FALL 25¢

TRIPLE DETECTIVE

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

ANC

PUNCH WITH CARE

an Asey Mayo Mystery by

PHOEBE ATWOOD TAYLOR

THE DOGS DO BARK

by

JONATHAN STAGGE

LADY TO KILL

by

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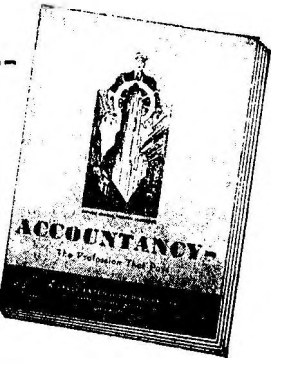

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TRIPLE DETECTIVE

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

Vol. I, No. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Fall, 1947

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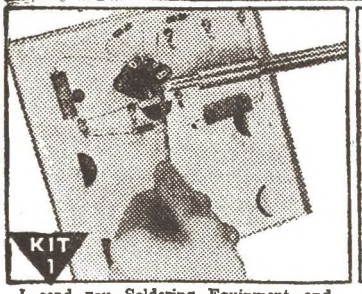
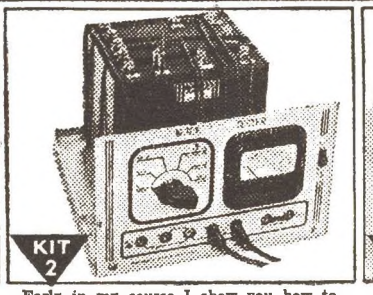
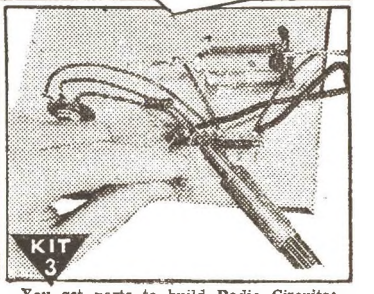


I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



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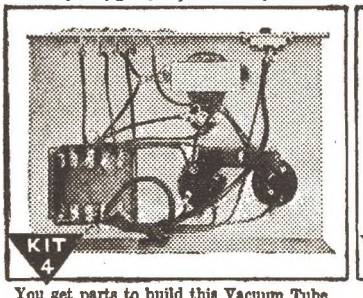
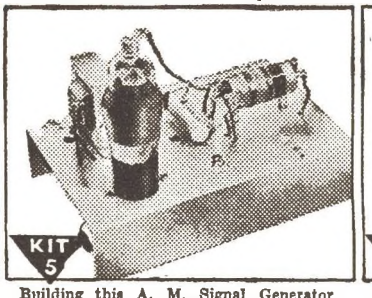


You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.



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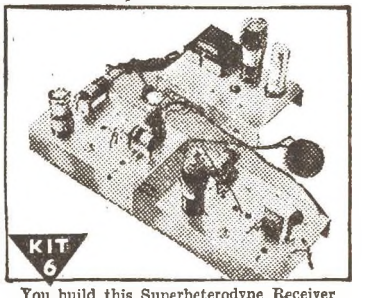

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Guest Editor Helen Reilly Calls the Court to Order

THREE of a kind is a mighty tough combination to beat. Ask any poker player who is stuck with two pair. It takes at least a straight to top three of a kind and it's not easy drawing to a straight.

Three of a kind was a tough combination back in the days of Alexander Dumas when he was writing of his famous trio, "The Three Musketeers." Athos, Porthos and Aramis made a formidable trio of swordsmen. They could run you through as quickly as you can blink an eye. And when D'Artagnan came along they had France in the palms of their hands.

There's another three of a kind that adds up to a formidable combination in the field of mystery fiction. We're speaking now of Phoebe Atwood Taylor, Jonathan Stagge and Lester Dent, the trio of outstanding mystery authors whose novels are featured in this issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE, the jumbo-sized, 196-page magazine of mystery, suspense and thrills.

We Present—Helen Reilly

We can introduce these distinguished authors and their novels in no better fashion than to turn our mystery fiction court over to our guest editor, Mrs. Helen Reilly, popular creator of the Inspector Christopher McKee stories, who is actually responsible for The Readers' Jury selections now being offered on the witness stand. Presenting Mrs. Reilly:

It was a very real pleasure to sit in the Editor's chair and select the three mystery novels which are featured in this, the third issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. With a good conscience I was able, for the first time in a number of years, to sit back comfortably and instead of being a writer treat myself to becoming a reader, the world forgetting and by the world forgot.

It was a genuine holiday and I went to town, enjoying myself to the hilt. The three novels I have chosen for your readers gave me pleasant hours of distraction, excitement, and genuine thrills.

While the wind blew and gray skies pressed down outside the windows of my New York apartment, I rambled Cape Cod in sunlight, traveled the continent by streamliner, and had a turn at hunting life farther South when the frost was on the pumpkin—all this without spending a penny for transportation. I've met some charming people, too, and others not so charming—but variety's the spice of life. I've decided that I must do this more often.

And I know how I can do it, without taking too much time from the curse of Adam (and Eve). I hereby, not authorize, but plead with you, Mr. Editor, to put me on your mailing list for TRIPLE DETECTIVE. Once every three months I intend to lock my doors, take the telephone receiver off the hook, and forget all for a whole day in what I'm sure will be the same delectable fashion.

I hope your readers will like the books I've chosen for them as much as I did. The first is "Punch With Care," by Phoebe Atwood Taylor. The salty flavor of Asey Mayo is always a pleasure. In this particular novel, Phoebe Atwood Taylor has reached a new high. Against a background of the Cape she combines the bizarre and unusual, such as Lulu Belle, the ancient Pullman train with the glass flower vases and the silver spittoons that doesn't go anywhere but around the Douglass' estate, with astute characterization, wit, probability, and a sound and logical denouement at the end of the road. You put the story down with a sigh and determine with a pleasurable chill to pay the Cape a visit at the earliest possible moment.

The second book, "The Dogs Do Bark," a

(Continued on page 8)

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THE READERS' JURY

(Continued from page 6)

Dr. Westlake mystery by Jonathan Stagge, takes you into a different milieu. You'll move South, into Pennsylvania. It's not summer, it's fall. There's a chill in the air—and it's not only because of the temperature. With a country doctor, you'll ride to hounds over the frosty fields, and make an unusual discovery in a dense woods.

The discovery won't be what you think. The fox plays a distinctly secondary part. Watch Sir Basil and the barking dogs in the night and Dr. Westlake's young daughter, Dawn. Talk to the expatriated Englishman with the lovely tragic wife, the farming Grimshaws, the masterful and solid Mrs. Faulkner. There's a twist on this one. Watch and listen as you will, but one gets you five that you won't guess the perpetrator. Try it and see.

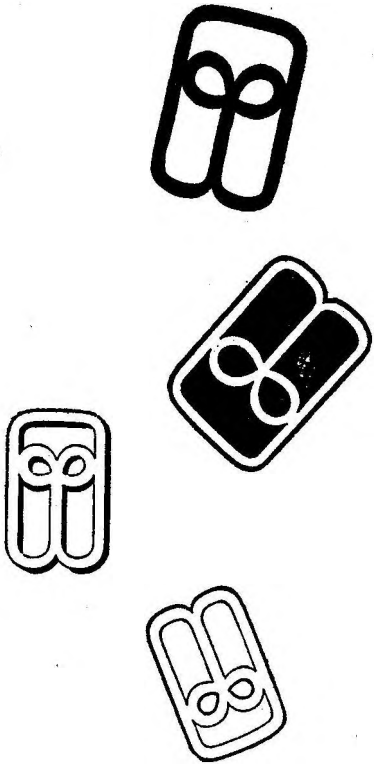
In my third selection—last but by no means least, "Lady to Kill"—Lester Dent will bring you east on a fast train with murder on board and a killer who means business. The characters in this most excellent novel are full scale: Chance Malloy, head of an aviation company; two grim gentlemen named Fleshman and Walheim, and the girl they are intent on eliminating, Julie Edwards, to mention only a few.

The pace is as rapid as the landscape flitting past the windows, the suspense mounts steadily and surely. You won't read about this journey, you'll take it—to end up in a house on Long Island in the middle of a blizzard and as thrilling a climax as you'll meet in a month of Sundays.

A Vote of Thanks!

Well, Mrs. Reilly, we are rather hard put to find an appropriate way to thank you for your time and effort in picking

(Continued on page 184)



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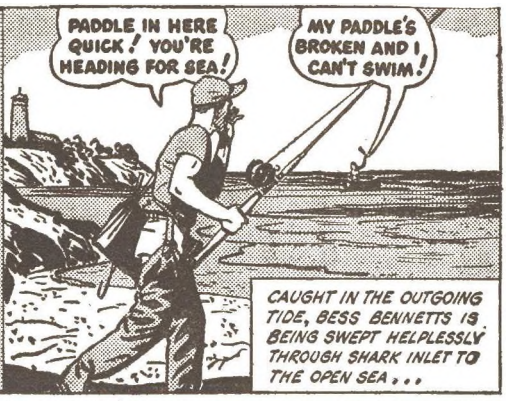
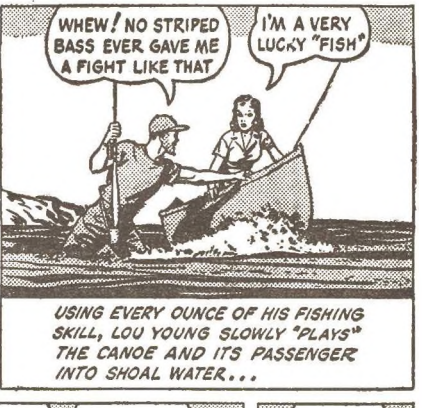




PHOEBE ATWOOD TAYLOR

PUNCH WITH CARE

AN ASEY MAYO MYSTERY

Suddenly, as if she were tossing a basketball, the girl pitched the folded blanket into the mud hole (CHAP. IV)

ASEY MAYO dropped his empty wooden-slatted clam drainer by the back door, set his clam hoe and rubber boots beside it, and informed his housekeeper cousin Jennie Mayo that her luncheon menu was changed.

"Your clam chowder's out," he continued as he took the wicker chair next to her. "Those fellows at the boat yard"—he raised his voice to compete with the midget radio on her lap—"they hadn't even bothered to take my new engine out of the crate. They're on strike— for Pete's sakes!"

He suddenly realized that Jennie was sound asleep.

The radio's music abruptly gave way to the mournfully dulcet tones of Jennie's favorite announcer.

"*Will* Mother Gaston's adopted daugh-

ter go to jail—by mistake? Should old Dr. Muldoon tell her about Jimmy? *Can* Sonia, in her evil zest for brutal revenge, actually plant the stolen bearer bonds on little Beth?"

Three shots rang out, a siren wailed, and a woman screamed in anguish.

Jennie never stirred a hair. Asey snapped the radio off, and Jennie at once waked up and glared at him.

"All right!" she said irritably. "I know I promised you waffles for lunch if you'd get clams for a chowder. But I never had one single solitary spare moment since you left. Not one!" She glanced at Asey's empty clam drainer. "Hm. Where are the clams?"

"Wa-el," Asey drawled, "there's a particularly good ball game up-Cape this afternoon, so the boatyard boys decided to strike again. So my engine's still in its crate, so I got no motor boat. In short, your clam project got washed up."

"If you say that word again," Jennie interrupted, "I'll scream!"

Asey looked at her curiously. "What word?"

"Project!" Jennie said explosively. *"Project!* Don't talk to me about projects! *That's* why I fell asleep just now. It wasn't the sun. It was that darn project."

"What project?" Asey inquired.

"Of all the silly fool words people've thought up in the last ten years, that's the silly foolest!" Jennie banged her fist on the arm of her chair. "Project! That fool project crawling all over the place! Jumping on the new grass seed, bouncing up and down in the perennial border. Just a bunch of human *ants!"*

"Look, is this somethin' you dreamed about while you were asleep?" Asey asked gently.

"I hadn't been asleep two seconds before you came back," Jennie told him tartly, "and I can prove it. I can tell you every word of 'Mother Gaston' up to the theme music! I just caved in when that project finally left—why, think of that redheaded Air Corps colonel, sneaking a swig of my blackberry cordial!"

"Oho!" Asey said. "So this was some Army project that stopped by?"

JENNIE sniffed.

"Army nothing! It was a bunch from Larrabee College. Down from Boston to do a project on Town Government. The towns under nine hundred population division."

"But what in thunder were they doin' *here?"*

"Like every other fool project in the world," Jennie said impatiently, "they'd got sidetracked. Only been in town since eight-thirty this morning, but they're already sidetracked forever, if you ask me! Except maybe that thin ex-Wave with the glasses. She kept tryin' to pull 'em all together and get 'em going to the Town Hall, but she was just a little squeak in the wilderness. That ex-Wac with the snapping black eyes—*she* was a one, that ex-Wac!"

"I don't think," Asey said pensively, "that I ever felt much more confused. Now just exactly what hap—"

"You're confused?" Jennie interrupted. "What d'you think *I* was, being pounced on by a swarm of twenty-odd projectors? Honestly, Asey, I sometimes think life was a lot simpler during the war."

"I still don't understand why a college project on Town Government should turn up *here!"* Asey persisted.

"Seems," Jennie said, "they decided that before they set to work projectin', they'd just take a look around the town. Somebody remembered that this town was the home of Cape Cod's famous old detective." She glanced at him sideward. "Tall, lean, salty Asey Mayo, the Codfish Sherlock, the wonderful genius that figured out Porter's miracle tank, the Mark XX. So with a whoop and a holler, they rushed here to see *you.* And don't sit there smiling so smuglike, kidding yourself you've ducked 'em, either. You haven't!"

"Now see here, Jennie, you didn't

promise I'd *do* anything about 'em, did you?"

She smiled. "Thought I could get a rise out of you! No, I never got you into anything, but there's a pile of autograph books inside waitin' for your famous signature—" She broke off as a car rattled up the oystershell driveway and stopped with a great squealing

ASEY MAYO

of brakes. "Why *doesn't* Doc Cummings use his new car instead of that battered old wreck?"

"It is his new car," Asey said. "He can make any vehicle look like that inside of six months. Hi, Doc. Aren't you through work early today?"

"Hi, Asey, hello, Jennie. I'm not through." The doctor eased his short, stocky figure into a steamer chair, and sighed. "Asey, was peace always like this?"

"You mean sittin' out under a bright sun, watchin' marshmallow cream clouds in a bright blue sky?" Asey said quizzically.

"That's not peace you're describing," Cummings interrupted. "That's a butcher's Christmas calendar. Now during the war years, I had a distinct mental picture of peace. All my young colleagues had come home and taken over my practice. I was lovable ol' Doc Cummings, who retired so gracefully. I lived like a king on the royalties of my best-selling memoirs. Haven't either of you the common decency to ask me the title of 'em?"

Asey chuckled. "I thought you'd settled on 'Night and Day'," he said. "Or 'From Mustard Plaster to Penicillin'. Made up another new name?"

"It's a dilly!" Cummings said happily. "Listen! 'Cummings and Goings, the Record of a General Practitioner.' Oh, well, I thought it was funny! But then, I've been up struggling with the toys of peace since five this morning."

"Whose baby came?" Jennie asked interestedly.

"Oh, nothin's been as normal and sensible as a baby! At five, I was at the newly reopened Sandbar Inn, where the newly arrived chef hadn't bothered to use newly opened lobsters in his Lobster Surprise. At seven, I coped with a kid whose inland mother let him paddle in the nice back shore undertow before breakfast."

"Collarbone?" Asey asked.

"Uh-huh, and four ribs. That mother will treat oceans with more respect from now on. Let's see. Then there was that sedan whose driver ignored the big Tonset reverse curve. She's going to see quaint Cape Cod from a hospital window. And just as I finished extricating a cod hook from the calf of a leg, I was waylaid by a group of college kids—"

"That project!" Jennie said. "Twenty of 'em, from Larrabee College?"

"Well, they mentioned Larrabee. But there were just four girls."

"That ex-Wave with the glasses, I bet," Jennie said, "and those quiet other ones. The rest are probably at the Country Club! Let me *tell* you—"

CUMMINGS laughed when she concluded her description of the project's visit.

"You make 'em sound like seven-year locusts," he remarked. "But my four girls were deadly serious. Came to call on me in my capacity as Chairman of the Board of Health. Wanted vital statistics on Public Health and Welfare. I gave 'em a copy of the Annual Town Report, and excused myself. Very urgent case." He paused and cleared his throat. "Matter of fact, Asey, I *do* have rather an urgent little project I want you to help me with."

"There, Asey," Jennie broke in. "All he means is that he's got some small chore. But when he calls it a *project,* see, it seems like something big and im*por*tant!"

"It *is* important!" Cummings retorted. "Furthermore, Asey's going to help me with it. He's got to."

Jennie stared at him.

"If I didn't know you as well as I do," she observed thoughtfully, "I'd say you were setting out to call on your first girl, and wanted Asey to come along with you for moral support. Hm. Got on your best suit. And a brand new white shirt."

To Asey's amazement, the doctor sat there, silent and red-faced. Jennie went on, "Well, before Asey sets out projectin', he's got to have some lunch. You look as if a cup of soup would do *you* good, too! I'll bring it out here."

Cummings gazed after her ample figure as she bustled into the kitchen, and shook his head.

"Sometimes," he said, "I'm dazed to speechlessness by the things women seem to know instinctively! How do they do it?"

"Meanin'," Asey said with a grin, "that you *are* callin' on a girl? Is that your urgent project? What'll your wife say?"

"I didn't— Look, Asey, I don't know how to say this, but look—there's a woman in town I want to meet, and you're going to help me!"

"But, Doc—"

"No buts, no buts!" Cummings said. "If you don't get out of those fishing clothes, and dress yourself up, and take your new Porter roadster, and help me meet her, I shall consider it an unfriendly and hostile act. . . . Oh, stop chuckling!"

"Who is she, Doc?"

"Carolyn Barton Boone," Cummings said, almost with reverence.

"Boone," Asey said. "Boone—oh, sure. Blond an' beautiful, an' married to a governor, isn't she?"

"She's the wife of Senator Willard P. Boone, and she's the president of Larrabee College, and—"

"Oho!" Asey interrupted. "So she came to town with this Larrabee project, huh?"

"I don't know," Cummings said. "I was just told that she's staying over with the Douglasses. Asey, I've always been a little fascinated with Carolyn Barton Boone. She's a writer, and she was a judge, and she had a front seat on all the atom bomb stuff, and flew to all the war fronts and so forth and so on. *You* know the Douglasses, don't you, Asey?"

Asey shook his head.

"You don't?" Cummings sounded bewildered. "Why, damn it, you must! They've been patients of mine for the last five years! You've got to—because you're going to take me there to meet Carolyn Barton Boone!"

"If they're patients of yours," Asey said gently, "what difference does it make whether I know 'em or not? *You do!*"

"I know 'em professionally, that's all!" Cummings retorted. "I can't just barge in and say I want to meet their house guest, please!"

"Why not?" Asey said. "You're better known the length and breadth of the Cape than this Boone woman is," Asey said. "You—"

He broke off as the town's fire-house siren, affectionately known as the Bull Moose, gave its daily pièce de résistance, the ear-shattering one o'clock blast.

Instantly, Jennie came flying and snapped on the midget radio.

"Golly!" Cummings said. "Time for the Quick Quiz Question! You got paper to take it down on?"

"Ssh, listen!" Jennie said breathlessly.

SHE and the doctor stared at each other in blank bewilderment as a blare of hot jazz issued from the little set.

"Wrong station, maybe?" Cummings suggested.

"No! It's smack on WBBB! Why, isn't that funny? And the Bull Moose hadn't stopped when I snapped it on! Asey, what's the time by your watch?"

"Approximately one-four."

"Four minutes *past?* Tch, tch, tch!" Jennie clucked her tongue. "That means the Bull Moose was late! Hm! Sylvester'll hear about this!"

"Sylvester," Cummings said cheerfully, "might as well pick out his tombstone. He'll be torn apart by sunset."

"Punch, brothers, punch with care! Punch in the presence of the passen-jaire . . . ."

"Sylvester?" Asey said. "Who's Sylvester?"

"For a man that's supposed to be so darn great and so darn bright and so darn wonderful," Jennie retorted irritably, "you do seem to miss more that's goin' on around you! Well, you see, we didn't have any time siren during the war because we saved the siren for an air raid signal—"

"I know all that!" Asey said.

"And when we returned to what we laughingly refer to as a peace-time basis," Cummings said, "it was unanimously voted to sound the Bull Moose at one instead of the traditional twelve noon."

"Uh-huh, I'd noticed," Asey said. "But I never understood why the time was changed."

"Because of the Quick Quiz Question, of course!" Jennie said. "This way, nobody could *miss* it! You must've noticed how I always rush to the radio just at one o'clock!"

"You rush to it so many times durin' the day," Asey said. "Why's this question thing so important?"

"Why, you take down this Quick Quiz Question they ask at one," Jennie explained, "and then you run find the answer if you don't know it—and you usually don't—and then when they call you on the phone and ask you the answer in person, you tell 'em—and you get things! Free! Only yesterday, a girl in Taunton got an electric fan, and a wrist watch, and a waffle iron. All free, and all just for knowing what a Turdus Migratorius was!"

"There, see?" Cummings said with irony. "A munificent horn of plenty disgorging rare and precious items on your very doorstep—provided you've equipped yourself with such little smatterings of incidental information as the Latin name for a robin! I personally never miss it—poor, poor Sylvester!"

"Who's Sylvester?" Asey demanded.

"In a sense," Cummings said, "he's the power behind the throne. Owing to some small part or other being currently unavailable, the automatic mechanism of the Bull Moose is out of order. During the crisis, Sylvester Nickerson sounds the Bull Moose with his bare hands. He—"

"Hold it!" Asey said. "He's the one they used to call Silly Nick, isn't he? Tall, gangly fellow, always chewin' tobacco? Used to sit on the movie steps at four so's to be on time for the show at seven?"

Cummings nodded. "While Silly Nick is no mental colossus, he's on time. Never knew him to miss before. By the way, Jennie—"

"Listen!" Jennie interrupted excitedly. "The phone's ringing! What'll I do?"

Asey drily suggested that she answer it.

"But s'pose it's Station WBBB calling for the Question answer—and here we don't even know what the Question *is!*"

She rushed indoors only to reappear within a minute, muttering.

"It was only that Mrs. Douglass, Asey. She's lost another house guest. Carolyn Barton Boone, that blonde who's—why goodness me, Doctor, whatever are you making such noises for?—in the papers so much. Mrs. Douglass says will you please find her."

"Asey Mayo!" Cummings was spluttering with indignation. "You told me you didn't know the Douglasses!"

"I don't," Asey said. "Except two or three times Mrs. Douglass's called an' said she's lost a guest, an' since I'm a detective, do I mind awfully findin' 'em please. An' then the flibberty-gibbet calls back an' says they've found the company they mislaid, an' it was awfully nice of me. I never did anything about any of her lost guests, I never met her or saw her, an' I don't even know whereabouts they live!"

"Pochet Point."

DR. CUMMINGS arose and threw away his cigar stub. "Come on, man, get started! And while we're gone, Jennie, see if you can't locate someone who happened to hear the Question."

"And what about lunch?" Jennie demanded with a touch of asperity. "It's all *ready!*"

"Oh, we'll be back inside of half an hour. Come on, Asey, rouse yourself! This way you won't have to dress up. You can be your picturesque self, complete with yachting cap and fishing clothes."

"Wa-el, all right," Asey said, as he got to his feet. "I'll humor you."

"Not my car!" Cummings steered him away from the battered sedan. "We're going in your new Porter roadster!"

"Do we have to take that confounded Christmas tree, Doc? It's so doggone flashy! The old one's so much—"

"This *new* one!" Cummings insisted. "Come along!"

Before the pair reached the garage, the telephone rang once more, and Jennie hurried to answer it.

She was at the back door calling Asey at the top of her lungs as the brand-new Porter roadster glided down the driveway and on to the main road, but neither Asey nor the doctor heard her frantic yells.

Jennie shrugged as the chrome-plated car flashed along the shore road. She walked slowly back into the kitchen.

"Well," she murmured, "I s'pose there's no sense wasting it!"

Deftly she poured soup into a thermos bottle, packeted sandwiches in waxed paper, wrapped up slabs of sugar gingerbread, slid two apple puffs into a covered dish, packed the lot neatly in a basket, and tucked a damask dinner napkin over the top.

She was setting the basket on the floor of Cummings' sedan when the telephone again sent her scurrying back.

"Oh, hello, Emma!" she said. "No, we missed the Question, too. That darn old Sylvester was late with the Bull Moose! Yes, Asey's been back home a day and a half—Porter Motors is striking. Anyhow, I think he's going to be pretty busy right here in town for a while. Why? Because Mrs. Douglass just called to say that Carolyn Barton Boone —you know, that pretty blonde who's in the papers and newsreels so much—well, she's just been murdered over to Pochet Point."

II

"MRS. DOUGLASS really isn't a flibberty-gibbet at all," Cummings remarked casually as they stopped for the red light at the village four corners. "You've got the wrong impression. You know, I begin to sense what you mean about this car. I keep feeling I should bow to the populace and have rose petals thrown at me."

Asey chuckled.

"It was built to the specifications of a Balkan prince," he said. "Then he strung along with the wrong People's Party, and hadn't enough money left to buy even one of the six horns. So Bill Porter an' I tossed for the thing,

Mrs. Boone, dressed in perfectly fitting white slacks and white jacket, had been murdered (CHAP. II)

an' I lost. I don't think I ever saw more useless gadgets. That curved hook by your elbow is to hang one of them uniform swords on, for example."

"Won't you find that handy man," Cummings said. "As I was saying, Asey, Louise Douglass isn't a flibberty-gibbet. She and Harold Douglass are a pleasant, amusing couple."

"I haven't been over to Pochet Point in years," Asey said thoughtfully, "but the only house I recall there is old Aunt Della Hovey's."

"That's it," Cummings said, "and it hasn't been renovated by a modernistically minded architect, either . . . See here, you don't for a moment suppose that Carolyn Barton Boone's really lost, do you? There are some pretty treacherous marshes and bogs over this way!"

"If she's followin' the tradition of the Douglass' other guests," Asey said soothingly, "she's just got mislaid."

Cummings suddenly pointed over toward the edge of a swamp.

"See that thin girl standing by the pines?" he said. "That's one of the Larrabee project group who came to my office. I think she's the ex-Wave Jennie mentioned. Now what on earth is she doing there with a notebook?"

"Mosquito control's the only explanation I could offer," Asey said. "Which lane here, Doc? The left?"

They drove for minutes along a rut road bordered with post and rail fencing.

"They keep their fences neat an' mended," Asey observed. "Oh, Doc! Look! Look at her!"

He braked the roadster so abruptly that Cummings's head thudded against the windshield.

"Carolyn Barton Boone?" he demanded. "Where? Where is she?"

"Look, Doc!" Asey pointed.

Cummings, staring in the direction indicated by Asey's finger, snorted with irritation.

"I can't see anything except the railroad!" he said.

Asey pushed his yachting cap back on his head.

"You can't," he said gently, "see anything *but* a railroad? Oh, for Pete's sakes, Doc! Where did it *come* from? An' look—look up back of the house there! An engine—a baby Baldwin! An' a Pullman!"

"Oh, yes, yes!" Cummings said impatiently. "That's the Pochet Point and Back Shore Railroad!"

"But whose *is* it? An' what's it doin' here? I never saw it before."

"Oh, for the love of heaven!" Cummings said in exasperation. "We came to see Carolyn Barton Boone, remember? This old railroad just belonged to Louise Douglass's grandfather, that's all."

"I see," Asey said. "I see! Something to remember grampa by!"

Cummings drew a long breath.

"Let's stop being sardonic," he said with icy sweetness. "Why, man alive, you can see the Pochet Point and Back Shore any time! In fact, Harold Douglass won't let you get away without taking at least two round trips. You never went through more childish fiddle-dedee! First he sells you a ticket in the station. Then—"

"Station? Where's the station?"

"Then"—Cummings ignored the interruption—"he takes off his ticket-seller's green-visored cap and puts on a conductor's cap and coat, and gets on the train, and punches the damn ticket. Then he takes off the conductor's cap and coat and puts on an engineer's outfit and rides you around and around. *After* I've met Carolyn Barton Boone, I'll see that you're given the whole silly works!"

"Doc, don't you like railroads?" Asey asked curiously.

"I can take railroads," Cummings returned with dignity, "or I can leave railroads alone. Oh, drive along to the house!"

"A narrow gauge!" Asey said. "It must've been an old short line somewhere. Happen to know what line it was in the good old days, Doc?"

"It was the Harmony and North Blodgett," Cummings said. "Get along!"

"The Harmony and North Blodgett! Why, I knew that line! I used to take it, years ago, to get to old Cap'n Porter's place in Maine!"

ASEY started up the roadster and stopped on the gravel turntable by the Douglass' house.

By the time Cummings had located the push button which opened the car door, Asey was striding in the direction of the engine and the Pullman, drawn up by the little boxlike station.

"Asey!" Cummings called in aggrieved tones. "Asey, come back here!"

After the fourth futile shout, the doctor gave up and hurried after him.

"The old Harmony and North Blodgett! Look at that old Pullman, Doc, look at her!" Asey said with admiration. "Isn't she a beauty? That's luxury de luxe! Look at that fine gold leaf stripin', an' the gold filagree work."

"While I shrink from throwing any monkey wrenches into this nostalgic rhapsody," Cummings said in his most acidulous tones, "may I point out that we came here to find Carolyn Barton Boone?"

"To shake hands an' say howdy. I know. But I just got to take a glance. Doc, this is the very same Pullman I used to travel on to Blodgett Centre. Look!" He pointed to the ornate gilt lettering running along the side. "The *Lulu Belle!* Isn't she something!"

Cummings stared stonily at the *Lulu Belle* as Asey raptly walked the length of it.

"The baby Baldwin engine!" Asey said. "I got to take—"

Cummings grabbed his arm.

"Asey, you can play with the nice choo-choo as long as you want to if you'll only just come inside the house first and help me meet Carolyn Barton Boone before her blond hair turns to silver, and she's taken to a cane!"

But Asey had gripped the filigreed iron grab-rail and swung himself up the single step to the end platform of the *Lulu Belle.*

With a loud sigh, Cummings followed him.

"This was the smokin' end, see?" Asey said as he slid open the paneled mahogany door. "Here's where old Cap'n Porter an' his business friends used to sit, in these fancy wicker chairs, an' toss more millions around than you an' I ever dreamed existed. Up there's the observation end with the red plush settees. Oh, golly, those old chandeliers with the jinglin' glass prisms, an' the silver-plated spittoons, an' the thick red carpet—the thick red carpet—"

Asey stopped.

He couldn't bring himself to add that on the thick red carpet lay the body of Carolyn Barton Boone!

"What's the matter?" Cummings demanded sharply. "What're you blocking the aisle like this for?"

"But, Doc—"

Cummings pushed past him.

His facial expression never changed as he gazed down at the still figure on the thick red carpet. Asey watched the doctor's professionally impersonal survey of the situation.

Mrs. Boone, dressed in the perfectly fitting white slacks and white jacket which were almost her trademark in the newsreels, had been murdered. By no stretch of the imagination could she have managed to inflict on herself that ugly head wound.

Cummings, kneeling on the carpet, looked up at Asey.

"A rabbit punch," he remarked. "Beautifully placed. But not expert." With a brief gesture, he indicated the pointed silver bud vase that was lying in the aisle. "And what a nasty thing to use for a weapon!"

"They wrenched it out of the ring-holder above Seat One," Asey commented.

"Your cunning little Pullman is certainly a fertile field for blunt instruments!" Cummings said. "Though I'd have taken my chances with one of the silver-cuspidors, or a mahogany footstool. Well, let's see, now!"

He squinted up at the gold plush Pullman seat beside him.

"That's what I thought," Asey said. "She was sittin' there, half-swung around to look out of the window. Then, all of a sudden, she hears a sound behind her. She turned her head an' looked, an' then started to her feet. I'd say she'd almost stood up when she was caught with that blow. That'd explain her pitchin' into the aisle."

CUMMINGS gave the plush chair an experimental turn.

"It sticks a bit," he said. "That's probably why she just turned her head. Well,"—he got up and dusted the carpet lint from his knees—"if I hadn't gone home and changed into this suit, and then frittered away so much time going over to get you—"

"Are you tryin' to say that she hasn't been dead longer'n an hour?" Asey demanded.

"If I'd arrived here at noon, I think I might have met her." Cummings paused. "Heavily made up, isn't she? Not as young as I'd somehow imagined. I'd have said that she was about thirty-five or so. She's easily fifty. Maybe more."

"Jennie calls that stage-managin'," Asey said. "With her slim figure, that white suit gives the impression of her bein' youthful, an' that green scarf around her neck is just the right shade to make her hair seem more gold, an' her skin whiter. An 'she doesn't wear a lot of sparklin' rings to call your attention to her hands. Now I didn't notice that before!"

"What?" Cummings asked curiously as Asey bent down.

"See what she's grippin' in her hand? It's a green ticket!"

"I missed it too," Cummings said. "Hm. It's a punched ticket, furthermore. Looks as though Harold Douglass had started to give her a ride—that's an ugly way for me to put it, I must say! Well, where do we go from here? All hell will break loose on this business, I suppose. And Halbert'll be delirious with pleasure!"

"Albert who?"

"Halbert. The new state cop in charge of this area. Hanson's been transferred to the western part of the state."

"Experienced man?" Asey inquired.

"Halbert? Experienced? Why, he virtually ran the Counter-intelligence of the United States Army with his own two hands. I assure you," Cummings added with irony, "that no corporal since Napoleon was ever more essential! I try not to think of his three uncles who actively engage in politics."

Asey started to walk to the end platform. "Think one of us should stay here?" Cummings asked.

Asey shrugged. "If no one knows she's here except you an' me an' the murderer, I don't think any guard's necessary."

Neither of them spoke until they were crossing the gravel turntable by the house.

"Seems incredible that the Douglasses don't know about this!" Cummings said absently. "But they can't know, or there'd have been some hue and cry. I suppose they must be out hunting for her, or they'd have seen us when we drove in."

"This is a pleasant place." Asey surveyed with approval the neat white Cape Cod house with its dark green blinds.

"Oh, they take good care of everything. They promised Aunt Della they would, and not change anything." After a perfunctory knock, Cummings shoved open the paneled front door. "Notice all their ship pictures, Asey. All of old Aunt Della's family stuff."

A tall, dark, powerfully built man in his forties, wearing khaki shorts and a white crew-neck sweater, entered the hall from a door to the right.

"Douglass!" Cummings said in surprise. "We didn't think anyone was home!"

"It's providential, Doctor—*was* it you she called? I phoned your house, but your wife didn't know where you'd gone. Really, I'm terribly worried about her." He turned to Asey and smiled politely. "Mayo, isn't it? Glad to see you. "She's still out, Doctor. Out cold!"

Cummings looked from Douglass to Asey, then back to Douglass again.

"Who," he said crisply, "is out cold?"

"Why, Louise! I heard her making a phone call, and then she called me, but she'd fainted before I got to her. She's in here." He led them into the living room from which he'd just emerged.

The sight of the woman stretched out limply on the chintz-covered couch in front of the long fireplace was awe-

inspiring enough, but Asey found that he was almost too impressed with the room itself to notice her much.

He hadn't, he decided, seen so many miscellaneous objects enclosed by four walls since he'd been a small boy living in his sea-going grandfather's house.

And they were exactly the same sort of things.

Like those mercury glass goblets, with ships' names etched on them, that stood on the mantel, and like the vast, gold-tooled family Bible in the exact center of the Chippendale table. It was Old Home Week to see again such a collection of sailors' scrimshaw work, and odd chunks of coral, and ivory tusks, and peacock fans, gold-knobbed captains' canes, wax flowers, ivory elephants on teakwood stands, and a full-rigged ship in a bottle.

And shells! Small pink shells from the Indies, and conch shells from India, and one huge shell from Africa big enough to bathe a baby in!

"Golly!" Asey said.

THE floor was covered with hooked rugs, and every inch of wall space was filled with pictures of ships, with hull models, with framed daguerreotypes and crayon portraits.

"See what you can do for her, Doctor!" Harold Douglass was saying anxiously to Cummings. "Louise never fainted before in her life!"

"She'll be all right!" Cummings said shortly. "Stop worrying!"

"Oh," Douglass said. "Well, I suppose you know!" He turned somewhat hesitantly to Asey. "I notice you've been looking around the room, Mayo. We promised Aunt Della Hovey that we'd keep certain things just as she'd always kept them, but it's rather startling to people seeing it for the first time."

Asey smiled.

"Startlin'?" he said. "This's the first native house taken over by an outlander that I ever felt at home in. This, Mr. Douglass, is the real McCoy! What's the matter with Mrs. Douglass, doc?"

While he couldn't fathom the expression on Cumming's face, Asey knew that something was wrong.

"Well," Cummings said, "she's had a severe shock, and she hasn't come to. But she will!"

"I never felt so damn helpless!" Douglass said. "I didn't know what to do when I found her lying out there in the hall!"

"Go get a glass of water," Cummings said briskly. "Put two—no, three ice cubes in it, and just a pinch of salt. Three grains."

Asey raised his eyebrows questioningly as Douglass bolted from the room.

Cummings answered with a wink, then went into an elaborate pantomime from which Asey deducted that Mrs. Douglass never had fainted at all.

"Her color's good," Asey said interestedly as he strolled over to the couch and looked down at the motionless figure. Mrs. Douglass, he decided, was a lot younger than her white hair indicated. In her thirties, perhaps.

Cummings winked again. "Yes," he said solemnly, "but I don't like her

[*Turn page*]

breathing. I'm going to write out a prescription. You can whip up town and get it filled. Funny about this sort of thing," Cummings added casually as he scratched away on the prescription blank pad. "Nine times out of ten, when the patient regains consciousness, you'll find they can't remember a thing. Here, give it to Billy at the drug store."

With some difficulty, Asey managed to decipher the doctor's minute handwriting. The slip said:

She's okay. Faking. This is all fishy. You pump D. I'll pump her. *Both* stalling. D. took 1st Aid & shd certainly know faints & what to do!

Asey tucked the prescription blank into his pocket as Douglass came panting back with the water.

"Fine. Thanks." Cummings drank the water, to Douglass's obvious surprise. "Now, you go along with Asey and get a prescription filled for Louise."

"But should I leave?" Douglass asked uncertainly.

Cummings nodded. "You've been under a strain, need a change. She's coming to, needs complete quiet. Get 'long, now. I want that stuff from the drug store!"

Asey herded Douglass toward the door.

