights of the town like a pair of blind eyes, so this must be the place.

Miss Withers came softly up a board sidewalk toward the front door of the one-story shack, her umbrella held like a lance. Then she relaxed. There was no danger of a watchdog here, at least. She came up on the porch, littered with garden tools and old rubber hose, and approached the door on tiptoe.

Even with the help of the tiny pencil flashlight in her purse she could see neither bell nor knocker. She took a deep breath, made a fist, and knocked sharply.

The little building seemed to roar and rattle with the sound, but nobody answered. Then Miss Withers caught her breath, for the door had been ajar and now it was softly swinging inward. She sniffed sharply, trying to classify the scents which poured out of the pitch-blackness.

"Alcohol," she whispered. "Fish . . . tobacco . . . cabbage . . . hamburger." But was there something else, something more subtle, more frightening?

She cast the thin gleam of the flashlight into the room so that it played over walls decorated with pages torn from the Sunday supplements, over a stove and table crowded with dirty pans and dishes, across a floor marked with a wide, dark stain.

The stain came from behind a couch on which Joe Searles was lying, his stockinged feet sticking out all akimbo. He was still in his overalls, and his hands clutched the tangled blankets in a frozen spasm of agony.

"Mr. Searles!" she whispered once, and tiptoed forward.

She started to breathe more easily when she saw that the stain on the floor was only water. Then she found that the water had overflowed from a four-gallon pail of water standing on the floor at the end of the couch. The reason it had overflowed was that Joe Searles' head had been shoved down, jammed tight into the pail, and left there.

He was as dead as if he had been at the bottom of all the Seven Seas.

The immediate requirement, Miss Withers decided, was more light on the subject. She finally found and pulled the dirty string which turned on the glaring overhead bulb, and then looked at the old-fashioned gold watch pinned to her old-fashioned bosom and noted that it was just seventeen minutes past twelve.

The important thing was to keep perfectly calm. This was, she reassured herself, an amateur detective's dream come true, because here was a still-warm corpse and a murder room unsullied and untrampled by the myrmidons of the police, its clues crying to heaven to be discovered.

It was really only a matter of where to begin.

VII

MISS Withers was holding a container of pancake flour in her hand when she heard the sound of a car turning into the alley. Her first natural feminine impulse was to lock herself into the bathroom and scream, but then she noticed that the approaching automobile had a red spotlight and that as it stopped two men got out with a flash of brass buttons.

"Oh, dear!" cried the schoolteacher as she turned out the light somewhat tardily. But by the time the two officers from the police radio car were crowding into the doorway, guns out and flashlights blazing, she was calmly seated at the telephone, dialing the number of the Shoreham police station. "I'd like to speak to Inspector Oscar Piper," she was saying. "I want—"

That call was doomed from the start never to be completed. But as Miss Withers tried to explain later, it was the officer's own fault if he tripped over the wastebasket.

"Because he needn't have been in so much of a hurry to snatch the phone away from me when I was only trying to report the murder!"

They were standing now on the porch of Searles' cottage, where until a mo-

ment or two ago the maiden schoolteacher had been in police custody. Inside the cottage there was now a considerable hubub going on, with much flickering of flashlights and the rumble of official masculine voices.

"Just relax, Hildegarde," the Inspector said patiently. "I want you to answer one or two questions. Why did you put the wastebasket in front of the door?"

"Because of the flour, of course."

"I see. That makes it just as clear as crystal. And do you mind telling me why you poured all that pancake flour on the floor?"

"Your men coming so belatedly to arrest Searles startled me. I only meant to put down a little flour."

"A little flour! But for heaven's sake, why?"

"Go blow on it, and find out," she told him. "You'll see I poured the flour on the clearest footprint. The murderer must have stepped into the water that overflowed from the pail when he stuck Searles' head in. It was evaporating fast, and I didn't see how else to protect it, so I poured the flour over it and then put the wastebasket on top."

"The idea being, if I may ask?"

"A reverse-action *moulage,* of a sort. I thought that perhaps the flour would stick to the damp spot and give the outline of the footprint."

The Inspector suddenly left her and hurried inside. After a moment there was the sound of flapping newspaper, and then Sheriff Vinge's voice.

"There she is, damn if she ain't. Come here, you with the camera. And who's got the tape measure?"

After some time the Inspector came back out on the porch, mopping his brow.

"It's a man's shoe, medium-narrow toe, size eight and a half B," he admitted. "That ought to be of some help, unless —" He broke off as a stubby, competent-looking little man came out of the door, jamming a straw hat down over his bald head. "Oh, Dr. Farney, can you tell us anything about the time of death?"