III

AS DOUGLASS got into Asey's roadster, he said diffidently that he didn't feel at all right about leaving Louise.

"But I suppose Cummings knows best," he said. "What an incredible car! I'm glad to have the chance to meet you, Mayo, after hearing so much about you. Louise and I were thinking of asking you to come to this buffet supper we seem to be throwing tomorrow. We have a house guest, Carolyn Barton Boone. You've probably heard of her?"

"Uh-huh," Asey said. He didn't have to turn his head to know he was being stared at sharply, thanks to the Balkan prince's lavish specifications on side mirrors.

"Of course, asking anyone to meet Boone is a tough problem! Fraught with pitfalls, as Louise put it."

"So?" Asey asked. "Why?"

"Well" — Douglass shrugged— "Boone's never been exactly lukewarm in her opinions or reticent in expressing them. You're not just for Boone, or against her. You're very-very-for, or very-very-against."

"I'm neutral," Asey said. "Doc, on the other hand, is very-very-for."

"Is he?" Douglass said. "Never happened to discuss her with him."

"An' what about you?" Asey asked in what he hoped was a casual tone. "Are you pro, or con?"

He saw the corners of Douglass's mouth curve upward slightly.

"My role in this, Mayo," he said, "is that of the perfect parent."

"The perfect parent? Er—whose?"

"Layne Douglass, who is twenty-four and an instructor at Larrabee College," Douglass said, with resignation, "might be summed up impartially as pro-Boone."

"Twenty-four?" Asey mentally revised his estimate of the Douglass' respective ages.

"And you do not tell a modern girl of twenty-four what you think of her boss," Douglass said, "or present your somewhat biased personal opinion as a sufficient reason for her taking a position somewhere else."

Asey chuckled. He was beginning to enjoy Harold Douglass.

"To think," the latter continued, "that Layne could have catapulted Carolyn Barton Boone into our house last night—without notice! *Dar*-lings!" —he assumed a creditable falsetto— "*dar*-lings, we've come to make a check on a project!"

"So that project's the cause of the invasion, huh?"

"Yes. Boone suddenly took it into her head to do a little field work and find out just exactly why some of the various projects kept getting gummed up so badly. We've seen Layne through a lot—measles, wisdom teeth, pilots suffering from delusions of grandeur, beardless Ensigns. But bringing Boone here!"

Asey glanced at him in the side-view

mirror. "How long is she plannin' to stay?"

"Three days!" Douglass shook his head. "We've gaily opened our house to the project members and we're throwing this fish fry and buffet supper for them and Boone tomorrow, and we're doing it all with a fixed smile. No, I am not a pro-Boone man!"

"Difference in political concepts," Asey suggested, "or social concepts, or don't you approve of her educational notions, or what?"

"Purely personal reasons," Douglass said. "One of those emotional reactions that should have faded with the years, but hasn't. When Boone stuck her beautifully coiffed blond head into our living room last night, I felt that same old urge to rise up, right in the middle of Aunt Della's decor, and murder her in cold blood."

"Oh?" Asey said.

"You see, we knew Boone on her way up in the world," Douglass said, "and that's so often a disillusioning time to know the great!"

"What was Mrs. Boone doin' then?" Asey asked.

Douglass laughed shortly. "What she's done all her life. Smashing down everything that stands between her and her goal. Specifically, it was back in the old days of radio. We were all writing for it—Louise still does, you know. In fact, we both do." He smiled. "But don't worry, Mayo. It was a long time ago that Louise and I got in Boone's way— Great glory!"

"What's the matter?"

"I just thought! I shouldn't be going to the village with you!"

ASEY swung the roadster to the curb. "Why not?" he said. "Besides, you're already here."

"In all the excitement of Louise fainting, I forgot! We've lost Boone—oh, not really lost! She's just wandered off somewhere. And my aunt, Mrs. Framingham, is out in a beachwagon hunting for her. I ought to be home straightening things out!"

"D'you often lose your guests?" Asey inquired as he got out of the car.

"Mrs. Douglass has phoned me a couple of times in great anguish about your—er—displaced persons problems."

"Has she? Louise does get panicky when people are mislaid. We've had a few grim experiences with guests who foolishly set off in small boats and had to be rescued by the Coast Guard. And we've put signs on the marshes, warning people off. I don't think Boone has met with any dire accident, but I feel I should hurry back. Will Cummings' medicine take long, d'you think?"

"I don't think so," Asey said, "an' anyway, isn't the medicine for your wife probably more important than locatin' Mrs. Boone?"

"Of course!" Douglass said contritely. "Actually I don't care if Boone is up to her neck in the bog of the east marsh! My real concern is Louise. She'd go berserk if any little thing happened to Boone while she's staying with us."

"Haven't you any idea where Mrs. Boone went to?" Asey asked casually. "Golly, how could you lose track of her?"

"You might as well try to keep tabs on a flea!" Douglass said. "She started off to meet the Larrabee project when it came this morning, then she had to come back to the house—phone calls were pouring from all over. She finally had them all relayed back to her college office. Then as I had her all set for a ride on the railroad, she disappeared—for a phone call, I thought. But when I went indoors, Louise said she wasn't there."

"But didn't any of your servants see her?"

"Servants?" Douglass said. "Are you kidding? We haven't been able to get any for years, except for a cleaning woman on Fridays! I was just starting to take a look around the marshes when I found Louise on the hall floor. She must have felt ill, and called Cummings. That was how you two happened to turn up, wasn't it?"

Asey evaded the question.

"Cummings'll turn me over his knee if I don't get his prescription filled," he said.

Inside the drug store, he made his way out to the small back room that served as a pharmacy, and asked cheerfully for a four-ounce bottle of tap water.

"Just color it pink, an' label it 'Cummings-Special', Billy," he added. "The doc's humorin' a patient."

The druggist grinned.

"Doc sure is busy, isn't he? I just saw his car rattle by here for about the twentieth time today."

"His car?" Asey said. "Rattlin' by here? But his car's over at my place!"

"He parked right around by the post office, Asey."

Asey strolled to the front of the store and looked out the window.

There was no sign of Cummings' sedan by the post office. Neither, he discovered with a start of surprise as he turned his head, was there any sign of his own roadster, out front. Asey rushed into the street.

His chrome-plated car was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh!" Asey shoved his yachting cap on the back of his head. "Now what in time would Douglass go and do *that* for?"

Asey hitched a ride on an oil truck that deposited him at the foot of his own oystershell driveway. Cummings's sedan wasn't parked by the house, but Asey dismissed that as unimportant after discovering that Jennie wasn't at home, either. Without question, she had taken the car.

"But why the doc's?" he murmured as he walked to the garage. "Whyn't she take her own coupe, or my old roadster?"

He was still asking himself questions as he took out the roadster and started to drive back quickly to the Douglass house.

Who had Mrs. Douglass telephoned—provided she had? And why had she thereupon fainted—or pretended to faint?

And why hadn't Douglass guessed that her long-drawn-out period of unconsciousness was a fake?

"An' why'd he swipe my car an' beat it? What about that feller, anyway?"

THE gravel spun under his wheels as he braked to a stop in the Douglass driveway.

There was no sign of Cummings' sedan. That meant that Jennie, too lazy to walk to the garage, had taken it to go shopping in.

There was no sign of his new roadster—and what that meant, Asey didn't know.

"Where in time did he go to in it?" he said aloud as he strode into the house. "Hey, Doc! Mrs. Douglass! Cummings!"

Nobody answered.

The house was empty. Asey went through it twice, room by room.

As he came down the back stairs to the kitchen, he helped himself to some sandwiches from a plate on the kitchen table, then went out on the back step and sat there, munching thoughtfully.

He had topped off his impromptu lunch with fruit and some cookies when he noticed the little green slip of paper blowing along the driveway.

Asey jumped up and grabbed it as it bobbled along past him. It *was* a ticket. A punched green ticket! Asey started off toward the Pullman on a dead run.

Like the Douglass house, the *Lulu Belle* was empty, too!

The pointed silver bud vase was back in its holder above Seat One. The gold plush swivel chair beside which Cummings had knelt was now back in line with all the fifteen other gold plush swivel chairs. A Boston newspaper—that morning's paper — covered the dampish spot where someone had eradicated bloodstains.

Asey pushed one of the plush chairs around and sat down. This situation required a brief review! He and Cummings had left the *Lulu Belle* at roughly a quarter to two. It was now five minutes to three. Seventy minutes.

And that was just about sixty-five minutes more than anyone had really needed!

For someone who had previously been armed with a newspaper and a damp wash cloth, slightly less than five minutes would have sufficed for the task of replacing that vase, scrubbing the red

carpet, dropping the newspaper, and making off with the body.

Harold Douglass would have had plenty of time to do it, after rushing back from the village in the new roadster! Putting it the other way, Asey supposed fourteen separate people had had the opportunity.

The project bunch, for example. Twenty of them. They had been offered the run of the place. Then there were the Douglasses. And their daughter.

"And that aunt Mrs. Somebody-or-other that was out huntin' Mrs. Boone in a beachwagon!"

And Dr. Cummings—where in thunderation was Cummings?

Where were the lot of them? Where'd they gone to? The whole place was as lifeless as a tourist post card.

Twenty-six people, more or less. Why, twenty-six people—and a corpse! —couldn't just vanish off the face of Pochet Point!

And where were the police? At least by now they should have sent someone here in response to Cummings' telephone call!

Of course, he thought with a grin, explaining the situation was going to be a little awkward.

"Dear Mr. Halbert, whose uncles are so good in politics," he murmured, "we used to have a body here that would have put you on the front pages of every newspaper in the whole country. But it seems all we got left is a green ticket with a punch in it! Huh!"

He swung down from the platform and marched off back to the house. On this new tour of inspection, he looked under beds, examined closets and cupboards, poked around eaves closets, and subjected the cellar to what amounted to a cross-examination.

Then he tackled the barn, whose sprawling first floor was a combination garage and general catch-all.

The more compact second floor was an elaborate guest apartment, obviously where Mrs. Boone had stayed. Her rawhide suitcase was perched on a luggage rack, but she hadn't bothered to unpack more than a pair of green silk pajamas, a green dressing gown, and a few toilet articles. A green pocketbook that looked like a large envelope lay open on the maple bureau, and Asey glanced at its impersonal contents. A folding check book, a sheaf of travelers' checks, a leather change purse, a gold pencil, and a lipstick.

ASEY'S footsteps seemed to him to echo hollowly as he descended the stairs, and he began to feel oppressed by the stillness.

To all intents and purposes, there never had been any murder at Pochet Point!

"But doggone, there was one! I just keep missin' what's wrong here!"

The only thing left which had escaped his minute attention was the water tower, the relic of an old windmill water-pumping system that plainly hadn't been used in many years. Asey strode over to it.

A really ingenious person, he thought as he mounted the weatherbeaten ladder, would have hoisted Mrs. Boone's body up here. There were blocks and tackles in the barn, and plenty of stout rope. He felt genuinely disappointed when he found nothing there—not even a bird's nest.

Just as he gingerly started the downward climb, feeling that at any moment everything might collapse beneath him, he caught sight of something flashing in the meadows beyond the pine grove to his right.

A mirror? No, not a mirror. That was the chrome-plate of the prince's roadster!

The old water tower was not only trembling like a leaf but groaning as well when he reached ground.

He slid in behind the wheel of his old car and started down the driveway. Five minutes later, he turned off a rut road, parked in a clump of bayberry bushes, and started off on foot toward where he had seen the chromium gleaming.

He came on it standing on another lane that ran between the pine grove and the meadow.

Asey stopped short.

Just beyond the car's rear fender

stood a white sign, whose primary decoration was a gigantic, leering black skull that surmounted particularly gruesome crossbones. The lettering below read:

MUD MEADOW. KEEP AWAY!
IT TOOK FOUR MINUTES FOR A COW TO DISAPPEAR ENTIRELY IN THIS HOLE.
YOU'LL GO QUICKER!
YOU WEIGH LESS! KEEP AWAY!!!

It was signed with Douglass' name.

And just beyond the car's front fender, with her back to him, was a brown-haired girl who seemed at first glance to be wearing a brief white wooly jacket, and absolutely nothing else.

But Asey was less moved by her apparent state of near-nudity than by the fact that she was staring down into the muddy stretch of bog in front of her, rather as if she had been watching something disappear from sight.

Asey's eyes narrowed.

The girl reached into the car and pulled out a khaki-colored Army blanket. She folded it with such meticulousness that she seemed almost to be parodying the gestures of someone folding a blanket.

Then, suddenly, she pitched the folded blanket into the mud hole.

She didn't bother to watch it disappear. Instead she swung around and took off the short white coat, revealing the sort of bathing suit which Jennie was accustomed to refer to as "those disgraceful baby clothes." In Jennie's opinion, not one woman in a million could get away with the things. This girl, Asey decided, was the one who could.

After stretching herself luxuriously, she got into the roadster, sat back, and lighted a cigarette. That was not the nervous gesture of someone who had just re-disposed of a body, Asey thought.

With her cigarette in one corner of her mouth, the girl fumbled in the pockets of the white coat. Then she got out of the car and started hunting around in the bushes.

Finally, behind the car, somewhere near the foot of Douglass' skull and crossbones sign, she found what she'd been searching for.

Asey felt shivers run up and down his spine as he watched her tie around her head the green scarf that Mrs. Boone had been wearing.

IV

THIS, Asey decided, was the place for him to come in. Leaving the shadow of the pines, he strolled over toward the girl. At the sound of his footsteps, she turned her head quickly and smiled. Then her face fell. Asey experienced a vague feeling of being a disappointment to her.

"Good afternoon," he said pleasantly.

"Hello." She wasn't nervous or jumpy, but she was clearly on guard.

"Nice car you got there," Asey remarked.

The girl agreed that it sure was.

"Yours?"

"Nope," she said, "I'm just minding it for a friend. He's over in the woods there."

"I see." Asey saw also that she *had* been dumping something into the mud hole. There were marks where some heavy object had been dragged from the roadster. "I'm Asey Mayo," he went on. "I wonder if you've seen Mrs. Boone around anywhere. I'm huntin' her."

The girl turned as white as her bathing suit. Her voice sounded harsh.

"Is anything wrong with her?"

"I'm just huntin' for her," Asey said with perfect truth. "The Douglasses can't find her."

"Gee!" She leaned back against the seat, and her color began to return. "Gee, you certainly had me scared! I know who you are, of course—I thought for a minute she might have been hurt. Say, I met your Cousin Jennie this morning."

"I bet you're the ex-Wac!"

She extended her hand. "Roger!" she said. "I'm Gerty Rand. I used to be a sergeant."

"An' now," Asey said quizzically, "you're a member of the Larrabee Col-

lege Town Government Project, Section B, or Small Towns Division?"

"Beats hell what the GI-bill did, doesn't it?" She grinned from ear to ear. "Say, what makes with General Boone? She missed the beam somewhere?"

Asey nodded. "That looks like one of her scarves you're wearin' around your head," he remarked.

"It's one of hers," the girl said simply. "She gave it to me."

"Oh?" Asey said. "I thought a scarf that particular green was sort of her special trademark, like."

"Yeah, it is, but she gives 'em away." Gerty explained. "It's like a Good Conduct Badge at Larrabee. She strews 'em around to key personnel when she's in a good mood. This college outfit—Say!" She broke off suddenly. "Say, listen, I got a problem, Mr. Mayo!"

Asey said that he had a problem, himself.

"I keep lookin' at those marks in the ruts. An' I keep askin' myself what in the world you could have been shovin' into Douglass' mud hole here!"

"Oh, that!" Gerty said. "That's a part of the problem. You see, Boone—No, I guess I hadn't ought to start off with her, but I don't know where else—"

"What's Mrs. Boone like, anyway?" Asey asked quickly.

"Well," Gerty said, "well, on public relations, she's tops. Give her a bunch of reporters and ask her—oh, anything. Ask her like what she thinks about Russia, see? She's right back at you—history of Russia in one little sentence, social and economic problems in another, peace of the world demands such-and-such, and while we may feel thus-and-so, why whoop-de-dee for the global good and— What're you laughing at?"

"You," Asey said. "Mostly that little gesture with your hand. I've seen Mrs. Boone use it in newsreels. Go on."

"Of course," Gerty said, "she always lands up straddling the fence, but it sounds swell, and everybody loves her to death."

"An' how about you?" he inquired. "What're your feelin's about her?"

Gerty ignored his questions. "Yes, sir, on PR, Boone is there! Between you and me, though, Shearing's the one that runs the college and keeps the joint buzzin'."

"Who's he?"

"She," Gerty said. "She's just Miss Shearing. She don't seem to have any rank, but just you get something good and fouled up, and everybody says to go see Shearing. Not Boone. Shearing's father started the college and she was head until somebody left the place a lot of dough, and stuck Boone in as president. Shearing came down here with us on the project," she added, "but I think Boone sent her right back—for a pencil, or a piece of Kleenex, or something."

ASEY mentally put Miss Shearing on his list for future reference.

"An' what," he asked again, "are your own feelin's about Mrs. Boone?"

"Look," Gerty said severely, "I don't stick my neck out on my C.O.!"

"Wa-el, what does the rest of the project think of her, then?" Asey persisted.

"That's another part of this problem I got—I mean, I have. Listen, Mr. Mayo, this crowd at Larrabee—well, they're okay. They're right. Only a lot of 'em aren't shook down yet, see? Like Stinky."

"Stinky who?"

"Gee, I forget you don't know! His name is Bill Cotton, but we always call him 'Stinky'," Gerty said. "The way we been talking, it seems like I known you a long time—oh, that's all wrong! Honest, what'm I going to *do?*" she asked unhappily. "If I got to make it proper grammar all the time, what comes out isn't what I want to say. Whyn't you come in and take a load off your feet?" She moved over obligingly and made room for him. "Now, here's the picture, see. Stinky—that's Bill Cotton—he was a fly-boy. Chicken colonel. Big shot. Then, bingo—he's back in school, see, a senior again. Okay! Then there's Jack Briggs. Bad eyes, see? Glasses. Limited service. P.F.C. Briggs, the desk-drawer commando. So he's back being a senior,

too. So what's *he* going to do? He's going to show Stinky who's the brains colonel, see? He's going to be the big shot in school, and the hell with all of Stinky's fruit salad—" She paused.

"Ribbons," Asey said. "I know. Look, could you just maybe clarify this situation of Stinky an' his friend Jack Briggs?"

"Friend? *Friend?* That's just exactly it! He *isn't!* But Stinky's such a sap, he thinks so! Every time we go on one of these projects, Stinky lands up in a cooler somewhere, see, usually D and D—"

"Uh-huh, city girl," Asey said gently, "I know what a drunk an' disorderly charge is."

"Well, so Stinky's in the cooler, and Jack's the bright boy with his work all done. Every time there's an exam, Stinky's in trouble the night before, see? Jack's the bright boy again. And Stinky, the big sap, doesn't have sense enough to see what's rolling over him!"

"But what's it all got to do with your shovin' things into the mud hole? An' with Mrs. Boone?"

"Look, Mr. Mayo. You see this car?" She waved her hand toward the Balkan prince's fanciful gadgets. "Look. Ten grand!"

Asey nearly corrected her and said twelve.

"Well," Gerty went on, "Stinky stole it."

"Stinky? He stole it?"

"That's right! It's hot. Now, what would you do about that, to begin with?"

"Wa-el, I been wonderin'," Asey said. "You see, it's mine."

"Wow!" Gerty said softly. "Wow!"

"Exactly," Asey said. "Just so! You better talk quick, sarge, an' you better get all the problems into the record."

Gerty smoked half of a cigarette before she answered, then she sat up straight, and reported.

"After leaving your house at approximately twelve noon, Layne Douglass and I proceeded in her car to her house at Pochet Point, where we secured rations—I mean, lunch—which we took to the beach. We swam, ate lunch, and she made sketches. Slightly over an hour ago I started back to the Douglass' house, leaving Layne still working on her sketches. Owing to lack of knowledge of the terrain, I took the wrong path, found myself on this road here, and the first thing I saw when I came around the curve there was this car, and Stinky in it."

"Wow!" Asey said. "Nothin' wrong with your grammar when you report!"

"But it takes so much time! And so" —Gerty dropped her crisp manner— "you see what happened, don't you, Mr. Mayo?"

Asey allowed that he didn't, quite.

"Why, Jack suggested a party, like he always does—on projects, or before exams. So he and Stinky go to the town and get a case of beer, and some gin. Then Jack wonders what's the best way to get it to the inn where we're staying, and says they need a car. Then he looks out the window and sees this roadster, and dares Stinky to take. And Stinky does! *That's* what happened!"

"I thought you were at the beach with Layne Douglass," Asey observed.

"I was—but I know what happened! I know what would have happened later, too. It happens in different ways, but the results are always the same."

"An' what was Stinky doin' over here?" Asey inquired. "Samplin'? Or just en route somewheres?"

"He was lost. I told him to go get Layne, and she'd show us the way back. And the minute he got out of sight, I dumped all the liquor into the mud hole. I know how much dough this crowd has, and I know Jack can't borrow enough to replace what I dumped, no matter how he scrapes around."

"Just how were you plannin' to fix up the car problem?" Asey asked.

"I was going to make Stinky march it back to the owner and apologize like crazy. He *will*, too."

SOMETHING in her voice made Asey suspect that Stinky would probably arrive on his knees, dressed in sackcloth and smeared with ashes.

He asked about the blanket.

"Oh, that? That belonged to Jack. I was so damn sore, I threw it in the muck, too."

"Wa-el," Asey said, "that accounts for the roadster, the mud hole department, an' Stinky an' Jack. Now—about Mrs. Boone. Just where does she enter into this problem of yours?"

"The Sucker Club," Gerty said promptly. "Boone's the founder, organizer, and head girl. Oh, there isn't any such thing really, of course! That's just what Layne Douglass and I call it. You see, Mr. Mayo, Boone's the real trouble with Jack, and Stinky too. They're both right guys. It's just that Boone's made suckers out of both of 'em, only they don't know it!"

"Made suckers out of 'em in what way?" Asey asked curiously. "Gee, if you was—I mean *were*—only another girl!" Gerty sounded wistful. "Your cousin Jennie would see the picture. Well, it's like this. Boone'll go to Jack and say she's making a little speech, or writing a little article, and she'd like his point of view. Just what would a former enlisted man think of this? Then she goes to Stinky and asks his point of view of a fighting officer with twenty-one decorations on the same thing. Don't you see?"

"I think I do," Asey said slowly. "You mean they never get a chance to stop rememberin' what they was an' what they did in the war, because she keeps bringin' it up."

"That's it! Stinky's flattered that a big shot like her should ask him, and he shoots his mouth off. And Jack, he's flattered that she asks him, but he's a little sore because of her still thinking of him as a private, see? Then he goes and cooks up something else that gets Stinky into a mess, to prove that Stinky's the low boy in civilian life. And the suckers—oh, those two big suckers, how they fall for it!"

"An' for her, too?"

Gerty sighed. "Uh-huh. Her too."

"No need askin'," Asey remarked, "which one you're feelin' all that anguish for!"

A little smile flitted across Gerty's face. "Layne Douglass would kill me if she thought I said it, but it ain't—ooop! *isn't*—half the anguish she's feeling about Jack and his actions."

"Oh?"

"They were in college together, before he went into the Army. If she wasn't the refined type, she'd black both his eyes so quick! Honest, people can act so crazy, can't they? Jack calls her 'Doctor' Douglass, like she was a professor about a hundred years old, and she calls him 'Briggs', like he was a freshman of sixteen. And if you said a word to either of 'em about it, they'd kick your teeth in."

Asey suppressed a smile. "How does Layne feel about Mrs. Boone, in view of her makin' a sucker out of Jack?"

"Oh," Gerty said wearily, "she thinks Mrs. Boone is Mrs. God! Sure, she kids about the Sucker Club, but she doesn't hold anything against Boone—no, sir! She's just livid with Jack because he don't catch on. I'm not a one to underestimate the power of a woman—not a woman like Boone, anyway! I don't think she doesn't know her own strength. I know very well she knows it, and uses it, but good!"

"On Jack, for example?" Asey steered her back to the angle which interested him most. "I gather he's fallen for her even though he loves Layne."

"Oh, Jack and Stinky both!" Gerty said. "They eat Boone up, both of 'em! They're goggle-eyed—punch drunk. I tell myself," she added with a touch of bitterness, "it can't be just on account of her lovely grammar."

"Have you bothered," Asey said, "to tell yourself that she's married?"

"Look, I seen that old, bald, weedy windbag!" Gerty retorted. "Married to Senator Willard P. Boone, a girl might as well be single!"

"Now give the old fellow credit," Asey said with a chuckle. "The papers always call him spry."

"Oh, he's agile!" Gerty said crisply. "He's quick on the old pins. Every blonde in school gets set to sprint when Old Horse-face comes to the campus! But I don't count the senator. What I count is secretaries!"

ASEY raised his eyebrows.

"Men secretaries, I mean," Gerty said hurriedly. "Boone always has men because she claims girls get too jealous of her. Eric—the one she's got now—is going into the diplomatic service, so she's hunting for a successor. It's a sort of springboard job, being her secretary is. And—" she grinned—"all of 'em bounce off into the nicest things!"

"So?"

"I think Jack Briggs wants to go into politics."

"And he certainly couldn't ask for a nicer place to bounce into 'em from," Asey said, "than bein' her secretary. That what you mean?"

"Yeah. Like Eric said to me last week, you meet such interesting people, working for her! And Stinky, he has some idea he'd either like to teach, or run a school," Gerty went on. "He'd contact some pretty interesting people, too."

"An' if one of 'em should get it?"

Gerty winced. "Then either Layne Douglass is going to do some pillow-biting, or I—well, I don't think mummy'll stick around Larrabee College to watch, if Stinky wins."

"What did you do," he asked curiously, "before you went into the Army?"

"Show business," Gerty said. "I was twenty then, and I'd been in show business for five years. I didn't know one part of speech from another, and I didn't starve. What are you asking all this for?"

"About you?" Asey returned. "I didn't mean to pry, but I was curious."

"Don't stall, chum! It's Boone you wanted to know all about. It's her you been so interested in! I'm just beginning to catch on! So Boone's lost? Lost? Okay, chum, let's have it! What's happened to Boone?"

Asey said truthfully that he didn't know.

"She *was* at the Douglass'," he continued, as Gerty made a derisive sound of disbelief, "an' then—well, they sort of lost track of her. I wish you wouldn't be so suspicious-like. I am huntin' Mrs. Boone because—she's lost!"

The irony in Gerty's voice, Asey thought, would have done credit to Dr. Cummings.

"To the person sending in the best answer, in fifty words or less, to our question, 'Why is Asey Mayo hunting Mrs. Boone?' we will give, absolutely free and without charge, a two hundred and forty-eight piece set of genuine, bone-type china," Gerty said. "Including two pickle dishes. And just a tip, folks. The answer is *not,* and I quote, 'Because she's lost!' Unquote."

Asey sighed.

"I can see," he said, "where you an' my Cousin Jennie have a lot in common. She refers to that trait as her perspicacity. Cummings calls it her intuition, and I sometimes feel she does it with mirrors."

"So I'm right?"

"I'm torn," Asey said. "If I say no, you'll go whisper things to the project, an' I don't think I want that. If I say yes, you'll go whisper things to the project, an' I don't think I want that, either. Could you maybe dead-pan till I find out how things shape up? I know she's dead, an' I know she was murdered. I saw her. But I don't know where she is now. I'm huntin'."

Gerty pitched her cigarette stub into the mud hole and watched it disappear.

"I told you a while back," she said, "that I didn't stick my neck out on my C.O. Well, an ex-C.O. is something else. You know what? I've run into a lot of nasties, but she took every prize. And," she added quietly, "I hated her."

"Oh, I guessed that," Asey returned. "After all, she hasn't treated your friend Stinky very nice. She—"

Gerty bit, just as he hoped she would.

"Not because of him! What I think about Boone is strictly personal!" She had never, Asey thought, sounded so deeply in earnest.

While Gerty was smiling, her eyes were suspiciously bright, and Asey decided that he would skip it. Whatever Mrs. Boone had done to the girl, the hurt had been deep enough to sting even now. It must have been a sledgehammer blow.

But if the girl could turn herself into Mrs. Boone with just a simple twist of her wrist and a flick of her finger, or if she could snap out a report like a company commander after a few seconds' thought, then just how far could you trust her? Where did her play-acting begin, and where did it end?

HE ASKED her where she thought Stinky and Layne might be.

Gerty shrugged. "I never expected he'd be this long getting back!" she said. "After all, I sent him packing off in the wrong direction!"

"Whatever for?"

"Your Cousin Jennie," Gerty said with a demure smile, "would catch that one!"

"Wait for him, then," Asey said as he got out of the roadster, "an' bring him an' the car back to the Douglass house." He took a stick and scratched a few lines in the dirt. "Here's the way the lanes go."

"You mean I should drive this thing?"

"You probably drove jeeps, didn't you?"

"Sure, from Casablanca to Berchtesgaden."

"Then I dare say," Asey remarked, "that you'll be able to trundle this job if Stinky doesn't come soon."

"What about you?" Gerty asked.

Asey pointed to the woods. "Oh, I got another roadster," he said. "I keep a spare."

"Dirty capitalist," she said amiably. "And don't worry, Mr. Mayo. I'll deadpan. If Sti—I mean, if somebody gets themselves mixed up in a mess like this, you can't do anything for them!"

V

WHEN Asey reached the edge of the pine woods, he paused and looked back toward the roadster. Gerty had climbed up on the folded car-top, and was stretched out, peacefully sun-bathing.

"An' I'll bet a nickel," he said to himself with a chuckle, "that she played gin-rummy in fox-holes—an' probably won!"

He had nearly reached the place where he'd left his old roadster when someone called to him.

"Yoo-hoo! I beg your pardon! Could you—"

A tall, thin girl in a striped seersucker suit was hurrying toward him, notebook in hand. He recognized her as the ex-Wave Cummings had pointed out earlier, over by the swamp.

"I beg your pardon," she said a little breathlessly, as she adjusted her blue-rimmed glasses, "but would you know the location of an abandoned mosquito-control project in this area?"

"I'm sorry," Asey said, "but I wouldn't. I haven't been over this way in years until today."

Notebook in hand, she marched on through the pine woods.

Asey backed the roadster out of the bayberries.

He felt a sense of relief, on swinging into the Douglass' driveway, to hear the sound of voices. That meant the cops were there, and Cummings. Mrs. Boone's body would have been located.

His first impression as he stopped on the gravel drive was that he'd never seen so many people outside of the Grand Central Station.

Then facts leapt at him.

Cummings wasn't there. Nor his car.

The cops weren't there. Nor their cars!

He hardly recognized Mrs. Douglass as she wove her way through a quartet playing badminton. She was as happy as a lark.

"Where's Cummings?" Asey demanded.

"The doctor? Oh, isn't he with you? Mr. Mayo, I'm sure you'll be happy to know that there was some frightful mistake! She's all right!"

"Who is?"

"Mrs. Boone! Isn't it wonderful? She's all right!"

"You mean"—Asey sounded as incredulous as he felt—"you know where Mrs. Boone is?"

"Well," Mrs. Douglass said, "not exactly *where*, but I know that she's perfectly all right. I was frantic, and then Miss Shearing phoned and said that Mrs. Boone was with her, and all

right, and for me not to worry. Wasn't it silly of me to think she was dead!"

Asey looked at her thoughtfully, while the badminton game the project was playing held a brisk free-for-all almost under the roadster's wheels.

"Do I sort of gather," he said, "that at one time you did think she was dead?"

"What on earth d'you suppose I called you here for?" Mrs. Douglass demanded. "I distinctly said she was dead! In fact, I thought she'd been murdered! I told you—"

"Hold it just a second, please," Asey said. "Just exactly when did you phone me?"

"Just after I phoned and said she was lost!" Mrs. Douglass returned. "After I found her on the floor of the *Lulu Belle!* When I saw her lying there, I rushed in and phoned your house again, and told your cousin. She said you were just leaving and she'd try to catch you! Mr. Mayo, haven't you seen your cousin?"

"I haven't seen Jennie since—oh, for Pete's sakes!" Asey plucked a shuttlecock out of his lap, and tossed it back at a husky, dark-haired girl with a thick fringe of bangs.

"She's been here," Mrs. Douglass said.

"Who?"

"Your cousin! Oh, dear, it's really distracting here, isn't it?"

"What's that?" Asey almost had to yell to make himself heard.

"I said, your cousin left some things for you!" she yelled back. "A basket and a note. I thought you knew all about them. I thought you'd probably come for them!"

Asey got out of the car. "Let's get it, shall we?"

Aunt Della's cluttered living room was so quiet, after Mrs. Douglass had shut down the windows overlooking the lawn, that the silence was almost as deafening to Asey as the outside noise had been.

"I suppose it's a sign that I'm aging rapidly," she remarked, "but it keeps seeming to me that youth keeps getting noisier and noisier, and somehow knocking over more objects! I told Layne they simply could not step foot in this room. Just a moment, I'll get your things."

AFTER she'd left the room, Asey was puzzled to find himself again experiencing that same uncomfortable feeling which had so obsessed him earlier in the afternoon.

Something about this place still bothered him!

Where in thunder was Cummings? And the cops? And Mrs. Boone? And what was this idiotic business of her being "all right"?

"Here you are!" Mrs. Douglass brought in a basket covered with a white napkin, and held out an envelope to him.

Asey slit it open to find that Jennie had apparently sat herself down and written a short novel on the Douglass' fancy blue stationery. A smile came to his lips as he read the first sentence to himself.

Dear Asey, that Mrs. Douglass may be a writer & a wonderful woman & all that but she is certainly a *crazy coot*, that's all I got to say!

She called our house just as you and the doc were leaving & said Mrs. Boone was murdered! Think, think of her getting me all stirred up that way & packing your lunch (there is salt in waxed paper, wrapped up, in corner of basket in case the soup isn't salty enough for you.)

Mrs. Douglass cleared her throat. "Is she explaining everything?"

"Jennie," Asey said, "isn't leavin' a single stone unturned."

He went on to the next page.

So I took the doc's car figuring you'd want it & he'd want his bag, & your lunch, & on the way I stopped in town to ask about the Question but nobody has heard it & everybody is furious with Sylvester. Someone said someone from Truro said he'd forgotten the Question, which somebody else told him at a gas station, but the answer was *catnip*. I mean the Question was the Latin name for it.

Asey sighed, and went on to the last page.

"Does she make everything clear?" Mrs. Douglass wanted to know.

"Yes," Asey said. "Just remember catnip."

The last page read:

So, I guess I was a little late getting here because I had to stop by the Red Cross on an errand & at the post office—

"That's how Billy at the drug store saw the doc's car!" Asey said aloud.

The letter went on:

I still can't see, WHY I didn't tell everybody about the murder only everybody was so busy fussing at Sylvester & *I* was so busy trying to get hold of the Question, I guess I never got the chance to. Just as well because now Mrs. Douglass says all a mistake & Mrs. B. *not* dead *or* murdered & I *do* think you should speak real firm to her about bothering you this way! Jennie.

"Well," Mrs. Douglass said as he looked up from the letter, "if you'll excuse me, I've got to tell Layne they simply mustn't climb up that water tower—it's suicidal! And *look* at that silly little fat boy!"

Asey craned his neck to look through the window over at the tower.

"Isn't he a mite younger than the rest of this crew?"

"Oh, yes, he and the girl with the bangs," Mrs. Douglass said. "Not ex-G.I.'s, or anything. I'm so glad"—she was edging politely toward the door—"that your cousin explained everything to you, Mr. Mayo, and you were so good to come, and thanks just awfully!"

"I'm afraid," Asey said as he put Jennie's note in his pocket, "that she explained things of what you'd call a more local nature, like. Mrs. Douglass, do you honestly believe this business about Mrs. Boone bein' all right?"

"Why, I certainly do! Miss Shearing said so!"

She certainly sounded sincere, Asey thought.

"Okay," he said. "Then let's work this out on a basis of my just insistin' on knowin' what happened, an' why. Why did you pretend to faint?"

"I was so worried about Harold, and what he might do when he learned about Carrie—Mrs. Boone. We knew her long ago, you know," Mrs. Douglass added parenthetically, "when she was just plain Carrie Branch. The only thing I could think of to do that would keep Harold with me, and away from the *Lulu Belle* and her, was to faint!"

ASEY raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, I know it seems silly!" Mrs. Douglass said. "But as I told Dr. Cummings, when a woman is in a quandary, she doesn't stop to figure out wonderful modern solutions on a par with the atom bomb!"

"But what did you think Harold might do?" Asey persisted.

"As I said to the doctor—I've been through all this with him—Harold is ingenious! He writes! He—"

"Harold told me," Asey interrupted, "that you wrote!"

"Oh, we both do!" she said earnestly. "I do dialogue and script, but Harold writes the plot! I'm afraid you don't appreciate, Mr. Mayo, what Harold might have thought up to do, if he'd known about Carrie! Oh, if only you were a woman, I could make you understand!"

"This is the second time this after-

[*Turn page*]

noon somebody's wished I was a girl," Asey said. "What difference d'you think my bein' a woman would make?"

"You'd listen!" Mrs. Douglass said. "Oh, to the radio, I mean. To daytime radio. Like serials. If only you'd followed 'The Life of Mother Gaston,' I'd never have the slightest difficulty in explaining."

"'*Will* Mother Gaston's adopted daughter go to jail—by mistake?'" Asey said. "'*Can* Sonia, in her zeal for revenge, actually plant the stolen bonds on poor little Beth?'"

"You've heard some of it!" Louise Douglass said. "But do you begin to see what I mean about Harold?"

"You win," Asey said, "an' I get your point. Anybody who could think up that stuff could think up anything, particularly since he didn't like Mrs. Boone anyway. But why did you keep up the act after the doc an' I got here?"

"I was waiting," Mrs. Douglass said, "for Harold to get out of the way!"

"Cummings sent him for a glass of water—remember?" Asey pointed out.

"Oh, but by *then* I was feeling too foolish!" she said. "I realized that instead of helping Harold, I'd actually made everything much worse by assuming that he *would* have done something to her. I tell you, I'm just no good at plot. I invariably mess it up."

"But Cummings managed to rouse you all right, after Harold an' I left?"

"He pinched me," she said briefly.

"An' after tellin' all this to him," Asey said, "what happened then?"

"I cried."

Asey started pacing back and forth. "But what happened? What did you do? What did Cummings do?"

"I just bawled my head off," she returned. "And after a few minutes, the doctor presented me with his handkerchief."

"I see what you mean by plot comin' hard to you." Asey stopped pacing and perched on the arm of the couch. "Let's try straight narration. I told Cummings I'd been faking my faint, and why. I cried. Then what did I do?"