"Not much. His body temperature's ninety-seven and five-tenths, which on a night like this means he's been dead not more than two hours and not less than half an hour. It's just a case of simple drowning—a man can drown in a pail or an inch-deep puddle, for that matter, just as easy as in an ocean."

"I see. Any chance of suicide?"

The doctor stuck out his lower lip. "Can't rule out the possibility. But offhand I'd say that somebody jammed the man's head under water and held it there."

"Which would mean, wouldn't it," Miss Withers excitedly put in, "that the murderer must have been exceptionally powerful?"

Farney was openly amused. "I think, ma'am, that you yourself could have done it if you were mad enough. You see, Searles was asleep, apparently in a drunken stupor. He may even have been doped. Anyway, he was unconscious before he knew what was happening to him."

"And you can't narrow the time element down any?" Piper asked.

Dr. Farney shook his head. "Well, I can!" insisted Miss Withers. "I called Searles on the phone a few minutes before twelve—it rang and rang and rang and finally he answered. And I discovered the body at twelve-seventeen."

"You phoned Searles?" Piper demanded. "But why?"

"I was worried," she admitted. "I felt that earlier this evening I had started something, and I didn't know what. I was sure that Searles hadn't told all he knew, so I phoned him. When he answered his voice was thick, and his language—"

THE Inspector said dryly that he could understand about Searles' language.

"You recognized his voice?"

"It sounded like Searles. His voice was all gummy and thick."

The doctor agreed that that would be natural, with Searles in the besotted condition in which he had gone to sleep.

"It's a wonder he woke up at all," Farney continued. "Well, if you'll ex-

cuse me—" Mumbling quietly to himself, Dr. Farney hurried off toward his car.

"Just a minute, Hildegarde," the Inspector said. "I'll see if Vinge has ordered the ambulance yet. Then I'll see you back to the hotel. I want to talk to you."

He was back in a moment, and they started off together.

"How'd you know Searles was going to be killed?" Piper demanded.

"But I didn't! I thought he was the murderer, and I was going to surprise him into a confession." She smiled. "Don't look so glum and disgusted, Oscar. Because this second murder proves one thing anyway. Pat Montague is innocent."

They came out of the alleyway, away from the slow hushing sound of the breakers on the shore. The Inspector laughed bitterly. "You may as well know all," he said. "We let Montague loose a little after eleven o'clock."

Miss Withers gasped again. "But, Oscar!"

"We had to. The confession was no good. As soon as we put him under the lie detector it all fell to pieces. Not one thing in the confession was on the level, except that he hated Cairns and wanted him dead. Of course, he may have been tricking the machine, but that's awfully roundabout. Anyway, we were up a tree. Then finally Loomis, the D. A., suggested that we forget the lie detector and try a truth serum, or whatever you call it."

"Not that scopolamine stuff again?"

"No, twilight sleep is out of date. We were talking about that new drug they developed in the Army medical corps to loosen up the subconscious of bad cases of battle fatigue. When anybody's had enough sodium betapentalin he'll answer questions truthfully. He can't help it. Only—"

"Only Pat Montague refused his permission?"

"Permission, hell. There's a new type of the drug you can give through the mouth, in coffee or anything. Taste's faintly salty, that's all. We were going to try it on Montague first and ask his permission later. By that time maybe we'd better have had a real confession instead of a fake one like he gave us earlier."

"But even so, could you use it?"

"Not in court. But we figured we'd have enough of the real facts so we could prove our case anyway. I even had the chief medical examiner send me out some of the stuff"—Piper showed her a small blue glass bottle—"but we never got to use it."

"Still insisting that Montague is guilty?" she interrupted. "Can't you ever forget that blessed triangle of yours?"

He smiled. "There are new angles to the triangle now. And Searles' death doesn't make things any simpler, either. On the contrary, as a mater of fact." They both turned to watch the ambulance as it sped along on its mission to pick up what was left of the unhappy gardener.

"But if you were so convinced of Montague's guilt—"

"Listen a minute," Piper said. "We never held Montague for murder, but just for investigation, see? But what do you think Mrs. Helen Cairns up and does yesterday? She telegraphs to Chicago for a hot-shot criminal lawyer, meets him at the airport, and rushes him over to the station, stopping to see a judge on the way. So all of a sudden we had this stew-bum of a wild Irishman on our hands—some guy named Malone or Mahoney. Before we even knew he was in town he'd got wise to the betapentalin gag, uncovered the sheriff's private bottle of rye, dated up the D.A.'s big blond secretary, and slapped a writ of habeas corpus in our faces."

They walked on in silence. "A fast worker," Miss Withers said.

"Jim the Penman crossed with Captain Kidd," remarked the Inspector bitterly. "Anyway, he sprung his client about eleven, which gave Montague plenty of time to kill Searles, who was the only real witness against him."

"But if Montague went off in the com-

pany of his lawyer and Helen Cairns, then he has an alibi."

INSPECTOR Piper shook his head.

"He didn't. He went off alone, like a bat out of hell. Said he was going to reenlist in the Army or something. Last I saw of Mr. Whatshisname, he was sitting in Vinge's office, figuring up an expense account for Mrs. Cairns and singing some silly song about how he caught himself a midnight train and beat his way to Georgia."

"But wasn't Helen waiting outside for Pat?"

"In the hall—but he went out the side door, without a word of thanks to the hot-shot lawyer or a good-by to anybody."

"My, my," said Miss Withers. "It must have been a great disappointment to Helen Cairns. After she'd gone to all that trouble."

"For two cents I'd run the stew-bum out of town," Piper growled. "I've got a hunch he isn't entitled to practice before the New York bar anyway."

"I'm afraid, Oscar, that you have even worse worries than that. Or rather you will have in a minute, when I get up courage enough to make a sort of confession." By this time they were coming up the clamshell-bordered path toward her door. "Please come inside and I'll make you some coffee."

"Haven't time, thanks," Piper said. "Now what's this about a confession? You're not going to tell me that you did Searles in, are you?"

The amusement went out of his face as he saw her expression.

"I'm afraid," she said, "that in a sense I did just that. You'd better change your mind and come in."

The Inspector came in and even accepted a cup of coffee. "Go ahead and tell me the worst," he demanded.

"I meant it for the best. How was I to know? I mean, I was only trying to help uncover the trail by smoking out something that seemed rotten in Denmark, and—" She told him about her

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discovery of the passage in "Oriental Moments" and her visit to the Benningtons. "So I walked into the meeting," she concluded, "and I dropped what I hoped was a bombshell. I told them I knew all, or nearly all, and that if Cairns had been killed for that reason, then they had got the wrong man, because he hadn't been the dog poisoner at all. In proving my case I'm afraid I let them think that I had evidence enough to prove that the real dog poisoner was Joe Searles."

Piper set the coffee down on a nearby table. "I begin to see."

"I hope you do—and that you'll understand. Anyway, after I'd done that I got to worrying. Suppose Searles was really the murderer and had killed his employer to cover up the dog poisoning? I talked myself into believing him guilty, and finally I very rashly went down there hoping to surprise him into a confession, and I found him dead!"

"And you have a good idea that somebody in the group, on learning they'd got the wrong man the first time, up and rushed off to get the right one!"

She nodded. "It seems logical."

"So now it's a question of whether one of the Benningtons, or Nicolet, or Doc Radebaugh wears a size eight and a half B shoe!" Piper brightened a little at the prospect of something definite to get his teeth into. "You've really made a mess of things this time, trying to work alone in the dark—but maybe I can still save something out of it, with that footprint to go on."

"Yes, Oscar, but—"

He paused in the doorway. "But what?"

"If it only wasn't for the other clue in Searles' cottage tonight! That alters everything."

"What other clue?"

"The whisky bottle."

"But there wasn't any whisky bottle!"

"To quote from the esteemed Mr. Holmes, 'That was the curious incident!' The man had been drinking, the place smelled of it, but obviously he hadn't spent the evening in any bar. And why the killer, if it was Nicolet or one of the Benningtons, should bother to carry away a whisky bottle—"

The Inspector thought and then shrugged. "Searles probably threw it out of the window in a drunken moment."

She looked dubious. "Perhaps, but I doubt it. The more I think about this case, Oscar, the more I am convinced that from the beginning we have been looking for the strange and fantastic, when the actual truth is very plain and simple. As plain as—"

"As the nose on your face?" The Inspector beat her to that one and then got out of the door before she could think of a reply.

" 'He laughs best. . . .' " murmured the schoolteacher to herself.

SHE took a small blue glass bottle from her handbag and studied it thoughtfully. It had been very easy to abstract it from the Inspector's coat pocket as they walked along. The idea of an otherwise harmless drug which would force a tongue to speak the truth was extremely attractive to her at the moment.

The question was—how to use it? For truth was, she knew, a double-edged sword. She decided to sleep on the matter, and take action in the morning. Then, having made up her mind, she crossed to the aquarium.

Lifting the top of the tank, she sprinkled powdered fish food into the glass triangle which floated on top of the tepid water. Instantly the entire happy family of fancy fish swarmed out of the plant forest, plunging enthusiastically into the falling column of manna from heaven. Even the snails, catfish, and do-jos hastened toward the rock-bordered depression in the center of the tank's floor to see what would settle down their way. They ranged themselves at the bottom, goggling upward. Then suddenly Miss Withers noticed something.