"I went upstairs to wash my face and change my clothes and do my hair, of course!" Mrs. Douglass said. "And when I came downstairs again, Cummings was gone. I naturally assumed he'd gone out to the *Lulu Belle!*"

After that she had started out on foot over toward the beach, she told him, and had run into Aunt Mary walking back.

"She'd had a flat," Mrs. Douglass explained. "And Harold had taken out the beachwagon's jack again to use for something else so she couldn't do a thing about changing the tire."

"What time was all this?"

"*I* don't know! I can time dialogue, Mr. Mayo, but I haven't the faintest idea of my own personal time, and when I do things! What does it all matter now, anyway?"

"Call it my whim." Asey had no intention of going into all that "Mrs.-Boone-was-all-right" business again. "What did you an' Aunt Mary do after you walked back here?"

"We went directly out to the *Lulu Belle.* Aunt Mary is an adamant soul," she said, "and she insisted on going and looking for herself. She absolutely refused to believe that Carrie was dead, and said that I had jumped to silly conclusions, and that unquestionably Carrie had only fainted.

"When we looked inside the *Lulu Belle* and found it empty," Mrs. Douglass went on, "Aunt Mary just purred with satisfaction and said that she had unquestionably been quite right, hadn't she? She just said why didn't I take a nice nap, and went indoors."

Asey grinned. "Assumin'," he said, "that your sense of plot may occasionally skip a beat, still an' all, what was your guess as to what had become of Mrs. Boone an' Cummings?"

"I assumed that you and the doctor must have taken Carrie away. But after I'd gone back into the house, Miss Shearing phoned and said Mrs. Boone was all right, and with her, and not to worry. Of course, Aunt Mary rose to dizzy heights!"

THEN Asey asked what she had done after Miss Shearing called.

"I just sat there, dumb with relief,"

she said. "And then Aunt Mary and I went back to the beachwagon and changed the tire. When we finally got back, the project was here. And then you came. There!" She heaved a sigh of relief.

"An' you don't know a thing about Cummings?" Asey asked.

"In my work," Mrs. Douglass said, "the detective and the doctor are always in constant communication. Somehow, I assumed you and Cummings would be. He's probably just making a call on a patient!"

Asey strolled over to a window and looked out at the lawn, now just as empty as it had been full a few minutes ago. It must have been while Mrs. Douglass had gone to change the tire that he had found the place abandoned.

"Where's your daughter?" he asked absently.

"Upstairs, changing her clothes."

"An' Mr. Douglass?"

"Oh, Harold came home footsore and weary. He's upstairs, too, taking a shower and changing. He's just a little annoyed with you, I'm afraid."

"With me? Whatever for?"

"He said he went into the post office, and while he was in there, you drove away in your roadster. He had to walk every inch of the way home."

Asey Mayo turned away from the window.

"In your Mother Gaston stories," he said, "you indicate everything with sounds. I have to do it the hard way, an' ask questions. Let's get to the root of things. Just exactly where did Miss Shearing call from, an' what were her exact words?"

"Aunt Mary took the call," Mrs. Douglass said. "And let me assure you," she added, "she's not a person to make mistakes with phone messages!"

"I think," Asey said, "that I'd like to have a little chat with Aunt Mary—Mrs. Framingham, isn't it?"

Mrs. Douglass ran upstairs to return almost at once with the information that Aunt Mary was taking a tub, and would be down in about fifteen minutes or so.

"And now, would you excuse me?" she said. "There are a million things I've got to see to. Won't you just make yourself comfortable?"

Asey started to pace around the living room after she left, but after a moment he picked up Jennie's lunch-basket and went outdoors. The longer he stayed in that house, the less he liked the feel of it, and the basket was a good excuse for his going out to sit in the roadster while he waited for Aunt Mary.

He had eaten up the sugar gingerbread and most of the sandwiches before he noticed the tire in the rear of the beachwagon parked beside him.

Asey sat up suddenly and told himself he was a fool.

"Sittin' there right in front of your eyes is the one easy, sure way of findin' out if all this simple disarmin' story is a made-up soap opera, or not!"

He climbed into the beachwagon and examined the tire, then he hoisted it into his roadster and roared away down the driveway toward the village.

Twenty minutes later, Benny, the garage man, shifted his plug of tobacco and gave it as his opinion that Asey was right.

"Only thing the matter with this tire is," he said, "somebody just let the air out of it. I think somebody took—oh, like a ladies' nail file, say—an' stuck it in to hold the valve down. What I'm aimin' at is somebody didn't just use their finger, like a man. Say, Asey, what do you look so glum about this for?"

Asey sighed. "It just means a yarn was too simple, that's all! I thought as much, but—"

He broke off as Jennie's coupe bounced up to one of the gas pumps.

"Hello," she said, and leaned her head out of the window. "Fill it up, Benny, and charge it. I left my purse at home. Asey, for goodness sakes, what *is* the matter with that crazy coot of a woman?"

"That," Asey said as he strolled over, "is exactly what I'm tryin' to figure out. Move over those bundles, Jennie. I want to get in an' tell you a story, an' you listen careful!"

HE TOLD her what had taken place at Pochet Point that afternoon. His only elimination was any reference to soap operas or to Mother Gaston.

"Well," Jennie said reflectively, "I know how you hate the things, but it sounds just like one of my serials. Mostly Mother Gaston."

"That's what I was afraid of," Asey said, as he got out of the coupe. "Thanks a lot, Jennie."

"Wait!" Jennie got out and followed him to his roadster. "Where d'you suppose Mrs. Boone *is?*"

"What's your guess?" Asey returned.

"Not far. Far from the Pullman, I mean. You know perfectly well how hard it is to carry bodies. I'll never forget trying to cart people around, back in First Aid."

"How would you feel about the mud hole, or the swamp?"

"It's something smarter. Like a secret room. That's what happened in Mother Gaston about a month ago."

"An' what d'you suppose happened to the doc?" Asey inquired drily.

"I know one sure thing," Jennie said. "He certainly never *walked* far! You go back over there and look around some more for both of 'em, Asey. Hurry, before it gets dark!"

They separated in getting out of the way of a sedan that drew up at one of the gas pumps, and Asey went inside the garage, got the Douglass' tire and put it back in his roadster.

"I just thought to tell you," Jennie said as she walked over to him as the sedan departed, "Mrs. Douglass and that aunt were just coming back in the beachwagon when I got there with your lunch."

"Where'd you get *that?*" Asey interrupted, pointing to the green scarf she was holding in her hand.

"This scarf?" she said. "The man in that sedan that just left dropped it when he got out to pay for his gas."

"Was it someone from the Larrabee project?" Asey demanded. "One of the college bunch?"

"Oh, no, it was an older man. Dressed in dark gray suit with a pinstripe, and a Homburg, and a plain dark tie. Asey Mayo, where are you going?" Her voice rose as he sprinted for the roadster.

"You wait here for me," Asey said, "an' mind you don't go tellin' anyone about Mrs. Boone!"

Asey, speeding along, remembered that the sedan was light gray, and that it was sparkling with chrome.

But it wasn't anything that a Porter couldn't overtake!

After ten miles, he began to slow down. He couldn't believe that the gray sedan could have gone any further. It hadn't left the garage at any breakneck pace. The driver, he decided, simply must have turned off the main road.

He wouldn't have bothered to chase after one of the project, he thought as he turned the roadster around and headed back. But one of Mrs. Boone's green scarves in the possession of someone who didn't belong to the project was something which had seemed well worth taking a look into.

"Next time," he admonished himself, "keep your eyes open for— Ooop!"

VI

BRAKING the car to a stop, Asey fumbled in the glove compartment, drew out a badge, pinned it on his shirt, and was standing in the middle of the road with his hand held up when the gray sedan, which he'd spotted at the top of the long hill ahead, arrived on the scene.

"Emergency inspection!" he said briskly, and pointed to his badge.

This was the right man—pin-striped suit, Homburg hat, plain tie.

"Oh? Emergency inspection of what?"

The fellow was thirty-odd, Asey guessed, he was blond and good-looking, and he was smiling the forced smile of someone in a hurry who has decided to make the best of irritating delays.

"Quohaugs," Asey said. "What you New Yorkers call clams. You mind openin' your rear trunk?"

"If I have to, I suppose that I have to!"

A moment later, Asey helped him

slam down and lock the cover of the empty trunk.

"Thanks, mister," he said. "I'll admit you didn't look to me like the quohaug-stealin' kind, but I had to stop you." He wrote "Pass" on a page in his notebook, hesitated, pencil in hand. "Who'll I say to pass, mister? What's the name?"

"It's Manderson. Eric Manderson."

Asey wrote down "Pass Eric Manderson," and tore out the page.

"Just you show this if you're stopped anywhere in the next two towns. I can't begin to handle everyone, of course. Thanks."

"You're welcome, I'm sure." Mr. Manderson summoned up another forced smile and drove off.

Back at Benny's garage, Jennie listened to Asey's brief recital of the quohaug inspection episode, and announced that in her opinion, he'd been a fool.

"You say that Gerty said that Mrs. Boone's secretary was named Eric, and you say this fellow you just stopped was named Eric, and this scarf I found *certainly* came out of his car! You didn't pass him or overtake him! That must mean that he drove off of the main road after he left here! And for all *you* know, he dumped Mrs. Boone's body somewheres before he drove back onto the main road again!"

"Uh-huh, I realize that."

"Why on earth didn't you grab him?"

"Wa-el," Asey said, "it's just a mite difficult to corral anybody in connection with a murder that to all intents an' purposes hasn't happened."

"But it has happened!" Jennie said impatiently.

"Uh-huh, an' I got a lot of proof, haven't I? A green ticket with a diamond-shaped punch. See?"

"Why, *that's* nothing special!" Jennie looked at it. "*I* got one of those—one day, oh, just after they got that railroad set up, Mr. Douglass asked the Men's Club at the church to all come up and have a ride, and before he got through, he had the Sewing Circle and the Women's Club, and I don't know who all else besides. We *all* got tickets like that.

"Did you go inside of the station? It's not much bigger than a pint of cider, and it has a little pot-bellied stove in the middle, and a lot of old-time excursion posters hung around the walls. Why in the world didn't you go inside of it? I must say it's the first place I'd have gone to myself, to hunt for Mrs. Boone's body! It's so *near!*"

"An' it's just the one place," Asey said a little ruefully, "that I somehow missed!"

"For goodness sakes, look!" Jennie interrupted, pointing in amazement at the car swinging into the garage yard.

His own new roadster was pulling up to the gas pump.

"And *him!*" Jennie sniffed at the sight of the occupant, a dark-haired young man, hatless, and wearing sun glasses.

"Hey, you!" The young man made a peremptory gesture in Asey's direction. "Hey, you—Rube! Service!"

"Well for *good*ness sakes—"

Under his breath, Asey told Jennie to hush. Aloud, he said, "You want me, bub?"

If anyone ever deserved the nickname of Stinky, he thought, this fellow was it. He was sullen-faced, he was arrogant, he was rude—and that foolish little black mustache didn't add any endearing charm, either.

"Who d'you think I'm calling?" His battle jacket fitted him like a corset, Asey noted, and he wore one of Mrs. Boone's green scarves, tied Ascot-fashion, around his neck.

"Okay, bub," Asey said. "Want me to fill her up?"

"What d'you think I stopped at the gas pump for—a small beer?"

ASEY walked slowly around the roadster.

"Say, just where *is* your gas tank, bub?" he inquired.

"It's—" The young man stopped short. "Don't you hicks know anything about a good car?"

"We never seen one like this before," Asey said. "Hey, Benny, he wants me to fill this up, but I wouldn't know where the gas tank was, would you?"

"Nun-no, dunno's I would." Benny entered into the spirit of the thing. "Can't see any tank cap."

Gravely, they played for several minutes with the dashboard gadgets while the young man fumed.

"What I think is," Benny observed, "if you don't know where the gas tank on your own car is, bub, you shouldn't hardly expect us to!"

"What I think is," Asey observed as he idly played with several of the gadgets, "you don't need any gas anyways, bub!"

"Look here, you, the tank said 'Empty'! The—"

"Thought you didn't know where the tank was, bub," Asey interrupted.

"There!" The young man, now a rich dark purple, pointed to one of the dashboard indicators. "That one—it said 'E'—it's empty!"

"Look, bub, turn your ignition key," Asey said gently. "Now watch them needles. What you were pointin' at is an oil gauge. The next dial's the gas, an' if you'll look close, you'll see it's three-quarters full, bub—"

He broke off as the young man impatiently lighted a cigarette—with Cummings' own outsize platinum lighter! Asey knew that lighter. He'd given it to the doctor himself. And Jennie recognized it. He heard her startled exclamation.

"So you got enough gas," Asey went on. "Enough to last until your friend that owns this car can tell you where the gas tank is located. It *does* belong to some friend, doesn't it, bub?"

"What of it?" The fellow's voice was trembling with anger. "And stop calling me bub!" He jammed his finger on the starter button, and raced the engine until Asey winced.

Slowly, the roadster started away from the gas pump, and turned out on the highway.

"Funny," Benny remarked, "I'd of sworn he meant to slat away from here hell-bent for election, but he's still only creepin' along. Did you do somethin' to the car, Asey, when you played with them gadgets?"

"I'm introducin' Sonny Boy to one of the prince's fancier bits of equipment," Asey said with a grin. "A special speed just for parade work. He can't go more'n ten miles an hour in that thing right now."

"What was you intendin' to do to him, exactly?" Benny asked. "Seemed to me you broke off your plans there, didn't you?"

Asey nodded. "I *was* hopin'," he said, "to wangle him out of the car, an' under it. Then—wa-el, he was goin' to be an awful greasy boy if I hadn't spotted Cummings' lighter in his hand!"

"And what," Jennie inquired crisply, "do you intend to do about it? Get after him, Asey! Don't you think he'll lead you to Cummings? How would he have that lighter if he hadn't taken it from the doc? Don't you mean to follow him?"

"Uh-huh. But at ten miles an hour I can afford to let him get a mite of a start. S'pose you go along home so I can call you there if I need you. Now I'll see where Sonny Boy's goin', an' what he's up to. An' how he came by that lighter of the doc's, if I have to throttle it out of him!"

It was, Asey decided, the most leisurely chase in which he had ever participated. When they finally arrived at Pochet Point, Sonny Boy elected to turn off on a lane leading not to the Douglass house, but toward the shore.

"The old boat house road, huh?" Asey murmured. "An' a short lane, as I remember it." He waited until the sound of the other motor stopped, then he parked in a clump of bushes and started off on foot.

His new roadster, he found, had been left directly in front of a boat house—but it wasn't the rickety, tumble-down old building which he remembered from the past. This was a new model, sturdy and well-built.

No windows anywhere, a heavy door—you couldn't ask for a better place to put someone, Asey thought.

Sonny Boy was staring at the padlock on the door, fingering it uncertainly, as if he weren't sure whether to unlock it or not.

"Oh, make up your mind!" Asey mut-

tered impatiently. "Make up your mind. Give me something to pin you down on!"

SOMETHING dangling from the branch of a pine tree near the boat house door glinted for a moment in a final burst of light from the setting sun. Asey stared at it in fascination. The only thing in the world which that dangling object resembled was a stethoscope!

Asey smiled, and stepped noiselessly out from the cover of the pines.

Five minutes later, he had finished binding and gagging Sonny Boy, and was unlocking the padlock of the boat house door with the key which he had taken from the fellow's pocket.

"Cummings!" he called. "Cummings!"

A figure rose from a couch in the far corner.

"Ah!" Cummings said acidly. "Ah, Dr. Livingston, I presume?"

"Doc, are you okay?" Asey hurried over to the couch.

"Why, I'm fine, my dear Livingston! Bully! Probably haven't had such a fine rest in years. Little stuffy, of course. Someone left a few dead fish in here last fall, and Nature took its course with 'em. Little dull. Little dark. No good books to read. But I'm simply delighted that there's no chance of your catching cold."

"Okay, Doc," Asey said. "I'll bite. Why would you suspect I'd catch cold?"

"D'you realize," Cummings said bitterly, "that I've been months without a cigar? No, Asey, if you'd rushed and steamed yourself into a lather just coming after old me, and then caught cold from the lather, why I'd just never have forgiven myself. I'm glad you took your time and went at it at your damn sweet convenience."

"Now listen, Doc!" Asey protested. "You sent me off on a fool errand for fake faint medicine, an' when I come back, you've disappeared into thin air! How in time could you expect me to know you were here?"

"I'm counting to two hundred by tens," the doctor said. "Asey Mayo, I littered Pochet Point with clues! Short of erecting large signs with red arrows for you to follow, I'm sure I don't know what else I could possibly have done to lead you here!"

"Name three," Asey said. "Name three clues!"

"My lighter, for one," Cummings said promptly. "I left my lighter—the one you gave me—sitting on a freshly cut tree stump, right at the junction of the lanes, on *this* side. Nobody in God's green world could possibly have missed that lighter!"

"Nobody did," Asey said gently.

"Then why didn't you march straight here when you spotted it?"

"When I spotted it," Asey said, "it was in the possession of one of the project boys up at Benny's garage—not what you'd call an easy place to pick this lane junction from! I only happened here because I trailed him."

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" Cummings demanded. "And then, before I came inside here, I hung my stethoscope on the branch of a pine. When I'm following murderers I use my wits."

"I spotted that stethoscope," Asey said, "because of Divine intervention, an' nothin' else. Honest, Doc, how could you expect me to find you from a stethoscope hanging up in a tree?"

"I suppose," Cummings returned as he got up from the couch, "I *could* have left a paper trail, or tossed snippets of gingerbread in my wake. Now, tell me, how are you getting along with Halbert?"

"Er—did you phone him, Doc?" Asey inquired.

"*If* I'd had a phone, I might conceivably have been tempted to phone a lot of people! *If* I'd had matches, I might even have started a fire to lead people here. Good God, man, haven't *you* called him? You haven't?"

"Doc," Asey said, "what became of her?"

"She waited until I walked in here—tiptoed in, rather—and then slammed the door and locked the padlock. No violence," Cummings said, "on either side. As to what become of her, I frankly wouldn't know."

"Who?"

"Who? I regret that I don't know who. A female. Not a man. When did it get this dark?" He looked out of the boat house door. "Hm! Fresh air! No wonder I keep recommending it so highly to my patients."

"Now we've had our fun, Doc," Asey said, "what in blazes happened?"

"Fun? *Fun?"*

CUMMINGS delivered a caustic monologue on Asey's misconception of the word.

"And what's *that?"* He broke off suddenly and pointed to the ground. "Another corpse?"

"Just the fellow who had your lighter," Asey explained.

"Where is it? I never missed anything more!"

"Probably in one of his pockets. I didn't wait to find anything but the padlock key."

Asey followed Cummings to the trussed-up figure.

"You keeping him tied up indefinitely?" Cummings inquired.

"At least till I get this story out of you!" Asey returned.

"Ah, here it is!" Cummings extracted his lighter from a pocket of the battle jacket. "Well, Louise went upstairs to wash her face. Haven't a spot of hot soup on you, I suppose?"

"Come along!" Asey took his arm. "There's a thermos full of it in the car out there."

"Oh." To Asey's pleasure, the doctor for once seemed slightly nonplussed. "Where are you going?"

"The other roadster's up the road a piece."

"Oh!" Cummings made a swift recovery. "How'd you get 'em both here? Use your astral body? Really, Sherlock, if a man can drive two cars at once, I do feel he might spot a stethoscope on a tree."

When they reached the roadster, Asey presented Cummings with the thermos bottle of soup.

After he had made away with a cupful, Cummings condescended to tell what had occurred.

"Louise went upstairs to wash her face—I never suspected that she was the hysterical type," Cummings said reflectively, "and I know she's going to regret every word she poured out to me. 'Throwing herself on my mercy' is the only descriptive phrase I can think of that's suitable for the way she was performing."

"Let down her hair, huh?"

"And combed it. I was in the living room, starting to go to the hall to phone Halbert, and I heard a strange noise. I've spent most of the afternoon trying to think how to describe that sound, Asey, and I can't. Anyway, I went out to the *Lulu Belle,* even though the noise didn't seem to come from there, and the damned Pullman was empty! That was—hm—perhaps twenty minutes after you left."

"Time enough," Asey said, "for Stinky to have whipped back in my car, or for Harold Douglass to have hitched a ride. Did you hear a car? Or did you happen to look inside the little railroad station?"

"That was my first gesture," Cummings told him. "But it was empty. Then I thought I saw something—or someone—moving in the woods. And idiotically, as I will now publicly concede, I followed that will-o'-the-wisp. Asey, this place is very close to the house! Did you realize that?"

"Jennie claimed you wouldn't have walked far," Asey said, with a chuckle.

"I didn't. Well, in a nutshell, the boat house door was open, and I thought the woman had gone inside. So after draping my stethoscope over that branch, I came in. And there, to coin a phrase, I was. Where did you find her, Asey? Where was she?"

Asey gravely quoted his own words back at him.

"I regret that I don't know."

"I'm not referring," Cummings said impatiently, "to that unknown female who so deftly incarcerated me! I mean Carolyn Barton Boone!"

"So," Asey said, "do I."

"Merciful heavens, man, haven't you found that body yet? What have you been *doing?"*

Asey told him.

VII

CUMMINGS shook his head at the conclusion of the recital.

"It's macabre!" he said. "It's too preposterous! Even to tying up Little Arsenic yonder—man alive, do you realize how bizarre all this is? Do you realize that few sane people would believe you? No wonder you haven't managed to find her body, with all *that* madness going on!"

"Wa-el," Asey said, "I've had some success. At least I located you!"

"Even that's fantastic, when you think it out!" Cummings retorted. "D'you suppose that fellow just saw my lighter, and took it?"

"Uh-huh, I suspect so. I suspect he liberated my car in the same casual way."

"So that's how you happen to have two cars over here! Who is he—oh, from the project, you said. Asey, Mrs. Boone was alive at twelve o'clock. I pried that out of Louise on the basis of Aunt Della's cuckoo clock. She did remember Mrs. Boone watching the clock. And Harold had promised to give her a ride on the railroad. Did he happen to give you any explanation of why they thought she was lost? If he'd got through enough of his railroad routine to have given her a ticket, got her on board, and punched the ticket, he certainly must have known she was there!"

"Harold skipped lightly over that," Asey said. "Something about her leaving for a phone call and not coming back. Why does he hate Mrs. Boone so? D'you know?"

"I pried that out, too. Boone pulled a fast and nasty one on the Douglasses years ago, when they were all young and writing for the radio, and she was Carrie Branch. Seems she not only wangled the job that Harold and Louise should have had, but she told such a pack of lies about 'em that they landed on their ears in the gutter. It was really feline stuff, with claws, and spitting. It turned out a good thing for the Douglasses, because in their desperation they invented Mother Gaston, and Mother Gaston is a gold mine.

"But after Boone got them fired, and before Mother Gaston materialized, they had a period of grim sledding. Early depression stuff—not enough to eat, and sickness, and Layne just a child. It was the child's deprivations that infuriated Harold."

"An' yet," Asey remarked, "he seemed to me less mad about what had happened in the past than just mad in the present at her, if you see what I'm drivin' at."

"That's my point," Cummings said. "In her hysterical mood, Louise virtually admitted that she thought Harold had killed Boone, and when I commented that the motivation was a little tarnished with time, she said that the past hadn't goaded Harold as much as what Boone was doing to Layne now."

"An' what in time did she mean by that?"

"Well," Cummings said, "Layne is sold on Boone. It's Boone, Boone, Boone, Boone this and Boone that. The Douglasses play a small second fiddle. Louise accepts it philosophically, but Harold reacts as if Layne actually were their own daughter."

"As if she were their own—*isn't* she their own?" Asey demanded.

"Oh, no, she's adopted. The child of friends of theirs who were killed in an automobile accident. Layne was seven or eight, I think, when they took her."

"Come to think of it," Asey said, "Douglass never actually did refer to her as his daughter! Huh! When I talked with him, Harold pretended nothin' had happened outside of Mrs. Boone's bein' lost. But you say Louise thought *he* killed her. What do you think, Doc?"

"What goes for one of 'em," Cummings said, "goes for the other. They both have good motives—revenge for the past, jealousy over Layne. But I found myself thinking of Mrs. Framingham—Aunt Mary, that is—as I followed that woman over here. Oh, if I'd only been a Boy Scout in my youth, Asey!"

"Did you aim to build a fire under her, or just wigwag to her?" Asey inquired.

"I mean, I can't even trail people

properly! She was always just enough ahead of me so I couldn't see her, and I didn't dare gain on her too much. I don't know why, but I assumed she'd go straight to that body!"

"Why are you so positive that you followed a woman?" Asey asked.

"Because it wasn't a man!" Cummings retorted. "Maybe it wasn't Aunt Mary. Maybe it was Louise! But I'm positive I followed a woman. I never stopped to look at the Pullman carpet after I discovered the body was gone. But if you say that the stains had been scrubbed off, that proves it was a woman because women always know exactly how to take out stains the average man doesn't. Damn it, Asey, how can we find that body? Why was Boone moved? What are we going to do about it?"

"How would kindly old Dr. Muldoon solve this one for wise old Mother Gaston?" Asey said in sepulchral tones. "Listen in to*mor*row!"

"That Muldoon!" Cummings said with feeling. "There's a man I cordially detest! My wife's always throwing him at me because the kindly old fool's grateful patients are always giving sweet old Mrs. Muldoon the prettiest diamonds—and my wife feels the discrepancy keenly. Hm. I'm sure that she or Jennie would know in a flash where that lovable old mushmouth would go to find that body!"

"I asked Jennie," Asey remarked. "She suggested a secret room."

CUMMINGS snorted.

"Of course, a secret room! Oh, just the thing! Sherlock, what would anyone *do* with her body? Why hide it in a secret room or any other place?"

"I been askin' myself what anyone hopes to gain from it," Asey said. "For no matter what anyone has done with it, we know that it exists, an' we know where it was!"

"What they hope to gain is obvious enough!" Cummings said. "Time! They're stalling us!"

"I wonder, Doc," Asey said slowly. "I been thinkin' it over. I wonder if it's turnin' up some other place, as it will sooner or later, doesn't just mean that someone's tryin' to get it away from here. All the time Douglass talked to me about Mrs. Boone, I felt he was tryin' awful hard to shove her away from him, an' Louise, an' here!"

"You've really had what amounts to a life history of Boone, haven't you?" Cummings commented. "From me, one of her public—though I'll admit my enthusiasm has waned—from the Douglasses who knew her when, and from Gerty who gave you the college notes."

Asey said that the picture of Mrs. Boone was filling out. "Now, Doc," he continued, "s'pose we knew where the body was. S'pose things had progressed in a normal fashion. How different would things be now?"

"Why, everything would be different!" Cummings said. "There'd be cops all over and there'd be a million photographers and reporters in your hair. The place would be a damned madhouse."

"That's about what I figured," Asey said. "In fact, when everything proceeds accordin' to Hoyle, a murderer has a certain advantage. He can lots of times tell what you're goin' to do next, an' prepare accordingly. But if I were the murderer in this particular business, I sort of think I'd be kind of on tenterhooks."

"You mean, Pollyanna, that you're glad-glad-*glad* that we have no corpse?" Cummings asked acidly.

"Nope, I'm not that glad," Asey said. "But I think we found out quite a lot. You got Aunt Mary wanderin' around in a beachwagon, an' you got a fake flat. There's something fishy about that flat tire business, and about her insisting to Louise that no murder could have taken place! Then you got that Eric Manderson floatin' around. You got this Miss Shearin' phonin' from somewhere an' sayin' everything's okay. You got Gerty an' Layne over on the beach—"

"Layne really would be the perfect one, wouldn't she?" Cummings interrupted thoughtfully. "I mean, the perfect murderer."

"Layne?" Asey asked. "Why? She seems to be the only real genuine pro-Boone person I've run across."

"I know. But I can't believe she

doesn't know that many of her childhood hardships were due to Boone. She certainly knows what Harold and Louise feel about Boone! And yet she seems to worship the woman. It could be one of those reversals, you know!"

"Sounds a bit complicated," Asey said. "Seems to me it'd be easier to work out Layne by way of Jack Briggs. She wants him, but Boone has the Indian sign on him."

"But that's so commonplace—love, revenge, all that!" Cummings complained. "Asey, know what I thought of all afternoon in that damned boat house?"

"Food, phones, food, a word to describe a strange noise, food," Asey said promptly.

"Your insinuation that I'm a slave to my stomach is libelous!" Cummings said. "My real preoccupation was with that damned rhyme—d'you remember it? *'Punch,* brother, *punch* with *care—'* "

" *'Punch* in the *pres*ence of the passen-jaire!' " Asey finished up. "Sure. I remember. I've thought of it every time I've thought of that green ticket with the diamond-shaped punch."

"Well, there's more of it than that," Cummings said. "A blue trip-slip for something, and a something-else-trip-slip for something else. I tell you, it's driven me crazy! *Was* there a passen-jaire, d'you suppose, besides Boone?"

"I been thinkin' of the murderer as the passen-jaire all along," Asey said. "Well, let's stroll back an' see this fellow that I got tied up."

"And of course you've decided how you're going to justify this apparent mayhem on his person?" Cummings demanded.

ASEY chuckled.

"Fumble around in that glove compartment in front of you an' pick me out a badge—an oval, gold-plated job named 'Special Deputy'. It's very impressive."

"Don't tell me," Cummings said, "that you have some mad notion of playing quohaug inspector again! You never could get away with that twice!"

"I wager I can," Asey returned. "Remember this project crew is all outlanders. Hold it—that's the badge I want! Then after Sonny Boy, I think we'll look into Miss Shearing. She's presumably stayin' at some inn in town."

"And presumably," Cummings said with irony, "will be fascinated to the core by a visit from a quohaug inspector?"

"I can always give her the keys of the town," Asey said. "Then after we find out a few items, includin' what she actually said to Aunt Mary over the phone, we'll come back here an' see Aunt Mary."

"Asey, do you keep seeing lights over that way?" The doctor pointed toward the lane junction.

"You mean car lights? I've noticed some. This is close to the house, Doc!"

"I'm not talking about car lights!" Cummings said impatiently. "I mean that—see? There it is again!"

"Looks to me," Asey said, "like one of them little pocket flashlights that's like a fountain pen."

"Maybe"—Cummings began to sound excited—"it's that woman, my jailer, coming to let me out!"

WHEN the figure finally walked past the car, Cummings' voice breathed in Asey's ear:

"That's Layne Douglass!" Cummings' whisper grew louder as she moved out of earshot. "There, see? I knew I was right about her! She's the one with the motives! She took Boone out of the *Lulu Belle,* and then she did something that caused that strange noise I heard, and then I fooled her by coming on the scene! She lured me to the boat house, locked me up, then went back and really hid the body!"

"Not so loud, Doc!" Asey took his flashlight from its clamp on the steering gear.

"And now that it's dark, she's sneaking over to unlock that padlock!" Cummings got out of the roadster and at once stepped on a twig which snapped and sounded to both of them like the explosion of a blockbuster. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, Asey!"

"You better shush—an' watch your step!"

The pair paused on the edge of the clearing by the boat house. Ahead of them, the beam of Layne's little flashlight was focused on the trussed-up figure on the ground.

"Jack?" she said uncertainly. "Jack Briggs! What happened to you!"

Asey never felt more pleased than to discover that he'd guessed wrong. He should have put more faith in Gerty's judgment, he thought. He should have known at once that this couldn't have been her colonel, even though the nickname seemed so appropriate.

"I thought you said he was *Stin—*" Cummings began hoarsely.

Asey shushed him.

"Oh!" Layne said irritably. "Oh, damn! Of all times for you—"

Turning suddenly, she climbed into the roadster and swung her light over the dashboard.

"Trying to find headlights!" the irrepressible Cummings whispered.

Asey stepped forward and snapped on his own light.

"All right!" he said briskly. "Hold it! What's going on here?"

Layne gave a little start.

"What *is* going on here?" she retorted evenly. "What are you doing here? This is private property! Who are you?"

"I'm Asey Mayo. Doctor Cummings," he spoke the doctor's name distinctly—"who is this girl? D'you know?" In an undertone, he added, "Yes, you do, an' to your great surprise!"

"Why, it's Layne Douglass!" Cummings sounded sincerely bewildered. "You are probably the last person we ever expected to find—merciful heavens what's *that?*" A note of horror crept into the doctor's voice. "Who's that bound up there, by the steps?"

"It's Jack Briggs—and I can't imagine, I don't know what's happened, Doctor!" Her bewilderment, Asey thought, was genuine.

"We've had a lot of trouble today with people stealin' whole beds of quohaugs an' clams, Miss Douglass," Asey said smoothly. "An' since I happened to be home, they asked if I'd take a hand helpin' to find the thieves. Doc and I are special deputies. One of 'em—or somebody—pinched my car. That's it you're sittin' in."

LAYNE got out quickly, as if the roadster were red-hot.

"An' I guess that whoever took it," Asey went on, "must have taken your friend here, too—you know this young man?"

"Of course! He's one of the Larrabee College project! Would you two help me untie him, please? There's been some frightful mistake. Jack wouldn't steal quohaugs."

"Poor chap!" Cummings said solicitously, as he walked over and looked down at Briggs.

With his gag and bonds removed, Jack sat up, and blinked. Then he looked up at Asey and blinked even harder.

"This is Doctor Cummings, Jack," Layne said. "And Asey Mayo. You know, the detective."

"Didn't I"—Jack seemed to find difficulty in swallowing—"didn't I—uh—weren't you up town at the garage a while ago?"

"Garage?" Asey said politely. "What garage?"

"Well"—Jack hesitated—"maybe I'm wrong, but you look a lot like a man at the gas station near the traffic lights!"

"Oh, he means your Cousin Josh, Asey!" Cummings said brightly. "Feel all right, do you, Briggs?" he hurried on. "No ill effects?"

"I'm stiff, and I've got a cramp in my leg, and—"

"What happened to you?" Layne interrupted impatiently.

"Someone just jumped me. I was waiting here for you, Layne, as you said to. And just as I was starting to unlock the padlock with that key you gave me—well, that's all, brother!"

The fellow, Asey thought, was speaking with far more truth and accuracy than he guessed. There, in a nutshell, was everything he'd hoped to find out: Jack was meeting Layne, according to her instructions, and he was unlocking

the padlock with the key she'd previously given him! Like Gerty, Layne probably had wanted to get Jack to herself.

"But the people who jumped on you, Jack! They must have come in Mr. Mayo's car. Didn't you hear them?"

In a small voice, Jack told her that he had come in Mr. Mayo's car.

"You did? Where did you get it?"

"On the turntable, up at your house!" he retorted a little defiantly. "I thought it belonged to your family."

"You shouldn't have taken it!" Layne was furious. "I suppose that Stin—that someone put you up to it! But you should have known better, Jack!"

She continued to enlarge on his stupidity.

"Er—fancy your car being at the Douglass', Asey!" Cummings said quickly when she finally paused for breath. "I wonder how it got there?"

"Someone pinched it this afternoon, up on the main street," Asey said. "I'm sorry this happened to you, Briggs. Haven't you any clue at all as to who jumped you? Didn't you hear voices?"

"Well, yes," Jack said. "I guess I was knocked out for a few minutes first, but later I heard voices inside the boat house. Then after a while, I heard people walk out. I think it was two men."

"What did they sound like?" Cummings asked with deep interest.

"Well, they—as a matter of fact, they sounded rather like you two!"

Cummings leaned back against the roadster and laughed and laughed.

"Must have been quite a crack you took," he said, "to hear voices that sounded like ours!"

"Well, I guess — I guess — " Jack sounded even more confused than he looked.

Asey restrained a smile. "Wa-el, Doc," he said, "we better get along!"

"Oh, absolutely!" Cummings said. "Sorry we—er—broke up your tryst, Layne!"

"Oh, that doesn't matter," Layne told him casually. "I almost phoned you myself a while ago, Mr. Mayo. I'd felt terribly worried about Mrs. Boone, but Louise finally convinced me that I was just being over-anxious."

"Say, Doc," Asey prodded him, "isn't she the one you wanted to meet so badly?"

"She certainly is!" Cummings said. "By George, I don't suppose you could arrange a meeting, could you, Layne?"

"I'd be delighted to!" Layne smiled for the first time. "You'll love her, Doctor. Jack Briggs, what are you grovelling around on all fours for?"

"My glasses—they came off when I was hit," Jack said. "You might break down and help me, too!"

While they all helped him search for the glasses, Cummings unostentatiously retrieved his stethoscope from the pine tree.

"I got 'em—here they are, over by the step!" Jack said. "Turn your light this way a second, will you, Layne?"

Asey prodded the doctor gently.

"More Boone!"

"Oh!" Cummings said. "Oh. I hope we can make some arrangements for my meeting Mrs. Boone, Layne!"

"I'm sure Louise has already phoned

[*Turn page*]

Mrs. Cummings about the buffet tomorrow," Layne said, "but you'd have a much better chance to talk with her if there weren't so many people around. I'll find out if she can't spare you some time. Why, this door is unlocked, Jack. The key's in it. Did they take the key from you?"

"Yes," Jack said. "Then when they left, they took the cigarette lighter. It was a lighter I'd seen on a tree stump, and thought someone had lost, and picked up. Say, Mr. Mayo, that might be a clue! One man seemed to know I had it, and the other man said it was his."

Asey suddenly announced with briskness that they had to be on their way.

"Which car'll you drive, Doc?" he added.

"Neither!"

"Neither?" Layne said curiously. "Have you another car here?"

"Asey has his spare," Cummings said. "He's got lots of Porter roadsters, you know. No, Asey, I refuse to drive either of those things! I'm afraid of 'em. That's final!"

"Look, Doc, you got to!" Asey said.

"Let one of us," Layne suggested. "Let me. Jack's in no condition."

"I'm all right!" Jack protested.

"But I want to. I've always yearned to drive a Porter!"

"But I wouldn't want to break up your—uh—no, Miss Douglass, don't you bother!" Asey said.

"Don't be silly! You're not breaking up anything! I'll drive one of the cars, only"—she paused—"this one here seems a little strange!"

"Strange!" Cummings said with scorn. "Is that the best adjective you can think of to describe a car that is equipped with a built-in sword-holder? Come along up the road with me, Layne. I'm sure you can manage the old model."

VIII

LISTENING to the sound of their footsteps receding, Jack cleared his throat rather noisily.

"Er—Mr. Mayo."

"Uh-huh? Get in." Asey stepped into the roadster.

"I guess I was pretty fresh up there at the gas station."

"Wa-el"—Asey restrained his impulse to turn his flashlight on the fellow's face—"you were a bit on the nasty side."