"My female *betta* is missing," she cried. "And so is the angelfish Gabriel." She still knelt by the aquarium, watch-

ing the miniature world with keen, worried eyes. "Four of my fish gone in the last forty-eight hours," Miss Withers murmured. "A neon, a rosy tetra, a *betta,* and a *scalare.*" She leaned even closer. Then she lifted the top of the tank, dipped her finger down into the water, and splashed.

Out from the shadows behind the red rock came a plump greenish-blue fish, wearing at the moment an extremely smug look upon its goggled, batrachian face. The female *betta* was very pleased with itself. Butter would not, as the old saying goes, melt in her mouth.

Neither would the long streamer, the antenna, which dangled from her jaws, remains of the missing angel-fish.

"So," gasped the schoolteacher, "it was the *betta* all the time! Well sometimes we can learn the most interesting lessons from a close study of wild life. 'Sermons in stones,' in a way."

Early the next morning Miss Hildegarde Withers made two important telephone calls, one to the Cairns house, the other to Inspector Oscar Piper. She was sitting by the aquarium, when finally there came the sound of quick, nervous steps along the path and a sharp *tat-a-tat-tat* on the door. She opened it hastily. Lawn Abbott stood there, flushed and breathless, almost as if she had run all the way.

"Is he here?" she cried.

The schoolteacher indicated the clock.

"It's not twelve yet. You're a little early, child."

Lawn slapped her silver-mounted crop against her riding breeches.

"I'd have been earlier yet if my father hadn't gone off somewhere in the little car. And of course Helen is still using the sedan. So I had to saddle up that big hack of mine and ride down—it's not much more than a mile along the beach. I hope the hotel people won't mind. I tied him to a clothesline out back."

"Do sit down," invited Miss Withers.

But Lawn Abbott was in a prowling

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mood. "Tell me," she begged. "You've heard from Pat? He'll really be here?"

"Be patient, young lady. I made you a promise on the telephone, didn't I? I'm glad you came early, though, because we have a lot to talk about. We may as well have our chat over a nice cup of coffee, don't you think?" She started for the kitchen.

"None for me," Lawn said quickly. "I'm too excited." She hesitated. "I need something all right. You haven't —no, I don't suppose you'd have a drink in the house?"

Miss Withers blinked. "You mean you'd like a slug in it, as the Inspector so inelegantly says? I'll see."

She turned the burner on under the coffeepot and then after a few minutes poured out two cups, but her mind was elsewhere. Out in the living room Lawn was pacing up and down like a bear in a cage. "I don't see why you're taking all this trouble," she was saying.

"You've never been an old maid," the schoolteacher advised her as she reached up to the top shelf to take down the half-pint bottle of cognac that had been purchased for her Thanksgiving plum pudding. She carefully poured a modicum into the cup that wasn't cracked. "There is, you know, a certain pleasure in straightening out people's lives—in a way it's being *Dea ex Machina.*"

"What?"

"The Goddess from the Machine, who swoops down to make everything come right, at least in the classical theater." Miss Withers added, "I hope!" in a lower voice, and then let fall a few drops of the spirit into the other cup. She certainly needed some outside help if she was going to carry off the next half-hour successfully.

After a moment's delay she finally entered the living room, bearing a tray which held, besides the two cups of coffee, a sugar bowl and cream pitcher. She put the tray down on the low table before the divan, wishing with all her heart that her visitor would light some-

where. She didn't want Lawn glancing into the dark corner behind the divan, at least not yet.

VIII

COFFEE could hardly be drunk standing, which was one good thing. Lawn dropped down on the cushions as she accepted her cup. She made a wry face.

"Isn't it all right?" Miss Withers asked quickly. "Perhaps the slug was too strong—I never use alcohol myself."

"Oh, it's okay," Lawn said.

Miss Withers took her own cup and retreated across the room. She took a sip and decided that while some people might like coffee with brandy she would have it plain for the rest of her life.

"I suppose you know," she said pleasantly, "that the mystery is solved now."

Lawn's cup clattered in the saucer. "What did you say?"

"It is *solved*. The investigation is over. They've decided that Searles murdered your brother-in-law and then killed himself when he thought he was going to be caught."

"You don't believe that!"

Miss Withers cocked her head. "Perhaps not. But I'm only an amateur."

Lawn sat up straight. "Look here, Miss Withers, I want a showdown. I've got to know where I stand. I've got to know what you're driving at!"

"Yes?" To gain a little time Miss Withers finished her coffee. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything! But first I want to know where my sister Helen was all last night and where she is now. Do *you* know?"

There was a long pause. "I have my own opinion as to her whereabouts last night, but it's only a guess."

"Oh!" Lawn said. She took up her cup and thoughtfully drank the remainder.

Miss Withers heaved a great sigh of relief. She looked at the clock, wonder-

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ing how long it was before betapentalin took effect. It shouldn't be so very long, she decided, especially since she had used half the bottle.

"It's nearly twelve," she observed.

"It's time Pat was here, if he's coming," Lawn said. "What happened to make him change his mind?"

"He simply sees things more clearly by this time, or I hope he does. You've waited for Pat Montague a long time, haven't you?"

"That's no secret. I wanted him since the first day I saw him. And then I had to stand back and watch my sister put her lovely tentacles around and around him, strangling him—" She laughed without humor. "That was why I ran away from home," Lawn went on. "When Helen and Pat got engaged, I couldn't stand it. She could have had anybody, anybody at all, and there was nobody but Pat for me."

All of a sudden Miss Hildegarde Withers felt supremely confident. It must, she thought, have been the few drops of brandy that she let fall into her cup out in the kitchen. Her cup—the cracked one.

Just to reassure herself, she turned the cup around, but the brandy had made everything fuzzy so that she couldn't even focus her eyes on the crack. "You know," she confessed, "there was a time when I thought that you yourself might be the murderer of Huntley Cairns."

Lawn smiled at that. "Why in the world did you think that?"

Miss Withers reminded herself that she must be very careful and yet daring too. "It was because you didn't have any alibi. Your horse couldn't come into court and say what time it was that you brought him in from your ride on Saturday afternoon. Who could say whether you came up the hill to the swimming pool after Huntley Cairns was killed or before?"

"Go on," Lawn begged. "I hadn't realized I was that much of a suspect."

"I suspected Helen too, because she

spilled cocktails on her dress at the party and was gone a long time while she was supposed to be changing. She could have been swimming in the pool when Cairns came down for his dip, she could even have pretended a cramp while he was undressing, and when he rushed out to save her she could have pulled him in and drowned him. He was a very poor swimmer, and both you and your sister were brought up in the water."

"I can't believe it!" Lawn whispered. She was crouched back on the divan.

"Neither could I, my child. Then it occurred to me that it might have been you in Helen's bathing suit, which she'd left in the dressing room."

Miss Withers felt happy and glowing and a little careless.

"At any rate," she said, "it wouldn't have been difficult for a good swimmer to pull Cairns down to the bottom of the pool and hook his clothing onto that jagged bit of metal so he'd stay down."

"Go on, keep talking!"

"Oh, I shall. But just between us both, I'll admit that this is the last time I'll have coffee with brandy. It seems to have affected my tongue just a teeny bit. Where was I? Oh yes. You slipped out of the pool and into the dressing room, and to save time you put your riding clothes back on over the wet swimming suit. Outside, Pat Montague and Searles were discovering the body, so you sat tight with the door locked. Searles tricked Pat into going in the other dressing room to phone and locked him in before he rushed to the house to telephone, and you came out and let him go free."

Lawn was stiff and frozen, but she still showed no desire to do any confessing, which the schoolteacher thought was odd. The girl said, "Pat doesn't believe this pipe dream, does he?"

"I wouldn't know. But at the time he was fooled by the white bathing suit. And by the moisture which came through your riding breeches from the bathing suit—he thought you had

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brought your horse in all lathered up, which was contrary to your usual practise. Of course, neither he nor anybody else saw a motive for you to kill Cairns."

Lawn smiled faintly. "That's right. Why would I get rid of him and leave Helen a free, wealthy widow?"

"That puzzled me too for a while," the schoolteacher confided. "Then I realized how much you wanted Pat Montague for yourself. You knew that the moment he came back your sister would rush into his arms. She even kept a bag packed with a few of her summer clothes, so that she could elope in a minute if he asked her. But you saw that if your sister were mixed up in a murder Pat wouldn't ask her!"

"And so?" the girl prompted.

"It really worked, didn't it? Huntley Cairns dead was an obstacle between the lovers that he would never have been living. Pat thought that Helen did it, and she thought that he did. Of course you never meant to have Pat walk in and become Suspect Number One, even though you knew he would show up soon. You'd received his phone calls meant for Helen, no doubt mimicking the maid. Did you pretend to take a message so he would think Helen didn't care enough to call back? I'm sure you did. I'm sure you intended the police to suspect Helen, too, because of the damp white bathing suit crammed down in her laundry bag. It was when I saw the suit that I began to feel you must be the murderer, only I didn't see *how.*"

Lawn sat there, stiff and silent. "You see, you're what the medical profession calls an 'onychophagist,' or 'eater of fingernails.' And the laces of Helen's suit were ripped instead of untied—and a person without fingernails has a good deal of difficulty in untying anything especially when in a hurry."