"I recognized you right away just now," Jack went on, "only I didn't want to—I mean, in front of Layne. And I didn't know this was your car! I really thought it was the Douglass'! I shouldn't have taken it anyway—oh, the whole damn trouble was, I was sore! I couldn't say this when Layne was around, because I didn't want her to know where I'd been. But I had a date over on the beach this afternoon—that is, I thought I did!" he amended with some bitterness. "And I did see something odd over there!"

"So?" Asey withdrew his finger from the starter button.

"This man that was sneaking around through the pines. From where I was waiting, I could see Gerty and Layne, and I felt a little worried about them with him prowling around. I saw him at least three different times."

"I don't suppose you could describe him?"

"I wasn't near enough to see his face, but he was wearing a darkish suit and a felt hat. He wasn't anyone from the project, and he certainly didn't look like any of the townspeople I've seen around."

"Think that you could sum up his felt hat as a Homburg?" Asey was thinking back to Eric.

"I really couldn't say. Only man I ever knew to wear one of those"—Jack laughed—"is Mrs. Boone's secretary, Eric Manderson. But he didn't come down with her."

"Tell me, when did you find that cigarette lighter?"

"On my way back from the beach. I got mixed up with these lanes. Somehow I landed way down where this lane meets the one that goes to the Douglass' house."

"I see," Asey said. "Well, that's all very interestin'. Between you an' me, of course, there's a lot more to this

business than just the theft of a few quohaugs!"

"I thought so!" Jack said. "I didn't think you'd be called into action for a few stolen clams. What's the story?"

"Looting." Asey thought that was one way to describe the removal of a corpse!

"Oh. Just looting." Jack sounded disappointed.

"It's pretty serious lootin'," Asey said honestly. "But we're not talkin' about it now. What happened"—he started up the roadster—"to your date on the beach? Do I gather you got stood up?"

"Don't tell Layne," Jack said, "but I was supposed to meet Mrs. Boone. Purely on business, of course."

"Oh, sure," Asey said. "Why else would you be meetin' the head of your college?"

"Exactly! Only Layne would—well, you know how girls are! Anyway, when I went back from the beach to the Douglass', I saw this car of yours, and—oh, I was sore and hungry and generally burned up, and I just took the car. I wonder how I even managed to start it. Say, what did I do to make it go so slowly? Or did you do something to it at the garage?"

Asey chuckled, and explained to him about the parade speed.

"You mean it really was built for a prince? Wow!" Jack whistled. "No wonder when I drove into that gas station I was feeling like a damn Balkan prince!"

Over at the Douglasses, Cummings and Layne were waiting on the turntable with the other roadster.

"It's marvelous to drive! It's simply super, Mr. Mayo!"

Layne stood for a moment in the full glare of the headlights, and Asey had his first real chance to take a good look at the girl.

She was tall—taller than Gerty—slim, dark-haired, graceful. She had none of Gerty's bounce, but she had charm.

"Hey, what's all that?" Asey pointed to the floodlights glowing beyond the house. "Something wrong with the railroad?"

"Oh, no!" Layne said. "That's for Aunt Della!"

"Layne's just explained it to me, Asey," Cummings said. "Seems that Aunt Della Hovey always planted dahlias on this day of May—in the evening if it hadn't rained, and in the afternoon if it had, or was. The Douglasses are carrying on the tradition."

"It's more of that idiocy from the book!" Layne said. "I'm so bored with it."

"Er—what book?" Asey wanted to know.

"We have this silly book full of Aunt Della items," Layne said. "When Louise and Harold bought this house from her, they faithfully promised her that they'd do all sorts of things—and they actually do! I think it's some sort of compensation—possibly for their lack of roots. Think of having to live in that sitting room crammed with hoary family litter. Think of always having to burn apple wood in the fireplaces because Brother Willie—Aunt Della's brother—always said that apple wood should be burned. And the Bible facing east because Aunt Della's great-great-grandmother said it should. And all those graves in the cemetery!"

"You mean," Asey said, "you have to tend to them?"

"Tend them, and take flowers on prescribed days—and prescribed flowers, too! Costs a small fortune. You can't imagine what Harold had to pay for a certain variety of mignonettes."

ASEY laughed.

"It isn't funny!" Layne said. "We have to have goose at Christmas, and salmon and green peas on the Fourth of July, and Indian pudding on someone's birthday. And tonight is Dahlia Night."

"Who's doin' the plantin'?" Asey asked.

"Harold and Louise and Aunt Mary. She attends to putting the January first headlines of the Boston newspapers into the secret drawer of Cousin Lucy's mahogany desk that Uncle Willie—never to be confused with Brother Willie!—brought from Jamaica. Oh, I do wish you all wouldn't rave so. It's simply

hideous to live with."

"Annual headlines in a secret drawer!" Cummings said weakly. "Haven't any secret rooms, have you, that you have to put clean starched curtains in annually?"

Layne said wearily that seemed to be the only item they'd been spared.

"And please!" she went on, *"please,* Doctor, don't ever bring up the topic of secret rooms in this household! It's a sore subject. You see, secret rooms are Aunt Mary's hobby."

Cummings' fingers pinched Asey's arm.

"Is that so!" he said. "Well, well."

"Oh, yes. Secret rooms have been a lifetime hobby of hers. She found one by accident in England, on her honeymoon, and it simply went to her head. Why, for years and years, she rushed around here waving a hammer and a chisel, banging and prying!"

"She ever find one?" Asey inquired.

"Of course not—but she still goes wandering around, hopefully measuring. Oh, I forgot! D'you want to ask the family any questions, Mr. Mayo?"

"Could I maybe just take a peek at 'em?" Asey asked. "I'd like to see this Annual Dahlia Festival in action."

"Come along, then!" Layne said. "But do be quiet."

The quartet tiptoed around to the back of the house and silently watched the dahlia planting that was taking place with the aid of two floodlights around from the railroad station.

Asey's eyes narrowed as he got his first glimpse of Aunt Mary. Harold Douglass wasn't a short man, but Aunt Mary gave the impression of towering above him. Her broad powerful shoulders created an illusion of great height.

Cummings moved close to Asey.

"No impromptu grave-digging there!" he whispered. "Looks like plain, honest planting to me!"

Asey nodded. He walked over to where Layne and Jack were standing.

"Miss Douglass, that's a mighty interestin' sight!"

"But doesn't it appall you?" Layne asked as they started back toward the turn-table. "To think that people can live that way—and like it?"

Asey chuckled. "You ought to meet my cousin Jennie, Miss Douglass, an' find out why we plant peas when we do. Come on, Doc, we're late! I still wonder," he said, as he pocketed the keys of the new roadster, "how this vehicle got here!"

"I'm getting to be awfully afraid someone from the project is responsible!" Layne said. "I do hope you find those men you're hunting, and I'd adore to drive either car anywhere for you!"

"Thanks—just let it stay here till I can send for it," Asey said as he and the doctor got into the old roadster.

That extra car, would provide an excellent excuse for him to return at any time.

Cummings waited until the old roadster was speeding down the main road before he pulled out a cigar.

"Slow down enough for me to light this, will you, Asey? I haven't dared smoke, I've been so afraid I'd bring out this lighter without thinking. Tell me, did we fox that Briggs fellow, or didn't we?"

"I'm not sure, Doc."

"Humpf!" Cummings said. "Asey, they were all planting dahlias innocently enough while we watched 'em, but that doesn't mean they couldn't have buried Boone before we came!"

"Uh-huh."

"And that business of Aunt Mary's hobby being secret rooms. Asey, there's no reason why there couldn't be a secret room in Aunt Della's house!"

"Uh-huh."

Cummings said acidly that because he'd been playing quohaug inspector, there was no reason to act like a damned quohaug himself.

"Why didn't you talk to her—I mean, to Aunt Mary?"

"Too many people around, an' too many explanations would've had to be made, Doc," Asey said. "I want to talk to her, goodness knows, but I want to know first what this Miss Shearin' actually said over the phone."

"Know what I think?" Cummings remarked.

"Think you got that secret room lo-

cated?" Asey said with a laugh.

"Oh, that!" Cummings spoke as though the secret room angle were something that had been brought up several centuries before. "I think that Briggs is a nasty character, Asey! I don't like him!"

"I didn't at first," Asey said, "but I'm not sure it isn't just his face. When you don't see his face, you don't mind him. Oh, I forgot to tell you about how he spent the afternoon, an' about the stranger he saw prowlin' around the shore."

CUMMINGS snorted at the conclusion of Asey's recital.

"That's nothing but quick thinking on his part, Asey! He heard Layne say that she and Gerty had been on the beach, so he planted himself as being near, and watching. Humpf! So Boone stood him up!"

"I can understand why," Asey commented.

"That's not the point!" Cummings said. "Point is, the fellow's trying to accent the assumption that she's alive, in his estimation—don't you get it? He's smart! It was smart of him to throw in Eric, too! Brought him in very disarmingly."

"Lookin' idly over this whole bunch," Asey said, "I don't think I ever seen a more disarmin' crew! Seems to me I've asked a thousand people what time something happened, an' they just all shrug an' say, 'Oh, from maybe perhaps about a quarter-to-this to aroundabouts-half-past-something-else—more or less!' Fifteen minutes one way or another, or even an hour."

The roadster came almost to a complete stop.

"What's wrong?" Cummings asked.

"Just an idle passin' thought that struck me," Asey said, as the roadster picked up speed again. "Nothin' important. But I agree with you about Jack Briggs, Doc. We'll look into him some more later. Jennie said he left our house earlier than the rest of the project."

"By George, I didn't tell you! I discovered what Layne wanted to talk over with him! Seems he's been offered a job he's not very keen about, but Layne thinks it's a wonderful opportunity and he ought to grab it. I asked her about Boone, too, but she just said Carolyn was with Miss Shearing. Do you realize, Asey, that Layne has no inkling of anything? Wonder what Brigg's job could be?"

For the doctor's benefit, Asey recalled Gerty's contribution about Mrs. Boone's opening for a new secretary.

"Motive!" Cummings said. "For Eric, I mean. Kicked upstairs, and doesn't want to go. Oh, there's another thing. Layne made that date with Briggs this morning and gave him the padlock key then. Humpf! That must mean there's a duplicate key that was used by whoever locked me up later—" He stopped abruptly.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, damn it, they *couldn't* have known they were going to shut me up, could they, if I surprised them when they were removing the body? I give up. From now on you have complete charge of the Brilliant Solutions and Deductions Department. What particular hostelry is this project crowd staying at?"

"We can guess easy enough by the noise an' the swarm of—golly!"

He jammed on the brakes.

"Hoo-hoo! Asey! Hoo-hoo!"

Jennie came running up to the roadster.

"I thought you'd turn up here *some* time," she said breathlessly. "Hello, Doc! So he finally found you, thank goodness!"

"What've you got in that basket there, Jennie?" Cummings asked.

"Some chowder, and some supper—for Asey!"

"Do I have to play little tunes on your tender heartstrings?" Cummings demanded. "Do I have to enumerate my grim sufferings to get a wee snack to revive my famished frame and to gain sufficient strength to take up once again my selfless role of healer?"

"Selfless! At five dollars a visit?" Jennie sniffed. "Hm! Isn't it lucky that by the merest chance I figured on

something like this happening, and put in enough for two! Asey, I've made an awful mistake! I told you something that's all wrong. It's *not* catnip! Catnip was *last* week!"

"Catnip was what last week?"

"Why, catnip was the answer to a last week's Quick Quiz Question! Somebody told me wrong, and I forgot there'd already been catnip once. It's coypus."

"If that's the answer, what in the name of heaven is the Question?" Cummings demanded.

"The Question," Jennie said, "is what's something—I never was able to find out *what!*—and the answer is, *coypus!* And nobody they called so far has got the answer yet! And listen to me, Asey, who d'you s'pose has been over at our house, pumping me for all she's worth?"

"Who?"

"That ex-Wave. Alicia Grant, her name is."

"The project one?" Asey asked.

JENNIE nodded emphatically.

"Uh-huh. Claimed she wanted to interview me in my capacity as head of the Red Cross. But the only thing she talked about was *you!* I don't know as I ever saw anyone more anxious to find out where another person was. And furthermore—" She paused.

"The radio influence, Asey," Cummings said in resigned tones. "That's a mannerism straight out of Mother Gaston. The dramatic hesitation."

"I'm not pausing because I'm trying to be dramatic," Jennie said indignantly. "I'm pausing because I'm afraid you'll think it's crazy! But I *did* hear of one person, one local person, I mean, who promised to kill Mrs. Boone this morning when he heard she was in town!"

"You mean, 'I hear tell Miz Boone's in taown? Why, land's sakes, I cal'late I got to kill her? I—'"

"Stop it, Doc! Who, Jennie?"

"Well," Jennie said, "I almost hate to tell you because I'm so sure you'll laugh—but no one's seen him since the Bull Moose. It's Sylvester! And furthermore, Sylvester hates Mrs. Boone. He talked about her *terribly* today while he was waiting in the sugar line for someone."

"Did he actually say anything about killin' her?" Asey asked.

"He told Amy Waters that if he ran across that Boone woman in some lonely, secluded place he'd kill her with his bare hands! He said he thought it would be a mighty fine thing for the world if someone did."

"Oh," Cummings said weakly, "I haven't laughed so hard since I was a boy! Why, if Sylvester had put it all in writing—I think we could still take it for granted that Sylvester is not the person we want! Jennie, it's funnier even than coypus!"

"Where'd he go?" Asey asked.

"Oh, now, look, Asey!" Cummings said. "You can't take that nonsense seriously!"

Asey reminded him of the quohaug inspections, and of Aunt Della's Annual Dahlia Planting.

"They're not very sensible, either! Why carp, Doc, why carp? Where'd Sylvester go, Jennie?"

"That's it! *No*body knows! People were sore when the Bull Moose was late and they missed the Question, and of course they tried to find Sylvester to see what the matter was—but he'd just disappeared! They've even got to thinking it's all sort of funny, because he *never* was late at anything before in all his born days!"

"An' still no sign of Sylvester," Asey said.

"Sylvester," Jennie said coldly, "is *queer.*"

"While I freely concede," Cummings said as he started on another package of sandwiches, "that Sylvester is a 'character', as the saying goes, may I also point out that in some larger or urban center, he and his little eccentricities wouldn't even cause a ripple? Why in Hollywood, for example, he'd pass for quite normal!"

"I don't know about Hollywood," Jennie said with a sniff, "but I was at a town meeting here once when he got mad about having the new flag pole put across from the Town Hall instead of by the square, and he nearly killed

Uncle Bijah Knowles! Asey, what're you wearing that fool special deputy badge for?"

"He's been inspecting quohaugs," Cummings said. "Humpf!"

"Ever watch gulls, Doc?" Asey asked suddenly.

"Watch gulls? I can't say I've made it my life work. Why, Sherlock?"

"Ever notice a bunch of 'em swoopin' around and around in circles after a fish, an' then all of a sudden one fellow comes up from a mile away—an' *bang!* —he's got the fish?"

"If you mean to insinuate that Sylvester is a remote gull, I must say that's an entirely new angle on his character! Swoop?" Cummings said derisively. "Man alive, Sylvester never moved any faster than a slow crawl. Well, I must get on with my morning chores. Jenie, you're a wonderful woman, a fine cook, it was a dandy meal, and thank you! Good-bye, Inspector Mayo. I shall think of you trying to dig your way out of quohaug beds without my invaluable aid!"

"Keep your stethoscope handy!" Asey said. "Never can tell when you might want to drape it over some handy tree branch for me to rescue you by."

BUT Cummings' old sedan was already rattling off down the highway.

"Never even asked me if he could drop me off anywhere!" Jennie commented as she took the seat that the doctor had vacated. "Asey, you don't seem to feel that this business of Sylvester is crazy as the Doc did."

"I might have," Asey told her, "if I hadn't already thought back to somethin'. Jennie, I tell you what. While I go see this Miss Shearin', you drop by the Ladies' Aid, will you, an' see if you can find out any tidin's about Sylvester. An' one more thing—who's the oldest person that might be there tonight?"

"Well, let's see," Jennie considered. "It's a nice night. If her son's home, he might bring old Mrs. Phinney. She's ninety-eight and a half—is that old enough?"

"Ninety-eight an' a half ought to do," Asey said gravely. "Providin' her memory's okay."

"Okay?" Jennie said. "Why, when they revised the church history this winter Mrs. Phinney ran back ninety years without stopping to *think!*"

"Wa-el," Asey said, "s'pose you pump her about Aunt Della Hovey's house. Say you heard tell there was a secret room in it, an' so on."

"So I was right!" Jennie said delightedly. "So *that's* where Mrs. Boone's body is! *Just* like Mother Gaston—"

She broke off as a sedan suddenly stopped, and backed up to the roadster. The woman driver, whom Asey recognized as the druggist's wife, called to him.

"Asey! Billy said for me to give this to Jennie at the Ladies' Aid. You might as well take it now. It's some medicine you rushed away and forgot this afternoon."

"Medicine?" Jennie asked curiously. "Asey, *what* medicine?"

"It's my faintin' medicine," Asey informed her with a laugh.

Getting out of the roadster, he took the neatly wrapped bottle that Mrs. Gill was holding out.

"Thanks a lot," he said. "Tell Billy it slipped my mind."

"It's lucky I saw you. Isn't Jennie going to the meeting?"

"Maybe you'd give her a lift," Asey said. "It'd be a great help to me, because I got some errands to do. Would you? Thanks."

IX

PICKING the inn where the project was staying by their noise, was not, Asey discovered, going to work out. Both the larger inns and the neighboring guest houses were peaceful and quiet. He drew up at an old-fashioned, rambling yellow-frame structure with a cupola.

The roadster had hardly come to a stop before a tall, lanky, boyish-looking fellow with curly red hair jumped briskly from a rocking chair on the

porch, and fairly leapt to the side of the car.

"Sir!"

Asey surveyed his white flannels and blue, brass-buttoned coat.

"Is the Larrabee College project stayin' around here anywheres, do you know?" he asked.

"Here, sir. Mr. Mayo, I'm Bill Cotton,"

"Oh?"

"Stinky, sir. I think Gerty mentioned me."

"For Pete's sakes, why 'Stinky'? Why not just plain 'Red'?"

"Little problem in elementary chemistry, sir, that's followed me since I was in grammar school," he said with a laugh. "Sir, I'm sorry about taking your car. I thought it was Manderson's—Mrs. Boone's secretary's."

"Er—how come?"

"Well, I saw Eric going into the telephone office in the village—"

"When?"

"I'd guess it was somewhere between one and one-thirty." "Stinky" was obviously trying to cudgel his memory. "Anyway, I called to him—I didn't know he was coming down, and I was surprised to see him. We talked a few minutes, and he said he had a batch of calls to make, and I said could I take his car to transport a case of beer that Jack Briggs and I were promoting."

"You rehearsed this much?" Asey asked him casually.

"Oh, yes, sir! Gerty made me. She said I was to deal it out quick. No hesitations. And then Eric said he'd prefer not to lend it to me because this was his brand-new car. I didn't think I'd ruin his car, just taking a case of beer over to the Inn, but if he didn't want to be cooperative, why, the hell with it. And Eric put on a long face, and said I just didn't understand, that was all! The big fat-head!"

"In a nutshell," Asey remarked, "he wouldn't let you have his wonderful, brand-new car, an' so you went ahead and took mine?"

"In a nutshell, yes. Well, sir, I got the beer, and then I saw that car of yours—mind you, I hadn't seen Eric's. He didn't ever point the gorgeous creature out to me. But your roadster was so exactly what his sounded like when he'd told me about it—well, I took it!"

"How in time did you land out on the Point in it?"

"I took the wrong turn at the traffic lights, sir, and found myself on the road going out to the Douglass, and I suddenly took it into my head to show Eric's new car off to Gerty. I thought I might as well get him good and sore while I was at it." Stinky grinned. "Then I took another wrong turn and landed by the mud hole, and met Gerty coming back from the beach, and she gave me hell! Honestly, sir, there's nothing you can dish out that I haven't already had thrown at me."

"Let's see, now," Asey said. "What happened to you and Gerty later? I'm curious," he added, "because my roadster finally turned up two other places, bein' driven by someone else!"

"But we left it at the Douglass' for you, sir!" Stinky said with a touch of anguish in his voice. "Gerty and I hitch-hiked back to town on a truck full of live hens. It isn't smashed up, sir?"

"No," Asey said. "What happened after you went for Layne?"

"I went off in the direction Gerty said I'd find Layne," Stinky told him, "and almost just around the corner from the mud hole, I spotted Eric. He was looking as mad as anyone I ever saw. So I sat down under the pine trees, waiting for him to either find the roadster, or go away. Nothing happened, and the sun was hot, and I just fell asleep. Gerty finally found me and told me who the car really belonged to, and we took it back and left it at the Douglass'. I don't know who could've taken it from there!"

"What d'you think Eric was stomping around the Point there for?" Asey asked.

"Oh, I suppose he must have been trying to locate Mrs. Boone," Stinky said. "But I never thought of that at the time."

"Tell me, what's become of all the project crowd? No one's gone an' chloroformed them, I hope?"

"They've scattered for the evening," Stinky said. "Some to the movies, some to the juke joint, and some to the library, believe it or not. We've all been chastened. Been beaten over the head by Miss Shearing. See these?" He pointed to his clothes. "Orders! Gerty thinks they were just about to boot us out of this place when Miss S. took over."

ASEY chuckled, and gave it as his opinion that maybe the change might on the whole be for the good.

"That's just what Gerty said, in an unexpurgated sort of way. Uh—she's waiting for me at the sandwich joint, and I haven't eaten yet. Will that be all, Mr. Mayo?"

"Run along," Asey said, "an' tell her it was a very complete explanation!"

After Stinky departed Asey got out of the roadster and walked up the wide wooden steps to the inn.

He was thoroughly unprepared for the renovations which had taken place inside. In the lobby, the old rattan furniture and rubber plants and lace curtains had disappeared. In their place were chromium-framed, imitation leather chairs of a brilliant vermilion, with little matching tables. The walls were alternate strips of glass brick and mirror. The lighting was so indirect as to be almost nonexistent. Pale blue neon.

But with all the alterations, he noted with amusement that the service remained unreconstructed. There was no one behind the glass brick counter of the office. No one even materialized to answer the wall telephone, an obvious relic of the past, when it suddenly began to ring. Finally, Asey answered it himself.

"Desk!" he said briskly.

An agitated voice wanted to speak at once with Miss Shearing.

"It's vitally important. This is Mr. Manderson calling from Boston!"

"Oh, yes," Asey said. "Want me to take the message? She isn't available right now."

Mr. Manderson said excitedly that Miss Shearing absolutely must have Mrs. Boone call him at once, at college.

"Okay," Asey said. "I'll tell her."

Replacing the receiver on its hook, he turned around to the register.

" 'Elizabeth Shearing. Suite A.' " Asey murmured. "We'll go find it!"

The door to Suite A was wide open, and from on the threshold Asey could see that the bedroom décor, was not only pre-war but pre-several wars. Asey hardly wasted a glance on the carved walnut bed, the marble-topped table, the gilded wicker chairs and steel engravings. He knocked.

"You'll simply have to wait!" a harassed voice announced from the bathroom. "I don't dare to leave this shower thing—or are you the one I asked to fix it, several years ago?"

"No, ma'am," Asey said, "I'm not. but I might be able to help."

"Come in then!"

The bathroom was considerably larger than the bedrooms, and at the far end was an enormous claw-foot bathtub, with a short flight of steps leading up to it.

Perched on the tub's rim, her hand gripped firmly around a pipe running up to the overhead shower fixture, was Miss Shearing. She didn't look much older than Gerty, or Layne. She was tall, slim, and dark-haired, and she wore a smart yellow tweed suit and harlequin glasses with green rims.

"Miss Shearing?" he said hesitantly.

"Yes. Look, the trouble is, if you let go, it spurts. See where it's spurted there against the wall? I've tried adhesive tape, but it just blows right off."

Asey surveyed the situation.

"Can you play Dutch boy a minute or two longer," he said, "an' keep your finger in the dyke while I go an' get some tools?"

Five minutes after his return with a wrench he managed to locate the shut-off, and stop the flood.

"Of course," he remarked, "I sort of doubt if you'll have any water in here at all, but it ought to be a lot simpler than sittin' here stemmin' the tide with your bare hands. Golly, I missed that wreath of blue flowers runnin' around the inside of the tub! Now isn't that

somethin' special! Look, are you really Miss Elizabeth Shearing?"

" 'That Old Hag Shearing'," she said with a grin, "is misleading, isn't it, Mr. Mayo!"

Asey raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you know me?"

"I recognized you when you drove up a while ago. I was in the lobby—that was just before I came up and found the flood and phoned down for help. Oh, listen! Is that water running again?"

Asey went in to see.

"Is it all right?" she asked when he returned. "Did— Oh, what have you got? Where'd you find that?"

"The little silver bud vase," Asey said. "From the *Lulu Belle.* An' as smart a place to hide it, down among the wet bath towels behind the tub, as I could ever imagine!"

ELIZABETH SHEARING looked at him blankly.

"The little silver bud vase from what?"

"The *Lulu Belle.* An' a very bright place to hide it, Miss Shearing!"

She continued to stare at him.

"You saw me, an' you panicked," Asey continued. "First you come up here an' gave that pipe a good kick—that pipe never bust by itself! Then you phoned for help, an' sat there holdin' on for dear life. It didn't matter who came first, whether it was me or someone else. The bud vase is all hidden in the wet towels!"

"Are you," Elizabeth Shearing said, *"mad?"*

"On the contrariwise, I'm delighted." Asey purposely misunderstood her. "This is the first tangible thing I've been able to get my teeth into!"

"Mr. Mayo." Her low voice was controlled and even—"just tell me, please, what the Larrabee group has done!"

"Let's stop playin'," Asey said. "The project crowd hasn't done anything, an' you know it. Where's Mrs. Boone? What did you do with the body?"

"I'm trying to think," she said, "which one it might be. Such an amazingly horrible way of getting back at me for giving them a scolding they damned well deserved!"

"Why'd you panic in the first place, I wonder?" Asey seemed to be asking himself. "I understand your putting the vase in the towels when you saw me come here—that was smart. The mistake you made was callin' my attention to the pipe again. But why'd you take that bud vase away from the *Lulu Belle?* Bothered about fingerprints, maybe?"

"Is the *Lulu Belle* that juke joint they were going to?" Miss Shearing asked.

"If it had been anything else in the world," Asey said, "except that bud vase that was used to kill her, I might feel inclined to string along a while with this well-bred, blank amazement of yours. But under the circumstances—"

"When you came into the lobby downstairs, Mr. Mayo," she interrupted, "was there anyone in the so-called office?"

"No," Asey said.

"Did anyone stop your coming up here? If I hadn't been in, was there anything to prevent you from putting a bud vase behind that tub? Anyone could come and go at will anywhere in this inn! So let's concede that if you found anything behind that tub, it doesn't necessarily follow that I'm the only person who could have placed it there!"

"But why—" Asey paused. After all, she was as likely a person to plant things on as anyone!

"I thought you'd hesitate," she said. "Now, tell me what's happened, please!"

As he told her in a few crisp sentences about finding Mrs. Boone's body in the *Lulu Belle,* and of its disappearance, her face remained immobile.

"An'," he added, "if you can prove to me that you were sittin' with the local bank president in his office from a little after twelve until one-thirty—that's the time she was last seen to the time we found her—or closeted with the minister in his study around two, when Doc Cummings discovered the body was gone, I'll retract every harsh word I said. Where were you durin' the time

she was killed, an' the time that her body was taken away?"

"I don't know, Mr. Mayo, and I'm beginning to feel afraid."

"What d'you mean, you don't know?"

"I literally don't know! I was driving. I might have been in any one of a dozen towns." She got up and started to pace around the room. "That vase was planted behind the tub! Don't you understand the real purpose of someone's causing that leak? The vase was put there to be found!"

"Wa-el," Asey began, "I s'pose—"

"There's no more effective way of calling attention to any given spot than to cause a flood in it. Whoever came to fix the pipe would find that vase. And when this business of Mrs. Boone came to light, why I'd be suspected, immediately!"

SHE sat down suddenly in the gilt rocker as if her legs had given way. But her mind hadn't. She went right on talking.

"We've got to review this situation, right from the start yesterday. Why are you chuckling?"

"I'm just sort of surprised," Asey said, "to find someone knows where it started. Why yesterday?"

"Carolyn decided yesterday to come down here with Layne. She wanted to find out why the projects were working out so badly, why the crowd seemed to get into so much hot water. I knew why. I've theoretically been in charge of half a dozen of them—except that I've never had a single chance to be in charge!"

"How come?"

"Because the minute I arrive anywhere with them, I'm sent for by Carolyn and given some other job to do some other place. Without any restraining hand, those kids have raised simple hell! There's one girl—well, d'you know the phrase 'Hubba-hubba'?"

"You mean Gerty," Asey said. "We've met."

"I mean Gerty, and I should have guessed she'd meet you at once. Gerty doesn't mean to, but she treats every place we go to as if it were something just liberated from the fascist yoke. The rest follow her, dumb with pleasure, and they have the time of their lives!"

"But not much work gets done?"

"Not much. Can't you just see them hurling themselves into a spirited investigation of garbage collections, and traffic problems?"

"Why didn't Mrs. Boone figure that out?" Asey asked. "Wouldn't that bunch have been better off without quite so much projectin' around? Couldn't they have done it all in a library?"

"Carolyn," Miss Shearing said, "would have referred to that as a reactionary statement, and told you that it's obsolete to learn by learning. You learn, Mr. Mayo, by *doing*! She's written a splendid little pamphlet on the subject, and I'll send you a free copy—if I have free access to the mails in the near future."

"Oh?" said Asey.

"When I came today, Layne brought Carolyn to meet me. She had the inevitable errands for me, and I rebelled. It was utter nonsense, my driving back to Boston to find out about something that could be settled with a simple phone call! So I told her I'd go at once—but I didn't. I called Boston, got the information she wanted, then I went gaily off, riding around the Cape!"

"Did anyone know that you didn't mean to go back to Boston?"

She shook her head. "I doubt it. Then this afternoon I telephoned the Douglass house around three, and gave Mrs. Framingham—Aunt Mary the message for Carolyn."

"Exactly what," Asey said, "did you tell her?"

"I said, tell Mrs. Boone everything's all right, and not to worry, and Shee's hair—"

"And what?"

"Hu Shee. Carolyn's poodle. He was being clipped. That was why Carolyn wanted me to drive back to Boston—to find out about Shee. Anyway, I said that Shee's hair was okay."

Asey tilted back in his rocker and shook his head.

"Mrs. Boone's all right," he murmured, as if to himself, "not to worry,

an' she's here okay!"

"No, Mr. Mayo, you've got it wrong!" she protested.

"I've got," Asey said, "what Aunt Mary apparently got! Uh-huh, an' I see how it could happen, too!"

After all, he thought, Miss Shearing couldn't invent a poodle named Hu Shee on the spur of the moment!

"I know where I phoned from," she remarked. "It was a little variety store in Chatham. They could probably tell you the time—but it was long after two, and you don't care where I was then."

"What did you do after givin' the message to Aunt Mary?" Asey asked.

"I went to a beach, and sat in the sun. I came back full of vigor and told off the project en masse—so there you are, Mr. Mayo!"

"Didn't you eat any lunch?"

"Yes, but it was some sandwiches my housekeeper had put up for me. Oh," she said with a sigh, "if only I'd stopped to ask a two-headed woman the time! Or run over a cow as church bells were sounding!"

Miss Shearing got up and started to pace around the room again.

"I didn't kill Carolyn, I had nothing to do with it," she said, "and I'm sure that you—or someone—will be able to prove it. What terrifies me is that someone *planned* to put me in this hole! That someone must hate me so profoundly!"

"Wa-el," Asey drawled, "d'you s'pose someone possibly might've figured out that maybe you had a motive for killin' her?"

"I can't think why!" she retorted promptly.

"You were the head of Larrabee before Mrs. Boone came there, weren't you?"

"Yes—yes, I was," she said. "My father started it, you know."

"An' Mrs. Boone displaced you?"

"That depends on your point of view, Mr. Mayo. I still run the place. I'm paid more than she is, although frankly Carolyn doesn't—didn't—know that! And I never felt that she'd stay at Larrabee forever. She always had a next step. Writer, columnist, lecturer, judge, college president—she wasn't going down, Mr. Mayo."

"An' what," Asey said, "do you guess the next step would've been?"

"The seat of the Honorable Willard P. Boone," Miss Shearing said, "who isn't young, and probably not immortal."

Asey looked at her thoughtfully.

"Kind of awful philosophic about it all, aren't you?" he inquired.

She shrugged. "Admitting that she brought things to the college that I never could have is no discredit to me. On the contrary, Carolyn furthered my career."

"Just loved runnin' her errands, an' carryin' her Kleenex around, I s'pose," Asey commented, and noted that his thrust hit home.

"Yes, I have been bored, and annoyed with some of her errands!" For the first time, she sounded on the defensive.

"Tell me," Asey said suddenly, "what was she like?"

"She was invigorating, enthusiastic, one-minded, shrewd rather than terribly intelligent. She was an opportunist, and she took herself very seriously. And yet she cried her eyes out the year she was left off the list of the ten best-dressed women!"

"An' did you like her?" Asey inquired.

"She could hurl herself at causes like that man who's launched from the cannon at the circus, and she could grab headlines from anyone. No, Mr. Mayo, I didn't particularly like her. But I got along with her."

"Did she have any other husbands besides Senator Boone?"

"One. A Mr. Branch, I believe."

"What became of him?"

"For all I know," Miss Shearing said, "she ate him."

"Ouch!" Asey said. "What about her secretaries?"

Miss Shearing made a wry face.

"Frankly, all of them made me faintly nervous, Mr. Mayo. I always had the uncomfortable feeling that they were going to leap up and trim the back of my neck—hairdresser types."

"Think she was ever seriously taken with any of 'em—Eric, maybe?"

"Never! Not Eric, nor *any* of the others. Whatever the poor things advance to when she's tired of them, they've certainly earned it!"

"Was there any chance of Stinky or Briggs fallin' heir to Eric's job?" Asey said.

"You've done some probing, haven't you!" She sounded surprised. "Yes, she asked them both, and they both very politely refused her. I think she meant to work on Jack Briggs, though. He has some important political connections."

"An' now tell me," Asey said, "why Gerty hates her so."

Miss Shearing shook her head. "It's a horrid little story. Carolyn discovered that Gerty had practicallly never gone to school—she got into Larrabee on an intelligence test. Then she found out about Gerty's war record, and battle stars, and saw the wonderful publicity angle. It was pretty grim."

"Boone turned the spotlight on her, huh?"

"The works, including newsreels. I couldn't stop her. I tried." She got up from the chair-arm. "Oh, you can imagine what it was like. This lovely illiterate. Orphan asylum. Night school. Chorus Girl. Stage career. Wonderful army record. Real heroine. How many medals did you get, Gerty? Let's have your profile, Mrs. Boone. Thank Mrs. Boone for letting you get an education, Gerty. Smile!"

Asey whistled softly.

"An' didn't Gerty black her eyes an' tear her ears off?" he asked in astonishment.

"Gerty had to take it. But it was tough on her."

"Lovely illiterate—huh?" Asey said. "That explains why she's so sensitive about her grammar."

"I saw her mimic Carolyn one day," Miss Shearing remarked reminiscently. "It made my blood run cold. But look here, Gerty has nothing to do with this business! I wouldn't believe otherwise if you'd found her standing over Carolyn's body clutching a smoking gun!"

"Smoking bud vase," Asey corrected. "What about Eric — you seen him around today?"

SHE lifted her shoulders slightly. "Eric? Here? No, but I'm not surprised to know he's been here. I've known him to take a plane to see if Carolyn wanted certain letters signed with initials or her name."

"Any reason you might suspect him? He was seen around Pochet Point."

"I'm quite sure," Miss Shearing said with a laugh, "you'll find out he wished to know whether invitations were to be printed on cream or ivory paper. Why Eric would never kill the goose that's thrust his golden eggs on him!"

"Who would be your candidate?" Asey inquired.

"I've been racking my brains to remember if we have any pet cranks in this vicinity," she said. "You know, who write to people like Carolyn."

"Huh!" Asey said. "An' next to some crackpot, who'd you pick?"

"None of the project," she told him with finality. "The undergraduates all worship the ground she walks on. And not the Douglasses. I find myself thinking about Mrs. Framingham. Aunt Mary."

"Oh? An' why?"

"She loathes Carolyn. I don't think she's ever forgiven her for getting the judgeship that her son was slated for. It was dirty politics."

Asey stood up.

"I wonder," he said as he picked up the bud vase, "if you'll come downstairs an' call Eric from the pay station in the hall, an' see if you can find out what he wants Mrs. Boone for, an' why he came down here today."

X

ERIC'S problem, Miss Shearing informed Asey as she emerged from the telephone booth, was whether the Trustees' Annual Luncheon was to be held in the Blue Room or the Green Room.

"For that vital data," she continued, "he searched Pochet Point and combed the beach. I told him the Blue Room,

and he's now relaxed."

"Fine!" Asey said. "If you believe him!"

"I do, Mr. Mayo. He hasn't sufficient imagination to think up a story like that."

"Would Eric," Asey said, "have one of Mrs. Boone's green scarves with him?"

"Oh, I'm sure he'd have one to tuck in his pocket before he met Carolyn," Miss Shearing returned. "Where are you going?" she added as Asey entered the lobby.

He pointed to the glass brick and mirrors.

"Must be some way to get through this without smashin' a path!" he said. "Which strip is a door, d'you s'pose? I want a door. I want to find a Smalley. Any Smalley!"

While locating the door proved difficult enough, it was simpler than locating any of the Smalley family. It took them the better part of ten minutes to find the oldest son out in a remote ell.

"Tell me, was there any callers for Miss Shearing, or any messages?" Asey asked.

"Gee, didn't you get 'em, Miss Shearing?" the son said. "Pa must of forgot. He'll feel awful sorry!"

He led the way back to the office in the lobby, pawed around under the glass brick counter, and finally came up with a fistful of telegrams, and slips of paper.

"I think—yes, they're all from Eric," Miss Shearing said as she ran through them. "Wires saying he was coming, and when he was coming, and for me to be here. Want to see them?" She held the sheaf out to Asey.

"Say," young Smalley said. "Say, there was a caller I forgot to leave a note about. Just after dinner."

"Who?" Asey said.

"From the Douglasses. That aunt of theirs. Mrs. Frampton."

"Mrs. Framingham?" Miss Shearing demanded.

"I guess so. Big woman. She wanted to see you, but she was on her way to the movies and wouldn't wait."

"Thanks," Miss Shearing said. She looked quizzically at Asey as young Smalley disappeared. "Well? Aunt Mary called—and I go up to find the flood, and you find the bud vase. Well, Mr. Mayo?"

Asey looked at his watch.

"We might get to the second show an' catch her as she's leavin'—come on!"

"What is this, protective custody?" she inquired as they started off.

"In a backhand sort of way," Asey said. "Doggone, look at the cars already headin' home. I'm afraid we've missed her!"

"Now what?" Miss Shearing said.

"Now," Asey told her with a grin, "we're goin' to step out. We're goin' to the juke joint."

He caught the sound of a smothered chuckle. They drew up a few minutes later in front of Mike's Place.

"Come on," Asey said as he locked the bud vase in the glove compartment. "We're goin' in."

He stood for a moment in the entrance, peering through the thick haze of tobacco smoke.

"I'm proud to see my little charges are reasonably quiet," Miss Shearing said, pointing to where Gerty and Stinky sat with the fat boy and the girl with the bangs.

"I hoped they'd be here!" Asey beckoned to Gerty. "Golly, what a racket! Now, in the interests of your own personal safety, Miss S., you're goin' to surround yourself with this group, an' stay surrounded by—hi, Gerty! Miss S., you probably won't suffer anything that a couple of aspirin won't cure! So long! Gerty, come outside a second, will you?"

"Say, how are things?" Gerty said.

"I haven't time to go into 'em," Asey said. "Look you kids are not to let Shearing out of your sight. You—"

"Uun-uh, Mr. Mayo! Not her!" Gerty interrupted. "Shearing's okay! She never killed—"

"I don't think she did, either," Asey said quickly. "But it's possible she might be in a bit of danger. Don't you let her out of your sight till I say so! If she tries to duck, sit on her. Okay?

Now, one thing more. You an' Layne were on the beach from after twelve-fifteen or so. You left early—"

GERTY nodded vigorously.

"That's right. A little before you found me by the mud hole."

"Before you went to the beach, how long were you two together?"

"Why," Gerty said, "from the time we left your house! We were in her car!"

"You were together all that time? She didn't leave you, an' you didn't leave her?"

"Well," Gerty said slowly, "Layne did swim out further than I did, out to the raft—but hell, I saw her all the time!"

"Okay—you mind Shearing, now! Watch over her!"

From Mike's place, Asey drove on to the church. Jennie emerged bearing a paper plate with a small slab of ice cream on it.

"Refreshments," she said. "Asey, nobody knows a thing about Sylvester! And there's nothing to the secret room business—nothing at all!"

"Doggone!" Asey stabbed at his ice cream. "Jennie, are you sure?"

"Mrs. Phinney says sh'd've known if there was, because two of her brothers did carpentry work when they weren't at sea, and if there'd been any secret rooms being built, they'd've been sure to tell her about 'em."

"Wa-el," Asey said, "if someone didn't heft that body into a nice convenient secret room, then I s'pose someone took it somwheres else. Thanks, Jennie. I'm goin' over to Pochet Point an' have a talk with Aunt Mary Framingham."

"I don't think as it matters any, Asey," Jennie said, "but I *do* keep wondering about Sylvester! After all, he lives right over there at the Point."

"What?" Asey demanded. "I thought he lived over Skaket way!"

"Oh, he did till they took over so much land for that radar station—took his, too," Jennie said. "He owns a couple of acres next the Douglasses, so he come over and built him a little shack there. When'll you be home?"

"I'll be back soon," Asey assured her. "I'm just goin' to see Aunt Mary."

Over at the Point, he parked on the lane, got out and walked through the pine woods to the Douglass' house. Walking close, he stood in the shadow of the lilacs and peered into the lighted living room.

Harold and Louise were playing gin rummy. Layne sat by the table, turning the pages of a magazine. Aunt Mary, Asey decided with some annoyance, must have come home and gone straight to bed. He'd noticed a light in an upstairs bedroom.

Noiselessly he made his way around to the rear of the house, and looked reflectively at the *Lulu Belle* and the little engine, drawn up by the tiny station.

"An' it's all wrong, somehow!" he murmured. "It bothers me."

Was that the sound of footsteps in the woods near the station, or was he imagining things?

He'd never know, he thought, whether he'd actually heard anything or not, for the Town Hall clock suddenly started to peal out ten o'clock, and on its third stroke, an assortment of church clocks started to chime in.

Asey leaned against an apple tree. Folding his arms, he settled back until another clock, the little station clock, started belatedly to chime ten.

Asey drew in his breath sharply and stood up straight.

"Just about three an' a half minutes late!" he said out loud. "Golly, maybe what I been thinkin' isn't so crazy after all!"

He took a step toward the *Lulu Belle,* then stopped short.

There *were* footsteps, and they were behind the station. Going away from the station, he amended.

As if he were walking on eggs, Asey set out after the person.

In something less than sixty seconds, he discovered that the person was a man. A tall, gangly man.

It was Sylvester! And he wasn't taking any particular care about how much noise his footsteps made.

Keeping some distance behind, Asey

followed him along the curving, rutted lane, until Sylvester reached the door of the tar-paper-covered structure that was apparently his home.

JUST as Sylvester's hand touched the knob, Asey noiselessly appeared beside him.

"Hi, Sylvester," he said casually.

"What the—why, Asey Mayo! So they got you out huntin' me, have they?"

"I'm not huntin' for you at all," Asey said. "I just come over to see Harold Douglass on business, an' when I heard footsteps, I wondered if it mightn't be you comin' home."

"Asey, what they goin' to do to me for bein' late with the Bull Moose today?"

"Nothin'," Asey said. "They just think it's kind of funny, your bein' late after bein' on time so long. You askin' me in?"

"Why, sure!"

The inside of the shack, Asey thought, couldn't have been neater or better kept if Jennie herself had the care of it.

"Take a chair," Sylvester said. "That Boston rocker's the most comfortable. Didn't they send you out to find me, honest?"

"No, honest," Asey said. "I just happened to drop by the Douglass', like I said. Nice place you got here, Sylvester!"

"Well," Sylvester said with quiet pride, "I like it." He went to the door and let in an enormous white cat.

"Usually meets me on the path near the station," Sylvester went on. "I waited there for her, but she was bein' independent!"

"Nice cat," Asey said. "What's her name?"

"Lana Turner. Great company." Sylvester crossed over to a miniature ice chest and produced a tin of evaporated milk. "Here y'are, Lana. Fill up! Asey, ain't they awful sore about missin' the Quiz Question?"

"Wa-el," Asey said, "they were at first, but then they found people that had heard it, so it all worked out."

"What was it?" Sylvester asked interestedly. "The Question, I mean."

"I don't know what the Question is," Asey told him, "but the answer is coypus. Just think of Lana. Coypus. Look, Syl, what really did happen to make you late today?"

"Asey, I tell you, I don't understand it yet! I set my watch, just like I do every single day—"

"You mean," Asey said, "by the clock on the Douglass station?"

"Yes," Sylvester said seriously. "That clock's an old railroad station clock, and railroad station clocks are *always* right! Didn't have any notion in the world that I wasn't smack on time! Three minutes, an' most a half! Well, sir, I can tell you I skipped out of town so quick!"

"How'd you skip?" Asey inquired.

"Hitched me a ride on a truck clear to New Bedford!" Sylvester told him. "Don't know when I been so far away from the Cape before. Then I remembered I hadn't locked my front door, an' who'd take care of Lana? So I hitched back. After all, there ain't no place like home!"

"I always feel that way," Asey said sympathetically, "every time I get back. Say, I hear you been havin' famous visitors out this way."

"Who's that?"

"Carolyn Barton Boone," Asey said.

"Oh that woman!" Sylvester said with so much force that Lana stopped washing her face and looked up at him. "Her! *Dyed* hair, an' her face all painted up—honest, I don't know what the country's comin' to when women like that get into the papers, an' folks listen to 'em."

"Where'd you see her?" Asey asked. "Up town?"

"No, here, at the Point. By golly, wasn't I surprised to see her over at the Douglasses!"

"Douglass was givin' her a ride on the railroad, I s'pose."

Asey held his breath and decided that this was, in its way, the most completely nerve-wracking interview he'd had. But he couldn't scream out question after question—not with someone

like Sylvester.

"Yup, he was. Say, that's some railroad, ain't it? I bet her grandfather never owned any railroads! I bet he never even had a ride on one!"

"Did that really belong to Mrs. Douglass' grandfather, like I heard?"

"Why, sure!" Sylvester said. "An' Mrs. Douglass didn't want it sold for scrap, so she bought it up, an' they had it brought down here. You know how they are about old things, so careful with Aunt Della Hovey's stuff an' all."

"So," Asey said, "Mrs. Boone got a ride. She seem to be enjoyin' it?"

SYLVESTER said he wouldn't know. "Douglass helped her on, an' they went inside—I s'pose he punched her ticket—an' then he come out an' went into that little lean-to he's got where he changes his coats an 'caps, an' then Mrs. Boone hopped out an' ran indoors. After a while, Douglass came an' looked in, an' then he went off to the house—after her, I s'pose. An' then Mrs. Boone came back—an' by golly, *didn't* I want to go tell that woman what I thought of her! Yessir, wouldn't I have liked to of told her a thing or two!"

"Why didn't you?" Asey asked.

"There wasn't time!" Sylvester said. "I always plan on bein' up to the Bull Moose at least half an hour early. I got my reputation to keep up! An' it was after twelve, then. I had to come here an' make me a sandwich, an' be back to town by twelve-thirty! I wonder if Douglass give her that ride after all, Asey. I'd of been sure to of heard the train toot, but I didn't!"

Had Douglass returned from the house, Asey asked himself, looked at the car and thought it empty, since by then Mrs. Boone was lying on the floor, dead? Or had Douglass himself returned and killed her?

"I always felt pretty sorry for ole Senator Boone," Sylvester went on conversationally. "Him in Washington, an' his wife kitin' around the country."

"Always seemed to me"—Asey tried to draw a line between sounding casual and owning to a conviction—"she was the sort of woman this world would be a whole lot better off without!"

Sylvester promptly bit.

"That's just what I was tellin' Amy Waters while I was standin' in the sugar line. I said if all the busybody women like her was killed off in one swoop, why it'd be the best thing ever happened to this country! I said I'd like to do it myself—an' by gum, if I'd had just a mite more time this noon, I'd of given her a good piece of my mind!"

Asey looked over at him thoughtfully. "Wa-el," he said, "you can't ever tell—I mean, if you'd do any good or not. They probably wouldn't listen to folks like us. Say, Sylvester, you'd be just the feller to know!"

"What?"

"Jennie an' me," Asey said, "was havin' an argument about ole houses tonight. I said there was a secret room at the Douglasses, an' she said I was crazy."

"That's just where Jennie's dead wrong!" Sylvester said. "But I don't know how you can prove it to her just now, on account of—well, you see, Asey, I work around the Douglass' place some. Gardenin', an' helpin' keep the place tidy. Well, Aunt Mary an' me, we worked around the flower gardens a lot, an' she kept talkin' about this secret room—sounded awful kind of crazy to me at first. Then I said to myself, why not? The Hoveys did plenty of other crazy things."

Asey ordered himself not to jump out of the Boston rocker and shake the whole story out of Sylvester in one lump.

"An' then, by golly," Sylvester said reminiscently, "one day me an' Aunt Mary, we found it! You get to it from the outside, you know, Asey!"

"Is that right, now!" Asey felt his fixed smile crack and widen into a genuine beam of pleasure. "Well, well, well!"

"Yes, sir, that's where me an' Aunt Mary went wrong for a long while! We was all the time huntin' from the inside—while the Douglasses was away, of course."

"On the outside!" Asey said. "Huh—now let me think." He closed his

eyes, figured what portion of the house would be nearest the *Lulu Belle*, and made a guess. "Say, I bet you—uh-huh, I bet you it's somewhere on the west side of the kitchen door!"

HE OPENED his eyes to find Sylvester staring at him in open-mouthed bewilderment.

"I must say, Asey, you beat me!" he said. "'Course whenever they talk about what a great feller you are, I always tell 'em I understand how you got way up in Porter Motors. But I never seen how you— Now looky, just how did you detect where that door was?"

"Why, I don't deserve any credit, Syl!" Asey said truthfully. "It's kind of like Columbus standin' that egg up on its end. Easy enough when someone tells you—I mean, shows you! An' it seemed to me if it was an outside job, it couldn't hardly be on the front side of the house. Don't you forget, *you* can walk right to it, an' open it. I can't. I only just know where it is in a general way!"

"Oh, sure you could open it!" Sylvester said. "Anyone could, now we got it oiled up an' eased up. Aunt Mary said she'd always wanted to find a secret room there, but she guessed she never would, unless a wall fell in—an' by golly, Asey, what do you think?"

"A wall fell in," Asey said promptly.

"No, but where I was leanin' against it, by the back door, I felt it give! See, a door is cut there. It was hinged on the inside, see?"

"Oh, now wait!" Asey said. "You'd see a door cut there!"

"Nope. There ain't no latch, or handle, just a little hook you put your finger in."

"But you could see that!"

"Well, I s'pose you could!" Sylvester retorted. "If you knew there was a hook, an' if you was huntin' for it, an' if you knew how to shove the wistaria to one side! An' if you knew it was behind the drain pipe!"

"But whyn't you see the other side of the door?"

"Why, the side where the hinges are, there's this beam runnin' down that laps over the cut, see?" Sylvester explained. "The door shoves inwards."

"Hey, it goes to the end of—a pantry, or a closet?"

"Aunt Della's best-dish pantry. This secret room backs smack against that pantry's long side—room runs the length of the pantry, an' it's about three feet an' a half wide. Ain't big, but it's a room, an' it sure is a secret!"

"Why in time didn't someone ever spot that from the inside?" Asey demanded.

"I tell you why," Sylvester said. "You go into that pantry—no windows in it—from the dinin' room, an' what do you notice? Dishes, an 'shelves, an' shelves, an' dishes! Secret room's sittin' there to your left. But do you think of it? No, sir! Because you got a built-in corner cupboard there! Aunt Mary never noticed, and she went all over that house with a tape measure."

"Let's see!" Asey said. "One long side's the pantry, an' the other long side's the outside of the house. One short side's the dinin' room an' corner cupboard—what's the fourth side? What's that back up against?"

"Shelves," Sylvester told him. "Wall shelves in the kitchen, more shelves back of the pantry, too. I tell you, Aunt Mary nearly had a conniption fit when the Douglasses talked about cuttin' a window in the best-dish pantry this year. Told 'em it was a lot of nonsense, and she was sure Aunt Della wouldn't ever approve."

"Why's she keepin' this such a secret for so long?" Asey wanted to know.

"Because she's furnishin' it! Kind of slow goin', because she can't do nothin' unless the Douglasses are away, see? We'd never of got the floor painted an' spattered if they hadn't gone off for a weekend in New Hampshire. When she gets it all fixed up, she's goin' to invite 'em in, an' have like a party."

"Well, well!" Asey said. "An' nobody knows about it!"

"Just her an' me!" Sylvester said. "We kind of aim to have the grand openin' on the Fourth of July. With cannon-crackers an' a lot of noise."

"Speakin' of noise," Asey said, "don't that door scrape an' groan some?"

"Not if you know how to work it, an' take your time." Sylvester demonstrated. "You push a mite with your knee, an' pull up a little with your hand—so!"

"Seems funny you don't put a lock on that door."

"Don't need to. After all, nobody'd found it for I don't know how many years before we did, an' it wasn't locked all that time! Besides, Aunt Mary says there's no sense in advertisin' till she's ready to show it. Look, Asey, of course you're dead right about the secret room, but I don't know how you can prove it to Jennie without lettin' out what Aunt Mary wants to keep a secret! So, you won't tell her, will you?"

"Tell you what," Asey said as he rose from the Boston rocker, "I'll just tell Jennie to ask Mrs. Framingham herself. If she wants to confide in Jennie, she can. I had a real pleasant visit with you, Sylvester!"

XI

NOISY assorted town clocks were striking eleven when Asey swung his roadster into Cummings' driveway. Before he could turn the motor off, the doctor appeared in the doorway.

"Been expecting you!" he said. "I knew you couldn't continue inspecting quohaugs by yourself. You—" He broke off as Asey entered the office. "What's happened, man? I never saw you look shattered before!"

"I am," Asey said. "Listen, Doc!"

Cummings stared at him as he concluded his summary of his interview with Sylvester.

"My God!" he said. "So there *is* a secret room! And you went there at once, of course!" Asey nodded. "And you found Mrs. Boone's body in there."

"No," Asey said. "Not Mrs. Boone's. Aunt Mary's." After a moment he added, "Mrs. Boone's body is back in the *Lulu Belle*—not just exactly where we found her, an' not in exactly the same position. But almost."

"Mrs. Boone's is back where we originally found it! It's too fantastic! Mother Gaston never thought up anything like this! What's it all mean?"

"Mrs. Boone, I'd say, was supposed to be found tomorrow. When someone went into the *Lulu Belle*."

"Oh?" Cummings said, with rising inflection. "Indeed! And when d'you think Aunt Mary was supposed to be disinterred? August tenth, at four, possibly?"

"Nope, I don't think that Aunt Mary was s'posed to be found at all," Asey said. "Mrs. Boone gets found. Aunt Mary's missin'. No one'll ever forgive themselves for thinkin' Aunt Mary might've done it—but Aunt Mary's missin'. Think it over."

Cummings slammed himself down in his swivel chair.

"Oh, you're right, of course!" he said. "It's too diabolically simple not to be right! What happened to her?"

"Same thing," Asey said. "Blow on the head."

"Not another bud vase!"

"Milk bottle," Asey said.

"In there, in the room?"

Asey nodded. "Way I see it, Doc, after she came back from the movies, she went inside that room."

"And Boone's body was there," Cummings said, "and as she discovered it, the murderer arrived. Exit Aunt Mary. I'm sorry, Asey, but if it wasn't Aunt Mary I followed down to the boat house, who the hell was it?"

"Someone else," Asey said. "An' was that flat tire a fake, or did someone stymie Aunt Mary by givin' her a flat tire? An' who planted the bud vase behind Shearing's tub?"

"If you say that to yourself several times," Cumming said, "you can experience the earlier sensations of madness. May I remind you I haven't seen you since way back there at the traffic lights? Catch me up."

"I'll do it if you promise not to open your mouth till I'm through."

When Asey finished, Cummings said:

"You're licked, Asey! I'll call Halbert. He can bring in his fancy truck with the pretty equipment. This is where you need gamma rays and snip-

pets of uranium."

"We'll call him," Asey said, "but it ain't that hard, Doc. Most important thing is that station clock bein' three an' a half minutes slow. You don't need atomic energy to solve that one."

"What?" Cummings snorted. "Coypus! That's a good word to sum up what I think! Sheer, unadulterated coypus!"

"Sure. I been broodin' about them three an' a half minutes," Asey said. "How does an electric clock get to be three an' a half minutes slow? How d'you stop one of 'em? Wa-el, think, Dr. Muldoon, think!"

"You stop the electricity, I suppose!" Cummings retorted. "Look here, we can't sit and play quohaug inspector with two corpses sitting out there at the Point! I'm going to call Halbert!"

"Hurry up," Asey said, "because we're goin' to need him! This is goin' to take quite a lot of stage managin', Doc, an' I think that the quicker we get to it, the better. People get a taste of bashin' their fellow men, and it goes to their heads."

CUMMINGS paused with his hand on the phone.

"D'you mean you know who's responsible for this?"

"Sure," Asey said. "I know. Only I want to prove it quick before anything else happens."

"And while we're proving it, as you so humorously phrase it," Cummings said, "what's to prevent someone from taking both those corpses away?"

"Wa-el," Asey said, "Sylvester, for one thing. He's parked on a stump beyond the station with a loaded shotgun. Aunt Mary was one of his best friends, and I don't think he's goin' to let any one do any serious body-movin'."

"I suppose"—Cummings picked up the phone—"that we stage-manage so that at a given signal— Hullo, this Sophie? Cummings speaking. Can you get me Halbert, the cop who replaced Hanson? What? He is? Well, put him on!" He turned to Asey. "Halbert's in town. Hello! What?" A grin spread over his face as he listened. "Okay, I'll tell him. He's here in my office. Halbert, we have a little surprise for you—several, in fact. Suppose you come over, right away!"

"What's he doin' in town?" Asey asked as the doctor hung up.

"Seems he was just passing through," Cummings said, "when he was virtually annihilated by a jet-propelled roadster driven by a man with a yachting cap. He recognized you. He was about to call me to ask if I'd tactfully request you to slow down just a little."

* * * * *

As the station clock struck two, the Douglass' old water tower toppled to the ground with a crash that amazed Asey and Cummings, even though they'd been standing in the pine woods waiting for it.

"That got 'em all right!" Cummings pointed toward the house. "Knocked 'em out of bed! See the lights go on! There goes Douglass, rushing out! There go Louise and Layne. Let's move over nearer. I want to hear what they're saying!"

While the flashlights of the Douglass family played excitedly about the debris of the tower, Asey and the doctor edged as near as they dared.

Louise was ascribing the tower's downfall to the project.

"Over it like flies all afternoon—a miracle it didn't topple with them on it! For the— Harold! Look! Look what's tied on this piece of railing! With a red ribbon bow tied on them! What on earth are those rubber bathing shoes doing there? With their soles all cut!"

"The red ribbon bow," Cummings said in Asey's ear, "was a stroke of genius. If I'd put my murdering shoes away forever on a deserted, abandoned water tower, and then suddenly had them turn up at my feet with a red ribbon bow on 'em—wow!"

"What's keepin' that cop of Halberts?" Asey muttered. "As soon as Sylvester an' Stinky jerked that tower down, he was to— Oho, there he goes!"

"How Aunt Mary could sleep through this!" Louise's voice rose to a scream. "I'm sure now that she's getting deaf.

Oh, look! The *Lulu Belle*—is it on fire? It's all lighted up!"

The Douglasses stared toward the Pullman, then Harold suddenly stopped short. Louise clutched at his arm.

"Harold! The side of the house! It's opening! Layne, come look here! It's a door! Where did she go, Harold?"

Cummings turned on his heel.

"And there," he said to Asey, at the sound of a car starting, "Layne goes! She grabbed those shoes—notice that? Rushed to her car—no keys. Beach-wagon—no keys. Your roadster—keys! Does the little fool think we're going to let her streak away?"

"If she does," Asey said, "she'll soon find it's parade speed into the arms of Halbert, around the curve in the lane! Huh, I s'pose it's nicer that the Douglasses don't have to witness that scene—not after Aunt Mary! The cop who opened that door is shooin' 'em out of the room, see? I guess, Doc, you'd better take 'em over now. I'm goin' home."

"Asey, you can't leave me here to tell 'em!" Cummings protested. "I can't do it!"

"You told it to me," Asey said. "Or most of it, anyway. You set me to thinkin' of her. Begin with that stuff about reversal, Doc—how sometimes when you seem to be workin' so hard adorin' someone, you really hate 'em. Go on about roots—Layne hadn't any. She didn't understand 'em. She didn't begin to understand about Aunt Della's things. They know that. She never belonged—anywhere, or to anybody. Tell 'em how Boone used her—"

"That's another thing they certainly know!"

ASEY nodded.

"Uh-huh, but I doubt if they know it all. Tell 'em what Shearin' an' Gerty told us—how Layne wrote all her speeches an' articles, an' how Boone just took 'em over for her own."

"What do you think was the last straw?" Cummings interrupted.

"I concur with Gerty," Asey said. "She must have overheard Boone makin' that date with Jack Briggs for the beach. Explain about Aunt Mary—but they won't need any more explanations than that, Doc!"

"Except one, maybe," Cummings said slowly. "That Aunt Mary was getting deaf. She knew it. Made a date to see me about it next week. I'd completely forgotten till I noticed her name on my date book tonight. That's why she botched Shearing's message. Okay, I'll do what I can! Where's Jennie?"

"I told her to stick by that cop with the floodlights, over by the *Lulu Belle*," Asey said, "but there she is, pokin' her nose into the secret room! Jennie! Hey, we're leavin' now!"

"I suppose," Cummings said, "I really have the easier job. I've only got to explain motivation to the Douglasses, and commiserate. You've got to clear up every last question that is in Jennie's mind!"

But Jennie never spoke on the trip home until Asey was swinging the old roadster up the oystershell driveway.

"I can't hold it any longer!" she said, as the car came to a stop. "I saw her there in the lane with Halbert, as we went past! Spitting like a cat—ugh! Asey, if she was with Gerty all the time, how could she have done it?"

"Layne swam out to the raft, an' the moored boats," Asey said. "Gerty thought she saw her all the time, but she only saw Layne's bathin' cap. Layne knew Gerty wouldn't be venturin' out that far. So she draped her cap on one of the boats, swam around that far point, an' hopped across the rocks back to the Douglasses. She knew Douglass was takin' Mrs. Boone for a ride on the train, so she slipped into the station—"

"What was all that business of seeing that nobody touched the station clock? And it's being three and a half minutes slow?"

"How d'you stop an electric clock?" Asey asked with a laugh. "Why is our hall clock sometimes slow?"

Jennie said she wished he wouldn't harp on that old hall clock. "I have to unplug it to use the vacuum in that socket. I try to remember to set it ahead when I plug it in, but I do sometimes forget. You mean someone pulled the plug out for three and a half min-

utes—but they certainly weren't cleaning!"

"Nope," Asey said. "Layne hid in the station, an' accidentally pulled the plug out—tripped over it, we think—as she slipped out an' into the *Lulu Belle.* After killin' Mrs. Boone she slipped back into the station again—I think she was duckin' Douglass, who was huntin' Mrs. Boone. She saw what she'd done, an' put the plug back in."

"But what did that three and a half minutes matter?"

"Only that Sylvester, goin' back to town, set his watch by that clock, an' set it three an' a half minutes slow," Asey said, "an' it kept botherin' me."

"I'm sure it bothered me," Jennie said, "when it lost me the Question. What did Layne do then, go back to the beach?"

"Uh-huh. Took her cap, swam back to shore, chatted with Gerty, ate lunch, lay in the sun. Later she took her sketch pad an' pencil in a waterproof case an' swam out to the boats again—to sketch from out there, she said. Only she didn't."

"Seems funny that Gerty didn't ask to see what she'd been drawing!" Jennie said.

"Gerty did, an' Layne showed her—how was Gerty to know it was an old sketch she'd done long ago?"

"How did you know?" Jennie demanded.

"What Gerty described," Asey said, "an' what she drew for me from memory, was the shore line before the hurricane hit—steeples, an' big trees, an' a wharf. Wa-el, durin' that so-called sketchin' period, Layne came back to the house again. I think she concluded they'd missed finding Boone entirely, an' had probably gone off uptown on errands. I think she acted on impulse when she put that body into the secret room. Took her only a few minutes, includin' scrubbin' that carpet. But she made that noise with the door, an' Cummings heard, an' went out."

"How'd Layne know about the room, anyway?"

"She'd either spotted it herself, or else seen Aunt Mary comin' or goin'. Anyway, she lured the doc down to the boat house—"

Jennie had not finished with questions, though.

"WHAT about that business of the flat tire?" she broke in.

"I don't know when or how Layne happened on the beachwagon," Asey said. "Probably after shuttin' the doc up. Probably she got a glimpse of Aunt Mary, huntin' around for Boone. I suspect Layne thought it'd be a good thing if she was kept busy with a flat tire instead of pokin' her nose around too much."

"Nice way to treat your own family, I must say!"

"But it wasn't her own family, an' she didn't waste much affection on 'em. That's all Layne did till she put that vase behind Shearin's tub. I think Cummings asked her too many questions when she drove him back from the boat house. I think he tipped her off we were at work on things. She had to take Briggs up later, an' he said she left him in the village. She must've gone right on to the inn."

"Why'd she plant it on Miss Shearing?"

"Why not?" Asey said. "Next to Aunt Mary she was a good, likely suspect!"

"I heard Harold Douglass tell that cop Aunt Mary'd come from the movies and gone straight to bed. You think she sneaked down to that room instead?"

Asey nodded. "I think Aunt Mary suspected something. I'm sure something was bothering her, anyway, for her to go call on Shearin'. Maybe she wanted to check on that telephone call. Now let's get in an' get to bed! I'm—"

"Those shoes!" Jennie said.

"Oh. Well, I thought about the only clue would be her shoes—she couldn't have short-cutted over those barnacly rocks in her bare feet, an' she couldn't have worn much else on 'em but bathin' shoes. I honestly never expected to find 'em, but when I went up into the water tower—there they were! You can't burn rubber shoes up without lettin' folks

know, an' in that gardenin' family, I s'pose she'd have hesitated to bury 'em. Jennie, that's all!"

"Listen!" she said. "Isn't that—yes, the phone's ringing. You run in and answer, Asey."

Jennie paused curiously by the phone when she came in a moment later.

"How's that?" Asey was saying. "*What?* What's nutria? Say, what in time are you callin' to ask me a fool thing— Oh, I see. Well, by the merest chance, sir, I do happen to know the answer. Coypus!"

Jennie's gasp of surprise nearly deafened him.

"What? Can I recite the rest of what old rhyme? Just a minute, please! Jennie," he said in an undertone, "unwrap that bottle of medicine, an' take a swallow! Now, sir, the rest of what rhyme?"

"It's the *Doubler!*" Jennie's voice was an octave above normal. "It's the Question that doubles *everything* you get!"

" 'Punch, conductor, punch with care,
Punch in the presence of the passenjaire.
A blue trip-slip for an eight-cent fare,
A buff trip-slip for a six-cent fare,
A pink trip-slip for a five-cent fare,
Punch in the presence of the passenjaire!"
Punch, brothers, punch with care!
Punch in the presence of the passenjaire!' "

Jennie screamed.

"What's that, sir?" Asey said. "Oh. Send all the loot to Jennie Mayo. Our reaction? Owin' to the handy presence of some pink faintin' medicine, we averted casualties. But what with one thing an' another, I think you could sum us up as—punch-drunk! Good night!"

JONATHAN STAGGE

The baying of hounds is a dirge to mark the dread discovery of the headless and armless torso of a young woman during a fox hunt!

MY BEDROOM windows face in the other direction. That's why I didn't hear them. That's why the first hint of what was happening in Kenmore came to me in so oblique, so eerie a fashion—a thin, reedy voice chanting tonelessly:

> Hark, hark, the dogs do bark.
> The beggars are coming to town.

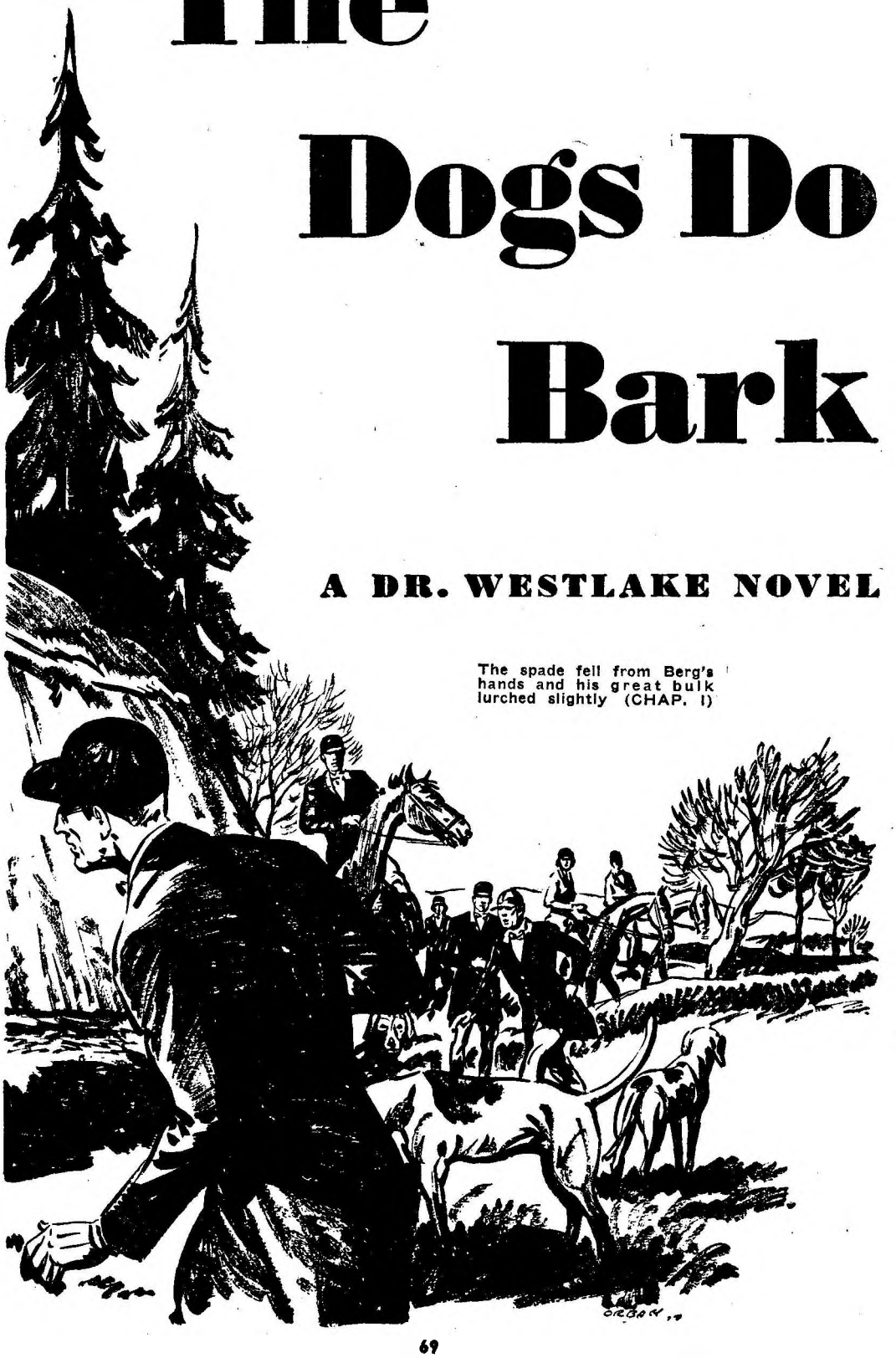
I should have recognized the voice of my ten-year-old daughter. I should have remembered that, although it was almost midnight, there was nothing particularly strange in Dawn's being awake. But, I was tired and half dreaming. A country doctor's day can be exhausting, especially in wintertime.

Slipping out of bed I hurried to the next room to admonish my daughter for keeping such irregular hours.

But I didn't admonish her. Dawn was standing by the open window, gazing out into the night. I could trace her

The Dogs Do Bark

A DR. WESTLAKE NOVEL



The spade fell from Berg's hands and his great bulk lurched slightly (CHAP. I)

small pajama-clad silhouette with its untidy mop of hair. And her voice rose and fell, softly.

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark.

As I listened, I heard them too—the Kenmore hounds. Somehow ominous, their baying drifted in with the cold November air.

I switched on the lights. My daughter turned to face me, her tawny-brown eyes half-guilty, half-indignant.

"And what, brat," I asked sternly, "is the meaning of this midnight serenade?"

"Oh, I was just singing," she said vaguely.

"With no consideration for a poor father who's been trying to get a good night's rest?"

"I was listening to the hounds." My daughter sat down on the bed. "That's really why I sang because—because there's something funny about the way they're barking."

I was about to retreat to my room when the telephone downstairs started to ring shrilly. "Damn," I said testily.

My daughter broke into an exasperating giggle and said: "There goes your good night's rest, Daddy."

I stumped downstairs and answered the phone. I heard the shrill, petulant voice of Louella Howell. Oh, would Dr. Westlake come at once? She was sure it was her heart. Growling that I'd be round right away I slammed down the receiver.

Louella Howell was one of the richest and by far the most exasperating of my Kenmore patients. Frightful diseases were always smiting her in the middle of the night. But there was seldom anything the matter except a permanent neurasthenia brought on by lack of exercise, too much candy, and a morbid curiosity into her neighbors' private lives.

THROWING on some clothes, I gave my daughter a final, stern injunction to go to sleep and went out for my car. As I drove off, the hounds, over at the Kenmore Hunt Club, were still baying.

By the time I reached the Howells' I was in the vilest of tempers. But Rosemary Stewart opened the door to me, and the very sight of her banished my irascibility. In her plain blue negligee Mrs. Howell's niece looked even more stunning than usual.

She was spending the winter with her Aunt Louella and her Uncle Cyril. It was not a visit I would have relished, but Rosemary was crazy about horses and hunting. I suspect that our excellent hunting in Kenmore just about counteracted the disadvantages of a neurotic aunt and a henpecked uncle.

"Too bad to bring you out so late, with the hunt meeting tomorrow, Dr. Westlake," she said. "I don't think there's anything really the matter with Aunt Lulu."

And she was right. We entered the bedroom to find Aunt Lulu sitting up against the pillows, and immediately I was engulfed in a flood of garrulity. I heard all about the "terrible thing that had happened." It was the trained nurse I had sent her—Susan Leonard. Really, the girl had been *disgraceful.* That very morning she had caught the hussy making up to Cyril!

Cyril was Louella Howell's husband, a placid, portly individual who, so far as I knew, had never looked at anything more seductive than a mare or the bitches of the Kenmore pack. But for years now Aunt Lulu's neurasthenia had taken the form of believing her husband a Casanova.

"Yes," Aunt Lulu was exclaiming with healthy indignation, "I caught them almost red-handed. Of course I threw Nurse Leonard out of the house immediately — immediately. It's been a terrible shock, Doctor."

While I was making my examination Rosemary opened one of the many closed windows. Faintly, the distant howling of the hounds wafted in to us. Aunt Lulu pricked up her ears and shivered.

"Listen, Doctor! Dogs barking at night. It's a sound of death."

"Come," I said briskly, "you mustn't be morbid."

"I've had a strange feeling lately, Dr.

I was just steeling myself for the jump when below me, running along the side of the barn, I saw a figure (CHAP. XI)

Westlake. A feeling that there would be death in Kenmore."

I showed no interest.

"And if there *was* to be a death in Kenmore," she went on darkly, "I could make a pretty good guess who it would be. Anne Grimshawe!"

"Really?" I said impatiently.

"That girl's headed for trouble, all right, Dr. Westlake. And it's not just with that Scandinavian farmer, Berg. Oh no."

Aunt Lulu's little scandalmongering monologs always ended with Anne Grimshawe. The daughter of our most prosperous and most puritanical farmer, Elias Grimshawe, Anne had been running a bit wild and was popular with the fox-hunting males of Kenmore.

"First," Louella Howell was saying avidly, "first it was Francis Faulkner. And then there was Tommy Travers! The fine Englishman who's so noble and considerate to his crippled wife! Why, I don't even trust my husband with that girl. Only this morning the cook told me Anne hasn't been seen around for several days."

"Aunt Lulu," Rosemary protested mildly, "you're only tiring yourself."