Miss Withers swayed in her chair, but her voice went steadily, monotonously on. "Pat's inept arrival on the scene rather spoiled your original idea of involving Helen. And then of course we were all confused by the red herring

across the trail—I mean the local committee who were trying to run down the dog poisoner. I wasted a good deal of time on them, and you of course encouraged that, since it took suspicion off yourself and off Pat." The schoolteacher shook her head sharply. "Have you noticed that this room is going round and round like a carrousel?"

The girl didn't answer, and Miss Withers picked up her coffee cup again, studying it most carefully. The crack must be somewhere, unless she was losing her eyesight.

Across the room Lawn Abbott had one fist in the pocket of her tweed riding jacket, a pocket which, Miss Withers remembered, had sagged heavily as the girl entered the room. "Don't stop now," Lawn prompted her.

Miss Withers knew that she couldn't stop, though she tried to put on the brakes.

"I don't mind telling you," she heard herself saying, "that in spite of my suspicions I never really began to understand the setup until Searles was murdered. By that time both you and Helen were very worried about Pat. He was in jail, and it looked as if the police meant to hold him and try to convict him. You both took steps—Helen sent for a clever lawyer with a reputation of saving lost causes. But you realized that if another murder, done in the same general fashion, happened while Pat was locked up, it would clear him completely. You heard over the radio that he had confessed—which he did in an effort to try to save Helen—and that clinched it."

"Go on," Lawn said.

Hildegarde Withers leaned back in her chair.

"You picked Searles because he was one of the first on the murder scene and he might have noticed something. It was easy enough to give him a bottle of whisky to take home last night. I don't know how you got down to his cottage—I imagine you rode your horse along the beach, as you rode here today—but any-

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how it would have been easy enough for you to step through your window onto the balcony, murder Searles, and get back without anyone knowing you had left the house. But you didn't know that you had left a footprint in Searles' cottage, size eight and a half B."

Lawn Abbott shook her head. "I don't wear that size, nor near it."

"Not in shoes, no. But riding boots are made several sizes larger than shoes, with a wide, heavy sole. It was you, of course, who shoved Searles' head into a pail of water. You must have been in the midst of that when you answered his phone at my call. It was really an excellent impersonation, though you only had to speak a word or two. And then, how lucky that I telephoned you just after you got back—it gave you an almost perfect alibi! You took the whisky bottle away with you because it would, of course, show traces of the sleeping powder you introduced, and you took Searles' gun in case it would come in handy later, such as now."

Lawn took her hand out of her pocket, and the pistol was gripped in it—not aimed, but just cradled easily.

"Tell me," she said quietly, "just why do you believe this nightmare you've dreamed up?"

"Because it makes sense," the schoolteacher whispered. Her lips were a little stiff and strange, as if they belonged to somebody else. "Because from the first it's been evident that you're an anti-social type. There's an old proverb —'Give a dog a bad name and he'll live up to it'—and that fitted you."

"Thinking it and proving it are two different matters," the girl reminded her. The hands of the clock were now pointing to a few minutes after twelve.

"There honestly wasn't much proof," the schoolteacher confided, still vainly fighting the heavy compulsion to unburden her mind of any and all secrets. "That's why I set this trap. That's why I had someone else listening, ready to arrest you at the right time after you'd

confessed everything. You have confessed everything, haven't you? I rather think you must have, but everything is getting so foggy . . ."

She had to squint to see Lawn at all, and even then the girl looked like something seen through the wrong end of an opera glass. There was a long silence, broken only by Lawn Abbott's quick, irregular breathing and the pounding of Miss Withers' heart. No, there was another sound, a soft purring, which had been, she realized, going on for some time. Lawn noticed it too. "What's that?" she cried.

It came again, a definite, unmistakable snore. Miss Withers fought a losing battle to keep silent and then said:

"Why, my dear, that's the Inspector. I put him there, stretched out on a blanket, so he could overhear your confession. Remember what I said about somebody being here who wanted you? Well, he wants you, for murder."

The girl whipped to her feet, Joe Searles' revolver gripped tight in her hand. Miss Withers tried to scream, but now that she really wanted to make a noise she found herself mute.

"I know she's going to lean over behind the divan and she's going to shoot Oscar Piper, the poor dear tired man, and I have to sit here and watch it all because I can't even stand up."