"Oh yes, you'll stand up for the Grimshawes all right, Rosemary." Mrs. Howell's beady eyes flashed at her niece. "She'll tell you Anne's an angel with a halo, Dr. Westlake, just because that brother of hers, Walter—"

"Aunt Lulu!"

"Walter Grimshawe." Louella Howell repeated the name with obvious relish at her niece's discomfort. "I know what's been going on between you and Walter Grimshawe, Rosemary. He

knows I've been very sick. He figures I've left you something in my will and—"

"That's absolutely ridiculous." Rosemary swung round.

It was high time, I felt, for me to put an end to this nonsense. After administering a couple of aspirin and assuring Aunt Lulu that I would procure her a very respectable nurse the next day, I took my leave.

ROSEMARY came down to the front door with me.

"Good night." Rosemary's quick young smile always made me conscious of my almost forty years. "Don't take your aunt too seriously, will you? See you at the meet tomorrow."

"Good night, Dr. Westlake—and thanks." The gray eyes fixed mine. "And Doctor, please don't believe the disgusting things Aunt Lulu said about W-Walter."

"My dear, I haven't believed a word your aunt said for the past ten years."

I shall never know what prompted me to drive home past the Kenmore Hunt Club. Possibly it was Aunt Lulu's utterances; or perhaps it was the memory of my own uneasiness when the childish voice of my daughter had trailed through into my near-dreaming.

The hounds had stopped baying, but I was still strangely conscious of them as I passed the darkened silhouette of the Hunt Club and made toward the kennels. In my headlights I could see the hounds moving like ghosts about their little yards. Normally, they should all have been inside the kennels at this hour, asleep.

I jumped out of the car and moved across the frost-harsh stubble to the pen.

"Hey, Nimrod," I called.

But my old friend was crouched in a corner. Instead of galloping up, he turned toward me eyes cold and baleful in the starlight, as though I had interrupted him at a kill.

Perplexed, I moved along the wire fence until I was opposite the bitches' pen. They, too, were restless. Several hovered around the dividing fence, sniffing and scratching frantically.

"Something must have got in," I told myself as I returned to the car. "Probably a rabbit."

It seemed I had slept only minutes when Dawn came into my bedroom with the gleeful announcement that the morning was grand for the meet.

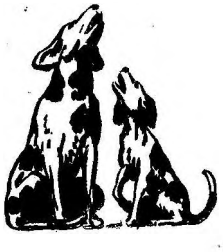
Saturday was the usual meet day. To me it meant a brief holiday from doctoring, and to Dawn a red-letter day. My daughter had abandoned the cradle for the saddle at a phenomenally early age.

Most of our fellow members had already assembled when we arrived at the club. They were cantering over the frosty turf, exchanging greetings. Dawn made a beeline for the hounds, who were scampering eagerly around the whips.

I made my way first to the Faulkners. As always, they dominated the field—Clara, the richest woman in Colenso County, and Francis, its crack rider and Kenmore's current master of the hounds. On her sturdy white mare Clara looked more formidable, more aristocratic, and, if possible, plainer than ever. Francis Faulkner, on wild, temperamental Sir Basil looked remarkably handsome and almost young enough to be his wife's son.

At their surprising wedding three years before, many had prophesied that the marriage of a young divorcé and an almost middle-aged widow was doomed to failure. But somehow they were obviously meant for each other.

None of us knew how they had met,



"Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town . . .
Some in rags, some in tags,
And some in velvet gowns!"

but it was reported that, after the death of her millionaire first husband, Clara Conrad had scoured the country for the best rider in America. She had returned triumphantly from San Francisco with Francis who, though twelve years her junior, had lived down a difficult situation with dignity and took as good care of her money and stables as if they had been his own.

As we chatted amicably about Hunt Club matters our other local stranger trotted up, bringing with him, as always, his own little bit of England. Tommy Travers had been in America almost twenty years, but not a fragment of the British veneer had chipped off. Like Francis Faulkner, he had been accepted with approval by Kenmore. We respected his ardent support of the Hunt Club and his devoted fidelity to his American wife, who had been tragically and permanently crippled by a hunting fall.

"Well," Faulkner was saying, "I guess we can start off."

"Yes." Travers' bright eyes surveyed the horsemen and women. "Pretty good showing today, what? Everyone's turned out except Anne Grimshawe."

At the mention of Anne's name I felt a slight stir of curiosity. I started to wonder what could have kept Anne away. I also found myself noticing that Travers had been the first to remark on her absence.

But at that moment Faulkner gave the sign to the whips and banished all my morbid speculations.

The hunt was up.

THE hounds were eager. Their white and tan coats gleamed with a fresh polish, adding to the vivid panorama of the frosty grass, the scarlet riding habits, and the glossy sheen of the horses.

We had swerved in the Ploversville direction when a horse trotted up behind me, and I heard a clear, young voice calling: "How's the hunting doctor this morning?"

On a beautiful roan mare Rosemary Stewart looked like a streamlined, twentieth-century Diana.

"None the worse for your aunt," I replied. "You look none the worse, either."

"Poor Aunt Lulu." Rosemary grimaced.

We had mounted a rise overlooking Ploversville when the hounds scented a fox. Their excited yelping split the crisp air.

"Hurrah! They've scented!" cried Dawn, who had just come up on her chestnut pony. She galloped off, and we followed.

The scent was strong. Nimrod led the pack, and they were off at a sprint. Dawn and I lost Rosemary in the full flight of the moment. A short cut across the meadows brought us almost up to the hounds, where only our two crack riders, Tommy Travers and Francis Faulkner, were visible. The four of us rode on together.

Faulkner was always a jump ahead of us. He was riding Sir Basil, and Sir Basil was in one of his particularly reckless moods.

Sir Basil was by far the finest horse for miles around. He was also the most dangerous, the most unaccountable. Sir Basil had thrown Travers' wife, causing the fracture to her spine which had brought almost total paralysis.

The hounds were flying ahead of us now up a steepish hill leading toward woods. Dawn gave a little dismal cry.

"Oh, Daddy, the fox is heading for Mr. Grimshawe's land!"

"I guess he can't read those No Hunting signs," I shouted back.

Second only to his Old Testament aversion to sin and the devil was Elias Grimshawe's hatred of hunting, hunting people, and the damage they did to his property.

The pack was skirting the wood now, heading toward the pastureland to the left. The fox had sought sanctuary in old Elias Grimshawe's forbidden acres.

"That's the end of sport for today," growled Faulkner. "Damn that old hypocrite and his farm land."

"Damn him, and forget him," drawled Travers. "We're not having any dashed farmer spoiling the hunting."

Grinning at Faulkner, he galloped forward. With a whoop of delight my

daughter followed. On a sudden impulse I gave my horse his head. Faulkner let Sir Basil go, too. Soon I could hear the rest of the hunt thudding behind us.

We reached the crest of the hill just in time to see the hounds swinging back into the wood. Swiftly we gave chase over Grimshawe's prize pastureland and plunged into the light undergrowth of the wood. Ahead we could hear the hounds, frantically excited. I could make out the roof of a tumbledown barn which one of old Grimshawe's more eccentric ancestors had built right in the middle of the wood.

Sir Basil's flashing hoofs instinctively picked out a path and piloted us through the trees.

And then, as we drew abreast of the barn, suddenly and for no apparent reason he stopped dead. He gave a high, frenzied whinny and reared, his pale eyes starting out of his head. Faulkner, taken by surprise, was thrown from the saddle. He fell into the low-growing underbrush.

I sprang from my horse, in alarm. But before I could do anything Faulkner had jumped up abruptly and was mounting again.

"What the devil, Basil!" His voice sounded like a whip. Then he grinned at me reassuringly.

"Hurt?" I exclaimed, my eyes flicking over him.

"Nothing serious. Basil's been like that lately—don't know what's come over him."

We hurried on, crashing past low branches, swishing through the dead vegetation. Suddenly a bare strip of ground stretched before us. We actually saw the fox, a large vixen, rushing along like a streak beneath a broad, high bank.

"Going to earth!" yelled Francis. He pressed Sir Basil forward, trying to head off the fox.

The animal had spun round at Sir Basil's approach and doubled back. Then I saw one of the hounds, Rollo, running from the right, his tongue hanging out. The rest of the pack followed. The fox disappeared down a large hole.

Then the impossible happened.

AS I watched, the dark tip of a nose appeared against the mouth of the hole. Then the vixen sprang out into the winter sunlight, and dashed crazily into the very center of the pack.

The huntsman was up now, shouting to the hounds. I heard their turbulent clamor and saw Faulkner gallop off toward them. But my attention was fixed on that hole. I jumped off my horse, tethered him to a fir bow, and ran to the bank.

Partly hidden by the dark foliage of an evergreen shrub, the mouth of the fox's earth yawned in front of me. Brushing the shrub aside, I peered into the blackness. Then I saw something pale and shadowy and felt the blood drain from my face. Involuntarily I turned and found myself staring into the face of Rosemary Stewart.

"What on earth's the matter?" she asked.

"Dawn!" I gasped. "Get her at once. Take her home!"

Rosemary looked puzzled, but after a moment pulled her horse around and galloped off. Francis Faulkner was back now. The others were grouped some feet away in expectant silence.

"What is it, Westlake?" Faulkner was asking.

"Look there," I said.

Francis bent forward.

"Good God!" His face was as gray as the wintry ground. He spun round to Tommy Travers. "Quick! Get a spade! Try Berg's place."

Within a few minutes Travers returned. Behind him ran the enormous figure of blond Adolf Berg, Elias Grimshawe's Scandinavian tenant farmer. In his hand he carried a spade.

"That hole! Dig it out!" Francis' command was like a pistol shot.

"Better get the women away first," I muttered, but no one seemed to hear me.

The young farmer moved to the fox's earth. His broad shoulders worked up and down as the spade crashed against the hard, frozen ground. Gradually a pile of earth collected behind him. Suddenly the spade fell from his hands. Berg's great bulk lurched slightly. Then he collapsed on the ground.

My eyes were glued to the wide opening of the fox's earth which had now been dug away. Crushed into the hole, armless and headless, lay the naked torso of a woman.

II

I REMEMBER calling to Travers to take care of the unconscious Berg. I remember Faulkner at my side and both of us dragging that ghastly thing out.

For a moment it showed cruelly clear in the sunlight. I whipped off my riding coat and was about to throw it over the body when the taut silence was split by a cry. It was a desperate, anguished cry—half-human, and yet unnervingly savage.

Sir Basil had torn himself free and was plunging wildly among the scattering group of huntsmen. Faulkner shouted and sprang toward him. But Sir Basil had swung round and was galloping crazily away down the hill.

Stillness descended on the gathering. Tommy Travers was bending over Adolph Berg, who lay stretched out on the ground, his face greenish yellow.

I was still standing on guard by the little mound under my coat when voices rang out behind me. I turned to see Elias Grimshawe and his son, Walter, hurrying through the trees toward us.

In their rough farming clothes they looked strangely incongruous against the brilliant riding habits—Elias, tall, grizzle-haired, and with the stoop that comes from long years of hard work; Walter, blond and straight, the typical, scientifically modern young farmer, but with the same defiant expression.

Elias swung round on Clara Faulkner.

"Get off my ground!" he shouted. "Get off! Hounds, hunting, breaking fences. You've no right here!"

He did not seem to have realized the situation. Neither did Walter. He had turned to Tommy Travers, his young face white with passion.

"You'd better go," he said softly. "We don't want people like you around here."

We were all used to the graceless truculence of the Grimshawes, but none of us seemed to know how to deal with

The bull snorted, lowered his head and charged toward me (CHAP. IX)

this utterly unexpected situation.

Francis Faulkner finally stepped up to the old man.

"I'm sorry," he said curtly. "There has been the most ghastly discovery. It is the duty of us all to stand by until the police arrive."

Then, as though suddenly remembering, he told Cyril Howell to ride off and call the police. With a brusque nod, Faulkner led the two Grimshawes up to the bright mound of my coat.

By now Berg had staggered to his feet. He was in a daze. Mechanically he picked up his spade and walked away.

Elias and his son were staring indifferently down at the heap at our feet, their faces still shadowed by traces of anger.

"We found it," Faulkner was saying. "Here in this fox hole."

With an abrupt gesture he pulled away my coat.

"We found it," repeated Faulkner, his voice firm and somehow challenging, "here on *your* land."

I turned my gaze to the Grimshawes, but there was nothing to be learned there. Even now neither of them spoke.

"Well," I said at length, "let's get down to it." Dropping on my knees I began a cursory examination of the body.

"It's a young woman," I said out loud. "A girl—and she hasn't been dead for more than twelve hours or so."

"A girl!" I think it was Walter Grimshawe who spoke.

"In her early twenties, I should think. Medium build." I added to myself, "About Anne Grimshawe's age."

I looked up, staring fixedly at Elias, but there was no flicker in his cold gaze.

I had finished my examination, replaced the coat and lighted a cigarette before any of the other three men spoke. Faulkner's voice finally broke the stillness.

"The police!" He pointed through the trees. "They're coming."

WITHIN a few minutes the sheriff and Inspector Cobb from Grovestown were at our side, followed by the coroner and a couple of men. While the sheriff moved to the body, Cobb and the coroner came up to me. I am, apart from my country practise in Kenmore, something of a consulting physician in the neighboring town of Grovestown. I lived there until my wife fell sick and needed country air. I still met Dr. Ford, the coroner, quite frequently in an official capacity, and Inspector Cobb was something of a friend. He was a shrewd, pleasant man who did not talk much. But whatever he said was always to the point.

After I had outlined to the inspector all that I knew, he sent his men to examine the ground around the fox's earth, then he and the sheriff crossed to speak with the Grimshawes.

I looked around for Francis Faulkner. He was standing a little apart, leaning against a tree. His handsome face was haggard. He was fingering his left wrist gingerly. I recalled his fall from Sir Basil.

"How about that wrist?" I asked. "Does it hurt?"

"Hurt?" he exclaimed, with a smile. "Yes, it does a bit."

I took his arm and felt around the wrist. It was badly swollen.

"You ought to get it fixed at once," I said firmly.

As I spoke, the coroner beckoned me over.

"We'll take it to the morgue," he said. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd come along."

The Grimshawes were moving stiffly away, and the sheriff joined us.

"Westlake," he said, "Cobb's taking the case over, and he's going to need local help. You've no objection to my swearing you in as a deputy, I suppose?"

I had never been mixed up in any criminal investigation before and had no particular desire to begin. But Cobb came forward and pressed the point. Reluctantly I agreed.

It was a sorry end to our hunt. . . .

The coroner and the sheriff drove off in the police car. Cobb and I followed in the inspector's automobile. As we swung into the Grovestown road Cobb turned his shrewd gaze to me.

"Think it's a local girl, Westlake?"

"Anne Grimshawe wasn't on the hunt," I said guardedly.

Cobb raised an eyebrow. "That's no reason why she should be murdered."

"One of my patients happened to mention last night that Anne hadn't been seen for several days. And she was blond, medium build, in her early twenties."

"You mean the daughter of that old guy?" asked Cobb incredulously. "He didn't say anything about his daughter being missing."

"Elias is a hard man," I said.

Cobb grunted. "Well, I guess we'll find out. It'll be a job making an identification, though. We'll have to find the rest of the body."

The rest of the body! Suddenly the quiet, sunlit lane, the winter fields, even the solid figure of Cobb became charged with a strange, nightmare horror. I knew—I knew with deadly certainty—where the rest of the body could be found.

"Turn right here," I exclaimed suddenly. "We're not going to Grovestown. We're going to the Hunt Club."

The hounds had already been brought back. In the distance I saw the kennelman walking toward the clubhouse with a bucket.

I shouted. He turned and hurried toward us.

I told him to open the pen. Cobb followed me inside. Swiftly I hurried to the far corner. Nimrod and Rollo moved after me. One look was enough.

"You know what I mean now?" I asked softly. "That is a phalangeal joint, and those—are fragments of human bone."

I found enough to satisfy myself that both arms had been disposed of in that particularly beastly way. But there were no traces of the skull.

At length we had collected all we could find into a grisly little heap. I felt a trifle nauseated when I thought how I myself had unwittingly surprised the hounds last night at their macabre feast.

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark.

My sense of foreboding had been only too well-justified.

AS THE car sped toward Grovestown the inspector murmured:

"Well, Westlake, you're a deputy now. What do you think about it?"

"Whoever killed that girl knew the countryside pretty well," I said. "The fox hole was in a deserted part of Grimshawe's land. A stranger could never possibly have located it in the dark. He wouldn't have taken a chance on using the hounds, either."

"A crazy way to dispose of a body." Cobb pulled at his pipe. "Must have been anxious to get rid of it quickly."

"Anyone would be," I said drily. "But it's particularly difficult to get rid of a body in midwinter. The ponds are all frozen over, and it'd be impossible to dig deep in this hard ground. A shallow burial would be worse than useless. Some animal or other would be bound to unearth it."

Cobb whistled. "So that's what he did, Westlake. Instead of giving the animals a chance to expose the body he used them to get rid of it."

"That's what I think. It's cunning, and it's a countryman's cunning, too."

"Wonder why he didn't put the whole thing down the hole."

"Guess it was too narrow," I said thoughtfully. "And a local man would figure on being safe enough with the hounds. The night before a meet they're fed light. Ingenious, all right."

"Yeah. With any kind of luck the girl wouldn't have been found for months."

Cobb drew the car up outside the morgue, and we entered together. In a drab waiting room we found a tall, grizzle-haired figure sitting stolidly on a wooden chair—Elias Grimshawe.

"I came about my daughter." The old man's voice was cold.

"I hear she hasn't been seen around the neighborhood recently," said Cobb quietly. "Is that true?"

"Yes."

"You know, of course, where's she been?"

"I do not know where she went when she left my house. But I know where

she is now. Anne Grimshawe is in there —dead. And so shall death come to all who sin before the face of the Lord."

I was shocked by the strange, almost triumphant ring in the old man's voice.

"Perhaps you could try to identify the —er—remains."

There is something about a morgue. It's not just the closeness, the dreariness, the smell of formaldehyde. It's something indefinable that makes life and sunshine seem futile, utterly remote. I was particularly oppressed by it that morning, as I stood there, watching Grimshawe's face.

His cold eyes gazed intently, with the fanaticism of an Old Testament prophet viewing the victim of a just Jehovah. He did not speak until we had returned to the waiting room. Then, in answer to Cobb's inquiry, he said:

"There was no need for me to see that. I know what I know."

"But I suppose you do not care to make a positive identification yet?" The inspector broke off, looking rather helplessly at me.

At that moment the assistant city pathologist came in, carrying a sheaf of typewritten papers, the reports of the preliminary autopsy.

"I think, Mr. Grimshawe," I said, "if I were to read you this—er—description, you might be able to tell us whether or not it refers to your daughter."

Elias nodded impatiently.

Omitting the unpleasant details, I read the report out loud.

A young woman, age about twenty-four, well-nourished, apparently in good health, medium build, blond, no special identifying marks—

"Stop!" broke in the old man. "You are reading me a description of Anne Grimshawe's body. You say nothing of her soul."

"I presume you don't object to answering a few questions?" remarked Cobb. "You say you hadn't seen your daughter since Wednesday?"

"I had not seen her for three days."

"Why did she leave your house?"

Elias drew himself up. "Because I told her to go."

"Why?"

"I have set down certain standards of conduct for my household. Anne did not abide by those standards."

"So you turned her out purely on general principles." Cobb's voice was not so sympathetic now. "There was nothing more definite?"

"No."

"It's just as well to be frank, Mr. Grimshawe. We're trying to discover the murderer of that girl in there."

"I do not lie," snapped Elias.

"Very well. But if I was worried about a daughter of mine I'd hardly turn her loose on the world without a cent."

"Oh, she would have been well enough off." Grimshawe's voice was bitter. "She was to be twenty-five next Thursday. On her birthday she was to inherit a considerable amount of money from her mother—money and land."

I CAUGHT Cobb's eye. Here was something definite at last.

"You mean land in Kenmore?"

"Yes," Grimshawe snorted. "When I married, my wife owned a property adjoining mine. She did not choose to leave me her property. She willed it all to her daughter."

I felt a sudden wave of sympathy for the unknown, long-dead Mrs. Grimshawe. She must have had spirit.

"Presuming your daughter is dead," the inspector was saying, "does the property revert to you?"

"No. It goes to my son, Walter."

"I see." Cobb's eyes fixed the old man steadily. "And you have no idea who might have wanted to kill your daughter in that particularly brutal way?"

Elias' voice when he spoke was sanctimonious. "The wages of sin is death."

"You don't seem exactly distressed about your daughter, Mr. Grimshawe."

"Daughter!" Slowly Grimshawe raised a hand. "Dead or alive, she had ceased to be my daughter."

"There is just one thing," I said, indicating the reports in my hand. "Anne was not married, and you have just told us your standards of conduct were

strict. Now wasn't there some talk of Anne's marrying your Scandinavian tenant farmer, Berg?"

"Berg asked her to marry him, I believe. But she would have nothing to do with him."

I nodded slowly.

"Well, perhaps it would ease your mind to know that the body we have found might not be that of your daughter. The autopsy reports show that this woman was probably—er—married."

Elias started, clutched the arms of his chair.

"You mean she was expecting to become a mother?"

"No, Mr. Grimshawe. She was either married or— Well, she was not *virgo intacta.*"

It was then that Elias' austere composure completely deserted him. He sprang to his feet, his face white with passion.

"I have told," he cried, "that I have no daughter! The woman I turned from my house—the woman in there—was a Jezebel. And it is written:

"In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel, and the body of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field, so that they shall not say: 'This is Jezebel.'"

Stiffly he strode to the door and out of the room. Neither Cobb nor I stopped him. We were staring at each other.

"Dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel!"

And no one but the police officials and myself knew of our visit to the kennels.

III

WHEN I drove away in one of the police department's cars I decided to take the short cut through Pytcher's Lane. And, absorbed in my thoughts, my absentmindedness almost cost me my life.

On rounding a sharp bend I became suddenly, blindingly, conscious of a roadster coming toward me at a speed even greater than my own. I jammed on my brakes and headed the car at the inclined bank which bordered the lane. I heard the screeching of the roadster's brakes, then saw that by a miracle, it had got by me without touching.

Being hopelessly stuck, I jumped out of my car and called. Walter Grimshawe appeared from the roadster.

We proffered mutual apologies and got my borrowed car back to the road. As I watched Walter Grimshawe's powerful young body straining against the rear bumper I realized how—physically, at least—he represented all that was best in country life. To this young Apollo, I reflected, I would not be a very formidable rival in Rosemary's affections.

Walter Grimshawe had strength of character, too. He had done well at college, and had applied to his native acres the modern methods which he had learned. Were it not for his unsociability and for the fact that he shared old Elias' views on hunting, Walter could have been the white-haired boy of the neighborhood.

"I'm terribly sorry," I began as I told him of his father's visit to the morgue. "I only hope that it will prove to be some ghastly mistake."

"You mean," he said at length, "my father positively recognized that—that thing you found this morning as—as Anne?"

"As positively as possible," I said reluctantly.

Walter had turned his face away from me and was staring blindly down at the running board of his car. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he broke into a harsh laugh.

"And won't your hunting crowd be shocked and delighted!" he said bitterly.

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to break the news," I said. "But I thought it was better for you to know before the police start to question you. Cobb's a decent fellow, though. He won't allow any unnecessary scandal."

"Scandal?" Walter spat the word viciously. "There'll be scandal all right. They'd none of them leave Anne alone—dead or alive."

I was amazed at the pent-up fury in his tone. Trying to be tactful I explained how his father had made some unfortunate remarks to the police about turning his daughter out of the house.

"My father is apt to exaggerate on

certain subjects. He didn't turn Anne out of the house. She had planned to leave as soon as she came into her property."

Muttering something about being in a hurry, he jerked open the door of his car. As the door swung open an old suitcase fell out and burst open at our feet.

A single glance showed me that it contained clothes—woman's clothes and shoes. Walter reddened as he stopped to pick up the suitcase.

"My—er—my sister's things," I suppose," he mumbled. "She must have left them in my car sometime or other."

Leaving this highly unsatisfactory explanation hanging in mid-air he drove away.

Dawn was waiting for me at home. I was glad it was Saturday, that she was not at school. Her youthful preoccupation with her own affairs cheered me. Obviously Rosemary had been successful in keeping my daughter in ignorance of what had happened. Throughout lunch Dawn chatted serenely about the rabbits which she had decided to buy with her pocket money.

When Cobb arrived soon after lunch, Dawn tactfully announced her intention of going into the garden to plan a place for the hutch.

I TOLD the inspector of my encounter with Walter Grimshawe. He looked annoyed.

"That boy's going to be a problem, Westlake. I've just been talking to him up at the farm. He took a pretty high-handed attitude. Said there was no point in his going to the morgue."

"Did you get anything out of him about an affair?"

"No. He's as cagey as his father."

"Found out anything else?"

"No. I've started checking up on Anne's movements after she quit the house. So far I've drawn a blank. I want you to give me all the dope on her."

"I don't know much. Officially I'm the Grimshawe's doctor, but the family's disgustingly healthy. Anne hasn't consulted me professionally for years. She'd gotten some of the local tongues wagging, but I think she was a pretty decent girl. If she ran a bit wild her father only has himself to blame."

"If she ran wild," Cobb murmured, "it must have been with a man. The point is—who's that man?"

"According to Aunt Lulu," I replied, "almost every male in the neighborhood at some time or other. For example, she had quite a torrid affair with Adolf Berg."

"The strong man who crumpled up like a lily when he saw the body!" exclaimed Cobb. "Tell me about him."

"I gather he was crazy about her. Elias admitted he'd asked her to marry him. But I guess she hoped for better things than a poor tenant farmer."

"Who else was she mixed up with?" said Cobb.

"Quoting Aunt Lulu again," I said, "Anne had been seen with Francis Faulkner in lonely places. Personally, I think it's so much hooey. But it may have a grain of truth. Anne was attractive, and Francis is much younger than his wife."

Cobb removed the unlighted pipe from his lips. "You had nothing to do with her?" he asked solemnly.

I grinned. "I toyed with the idea once or twice, but Dawn has strong views on the subject of stepmothers."

"Well, we'll count you out. Anyone else?"

"Mrs. Howell mentioned Tommy Travers. But that's rather far-fetched. He hardly ever leaves his wife's side now she's crippled."

"But where there's smoke and a pretty girl," commented Cobb, "there's usually fire. Did Mrs. Howell have anyone else up her sleeve?"

"Only her own husband." I smiled. "But she thinks every woman in Colenso County is after poor old Cyril."

"We've certainly got suspects and motives to burn, Westlake," Cobb said thoughtfully. "Faulkner, Travers, Howell—they're all married and not exactly happily married. Maybe she started to act ugly, *said* there was a baby coming—"

I stared out of the window. "Seduction and murder. It all fits in. But somehow I don't see any of my Hunt Club

friends as potential lust-killers."

"Maybe you prefer some of the other suspects and motives, Westlake. A jealous wife could have done the trick. And there's young Grimshawe. He had the best motive of the lot. He gets that inheritance now. One of my men found out he'd been making up to Mrs. Howell's niece."

I flushed stupidly. I could remember the hurt look in Rosemary's eyes when her aunt had started to tirade against the young farmer.

"Walter'd never have done it," I heard myself saying gruffly. "He's not a barbarian, you know."

"I guess you're backing old Elias," Cobb said. "I'd like to, myself. He might easily have seen red, and—" He pocketed his pipe and rose. "Well, no use sitting around gassing. You say Mrs. Howell's sick in bed. How about paying her a little professional call?"

"She'd throw a fit if I took a policeman into her bedroom."

"You don't know women, Westlake." Cobb smiled slyly. "They love it."

AND Cobb was right. I need not have worried about the fit. Aunt Lulu was having one already when, leaving Cobb in the corridor, I entered her bedroom. She threw me a telegram and cried:

"The impertinence, Doctor! What does she think I'll do with her bags? Open them and use those hideous clothes of hers myself?"

The telegram was from the ignominiously fired Nurse Leonard. It read:

PLEASE HOLD MY BAGGAGE UNOPENED UNTIL I CAN SEND FOR IT

SUSAN LEONARD

"As if I would open them," snorted Aunt Lulu again.

She spoke with such venom that I remembered the good old French proverb of: "He who excuses, accuses himself."

But I was there to calm Aunt Lulu down sufficiently for Cobb to question her. I had some trouble, but finally persuaded her to lie back and relax.

Not knowing whether or not she had heard the news I started to break it gently.

"Is Cyril at home?" I began deviously.

"Cyril? No, he's out. Heaven knows where." Aunt Lulu contrived to make her husband's absence sound like a personal insult.

"Then Cyril didn't tell you what happened on the hunt?"

"Hunt? Heavens, no! I never let him babble on about hunting." She shivered. "Disgusting!"

As delicately as I knew how I described to her the end of the hunt, the discovery of the body.

"Mr. Grimshawe," I concluded, "identified it as Anne."

Aunt Lulu stared at me. "Inspector Cobb is outside," I said. "He's anxious to ask you a few questions."

Before the storm of protest had time to break I whisked the inspector in. The sight of him seemed to restore life to Aunt Lulu's tongue.

"I know." She twisted her fingers together in sudden agitation. "I know why you've brought him here! You've told him what I said last night. Well, it isn't true! It was lies—all lies. Cyril didn't know Anne Grimshawe. Maybe Cyril is a bit—foolish at times. Maybe he was a little too friendly with Nurse Leonard, but not with Anne!"

This hysterical outburst bewildered poor Cobb. I myself was a little worried.

"Of course the inspector doesn't think Cyril has anything to do with it," I said soothingly. "We just wondered whether you had any ideas. You know a lot about the neighborhood."

This mollified her. Her agitation slipped away, and I saw a gleam of malicious pleasure creep into her eyes.

"There's more than enough men around here that could tell you a few things about Anne Grimshawe, Inspector. I could make a pretty good guess who murdered that girl. That farmer, Adolf Berg. He's a crazy brute —madly infatuated with her. I knew something like this would happen to Anne Grimshawe."

Cobb had had enough. With a short apology for worrying her he moved to-

ward the door.

"I'll meet you outside," I said.

After Cobb had withdrawn Aunt Lulu gripped my arm.

"That man," she said hoarsely. "You mustn't let him suspect Cyril, Doctor."

It took my most expensive bedside manner to restore some sort of order into her mental, moral and neural chaos.

Out in the corridor I told Cobb all that he had not heard of my conversation with Aunt Lulu.

"Nothing to be learned there," I said, "except that Cyril's out as Anne's guilty lover."

"Don't be too sure," he said slowly. "She was too keen to count her husband out. I have a feeling that little speech about Cyril not knowing Anne Grimshawe was rehearsed."

As we reached the hall Rosemary hurried from the living room.

"Oh, Doctor Westlake, I took Dawn home after—after the hunt. It's all right. She knows nothing about it."

"Thanks very much," I said.

"It's—it is Anne, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I'm afraid it is just about as definite as it could be."

"Poor Walter," she whispered. "And he was so fond of his sister."

FUNNY, I reflected, as I followed Cobb out onto the drive. It had never occurred to me to be particularly sorry for either of the Grimshawes.

"What next?" I asked the inspector as we boarded the car.

"Might as well go on combining your business with mine. Got any other professional calls?"

"There's Berg. I ought to go around and see him."

"Berg," said Cobb, "is a very good idea."

Cobb swung the car around. "What do you know about him?"

"He's a Swede or a Norwegian. A surly, solitary sort of young man. Turned up here a few years ago. Grimshawe rented him out a hundred acres or so for practically nothing, but he won't sell a square inch to the Howells and the Faulkners. Farmers belong around here, he says, not sluggards."

As I spoke a sound echoed across the fields, trailing from the woods. It was a weird, melancholy cry, like the wailing of lonely ghosts.

"The bloodhounds," said Cobb. "Put 'em on the job as soon as I got some clothes from young Grimshawe."

I had never been in Berg's house before. The young farmer, like the Grimshawes, had been too healthy to need a doctor. As Cobb drew up outside the little green gate I was surprised to see how carefully tended everything was.

Berg still looked shaken. He showed no interest in our visit but offered us chairs and took up his own position before the mantelpiece.

"Well, Berg, I came around to see how you felt," I said.

The light, North European eyes met mine guardedly.

"All right now," he said.

Cobb put in quietly: "We've come to see you about Anne Grimshawe. I understand that you knew her."

"Yes."

"And you know she's been missing from the neighborhood for three days?"

A great fist gripped the mantelpiece. He tossed the blond hair back from his forehead. "Yes, I know she is missing, and I know, too, that she is dead."

"What makes you think that?" asked the inspector sharply.

"You think I do not know this morning when I—when I dig the body?"

"Why should you imagine it was Anne Grimshawe's body?"

The Swede glared at him.

"I knew," he said simply. "And you think I do not guess this would happen? Here—with these rich, degenerate peoples?"

It was curious and somehow horrible to hear Elias' sanctimonious phrases repeated in that thick Scandinavian accent.

"Yes, and it was me they brought to dig her. That was funny, wasn't it?" He gave a harsh laugh. "It was me they chose. Me who have asked Anne to be my wife." He swung round suddenly, throwing out his hands. "You see this house? It is clean, pretty, yes? I do that because—because I hope Anne to

come here, to be my wife." There was something infinitely pathetic in those slow, labored words. "And she would have married me, see? Only it was that she was frightened—frightened to tell me what I guess so easy."

"Frightened to tell you that there was some affair?" put in Cobb quickly.

"Affair!" Berg gazed at him contemptuously. "It was no affair. Anne, she a good girl, see? Someone—he corrupt her." A touch of Elias again. "That's why he murder her."

"Who?" Cobb's voice was very soft. "Who do you suspect?"

"One of them—how can I say who?" Berg's lips trembled slightly. "But if I did know—you think I tell you? No. I tell no one. Because I kill him."

I had never before seen murder written so plainly on a man's face.

IV

HAVING given Berg definite instructions not to leave the neighborhood, Cobb followed me out. It was evening now.

"Queer people you have around here," muttered Cobb, sinking down into the driver's seat. "That guy's about as queer as any of 'em. Kind of sorry for him."

"So am I," I murmured. "But I'd be far sorrier for the murderer of Anne Grimshawe if ever Berg got his hands on him."

Cobb suggested a visit to the Faulkners, and, remembering Francis' wrist, I agreed to go along with him. When we arrived Clara Faulkner strode from the living room to greet us.

"This is Inspector Cobb," I said, seating myself in a hard leather chair strongly reminiscent of a saddle. "He'd like to ask you a few questions."

Clara's massive chin moved slightly to indicate her willingness to be interviewed.

"Damnable business," she said.

"Is your husband here?" inquired Cobb.

"No." Clara turned to me. "He went to your place to have his wrist doctored."

"I've been out most of the day," I said.

"Then he must have driven into Grovestown to Doctor Carmichael. Funny about Sir Basil. He's been pretty queer recently. Almost bit Francis this morning when he was saddling him. It bothers me rather. Can't help remembering what happened to Helen Travers. Did you want to see my husband in particular, Inspector?"

"I think not," said Cobb. "The body has been identified almost positively as that of Anne Grimshawe. I was wondering—"

"Anne Grimshawe?" broke in Clara with a note of incredulity.

Cobb leaned forward. "You've seen her recently?"

"Fairly. I didn't see her as much as my husband, though."

This seemed a peculiar remark in view of the filterings of idle gossip I had heard about Francis and Anne Grimshawe. Clara seemed to read my thoughts, for she gave a short laugh.

"Hugh, you aren't imagining there was a guilty affair, are you? Something tells me you've been listening to Louella Howell."

"Then what did you mean about your husband seeing more of her than you?" put in Cobb.

Clara smiled around her cigarette. "I suppose you'll find it all out anyway, so I might as well tell you, although Anne asked us to keep quiet about it. Some time ago Anne came to the house. She told me that on her twenty-fifth birthday she'd inherit that strip of land which stretches along Pytcher's Lane, from us over to Cyril Howell's. She wanted to sell." Clara jerked her cigarette into an ash tray and lighted another. "Of course, Francis and I were delighted. We've been trying to get that land for years."

"You don't have any idea why she wanted to sell the land?" Cobb asked.

"Haven't the remotest." Clara showed her teeth in a wide smile. "Maybe it was just to spite her father."

"And did the deal go through?"

"It did not." Clara spoke sharply. "I got Francis to arrange something with

the girl. She said her father would turn her out if she was seen near our house, and Francis had to meet her in the most Godforsaken places. Mostly at night. I suppose that's why Louella Howell's tongue started wagging."

Clara's tone showed her disapproval of Aunt Lulu.

"Anne was willing to sell at a ridiculously low price, but she had no title to the land until her twenty-fifth birthday. So we decided to postpone the deal until her birthday—next Thursday. Now this has put a stop to it. I suppose the land reverts to her father?"

"No," said Cobb. "It goes to her brother."

"To Walter?" Clara Faulkner's eyes widened slightly. "That's interesting. And there's a good suspect for you, Inspector."

"You think Walter Grimshawe murdered his sister, Mrs. Faulkner?" Cobb asked.

Clara rose and started to stride up and down the room.

"Heavens, man, I wasn't serious. All I know is that it made a mess of the hunt this morning."

Cobb looked a little annoyed.

"After all, the arrest of a murderer is rather more important than a hunt, isn't it?"

OBVIOUSLY Clara did not think so. She scowled and snapped: "Well, all I can say is it's a waste of time to try to suspect me or my husband. We wanted that land badly."

In an attempt to ease the tension I started to stroll around the room. In a corner I noticed the impressive gold cup which Francis had won in his pre-Clara days of steeplechasing. I glanced at it idly and read the inscription:

CALIFORNIA HUNT CLUB
1928
F.F.V.

"Didn't know Francis was one of the First Families of Virginia," I murmured absently.

Clara gave a short laugh.

"Oh, that's just his initials. He had a much-widowed mother, and when he was a minor she made him change names each time she took on a new husband. Finally he got so muddled that he went back to being a Faulkner again."

At that moment I heard a car coming up the drive outside.

"That must be Francis now," said Clara.

Francis seemed a long time coming. The room was silent except for the regular thump of Clara's heavy brogues as she strode up and down. I said something commonplace, and as Clara turned to reply, the door burst open.

Francis stood on the threshold. He was a ghastly sight. His cheeks were bluish, almost cyanotic. He was gasping for breath. As we stared in amazed silence he lurched and collapsed onto the carpet.

Like a flash Clara was at his side, bending over him. I pushed her away and dropped on my knees.

"Brandy!" I exclaimed.

With Cobb's help I lifted the unconscious man onto a sofa. Then I felt Clara's fingers pressing a glass into my hand. I looked up at her as I forced the liquid between Francis' teeth. The grim lines of her face had loosened. For the first time I realized that Clara Faulkner was capable of human emotion.

"What is it?" she asked weakly.

"Can't tell," I replied. "Seems crazy, but it looks as though he's had a touch of gas. He'll come round soon."

At length the heavy eyelids flickered. Francis Faulkner's uncertain gaze rested on me, then moved to his wife. Instantly Clara thrust a strong arm behind his head and raised him up. His lips formed indistinct words.

"The stable!" he whispered. "The stable. Quick—Sir Basil."

Clara took command of the situation.

"Go," she said. "Go at once. I'll see to Francis."

I cast a doubtful look at her husband, but Cobb was off.

"You too," urged Clara.

I turned and hurried to the hall after the inspector who had whipped out a pocket torch.

The stable door was wide open, re-

vealing the black cavern of the stall. There was something strange and heavy in the atmosphere which made me catch my breath. Cobb was flashing his torch into the darkness.

There in the yellow semicircle of light was Sir Basil's head on the floor, the eyes bulging, the mouth white with foam, and twisted in a tortured sneer.

Instantly I dropped at the animal's side, but Sir Basil was obviously dead.

Cobb's voice rang out sharply. "Listen, Westlake!"

I became aware of the noise. Low and steady, it trailed through to us from the garage next door. I felt Cobb's fingers on my arm.

"Quick!" he said. "It's a car running. Perhaps someone's trying to make a getaway."

We rushed to the adjoining garage. The big doors were open, but the interior was in darkness. Somehow I managed to locate the switch and snapped it down. But there was no one there. Three cars stood side by side, and the one nearest the stable wall was quivering slightly.

"Guess Faulkner left the engine running," grunted Cobb.

"That's not the car he was in," I said. "I saw him come up the drive in the blue sedan."

Cobb's eyes narrowed. He turned the key in the ignition lock and moved to the rear of the car.

"Well?" I asked.

"You were right about Mr. Faulkner," he said grimly. "It was gas-carbon monoxide. It got Sir Basil, and it almost got him."

I was at his side now, looking down. Clumsily attached to the exhaust pipe was a piece of rubber hose.

COBB was muttering to himself. His eyes followed the course of the hose pipe. It wound to the wall and passed out through a ventilation hole.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get back to the stable."

Once more in the dark stall where the great heap of Sir Basil lay stiffly at our feet, Cobb's torch played on the back of the side wall. There, coming in through a ventilation hole, was the mouth of the hose pipe.

I found the electric switch and flooded the stable with light. Cobb was kneeling in the far corner, examining the hole and the tip of the hose pipe.

"But how on earth—" I began.

"How's easy," cut in Cobb. "It's why that puzzles me. That car was left with the key in it. And the garage door was unlocked. All anyone had to do was to stuff a piece of hose pipe in the exhaust, then put the other end through the ventilation hole leading to the stable, start the engine. It's easy enough to kill a horse. But why?"

I could not answer.

In silence Cobb and I switched off the light and moved out of the stall into the darkness of the yard.

"There's no hope, Westlake?"

I spun round at the sound of Francis Faulkner's voice. He was standing by the wall of the stable, supporting himself against the woodwork.

"You oughtn't to be here," I said quickly.

"Oh, I'm all right." The voice was flat, dull. "What happened to him?"

I explained as gently as I could. His face in the shadows was gray, the color of death.

"Then it's true. He's—dead. I will make him pay," he said so softly that I could scarcely catch the words. "Whoever he is—I'll make him pay."

Cobb finally spoke.

"You can count yourself lucky you weren't killed yourself, Mr. Faulkner. You found Sir Basil just now?"

"Yes. Saturday's the stableman's afternoon off. When I got home I drove into the garage and came right round here to the stall. I found him lying there. I bent down to look at him. You know the rest."

Cobb nodded. "You saw Sir Basil before you left for Grovestown?"

"Yes. He was all right."

The inspector turned to me. "Any idea how long he's been dead?"

"Not offhand. It depends on how quickly the gas filled the stall."

The inspector turned back to Francis. "When the stableman's off is there any-

one else around here?"

"Only the gardener. But they wanted him to help search for the rest of the body."

"There are three cars in the garage. They are all yours?"

"Only one. The other two are my wife's."

"When you drove into the garage didn't you notice that one car was running?"

"No. I just backed in and hurried out. I was anxious to get to Sir Basil, I guess."

"I see." Cobb's voice was thoughtful. "Is the garage usually left unlocked?"

"Yes, in the daytime."

"So anyone could have got in without being seen from the house?"

Francis nodded. "You could go around back of the stables."

"And are the keys always left in the cars, Mr. Faulkner?"

"Good Lord, yes. We—we used to think this was a civilized community." His voice trembled slightly and trailed off.

"Come on," I said firmly. "You've no business standing here talking."

Clara was waiting for us in the hall, her face drawn and anxious.

"He *would* go," she said sharply. "I told him it was no use—that he should go to bed."

She took her husband's arm and guided him toward the stairs, speaking to him consolingly, as if he were a child.

Left alone, Cobb and I slumped down into chairs. Cobb glanced around absently.

"Another beastly crime," he murmured. "And an absolutely pointless one."

I felt suddenly weary. "Perhaps we're in for a reign of terror in the town of Kenmore."

"Maybe the horse was only incidental, Westlake. Perhaps it was Faulkner they were really after."

"A charming thought," I said grimly. "And it implies that anyone of us might be next."

"Well, it's none too easy for the police," sighed Cobb.

AS HE spoke I heard the sound of Clara's brogues in the hall. When she came in her arrogantly plain face was still pale.

"I won't keep you much longer, Mrs. Faulkner." There was a softer tone in Cobb's voice. "But a few things must be cleared up."

"It certainly must be cleared up. This is the most damnable thing I've ever come across."

"The horse was killed this afternoon, presumably between three when your husband left and seven when he returned," said the inspector. "Did anyone come to the house between those times?"

Clara glanced at him quickly. "Cyril Howell came in to talk things over. Wasn't here long."

"Could he have got to the garage?"

"Of course. But it's ludicrous to suppose he did."

"Anyone else?"

"Tommy Travers. He just looked in to find out if there were any developments."

"I suppose there was no one else?" inquired Cobb.

"Not that I know of. You'd like me to ring for the butler?"

"Please."

Within a few seconds a suave, nondescript man in a black coat was at her side.

"Hall," Clara said, "did you see anyone around the house this afternoon—anyone but Mr. Howell and Mr. Travers?"

"Only that farmer, Berg, madam. I happened to notice him in the meadow behind the stable."

"You don't know what he was doing?" said Cobb.

"No sir. I just saw him standing there."

"Very well."

The butler turned on a silent heel and vanished.

Cobb rose. "Well, thank you, Mrs. Faulkner. I'm sorry to have taken your time."

"Not at all." The smile drained from her face. "Inspector, it wasn't my husband they were after, was it?" There

was uncontrolled anxiety in her voice.

Cobb murmured something noncommittal, and we took our leave.

When I got home Dawn had on a clean frock and had taken a bath. She brought me a drink with a seraphic alacrity of which I had learned to be suspicious.

"You look tired, Daddy," she said. "Have you been working too hard?"

"It's just old age," I said.

"That's what I would have said," replied my daughter heartlessly. "But Rosemary was round here this afternoon. She saw that picture of you in my room and said you looked very extinguished."

"Extinguished's the word," I said gloomily.

"Well, any rate, she likes you, and I like her."

I was mildly surprised. Dawn usually preserved an aggressive antagonism against any other woman in my life. I bent and kissed the top of my daughter's head.

"And I like you," I said.

"I took Rosemary all around, Daddy, and she thought that the place there by where we used to keep the hens—"

I sipped my drink gratefully, listening to the soft young voice.

"Oh, Daddy, I may have them, mayn't I? If I get an all-white one and an all-black one do you think they'll have babies and everything?"

I put down my drink. "What'll have babies?" I asked.

Dawn's eyes were shining with ecstasy.

"Rabbits," she said.

V

SUNDAY dawned, one of those bright startling mornings with the wind curiously soft for November. Despite an indifferent night I felt fresh and rested.

Dawn appeared at breakfast in a demure Sabbath costume and discussed hymns and rabbits indiscriminately over the hot cakes and sausages. Murder seemed remote.

It seemed even more so when finally we embarked upon our weekly journey to the small local church. As we passed the Faulkner estate I noticed a group of men in a small meadow which adjoined the main lawn. They were digging, but what they were digging for I could not tell.

By the time we arrived at the small country church everyone had already congregated, and the service had begun. We creaked our way to our pew.

The preacher was reading from the Scriptures. Somehow the sonorous phrases brought back some of the horror of the day before.

Elias Grimshawe was in his usual place. I could see his profile against a brass memorial on the church wall. It was grim and expressionless.

I switched my gaze to Walter, who sat at his father's side. The two were amazingly alike, despite Walter's straight young back and blond hair.

The preacher had announced a hymn, and as the congregation rose I noticed Francis. I had not been able to see him until we rose. He still looked pretty sick, but was spruce and curiously calm. I suppose the presence of the indomitable Clara would take the load off any mind.

When the hymn was over I glanced behind me in the moment of shuffle that precedes prayer. There, in a chair by the door, sat Adolf Berg. In his Sunday suit of blue serge he looked impeccably tidy.

As the knees started to bend I noticed the church door being pushed discreetly open. To my surprise Tommy Travers appeared. The Englishman lived in Ploversville and rarely assisted at our little ceremony. Why, I wondered, had he chosen this particular Sunday to put in an appearance?

After a brief prayer we settled down to the sermon. The preacher's voice seemed soothing. It weaved pleasantly with the shreds of winter sunlight on the red tile of the floor. Everything was peaceful—too peaceful.

Suddenly it was brought back to me with violence that somewhere among those solemn faces was probably the face of a murderer. Someone in our unswervingly churchgoing community might be facing his Maker with a

ghastly sin on his conscience.

I closed my eyes. Then I started at a slight tap on my shoulder.

"Doctor Westlake."

A girl who was standing in the aisle passed me an envelope.

Inside was a short letter which ran:

> Please come at once, doctor. It's my heart again. You didn't send that new nurse you promised me.
>
> Louella Howell.

Until that moment I had completely forgotten the promise. That's what happens when there's a murder.

I nudged Dawn. "I've got to go around and see Mrs. Howell. Like to come, or can you go home with Rosemary?"

Her eyes were shocked.

"Walk out on the sermon? Daddy!"

Smiling, I patted her shoulder and slipped out into the aisle. Mrs. Howell's maid—how I remembered her face—was waiting for me.

I had already guessed that there was nothing really the matter with Aunt Lulu, and the maid confirmed my suspicions with the tact of an experienced servant.

When finally I stood by Louella's bed, as usual, I could detect nothing wrong. Mrs. Howell found this hard to believe.

"Not only do you fail to send me a new nurse," she exclaimed, her tone heavy with injury, "but you expect me to clutter up my house indefinitely with the baggage of the last one! Oh, Doctor, I had the most terrible night!"

"I'm very sorry," I said. "I'll get you a nurse right away, but you must understand that, now I'm deputized on this case, my soul is not my own." I added as a psychological master stroke: "If you like I'll take Nurse Leonard's bags over to my place."

AUNT LULU positively beamed.

"I'd just as soon have those things out of my house, Doctor. I can't imagine why you ever recommended a girl like that."

"The Visiting Nurses' Bureau sent the only girl they had available," I said wearily. "Her references were excellent, and she had just come from nursing Mrs. Travers."

"Travers? I'm not surprised at that. And don't you be surprised at anything you may find out about—about that Leonard woman!"

Despite my habit of charging gossip hours up to Mrs. Howell's account I couldn't bring myself to idle with her now that murder had been committed.

I left almost immediately. As I descended to the hall the door opened on Rosemary and Cyril Howell. Rosemary smiled rather vaguely and hurried upstairs. I found myself alone with Cyril.

"Louella all right?" he asked placidly, throwing his overcoat into a closet.

"Yes," I said. "She seems better. She's eating her lunch."

Cyril eyed me with a shrewd twinkle.

"Nothing wrong with her appetite, eh? How about a drink?"

I accepted willingly, and together we went into the living room.

"Bad business about Sir Basil," he murmured, as the man appeared with our drinks. "You've heard of Francis' affair this afternoon, I suppose?"

"No," I said. "What d'you mean?"

"He's giving Sir Basil a bang-up funeral, burying him by the front lawn. He and Clara want us all to turn out in hunting costume."

So that was the innocent explanation of the digging.

"What time?" I said.

"Two-thirty sharp, Francis said. Damn shame! Sir Basil was the greatest hunter around here."

For a moment we sat in silence. Then it occurred to me that Cyril was the only member of our immediate community whom Cobb and I had not formally interviewed the day before.

"The sheriff swore me in as a deputy, you know," I said. "I suppose you knew it was Anne Grimshawe?"

Cyril nodded, his red face growing a shade redder. I realized I was broaching a difficult topic.

"Rosemary just told me it was Anne," he said gruffly.

"Well, she disappeared three days before the murder. No one knew where she went, not even her father."

Cyril looked surprised. "You mean

she disappeared Wednesday?"

"Yes."

"That's darn funny. I saw her Thursday!" He smiled weakly. "You mustn't let Lulu know this. She's always suspecting things that don't exist."

"Of course I won't tell her anything," I said.

"Well, it was rather curious. I'd hardly known Anne—just seen her at the meets. But Thursday, as I was riding through Top Woods, she suddenly appeared from somewhere in the trees. She said she'd been waiting for me. I asked what was wrong, and she said she had some land to sell. She needed the money quickly."

"Yes, I know all that. It's true enough."

Cyril's face broke into a smile of relief. "Well, that's a comfort anyway. She had a chart with her and papers that looked fairly straightforward. It was irregular, of course. But she had quite a lot to sell and was selling very cheap."

"The deal went through on the spot?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't have the money on me, and she insisted on my paying in cash. I tried to get her to come back to the house but she wouldn't. She seemed frightened. I left her and went back again with as much ready cash as I could raise—several hundred dollars. She took it, and we signed the first option. Then she disappeared through the trees."

He fumbled and produced a piece of paper.

"Here's the option. Been carrying it about with me ever since."

It was written in longhand, nothing legal about it. Cyril must have been eager for the land to have accepted so unofficial a receipt.

"I guess I've been stung all right," he said ruefully. "But it was worth it for a crack at that land."

If true, this gave Cyril as good a reason as the Faulkners for wishing Anne alive.

"You don't know where she came from, or where she went?" I asked.

"Not the slightest idea."

I GLANCED at him—at the comfortable, plump figure, the florid face, the bright, screwed-up eyes.

"You did go and see Clara yesterday afternoon, didn't you?"

"Surely. Why?"

"Thought you might have seen something of the murderer of Sir Basil."

"Good heavens, no!" Cyril had turned quite pale.

I gulped down the last of my highball and rose.

"Well, thanks. You've no objection if I tell the inspector this, I suppose?"

"Of course not. Tell anyone—that is, except Lulu."

As soon as I got home I called Cobb and passed on the information I had obtained from Cyril Howell. Cobb thanked me perfunctorily, hung up, and I strolled into the living room in search of my daughter.

Dawn was deeply engrossed with paper and pencil. I was immediately roped in to admire her handiwork which was, apparently, a plan for the rabbit hutches. It was modern to the extent of providing separate bedrooms for the buck and doe.

"When I'm grown up, I've decided to be a rabbit fancier," exclaimed my daughter fervently. "You can get a gold cup by being a rabbit fancier."

She seemed a trifle piqued when, after lunch, I appeared in full hunting regalia; but I stalled her questions off with vague reference to a committee meeting.

I arrived at the Faulkners early. Clara came down the steps to meet me, looking more than ever like an old print with her scarlet riding habit and her steel-gray hair.

I asked about Francis, and she replied briskly that he was better.

As I stepped out of the car I noticed that the rumble seat was not properly closed. I opened it, to discover two unfamiliar suitcases on the seat. Obviously Aunt Lulu must have sent someone to put Nurse Leonard's baggage in my car.

"Surely you're not leaving Kenmore in the hunting season?" Clara's voice rang out, sharp, curious.

"No. Those are just the things of the Howells' nurse."

Clara's equine face still registered incomprehension, so I explained the whole farcical situation. With a muttered, "So like Louella" and a disapproving frown she strode away.

One by one the members of our little hunting community put in their appearance. Practically every horse owner from twenty to thirty miles around. But there was one face I did not see—that of Tommy Travers.

Why had the Englishman failed to appear, I wondered. Then I rebuked myself for a fool. Naturally, Tommy would never come to the funeral of the horse that had crippled his wife.

Despite the hardness of the earth, poor Sir Basil's grave had been dug both wide and deep. The freshly turned soil looked cold and dank, the hole dreary.

We had all taken up our positions around the grave now. Across from me I noticed Rosemary. Cyril was at her side, his face showing the general mood of solemnity. The huntsmen and whips were in a stiff little group at the foot. And at the head, her thin, rough hands clasped in front of her, stood Clara Faulkner.

We were all waiting for Francis.

And then, breaking the deep silence, a car engine throbbed behind us on the drive. I glanced around to see Tommy Travers' long green sedan approaching. Tommy sprang out, followed by a chauffeur, and the two men started carefully to lift a low-tilted wheel chair from the rear of the car. Not only had Tommy Travers come—he had brought his wife, too!

Ever since that day, three years before, when Sir Basil had thrown her, so far as I knew, this was the first time that Helen Travers had left her own house and garden.

And she had come to the funeral of the horse that had thrown her!

The Travers made a remarkable, rather tragic couple. Tommy, with his lean build beneath the close-fitting British hunting costume. And Helen.

It is difficult to describe Helen Travers. At one time she had been the leading spirit in the community—gay, reckless, beloved by everyone. Then came the accident. It had been sudden, horrible. Helen was still beautiful, but it was now with the serene, almost nunlike beauty of a woman who has gone through hell and come out as little unscathed as is humanly possible.

THE silence was deep. Then from the stables behind us came the throb of a car engine. A newly painted hay truck moved slowly across the lawn toward us. At the wheel I could make out Francis, his red coat bright.

To most people, perhaps, this whole scene would have appeared ludicrous. A group of grown-up people standing by a horse's grave. But it wasn't ludicrous. Nor was it pretentious. Hunting people have a funny way of expressing their emotions.

The truck was abreast of us now. Francis, pale and tight-lipped, backed so that the rear pointed toward the grave. Inside, stretched on the shining woodwork, lay Sir Basil, beneath a purple horseblanket.

Then Helen Travers spoke.

"Would you lift the blanket a little, please, Francis? I haven't seen Basil for so long. I'd like to—just once more."

So the explanation was as simple as that, and as touching!

I glanced at her husband. Tommy Travers' lips were tight. Helen had learned that it was childish to bear resentment to a horse. I was not so sure about Tommy.

The kennelmen were easing the body into the grave now. Francis worked with them. In a few seconds it was over. Sir Basil had found his last resting place.

I did not see Adolf Berg approaching. I do not think the others did either. Suddenly we were all conscious of him standing just behind Francis Faulkner, peering down into the grave.

"Horses!" he said softly. "You make a funeral, put on lovely clothes when a horse dies."

He lurched unsteadily toward Francis. I saw that he was drunk. But there

was something else, too. He seemed stunned, dazed, like a man in a dream.

"Yes, the horse, you cry when he is dead. But what do you care that a girl was found murdered yesterday? What does Anne get?" He laughed hysterically. "A pack of bloodhounds."

I crossed to Berg's side and gripped his arm.

"Stop it," I said.

He shook my arm off as though it had been a fly.

"Yes, you all do what you want with a girl until you are tired, then you murder her. Cut her up—and forget. You think you get away with it. But I find out which it is. I find out—I kill him."

"Listen, you'd better get out of here."

Faulkner swung round to face him. For a moment the two men stood within six inches of each other.

"Francis," I warned, "you'd better get back. He's hysterical."

Neither of the men paid any attention.

"Francis!" It was Clara's voice this time. Striding forward she pushed her husband aside and stared at Berg, her hands playing with her riding crop.

"Get out," she said quietly. "Get off our ground."

"Clara Faulkner," he said, "it is you who start it all. You brought them here —all of them."

Clara lifted her arm and cut him across the face with the crop. Berg's mouth crumpled like that of a little boy on the verge of tears. Then he began to laugh, wildly, crazily.

Once more the crop came up. Two purpling streaks played across his cheek. Then he gave a little sigh. He shook his head and looked around. To my surprise the only expression on his face now was one of embarrassment.

"Sorry," he murmured and turned abruptly away. "Sorry."

There was an awkward silence. Then again Helen Travers spoke.

"It's we who should be sorry for you. And we are. You must believe that."

VI

RETURNING home, I had half-expected Cobb to be waiting for me, but he was not there. I lugged Nurse Leonard's bags into the hall. For the moment there seemed nothing to do but sleep. I accepted the opportunity gratefully.

It was almost dinner time when I awoke. Dawn urged me to hurry because she was hungry.

I was finishing my coffee when Cyril Howell telephoned. He explained that the committee of the Hunt Club was calling an emergency meeting that evening at his house. He wanted me to attend. The committee consisted of Cyril, Francis and Clara Faulkner, and Tommy Travers, but I was an honorary sitter-in. I pleaded weariness and rang off.

About nine o'clock Dawn retired. Despite my afternoon nap I felt tired myself. I went upstairs less than an hour after her.

I must have fallen asleep almost instantaneously. I must have slept deeply, too, for Dawn had difficulty in waking me.

"Daddy, daddy, quick!" She spoke in my ear. "Wake up, Daddy!"

"W-what is it?" I asked.

"A burglar." Dawn seemed more excited than alarmed. "I heard him creeping around."

Together we tiptoed to the head of the stairs. I listened. I felt Dawn clutch my hand, and then I heard it—a soft, stealthy footstep. She was right. Someone was creeping about below.

"Hear it, Daddy?"

"Yes." I pushed her back with my arm. "Go and lock yourself in the bathroom."

"All right." The answer faded into the darkness. Then I felt something pressed into my hand. Melodramatically, my daughter had brought me my old duck gun.

My feet were bare so I made no noise going down the stairs. At first I was too intent upon what lay before me to notice that my daughter had disobeyed me. When I felt her soft breath on my neck it was too late to do anything about it.

We had almost reached the hall now. As we tiptoed toward the living room I

heard the sound once more—a soft scuffle, then silence.

"Who is it?" I shouted.

There was a confused, stumbling noise. A table fell over, and a revolver shot split the darkness. Dawn gave a little cry and tumbled against me. As I turned to her I heard a splintering crash and a heavy thump outside on the lawn —then nothing.

"Dawn! Dawn—you're not hurt?"

"No, Daddy," came the composed reply.

In an instant she had switched on the lights. One of the windows was swung open. I ran to it and looked out across the impenetrable blackness of the lawn.

"Careful!" cried Dawn. "Maybe he'll shoot again."

Overcome by this remarkable presence of mind I obeyed. I looked around and saw a china bowl on the carpet, a shattered heap of fragments.

"Wasn't that fun, Daddy? Wonder if he got anything." Dawn broke into a giggle. "You look so funny, Daddy, and you've got your dressing gown on inside out."

It was all very domestic to be indulging in backchat with one's daughter at one A.M., but a burglary had just been committed. I ran to the places where our so-called valuables were kept. They were all there.

My eyes idly turned to the umbrella rack, and I made my startling discovery. Nurse Leonard's bags had disappeared.

SLOWLY a possible explanation occurred to me. Cobb and I had scoured the neighborhood looking for suspects and motives. We had examined everybody, everybody but one person—an obscure nurse who had been in the neighborhood and had disappeared. Was it possible that some sinister thing, some clue to the mystery had been there all the time in those bags?

"Dawn," I said, "did you notice some suitcases in the hall?"

My daughter assumed a prim and faraway look, a look which I had learned to associate with guilt.

"Oh yes," she said. "I think they're in the gardener's lavatory."

"The gardener's lavatory?" I echoed blankly.

"Well, Daddy," she explained, "this afternoon, when you were asleep, I thought I'd play 'going away.' The kitchen was the station. The train was late, and I had a long time to wait so I checked my bags." She turned to me calmly. "The gardener's lavatory was the checkroom."

To my daughter's evident surprise I dashed through the kitchen to the outside lavatory. I switched on the lights. Dawn had been right. Nurse Leonard's bags had not been stolen, after all.

I carried them into the kitchen and shut the door. My first sensation was one of regret that my brilliantly evolved suspect was not a suspect at all. Then, a second explanation made itself clear to me. Perhaps the burglar had been searching for these suitcases. My daughter came in and asked whether I wanted some tea. It seemed a good idea, so I let her go ahead with it.

"Brat," I said, "can you open bags with a skeleton key?"

She paused, the blue-and-white teapot in her hand. "Daddy, you're not opening something that doesn't belong to you?"

"No," I lied. "It's just that I've lost the keys to these bags." I decided to spur her into action. "You're not smart enough to open them, anyway," I jibed.

"Not smart enough!" she exclaimed. Her eyes blazed dangerously.

"Well, prove it."

My daughter felt her self-respect in danger. For some minutes she bent wire, pried and prodded with diligence. Eventually the catches on one of the bags gave. Eagle-eyed, Dawn sprang on the second and performed the same miracle.

"I'm sorry," I said humbly as she glanced up in triumph. "I apologize abjectly."

Dawn rose, straightened her nightie with dignity and patted her hair.

"Oh, you're welcome, I'm sure. It wasn't very hard. You see, they weren't even locked."

As I glanced down at the bags I felt my old sense of uneasiness return. I picked them up.

"I'm just going upstairs with these," I told Dawn. "Call me when tea's ready."

Once in my room I threw the suitcases on my bed. Locking the door in case my daughter should become interested I clicked back the catches of one bag.

It was full of clothes—all the varied things that women wear. Apart from the clothes, there was a toilet set, a book or two, various bottles and a change of white uniform. Opening the next bag I was confronted by similar articles.

With a vague feeling of expectancy I worked my way through the tumbled lingerie. My hand struck something hard. I pulled it out to find a small cigar box. I flicked the lid back and saw a pile of papers.

Eagerly I skimmed them through—a receipt for a dozen oranges, a bill for three yards of some material, and finally an envelope.

It was addressed in pen to Nurse Leonard, care of Mrs. Howell. The date was fairly recent; the handwriting compact and somehow familiar. Why should Nurse Leonard have bothered to pack an empty envelope? If she had wanted the letter destroyed there was no sense in preserving the envelope. It took me some seconds to arrive at the obvious conclusion.

Nurse Leonard must have packed the letter—*and Aunt Lulu had found, read, and extracted it!*

Perhaps Mrs. Howell really had discovered some vital information, after all.

What a fool I had been not to have encouraged her garrulity.

My mind returned to the burglar and his extraordinary behavior. *His* behavior! Why had I taken it for granted that the intruder was a man? Couldn't it have been Nurse Leonard herself, desperately trying to retrieve her bags?

I began another exhaustive search of the garments on my bed. I continued feverishly until I came to the last garment of all—a soiled uniform. In the left-hand pocket my fingers came in contact with something crisp and crackly—paper.

PLUCKING it out, I scanned it eagerly. It was a short typewritten note which read:

> Better to get yourself fired than leave. Less suspicious. Arrange it for Friday, quit at noon and hang around where you won't be seen until it's time to meet me at the usual place. Everything's set. The plan goes through then. Don't worry about money. I'll have plenty for you.

This incredible document made the events of the evening only too clear. Now I could see why the burglar had been so eager to retrieve these bags. And here was definite proof of Nurse Leonard's complicity.

After slipping the note and the envelope into my clothes pocket my first coherent thought was to clear the clothes away before Dawn had a chance to see them. My second was to call Cobb.

I stuffed the clothes back into the two bags and put them under the bed. Then I called Grovestown. When he answered, the inspector's voice was cross.

"You waked me up from the first sleep I've had since Friday night."

"Too bad. But I've got some news. I've been burgled, shot at—and I've discovered something vital."

"Anything else?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"It can wait till tomorrow."

"But it's the most important thing that's happened to date!"

"You're a deputy, Westlake. You can hold things down till tomorrow."

He put down the receiver, and I did the same. Despite my impatience I could see sense in his point of view. I supposed I was too eager and amateurish.

As I unlocked the door I heard Dawn's voice, heavy with reproof, trailing up the stairs.

"For the eighty-eighth time—tea!"

After Dawn's welcome cup of tea I went back to bed. Half an hour later I was roused by the telephone. I sat up and put the receiver to my ear.

"Hello, hello—Doctor Westlake? Thank heaven!"

The voice was tense, verging on hysteria. I recognized it at once as that of Aunt Lulu.

"What's the matter?" I asked crossly. "Are you ill?"

"No, no—it's worse than that." The voice over the wire had dropped to a whisper. "Someone's been creeping around the house for hours. I'm certain he's been trying to get in by one of the downstairs windows."

"Why don't you wake Cyril or one of the servants?" I asked.

"I can't!" wailed Lulu. "Cyril still isn't in. Besides, I can't trust anyone. You see, I know something—something that's dangerous for me to know and even more dangerous for Cyril. I know that someone's after me. And I know why. You see, Doctor Westlake, I know who's been doing these awful things, and I believe I know why. But I want your advice."

"Speak louder," I shouted, as her voice became almost inaudible.

"I daren't—not over the telephone," she mumbled. "But it's about Nurse Leonard's bags. I *did* open them, and I found a note. I'm sure someone guessed I'd seen it. That's why they've been trying to get in here. They'll kill me if you don't come quickly, Doctor Westlake. I know—"

She paused. When she spoke again there was no mistaking the stark terror in her voice.

"Footsteps—they're in the house now—outside the door!" A long, frightful moment of silence. Then the one word, protracted into a shriek: *"Leonard!"*

Someone had attacked Aunt Lulu while she was in the very act of confiding her suspicions to me. That dreadful shriek of "Leonard" still echoed in my ears.

I jumped up, threw on my clothes and ran down to the hall. I was opening the front door when I thought of Dawn. Dashing upstairs I hurried to her room and shook her awake.

"Come on, brat," I said shortly. "We're going for a drive. Put on your clothes. And no questions."

At the Howells', Rosemary opened the door. Her gray eyes were horrified, but she managed to smile at Dawn and whisk her away without speaking.

She returned in a few moments.

"Dawn'll be all right," she said. "I put her in my room. Thank heaven you've come! But how did you know?"

She listened while I explained.

"Yes," she said at length, "Aunt Lulu's dead—murdered." She moved automatically toward the stairs. "Nothing's been touched. I've called the police. Oh, it's too frightful! Is—is it never going to end?"

LOUELLA HOWELL lay propped against the pillows in her purple silk pajamas. And thrusting out from the purple pajamas was the long steel handle of a paper knife.

After a moment's hesitation I forced myself to start an examination of the room. The telephone receiver still hung forlornly above the thick Persian carpet. One chair was twisted sideward.

Within a few minutes Inspector Cobb hurried into the room, followed by his men. Striding to the bed he glanced down.

"Well, Westlake," he said grimly, "I underestimated our friend's capacity, didn't I?"

I nodded. Then I told him all that had happened to me up till Aunt Lulu's tragic telephone call. His brows narrowed as he looked at the envelope and the typewritten note which I had found in Nurse Leonard's bags.

"So you think Mrs. Howell kept the letter that had been in that envelope, and that's why she was murdered?" he asked.

"She implied as much over the phone," I said. "As for this typewritten note—I guess she didn't discover that. It was hidden in the pocket of a uniform."

Cobb did not seem to be listening.

"If Mrs. Howell kept that letter it ought to be somewhere in this room—unless the murderer managed to get it back." He shrugged. "Well, if it's here my men will find it. Miss Stewart discovered the body, I believe. Any idea where she is?"

I hurried to Rosemary's room. I knocked and entered, to find her reading to the blissfully happy Dawn. As soon as she saw me Rosemary put down

the book and followed me out into the passage.

"The police want to talk to me, I suppose?"

"Just a few questions, if you can stand it."

She nodded and pulled the blue wrap around her. Suddenly I thought of Cyril. In the headlong rush I had completely forgotten Mrs. Howell's husband.

"Where's your uncle?" I asked. "Is he away?"

Rosemary looked surprised. "No. He slept in the spare bedroom tonight. Of course I had to break the news. It absolutely staggered him, but I persuaded him to stay away."

We had reached Mrs. Howell's bedroom now. Cobb came out, shutting the door behind him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Stewart, but I've got to talk to you. Shall we go downstairs?"

We followed her down to the living room.

"Now, Miss Stewart." Cobb leaned forward. "Will you please tell us how you made this discovery?"

"There's not much to tell," began Rosemary quietly. "I was tired and went to bed at ten-thirty. Somewhere around twelve, someone tapped at my door. It was Aunt Lulu. She said she was frightened, that she'd heard footsteps outside her window." Her eyes clouded. "I'm afraid I wasn't as sympathetic as I might have been."

"You can't blame yourself," put in Cobb. "You couldn't have known."

"I fell asleep again and had bad dreams," Rosemary said. "Finally I had some sort of a nightmare. I forget what it was about, but it ended with a scream, a long, horrible scream." She shivered. "It woke me up. I turned on the light, feeling rather scared. I remembered what Aunt Lulu had said. I—I got up and went to her room. I tiptoed in. The window was open, and the moonlight came in. It—it shone on the knife." She broke off, pressing a handkerchief to her lips.

Cobb's expression was kindly, gentle. "You turned on the lights?"

"Yes. Then I ran down to the hall and called you and Dr. Westlake."

"You woke your uncle?"

"Not till afterward. At first I couldn't make him understand. It was awful. And—well, finally, I made him promise not to leave his room. It would only make things worse for him."

"You saw the paper knife, of course, Miss Stewart. Did it belong to your aunt?"

Rosemary nodded. "She always kept it on the table by her bed—to open mail in the mornings."

"You mentioned a Hunt Club meeting. Who was at the house tonight?"

ROSEMARY glanced at Cobb quickly. "Just Clara and Francis Faulkner and Tommy Travers. They're the committee. They were reorganizing the meet schedule."

"And did any of them go upstairs to see your aunt?"

"Why, yes. I believe Clara and Francis went up to get some book Aunt had borrowed from them. And Tommy went, too. Aunt Lulu liked people to drop in on her."

"No one else came here except the Hunt Club committee?"

"Why, n-no." A faint flush crept into Rosemary's cheeks. "Why do you ask?"

"Just routine," replied Cobb, but I could tell that the flush had registered. "Now, Miss Stewart, you'd better try to get some sleep."

Shakily Rosemary moved to her feet. She said softly:

"I suppose this is all the same business? I mean the—the person who killed Aunt Louella killed Anne Grimshawe, too?"

"You must try not to think too much about it, Miss Stewart." Cobb's voice was paternal, but final. "You leave the worrying to us. Now, perhaps, if your uncle feels up to it—"

"I'll get him," I cut in swiftly.

I wanted just a few moments alone with Rosemary. Despite my own intense weariness I felt an almost overwhelming desire to say something comforting—to help. But when it came to the point I was tongue-tied. Rosemary finally broke the silence.

"You'd better leave Dawn here. She can sleep with me, and I'll see she gets off to school tomorrow."

I took her hand.

"There are so many things I'd like to say," I faltered. "But somehow they won't come."

She smiled, a slight, sad smile. "Thanks, Hugh, and good night."

VII

CYRIL was pacing up and down the spare room in pajamas and bathrobe, when I found him.

With any other husband it would have been inconceivable that he should have stayed in his room all through those crazy, terrible minutes. But somehow it was typical of Cyril.

He followed in silence when I told him Cobb wanted to speak to him. In the living room he instinctively sank into the most comfortable chair.

"Terrible," he muttered. "Terrible. Excuse me, Inspector, if I'm a little vague."

"Of course," Cobb said crisply. "And I won't keep you any longer than's necessary. But I'd like you to just run through your movements since dinner tonight."

"Let me see. I—there was the Hunt Club meeting. The Faulkners and Travers must have left around eleven. I smoked a cigar and then went straight up to bed."

"Was it your habit to sleep in the spare room?"

"Well, no, not exactly." Cyril looked rather flustered. "But I've been sleeping there since Nurse Leonard left. You see, my regular room adjoins Louella's, and, to tell the truth, she used to wake up so often in the nights and call out to me to get her a glass of water —something. It was a strain."

"I suppose you heard no one trying to break in?" asked the inspector.

"No. I'm a heavy sleeper."

"We've found out something tonight, Mr. Howell," Cobb said thoughtfully, "which makes us think that Nurse Leonard was involved in these crimes. We also have an idea she deliberately got herself fired. Could you throw any light on that?"

Cyril's plump face registered astonishment.

"Deliberately got herself fired, did she? Well, that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Well, there's a dressing room that separates my room from Lulu's. I happened to go in there on Friday morning to get something. Nurse Leonard was there. I stayed there chatting for a while about—er—my wife's health, when suddenly she did a damn funny thing. She deliberately knocked over a little table. Lulu called out, and the girl knocked over a chair with an awful clatter. I heard Lulu get out of bed and hurry toward us. Just as she came in, Nurse Leonard put her hands on my shoulders and then stepped back quickly."

"You mean she wanted it to look as though you'd made a pass at her?" asked Cobb.

"Yes. And Lulu was furious. Started swearing at me and the girl. Didn't back me up, either. She just took it. When Lulu told her to clear out of the house she muttered something about being only too glad to and left the room."

"You saw Nurse Leonard again after that?"

"Why—er—yes. She had the nerve to ask me to persuade Louella to let her take her bags with her."

"Her bags?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes. Louella was funny about—er—things like that."

"And did you do anything about it?"

"Why no. Wouldn't have been any good, anyway. Lulu got a maid to pack the bags later. That's why they were hanging around here."

Cobb spoke again. "There's one thing more, Mr. Howell. Do you know how your wife left her property?"

"Ye-es. Half the estate goes to Rosemary and half to me—provided I don't marry again."

"And if you do marry?" asked Cobb.

"Then it all goes to Rosemary."

"I see." Cobb shut his notebook. "Well, that's all for tonight, Mr. Howell." The inspector shifted his gaze

to me. "You'd better be getting home, Westlake."

I was halfway to the door when a thought struck me.

"By the way, Cyril, you don't happen to know whether Nurse Leonard had any particular friends around here? She didn't get any phone calls or anything?"

"Why yes. Friday—just after she left. I answered the phone. It was old Grimshawe's son, Walter."

Cobb and I exchanged swift glances. The inspector shook his head. I guess he was right not to press the point. We'd had more than enough for one night.

The house seemed strange when at last I reached it, though at first I could not analyze the change. I undressed and moved wearily to bed. Only gradually did it dawn on me then that my telephone table had disappeared. I moved round to the other side of the bed and found it lying on the floor.