She tried manfully, but her legs refused to work. Then she fell sideward against the little table which held her coffee cup. There was the shuddering roar of an explosion somewhere inside her head, and the rush of many waters.

After forty days and forty nights the rushing waters quieted and finally began to recede, leaving the highest peak of Miss Hildegarde Withers' mind exposed to the clear cold air of consciousness. She was being heckled by a masculine voice which kept insisting:

"Drink this, like a good girl."

Slowly she opened her eyes, saw that she was in her own bed and that

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Dr. Harry Radebaugh was leaning over her. It was dark outside, and the wind blew rain against the windowpane.

"I will never again in my whole life drink anything but water," she murmured with an effort that left her weak. "Where did that vixen shoot me?"

"You're not shot, Hildegarde." It was the Inspector's voice, and she opened her eyes again to stare at him.

"Neither are you, I observe! Though you should have been, for going to sleep at the post!" She turned back toward the doctor. "Well, what have I got?"

"Just the damnedest hang-over that anybody ever had," the medico told her. "Caused by an overdose of betapentalin." He snapped shut his leather bag. "Give her two of those pills every hour on the hour."

He went briskly out of the room, his footsteps on the thick broadloom carpet sounding to Miss Withers like the tramp-tramp of an army.

The Inspector came over and perched on a chair near the head of her bed. From a pocket, he produced a cigar.

"If you remember, I didn't get any sleep at all last night," he reminded her. "And it was so hot down there behind your couch, and the blanket was so soft—"

In spite of herself, the schoolteacher had to smile at the little-boy sheepish expression on his face. "Oscar?"

"Yes?"

"I'll forget about your going to sleep at the switch if you'll forget about my stealing your truth pills and then administering them to myself by mistake."

The wiry little Irishman nodded slowly. "It's a bargain."

"Go on and smoke that awful-smelling rope if you want to." She watched while he got the cigar burning, and then she sighed. "I suppose the girl got away and it's all to do over again?"

"Not quite," he told her. "She got away, in a sense. When you fainted and crashed over chair and table and all, Lawn took a pot shot at you, but she missed you a mile. Then she turned the

gun on herself, but a rib deflected the bullet, so it missed the heart. We got her to the emergency hospital, but she only lived long enough to babble out what amounts to a confession."

Miss Hildegarde Withers, in spite of her hang-over, sat up straight in bed.

"Eureka! Or whatever it is they said in Greek. I was right, anyway, even though I was half guessing. That girl really did commit two murders just so she could get P at Montague, a young man who seemed to me quite ordinary."

The Inspector took the cigar out of his mouth and blew a beautiful smoke ring. "I'm afraid there's somebody who won't agree with you about that," he said. "I mean the girl who sat in her car all night outside the main gate at Camp Nivens to make sure Pat Montague wouldn't re-enlist in the Army until she'd talked to him."

"Helen did that?"

He nodded. Now it was Miss Withers' turn to wear the sheepish expression. She confessed about the letters she was supposed to have returned to Pat Montague in jail, letters which she had since destroyed, and which, she now realized, must have contained secret messages that would have told him all he wanted to know. They must have worked out that code years ago, no doubt to keep as much of their secret as they could from the eyes of Lawn.

"Well, Oscar, don't keep me on pins and needles. Did Helen get there in time? Did they come to an understanding, or will Pat go back into uniform?"

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"You sound," the Inspector told her, "like the announcer on a soap-opera radio program. Relax, Hildegarde. Pat spent most of the night in a Turkish bath, and didn't reach Nivens until early in the morning. All I know about Pat and Helen since then is that the Garden City police stopped a big sedan with both of them in it, and there was lipstick on his collar. They were looking for the city hall."

She sighed. "Then I seem to have played Cupid in spite of myself! Pat has his Helen, and when a man wants a woman so badly I suppose he ought to get her, even if she didn't have the stamina to wait for him. Everybody to his taste, as the old lady said when she kissed the cow. I must admit that in the beginning I was rooting for Lawn. *There* was an odd girl, a twisted, unhappy girl with just one idea in life! I still wonder why she went to pieces and started shooting. She might still have got away with it because she hadn't actually done any confessing."

Inspector Oscar Piper shrugged.

"The truth was out, anyway. Maybe for the first time, while you were talking, the girl woke up to what a fool she'd been. People like that always make excuses for what they do and kid themselves along. You made a confession for her, and you probably didn't mince any words. It's over, anyway. Even Sheriff Vinge and the D.A. are happy because the county is saved the expense of an investigation and trial and all that. As a matter of fact, everybody but you came out of this okay."

"My head, you mean?"

But the Inspector didn't mean that at all. "I've got some bad news for you," he told her. "When that girl took a shot at you, she missed you by a yard. But the bullet smashed right into your tank of tropical fish. The boys gathered up what they could in pots and pans, but I'm afraid there's one got stepped on."

"If it's the female *Betta splendens*," Miss Withers said softly, "my regrets are modified by a certain sense of relief."

HOW LIKE A GOD

(*Concluded from page* 111)

above him, hurled it upon her head as she lay there at his feet. There was a cracking sound like the breaking of a brittle board; and the statue, spattered with blood, rolled gently onto the rug and came to rest there with its broken nose pointing to the ceiling.

He stooped and picked up the revolver from the floor and stood there an instant with it in his hand, then suddenly darted for the door; and as he opened it, he heard Mrs. Jordan's clumsy steps starting rapidly up the stairs, and her voice: "Mr. Lewis, was that you? What is it?" He stepped back and stood there two paces from the open door, the revolver still in his hand, unable to speak or move; he caught a glimpse of Mrs. Jordan's face in the dim stairway, heard her scream, and heard her clattering downstairs again and yelling, "Police! Help, police!"

He slowly lifted his hand and looked at the revolver—inquiringly, as if it could tell him something he wanted to know; then with a violent convulsive shudder he relaxed his fingers and it fell. He rushed to the hall, to the head of the stairs, but hearing voices below returned to the room; and, not looking at what lay beside the statue on the floor, went to the window and raised it and leaned out. He heard shouts and, in the dim light from the street lamps, saw forms of people moving swiftly. He closed the window and deliberately and precisely pulled down the shade; then he turned and walked rapidly to the little table in the corner where the telephone stood, and lifted the instrument and took off the receiver and put it to his ear.

The sound of voices, and of heavy and hurried footsteps on the stairs, came through the open door as he said into the mouthpiece:

"Chelsea four three four three."

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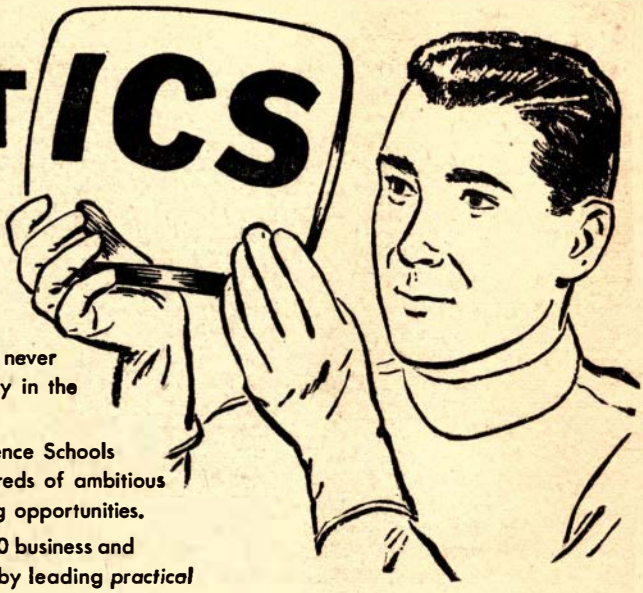

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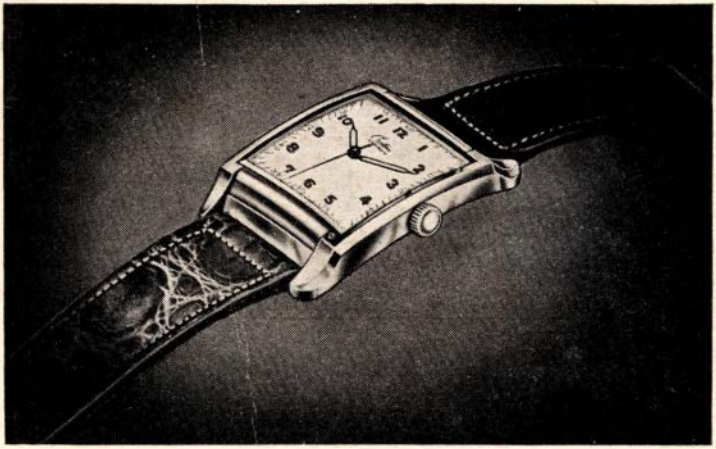

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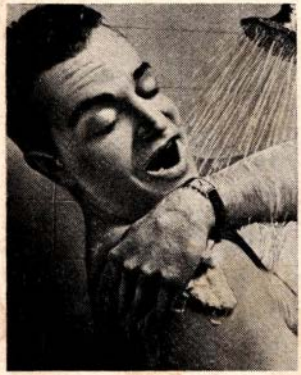

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