I stared at it in a dazed, stupid fashion. Then a thought struck me. Swiftly I bent down and looked under the bed.

Nurse Leonard's bags were no longer there. . . .

AT A reasonably early hour next morning I was in Cobb's office at Grovestown. The inspector looked as weary as I felt.

"Well," I asked, "anything new?"

"Anything new!" he snorted. "There's about six different lines I should be working on right now. But there's no time, Westlake. No time."

"Your men didn't find that letter in Mrs. Howell's room?"

He shook his head irascibly. "The murderer seems to have taken that away, all right. And he didn't leave anything behind, either. No fingerprints, no clues—nothing. The bloodhounds have still drawn a blank. I've started work on alibis for last night, but what the hell good is that?"

"Well, what's to be done now?"

"Best thing's to try and get it all straight. We know why Mrs. Howell was murdered. She'd read that handwritten letter and kept it. Something in it must have started her talking."

"It certainly did," I said. "She'd begun to throw out dark hints about Nurse Leonard yesterday morning, but I thought it was just Aunt Lulu being Aunt Lulu."

"I expect she talked to a lot of other people, too. That's how the murderer found out she was getting dangerous. We can reconstruct the murderer's movements, too. And he certainly had enough work on his hands."

"*His* hands!" I echoed. "How do you know it wasn't Nurse Leonard herself? Don't forget, it was her name that Mrs. Howell called to me over the phone."

"Sure, but I don't think she meant she saw Nurse Leonard coming into the dark room. I figure she was just trying to let you know she'd found out that the nurse was involved. The man who worked with her did the actual killing."

"And broke into my house, too?"

"Yes. He'd decided Mrs. Howell was too dangerous and had to be got out of the way, but he wasn't going to risk killing her while those suitcases were still floating around. So first he goes round to your place and breaks in. He doesn't find the bags, and you disturbed him anyway. He goes round to the Howells' just in time to hear Aunt Lulu telephoning to you. He kills her just before she spills the beans."

"But what did Louella find in that letter?" I asked. "And who wrote it?"

"There you've got me. I'm going to put a man onto checking up on the writing on that envelope and inspecting all the typewriters in the neighborhood. There's a dozen things to be done, but I guess the first's to see if we can find out anything about that Leonard woman. Let's go around to the bureau."

Ten minutes later we were in a plain, antiseptic room, talking to a plain, antiseptic-looking woman. She was Mrs. Fisher, head of the Nurses' Bureau.

"Nurse Leonard, Dr. Westlake?" A formidable finger whizzed through a cabinet and produced a card. "What is it you wish to know?"

"Everything," grunted Cobb. "She's been registered here long?"

"Only a few months, Mrs. Howell was

her second case. Before that she was with Mrs. Travers in Ploversville, for two months."

Cobb whistled.

"Why did she leave?"

"I really couldn't say. The record merely indicates that Mrs. Travers wished to make a change."

"You wish to hear Nurse Leonard's references?" Mrs. Fisher asked. "She came to us from a hospital in St. Louis where Dr. Steele says—"

"Never mind what Dr. Steele says," muttered Cobb. "No chance she's a phony, I suppose?"

The pince-nez wobbled indignantly. "Indeed, no."

"Why did you send her to Mrs. Howell?" cut in Cobb curtly.

"Let me see!" Mrs. Fisher had to think. "Doctor Westlake usually has Nurse Green for Mrs. Howell, but Nurse Green was already engaged. Nurse Leonard asked whether she could go."

Cobb glanced at me quickly. "So Nurse Leonard was eager to have the job?" He was smiling in satisfaction. "Thank you very much."

Mrs. Fisher rose. "Of course, if there have been any complaints about Nurse Leonard's conduct, you can report them to me."

"There are no complaints," murmured Cobb. "It's just that Mrs. Howell fired her several days ago. Didn't you know that?"

Mrs. Fisher looked startled. "No. Indeed, no. And it's most irregular. The girls should always report to me when such a thing occurs. I supposed her to be still in Kenmore."

COBB rose now and moved to the door.

"Well, she's gone." He paused. "By the way, can you give us some idea what she looks like?"

This was a question to Mrs. Fisher's taste. She stared balefully at the card and announced:

"Five feet four, blue eyes, blond, graduated St. Louis, aged twenty-six, large birthmark on left arm, fair complexion, religion Catholic, bust medium—"

"You haven't a photograph?" suggested Cobb mildly.

"A photograph? Yes indeed."

She crossed to another filing cabinet and within minutes produced a second card.

I GLANCED at the photograph. Yes, that was Nurse Leonard. Pretty, placid, almost demure.

We returned to the Grovestown Police Headquarters where the inspector immediately got in touch with the St. Louis police. There were no developments of importance on either of the two murders, but there was a report of another burglary.

"Looks as though someone had a busy time last night, Westlake," Cobb snorted.

The official memorandum stated that a Mr. Francis Faulkner had reported that his house had been broken into during the night, and that various articles, including a gold cup, had been stolen.

"Poor Francis!" I exclaimed. "First Sir Basil and now that cup—his prize possession. It doesn't make sense, Cobb."

"I'm not so sure. If our murderer was one of your hunting crowd wouldn't he deliberately try and throw dust in our eyes by doing things no sportsman would do?"

We were well on our way to Kenmore when I was struck with an idea. "Listen," I said, "maybe there was some sense in stealing that cup. Perhaps it was just a blind."

"Don't get you," said Cobb.

"We know the burglar was really interested in Nurse Leonard's bags. Well, I had them in my rumble seat yesterday when I went to the Faulkners. The burglar might have seen the suitcases and gathered I was going to leave them at the Faulkners. Drawing a blank there he took the most valuable things he could lay his hands on. Just to make it look like a real burglary."

"That was pretty smart, Westlake. But why didn't he do the same at your house?"

"Dawn and I interrupted him." Then a second idea came to me. "Whoever

burgled my house and Francis' must have known that I'd taken the bags over from the Howells. Cyril might have seen the man putting them in my car."

"And Rosemary Stewart," added Cobb reflectively. "Anyone else?"

"Mrs. Faulkner may have told somebody."

"Yeah. And then there's that Scandinavian, Berg."

When we arrived at the Faulkners we found Clara pacing up and down the front lawn like a sentry.

"So you've come." Her equine face was lined with disgust. "Poor Louella—that was bad enough. But now, having Francis' cup stolen—it's positively the last straw. Come in."

In the living room she indicated chairs, took out a cigarette and leaned against the mantelpiece. A question from Cobb started her off on the burglary. As I watched her head with its clipped frame of hair nodding brusque emphasis to her points, I had the distinct impression that this incident had incensed Clara Faulkner far more than anything else that had happened in Kenmore.

COBB promised to do all in his power to retrieve the missing property.

"You remember those bags that Dr. Westlake had in his rumble seat yesterday?" he asked her. "Did you tell anyone they belonged to Nurse Leonard?"

Clara looked surprised.

"Yes, I mentioned it at the Hunt Club meeting last night. We—we used to kid Cyril a bit about Louella."

I felt disappointed in my plan for narrowing down suspects. Not only had Clara and Rosemary known but the entire Hunt Club committee—Cyril, Francis and Tommy Travers.

"By the way," asked Clara suddenly, "why are you interested in Nurse Leonard?"

"What makes you ask?" said Cobb swiftly.

Clara shrugged. "Before the meeting last night Francis and I went up to see Louella. She started acting queerly about the Leonard woman. Said something about a letter."

"What was it?" I asked eagerly.

"'Fraid I don't remember. I'd given up listening to Louella years ago."

AT THAT moment Francis came in, looking tired and rather bewildered. I could tell that he was as angry as Clara over the loss of his beloved cup, but he behaved better about it.

"I'm going to do all in my power," he said softly, "to get that cup back and to get my hands on the man who took it. Sir Basil and the cup."

He explained to Cobb how neither he nor Clara had gone into the living room on returning from the Hunt Club meeting, and that, therefore, there was no way of timing the robbery.

"Making any headway?" Francis asked Cobb. "Poor Louella. Why on earth could anyone have wanted to kill her? Never anything harmful about her—except maybe her tongue."

"And there you've said it," put in Cobb grimly. "I'm afraid her tongue was the death of her. By the way, do you remember what she told you and your wife last night about Nurse Leonard?"

"Nurse Leonard?" Francis leaned forward. "Why yes. Some diatribe against the nurse for being an immoral woman. But so many women were immoral to Louella."

Cobb nodded reflectively.

"But you don't mean," asked Francis suddenly, "that the Leonard woman had anything to do with Anne Grimshawe's death?"

Cobb said, "I was hoping you and your wife might be able to help us on that point."

"Well, there *is* one little thing." Francis reddened slightly. "I hadn't told anyone about it. It—well, it does tie Anne Grimshawe up with Nurse Leonard. It seems a bit skunkish to repeat it, especially now the poor kid's dead." Francis' dark eyes regarded his brogues. "You know, of course, that I was dickering for some of her land."

"We've heard about that," said Cobb.

"And I expect Lulu told you I was carrying on with the girl?" Francis smiled slightly. "Well, you've got to

take my word for it that I wasn't. But I did get quite friendly with her over that deal, so friendly that I wasn't going to let her sell me her land way below its value. She was so crazy for ready cash she'd almost have given the property away."

"Why?" asked Cobb.

"That's what I wondered," said Francis. "There was no reason I could see why she shouldn't wait to sell the land when it became legally hers. But she kept on saying she had to get away at once, had to have ready cash. At last, she broke down and confided in me. She'd been making a fool of herself with some man and—"

"Did she say what man?" cut in Cobb.

"No. But she did tell me she thought she was going to have a baby. She was scared to death that old Elias would find out."

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Why on earth didn't she come to me?"

"I suggested it, Hugh," said Francis, "but she told me she'd been too frightened. She said she'd gone to Nurse Leonard instead, and the nurse promised to see her through. By the way, d'you know where she is?"

"I only wish we did!" exclaimed Cobb. "The one thing I do know is that she couldn't very well have been at the Howells' last night. These alibis are the devil, Mr. Faulkner. I guess you couldn't help me out on them?"

"I can vouch for Clara," said Francis with the ghost of a smile. "She was in bed, asleep, all night. But she can't say the same for me."

"You mean you went out again after the Hunt Club meeting?"

Francis nodded. "What with Sir Basil and everything I—well, I didn't feel like sleeping."

"Where did you go?"

"I know where he went," put in Clara surprisingly.

"But I thought you were asleep," murmured Cobb.

"Well, I wasn't," snapped Clara. "You mustn't be mad with me, Francis." Clara's voice was almost gentle. "My husband was down in the meadow—by Sir Basil's grave."

VIII

ONCE again we boarded the car. Cobb was solemn and silent. At length, when the Faulkners' house had disappeared behind its fringe of pine trees, he exclaimed:

"Getting up in the small hours of the morning to moon over a horse's grave! Does that make sense to you?"

"Francis was very fond of Sir Basil," I said.

"Well, Faulkner has tied the nurse into the plan in a way I'd never figured on," Cobb said. "Maybe Anne Grimshawe wasn't deliberately murdered, after all."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"This guy who got Anne in wrong, persuades Nurse Leonard to try the illegal operation—and it fails. Anne dies. And the nurse and the fellow get panicky and try to dispose of the body."

"And then the typewritten note!" I said reflectively. "I suppose that could apply to—to an operation just as well as to murder."

"Yeah. But it's just a theory. We're going round to the Travers'. I ought to have talked to that Englishman yesterday."

The Travers' had an attractive house in the English manner in the rural outskirts of Ploversville. Before his wife's accident he had played around with real estate. But that was all over now. What work he put in was merely nominal as director on the boards of several large local firms.

As we turned up the drive toward the Travers' studiously Elizabethan house we saw Tommy on the front lawn with his two liver-spotted spaniels trotting at his heels.

The spaniels noticed us immediately and came rushing up to the car, barking with furious delight. Tommy joined us, his alert, fox-terrier face smiling.

"So you've brought the inspector, Westlake. Thought it was about my turn for an inquisition. Come in, won't you?"

He led us into a living room, furnished in a definitely Elizabethan style with a great deal of oak and pewter. Crossing

to a sideboard he poured us whiskies and sodas.

"I meant to get around yesterday," Cobb said quietly. "But there was no time. One of my men talked to you, though, didn't he?"

"Yes. Asked where I'd been on Friday night. Told him I was in bed—but why should he believe me?" The smile drained from his eyes. "Helen and I don't share a room now and—no one to check up."

Cobb nodded sympathetically.

"It's not exactly about Anne Grimshawe that I came, Mr. Travers. I really came about Nurse Leonard," Cobb suddenly said.

"Nurse Leonard? Gad, she's not in this business, is she?"

"I'd like to know why your wife fired her."

Tommy shrugged. "Better ask her yourself. Helen's funny about nurses. Can't stand the same one around any length of time."

"Did you see much of Nurse Leonard when she was here?"

"Fair amount, of course. Pleasant girl—far jollier than the average run. Sorry when she left."

"And you never saw her with any man?"

"A man? Never— Wait a moment. I did see her with a chap one evening. Must have been about three months ago."

"Yes?" asked Cobb eagerly.

"Don't get excited." Travers looked rueful. "I never got a squint at the man. I'd been out riding. It was almost dark when I reached Top Woods and I barged right into a couple of—er—lovers, sitting on a log, kissing. I couldn't help recognizing Nurse Leonard."

"You're sure you didn't see the man?" Cobb was asking.

"Positive. He was in the shadows. Just had a glimpse of a tweed coat. When I got to know Nurse Leonard better, I ragged her about her little rendezvous. Asked who the sweetheart was. She turned quite pale, started to deny it all and got herself thoroughly tied up. I supposed I dropped a brick."

The door opened, to reveal a nondescript woman in a nurse's uniform. She glanced nervously at Cobb, then said to me:

"Oh, Doctor Westlake, Mrs. Travers heard you were here. She wants to talk to you."

I looked at the inspector. He nodded.

"And while you're there, Westlake, you might ask Mrs. Travers about Nurse Leonard. Then I won't have to bother her."

I FOUND Helen sitting at the window, gazing out across the frosty lawns.

"I'm glad you came, Doctor. I almost had Tommy telephone to you, but I didn't want him to know."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's something that happened last night." Helen was still smiling, but her eyes were clouded. "I feel you ought to know, as a sheriff's deputy."

"You mean something happened *here* last night?"

"Yes." Helen spoke softly. "Last night there was a man outside my window. I heard him off and on for hours, walking up and down. I had an idea he was trying to make up his mind to break in."

I felt a chill creeping over me. It was so like the story the other invalid had whispered hysterically over the wire the night before.

"It sounds silly to make a fuss about it," Mrs. Travers' gentle voice was running on. "But—well, it was rather frightening. At first I was frightened for myself. But then I realized that if that man was threatening someone, it could only be Tommy."

I did what I could to reassure her. But in my mind was the disturbing thought that, as far as we knew, Tommy Travers had been the only one to have seen Nurse Leonard with her lover, her accomplice, or whoever he was. Now that Louella Howell was out of the way, Travers was the one person who might be supposed to know the identity of the Kenmore murderer.

This brought me back to Nurse Leonard. I questioned Mrs. Travers, as gently as I could, about the girl. I might have known I would get little informa-

tion. Helen was too sweet a soul to say nasty things about people. She did, however, confirm Cobb's earlier suspicions that Nurse Leonard had been most anxious to stay in the neighborhood.

A few minutes later I left her to rejoin Cobb and Travers. As soon as I entered Cobb rose, and we moved out into the hall.

"Seems a decent sort of guy," said Cobb. "Guess there wasn't much to be learned from him."

But I was hardly listening to what he said, for my eyes had fallen on a pile of letters, waiting to be mailed, which lay on the hall table. They were addressed in longhand to business firms in Grovestown.

I gripped Cobb's arm.

"Look," I said.

Mrs. Howell had abstracted from Nurse Leonard's suitcases a letter whose envelope she had left behind. And now there was no doubt as to who had been Nurse Leonard's mysterious correspondent. It had been Tommy Travers.

"And to think," exclaimed Cobb softly, "that I said there was nothing to be learned from Travers!"

"And what is there to be learned from me?"

We spun round to see the Englishman strolling out of the living room, followed by the spaniels.

"We were just wondering," Cobb said, "who wrote those letters."

"Why, I did, of course."

"You know, Mr. Travers, there was a note of yours among Nurse Leonard's things?"

"Was there?" asked the Englishman indifferently. "Of course. I remember now. I was away when the girl left, and I owed her two weeks' pay. I just dashed off a line enclosing a check."

"JUST another red herring!" muttered Cobb as he piloted the car down the Travers' drive. "Maybe the Englishman's lying, maybe he isn't. But we can't do anything about it until we find what Mrs. Howell found."

"Which we probably never shall," I commented gloomily. "But there's one thing you might have asked Travers. I wonder whether he'd admit typing the other note, too."

"What d'you think I was doing while you were talking to Travers' wife? Travers claims he can't type and never owned a typewriter. His wife has one but it's not the right make. The one we're after's an Elliot portable, Number Five. What did Mrs. Travers have to say?"

I told him, and he gave a little grunt of disgust.

"Another prowler! Wasn't anyone asleep around this place last night?" He glanced at his watch. "It's still only four-thirty. I think it's about time for the Grimshawes."

As Cobb spoke we turned a bend which revealed the small farmhouse of Adolf Berg, lying back from the road in its scrupulously neat plot of kitchen garden. Slowing down outside the green gate was an old roadster which I recognized as belonging to Walter Grimshawe. Anne's brother jumped out and started up the path toward Berg's house.

"So he's paying a call on our Scandinavian friend," muttered Cobb. "And he seems in a hurry. Well, I guess we're in a hurry, too."

Walter was halfway up the path when we hailed him. He swung round and waited while we moved toward him.

"You're just the man I was looking for," said the inspector.

"And you're just the man I was looking for myself," replied Walter, with a smile. "Or, rather, you're the man I'll probably be looking for in a hour or so."

"No time like the present," suggested Cobb. "How about coming to my office and telling me now what you might want to tell me later on? For example, there's a little question of a telephone call to Nurse Leonard."

But Walter had pulled out his watch, and I noticed that his hand was shaking.

"Ten to five," he muttered, then looked at Cobb straight in the eyes. "I can't go anywhere with you now. But I'll try to get into your office around

six-thirty. You want to know about my visit to Grovestown that day, what I was doing last night. Well, I'll explain that later. I'm going in here to see Berg, and then I've got to do one more thing. After that I'll come clean."

"I've had enough fooling around from you." Cobb's eyes were like blue steel. "You're coming right round with me to the station."

Walter moved toward Berg's house. At the door he paused.

"Go back to your office, Mr. Cobb. I'll come to you like a lamb at six-thirty."

Then he pushed open the door and slammed it behind him.

"Well, what d'you make of that crazy act?" said Cobb, with a low whistle.

"Nothing," I replied. "But I suggest you do exactly what he says."

"All right, Westlake. I'll go back to my office, and you can tackle old Elias. Jump in the car."

"I'd rather walk," I said. "It will be the healthiest thing I've done in days."

Alone I turned up Pytcher's Lane in the direction of the Grimshawe's farm. Behind me I could hear Cobb starting back to Grovestown.

An early dusk was blurring the winter landscape now. The lane wound deviously up the incline, an indistinct ribbon of white.

Ahead of me, suddenly silhouetted against the evening sky, appeared a figure on horseback. Rosemary!

She showed no signs of noticing me until she was almost abreast of me. I called her name, and she looked up slowly. Her cheeks were paper-white, her eyes bright and strained.

"Rosemary!" I exclaimed. "What's the matter?"

"Hugh!" Her voice was flat and toneless.

AS THOUGH in a dream she dismounted and moved to my side.

"Rosemary, something's happened."

"It's nothing," she said dully.

"You know you can trust me." I took her hand and pressed it. "And I'll do my darnedest to help."

"Thanks, Hugh. And—why shouldn't I tell you? I've got to get it out of my system. Got to get him out of my system, too."

"Who do you mean?" I asked gently.

"Walter." She shrugged. "Got a cigarette, Hugh?" I handed her one.

There was a log lying along the side of the lane. We sat down together, the tip of Rosemary's cigarette cutting an arc through the growing darkness.

"Funny!" she said. "I suppose you'll think I'm just a sentimental miss who ought to be spanked. It's outmoded to have an attack of the vapors."

"There's always a reasonably broad shoulder here for you to cry on," I said.

"Oh, I'm through crying now." She tossed her cigarette away. "I'm just mad—fighting mad. I guess you knew about Walter and me. It was quite the big romance. Wedding bells were going to ring out."

"And you've quarreled?"

"Oh no. Nothing as healthy as that. I've just found out that I'm not the only pebble on the beach. Aunt Lulu didn't approve of Walter. And old Grimshawe didn't approve of anyone, so the only place we had was that old barn off the lane here in the Grimshawe woods. The barn was drafty and infested with rats, but I was sentimental enough to grow fond of it. If—if he had to have a date with another girl he could at least have chosen another place."

"You mean you saw Walter at the barn with another woman?" I asked incredulously.

Rosemary laughed again. "This afternoon. I was just in time to see him kiss her."

I did what I could to comfort her, but my heart sank when I thought of Walter as I had seen him so short a time before—flushed, excited.

"Why on earth should I be burdening you with my little miseries?" she said. "You're an officer of the law now. Haven't you any official questions to ask me?"

"There is one thing, Rosemary. You didn't tell anyone about your aunt's putting Nurse Leonard's bags in my car, did you?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I told—"

She broke off.

"You mean you told Walter?" I asked. "When?"

"I may as well admit to you, Hugh, that I lied to that inspector of yours. He asked me if anyone except the Hunt Club committee had come to the house last night. I said no, but it wasn't the truth."

"You mean Walter came to see you?"

"Yes."

"And you talked to him for long?" I asked quickly.

"Just a few minutes. He wanted to tell me we shouldn't meet at the barn any more because he thought he'd seen someone there, and he was scared we'd be—caught." She laughed. "I fell for the story all right." Suddenly Rosemary swung round to face me, her cheeks chalk-white.

"Hugh, you don't mean Nurse Leonard's involved in the murder?"

"It looks very much as though she is."

"My God!" Rosemary's hand touched my arm and then fell limply to her side. "So that's who it was! That woman!" Her voice was almost inaudible. "With Walter at the barn. She was in the shadows, but she was familiar—that blond hair, that— Oh, Hugh, I'm sure that woman with Walter was Nurse Leonard!"

IX

FOR a moment I stared at Rosemary like a village idiot. Of all the startling revelations of that black Monday I think that hers was the one which took me most completely by surprise.

"How long ago did you see them?" I asked.

"Why, about half an hour, I'd say."

"Listen, Rosemary." I drew her up from the log. "I've absolutely got to find that woman. And for God's sake, don't tell anyone what you've just told me."

She must have thought me completely crazy. With a final squeeze of her hand I turned abruptly away up the lane. There was still the vaguest chance that I could find Nurse Leonard somewhere up there in the woods.

I hurried on. And it was not particularly easy to hurry on that frosty ground. At last, pushing through a plantation of close-growing pines, I found myself on a rough path which wound to Grimshawe's barn some fifty feet away.

Then from the wood ahead of me I caught the crackling of dry twigs. Footsteps!

I stood there absolutely still, listening. The footsteps grew fainter. Whoever was there among the trees was hurrying away from me.

Breathless, I hurried forward just in time to catch a glimpse of the figure I was pursuing. I saw that it was a woman—hatless. I saw the faint gleam of blond hair.

About five minutes later I lost sound of her. A few feet ahead of me the woods came to an abrupt end at the edge of a field. That was why I could no longer hear the footsteps. Nurse Leonard was walking on grass.

But it was not that which had surprised me. It was the sudden realization of where I was. Not fifty yards away at the far side of the pasture, was the Grimshawe's house. I could see the girl quite distinctly now, a furtive, hurrying silhouette. As I stood there, watching, she walked up the steps and knocked on the woodwork.

The interval between her knock and the opening of the door seemed an eternity. But at last the hinges swung back. The girl made a move forward as though to enter the house, but Elias barred her way and slammed the door behind him.

They stood there, talking. From what I could judge they were having a heated argument.

Impulsively, with no attempt to conceal myself, I stepped out onto the field.

They saw me when I was just on the edge of the yard. Then Elias seized the girl by the arm, rushed her to the door, slammed it behind her and stood there, leaning against the door.

"Who is it?" he cried.

"Good evening, Mr. Grimshawe," I said politely. "I hope I haven't disturbed you."

"Who is it?" he muttered. "Is it you,

Doctor Westlake?"

"Exactly."

"Then don't try to get near the house. I must order you to leave these premises immediately."

"Unfortunately, I have been deputized to take part in the investigation of your daughter's murder, Mr. Grimshawe. I want you to tell me what that woman is doing here at your house."

"Deputy or no deputy," he snapped, "I give you one minute to leave this place."

"Really, Mr. Grimshawe, there's no need to be melodramatic." I tried to appear casual. "If you don't tell me, you'll only have to tell the police later."

Elias seemed to be working himself up to a frenzy.

"Very well," he said. "If you won't go of your own accord I shall have to make you."

Through the darkness I had the vague impression of the shed door swinging open and of Elias' dim figure slipping inside and then out again. As I stood there, irresolute, the yard burst into sudden illumination, and I saw Elias standing by the side wall of the shed, his hand poised on a switch. My eyes flicked to the open door of the shed just in time to see an enormous monster lumber across the threshold.

Elias had set his prize bull on me.

I STOOD watching, not quite knowing whether to be amused or alarmed. The bull decided the matter for me. Suddenly he caught my scent. He snorted, lowered his head and charged toward me. In a short second I was running ignominiously into the security of the trees.

I pushed my way through, feeling decidedly ashamed of myself. I reached the dirt track and trotted down it, feeling very much the worse for wear. Finally I came out onto the main road. I hoped to meet some friendly neighbor who would give me a lift.

I plodded on, but no cars passed me. At length I saw one speeding toward me, going in the direction of Ploversville. I stood in the middle of the road, waving madly. But I might as well have tried to stop Elias' bull. The car hurtled past, giving me barely time to step out of the way.

But it did give me time to catch a glimpse of the driver's face. The man who drove that car was Adolf Berg, and he drove as if all the furies of hell were pursuing him. . . .

When I arrived home I telephoned immediately to Cobb. His answering voice was short and angry.

"Damn it, Westlake, that Grimshawe boy played me for a sucker. There's not a sign of him. If he doesn't get here in ten minutes I'm going to get a warrant. I'll make him talk! Did you interview old Grimshawe?"

"Did I interview him!" I groaned. "You don't know the half of it!"

I recounted all that had happened to me since we had parted. When I told of my fantastic pursuit of Nurse Leonard with its fantastic conclusion, he gave a low whistle.

"And you let her give you the slip, Westlake?" He must have turned his head away, for I could hear his voice only faintly, rapping out orders to someone. Then his voice came clearly again. "I'm going right round to the Grimshawes' place, Westlake. With any luck we'll get the Leonard woman, Walter and Elias. Don't go out. I'll be coming over to your house just as soon as possible."

Although it was scarcely seven o'clock I felt famished. Moving into the living room I rang the bell for Rebecca. It was not until I had been reassured of an almost-cooked roast of beef that I remembered Dawn.

"Where's Dawn, Rebecca?"

"Why, John fetched her back from school, sir, around five."

"Then where is she now?" I asked anxiously.

"Don't know, sir. I didn't see her since awhile back."

Feeling a sudden stab of panic I dashed out into the hall and called my daughter's name.

There was no reply. I rushed into the dining room, the kitchen, out into the garden, yelling:

"Dawn!"

The last place I thought of exploring was Dawn's own bedroom. I found her there, sitting on the bed.

"Why on earth didn't you answer when I called?" I asked testily.

She turned slowly, and I really believe that she had neither seen nor heard me until that moment. There was a large, shiny tear dangling from the end of her nose.

"Hello, Daddy," she said. "I've been crying like this ever since I came back from school." She referred to this as a feat of endurance.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's Rebecca," she said with a sniff. "She told me Sir Basil died."

I had asked our factotum not to let Dawn know anything of what had been happening. But I suppose it had been expecting too much of anybody to ask them to resist the insidious delights of gossip.

"Yes, Sir Basil's dead," I said with parental condolence. "But you mustn't worry. He's quite happy now."

"Oh yes, I know. He's probably in heaven, but all the same I can't help crying." She looked up at me with all the world's misery in her eyes. "Poor Sir Basil."

I leaned down and patted her shoulder.

"Never mind," I said, with what I hoped was the right shade of joviality. "Nimrod and Rollo are still alive. And so are those rabbits you're going to buy."

Implausible as it may sound, rabbits did the trick again. . . .

IT WAS after eight when finally I heard Cobb's car swing up the drive. I packed Dawn off to her room, with a hurried promise to come up at nine sharp.

I had had fleeting visions of a car crowded with arrested suspects, but Cobb emerged from the driver's seat alone.

"Any luck?" I asked eagerly.

Without replying he slammed the door behind him and hurried into the house.

I followed into the living room, to find him pouring a stiff drink of whisky. "Luck!" he echoed sourly.

"You mean Nurse Leonard got away?"

"She got away all right." He glared at me. "And Elias and Walter Grimshawe have gone, too. And that's not all, Westlake. I went down to Berg's place, thinking they might be there and—"

I remembered how I had seen the Scandinavian farmer driving crazily through the night.

"Don't tell me he's gone, too," I broke in weakly.

"The whole four of them—vamoosed," he said.

I sank into a chair. "Heaven help us," I murmured.

"We need more than heaven." Cobb dropped wearily onto a couch. "We need the Federal police, Westlake, that's what we need. I've done all I can. Put all available men to trailing them, have the state police warned. Luckily, I've got the Grimshawe car numbers. They shouldn't get far."

"Did any dope on Nurse Leonard come in from St. Louis?"

"Yeah," growled the inspector. "They traced her all right. And the only irregular thing about her is that she rented her apartment under the name of Mrs. Susan Vaughan. But I guess it's no crime to use an alias. She may have been married, for all we know."

"Well, what's the situation now?" I asked. "Do we deduce that both the Grimshawes and Berg are involved because they've gone off with Nurse Leonard? Certainly Walter has a lot of explaining to do."

The whisky seemed to have banished Cobb's exasperations.

"We mustn't let things run away with us, Westlake. We've no proof the Grimshawes are making a getaway. We've no proof Berg went with them. Or Nurse Leonard, for that matter. We can't even be absolutely certain that girl you tracked through the woods was Susan Leonard."

"All right," I agreed. "You bring out your notes, and we'll put the jigsaw together."

"For what it's worth," grunted Cobb. "We've a raft of information from a lot of people I wouldn't trust an inch. But as for definite clues—we've got nothing but the things you found in the nurse's suitcases, the empty envelope addressed by Travers and the typewritten note."

He took these two from his pocket and I crossed to his side, reading over his shoulder the extraordinary phrases of that typed letter.

Better to get yourself fired than leave. Less suspicious. Arrange it for Friday, quit at noon and hang around where you won't be seen until it's time to meet me at the usual place. Everything's set. The plan goes through then. Don't worry about money. I'll have plenty for you.

Unquestionably that note was of vital importance. But, as Cobb pointed out, until we were able to find the machine that typed it, it was not going to get us far.

We made three decisions:

(a) That one person committed every crime —probably with the assistance of Nurse Leonard.
(b) That Anne Grimshawe's murder was the initial crime, and that all the other outrages were motivated either to cover the murderer's tracks or to throw the police off the trail.
(c) That all information gathered from whatever source should be assumed truthful unless proved to the contrary.

We argued about the psychological make-up of the persons concerned and other highly theoretical considerations. Finally we agreed that the murderer must be selected from the somewhat limited group of my neighbors and was, therefore, a man or woman of hitherto proved integrity.

"Well, there's a case of sorts against all of them," I commented.

A car engine roared on the drive outside. The front door opened on Francis Faulkner.

"Thought you might be here, Inspector," he said. "I've got something for you."

We trooped into the living room. I poured whiskies and sodas.

"I hate to do this," Francis said at length. "Seems like letting a pal down. But Clara convinced me you'd have to see it. And, after all, she was the one who found it."

"What is it?" asked the inspector.

"Last night, before the Hunt Club meeting, Clara and I went up to Louella's room to get back a book of my wife's she'd borrowed. Clara happened to glance in it this evening. She discovered this."

FRANCIS produced a folded piece of paper. The paper which Mrs. Howell had slipped into Clara's book was the letter written by Tommy Travers to Nurse Leonard!

Cobb was about to speak when the door swung open to reveal Dawn in crumpled pink pajamas. I could tell from her haughty manner and the dignified tilt to her nose that she was completely absorbed in her own problems.

"Daddy," she began, her voice saturated with reproof, "you know you promised to come up at nine, and now—" She broke off, seeing Francis Faulkner. I have never witnessed so quick a change of mood. Instantly she was as sweet as any cooing dove. Francis was my only serious rival in her affection.

"Oh, Mr. Faulkner, I didn't know you were here." She darted a glance at me. "Perhaps, as Daddy's so busy, you'd like to come up and talk to me. You can see my plans for the rabbit hutches."

Francis had sufficient tact to sense that Cobb and I wanted to be left alone. He let himself be whisked away.

As soon as the door shut on Faulkner and Dawn, Cobb glanced up, his eyes gleaming.

"So the letter wasn't a red herring, after all, Westlake. In fact, I think it about clinches things. Read it for yourself."

It was written in the now familiar hand of Tommy Travers and dated about three weeks before. It read:

Too bad you had to leave before I had a chance to see you. Well, there are stormy seas ahead. It won't be all beer and skittles chez Louella Howell. No more little rendezvous in the woods for a while! But cheer up. It won't be for long. Thanks for being so nice to Helen. I suppose she squared that count. But it's up to me to take care of the expenses for the little job you're going to do for me. I'm enclosing a check and hope it'll be enough. Tell me if you need more. In a way, it all seems like a ghastly

dream. But what has to be, has to be. I suppose it's the will of God, as old Elias would say. I know you'll see the thing through. And between us I'm sure we'll be able to deal with her. As I said before, it's all pretty awful. But I can depend on you. There's no need to ask you to keep this absolutely to yourself—T. T.

"You see?" Cobb was exclaiming. "Mrs. Howell figured out that Travers was paying Susan Leonard to get rid of Anne. That's why she called her name to you over the phone. Aunt Lulu was no fool. She even had enough sense to hide the note where, whatever happened, someone would find it."

I glanced at the letter again. The sinister implications were obvious.

"Well," I began, "what do we—"

I broke off as the telephone sprang into sudden life.

Cobb reached it first.

"Hello! Who is it?— My God!"

I was kept in acute suspense while he fired rapid questions over the wire. At length he threw down the receiver and turned to face me.

"Who was it?" I asked swiftly.

"Mrs. Travers."

"Helen? What on earth did she want?"

"What d' you suppose? This business seems to run in cycles, Westlake. First it was all murders, then it was all burglaries. Tonight it's all disappearances."

"You mean—"

"I mean Mrs. Travers wants us right away. She's scared because her husband left the house around five-thirty and hasn't been seen or heard from since."

X

UPON reaching the Travers' house, we were shown immediately into Helen's room. She greeted us from her couch, sweet and apologetic for troubling us. Tommy had gone out about five-thirty to put the spaniels in their pens for the night. He had not come back.

"If he was on foot he couldn't have gone far." Helen gazed up at us pleadingly. "That's what makes me think—something has happened."

I could hear Tommy's spaniels outside, yelping and whining frantically in their kennels. Dogs, dogs, dogs! Somehow their barking had run like a sinister refrain through the tragedies of the past few days.

"Listen, Helen," I broke in. "From the noise the spaniels are making I'd say Tommy was near enough for them to scent him. Shall I get one of them on a lead and see?"

Helen summoned the butler, Rainsford, and he led me to where the spaniels slept. Cobb followed. The spaniels were barking furiously.

"One'll be enough," I said as Rainsford opened the nearer of the two kennels.

As I spoke a shadowy form shot through the open door and past us, vanishing into the darkness with a joyous yelp. The other spaniel went half-crazy in a wild attempt to follow.

"Never seen them act that way," murmured the butler as he went off to fetch a lead.

Cautiously I entered the second pen and, after a certain amount of struggling, managed to attach the lead to the spaniel's collar. Then I gave the dog its head. I was certain now that the spaniels had scented their master.

Twisting and turning, the dog led us down a path toward an open lawn where, in summertime, Tommy had a first-class tennis court. On the edge of the grass the spaniel paused. Then it gave a low whine. Immediately the whine was answered from somewhere ahead in the darkness.

Cobb's torch was flashed forward. There, in front of us, was the second dog, crouched by something lying on the ground.

It was Tommy, of course. He was sprawled on his back, staring unseeingly upward. His arms lay limply at his sides, one leg was bent grotesquely at the knee. His face was torn, bruised, almost unrecognizable.

I fell to my knees and laid my head against his chest. Then I glanced up at the butler.

"The inspector's car, quick," I exclaimed. "My medical kit—a black bag. And don't say a thing to Mrs. Travers."

I rose and nodded to Cobb. "We must

get him inside at once," I said. "You take his feet."

We laid Travers on a couch in the servant's living room. I started work on him at once, while the butler brought boiling water and towels. It was obvious that the Englishman had been the victim of some savage attack.

I had just given him an injection of glucose when the door opened, and the nurse appeared, pushing Helen's chair.

"Thank God you found him," Mrs. Travers breathed. "Is—is he badly hurt?"

"Not a bit of it," I said cheerfully. "He's had an accident and suffered from shock and exposure, but there are no bones broken."

"But what—?" Helen left the sentence unfinished. With a last look at her husband she nodded to the nurse to wheel her away.

"It's a funny one," grunted Cobb. "It might have been accidental, though. Travers could have struck his head on a sharp stone when he fell."

I HAD forgotten the butler was still in the room until he spoke, in a deferential voice.

"I think I should tell you, sir," he said, "that I saw a man round the house about six o'clock. He drove up to the gate and jumped out in a hurry. I went out to him, and he said he was looking for Mr. Travers. I told him that Mr. Travers was out—not knowing, of course, that anything had happened. He stared at me, funny-like, a minute and then went off to his car."

"Who was it?" asked Cobb.

"Well, sir, it was old Grimshawe's son."

The inspector and I looked at each other. I knew he was thinking what I was thinking. Walter had said something about "having one more thing to do," something about there being another murder if we did not watch out.

"Good Lord," I said. "So this is what Walter Grimshawe was planning to do! He came here to kill Travers."

There was a sound behind me. I wheeled in surprise as Tommy's voice rose, weak but steady.

"It wasn't Walter Grimshawe," he said. "And no one came here to kill me. It was a fair fight, and the best man won. And if you want to get any more out of me than that, you're going to be disappointed."

His bruised lips twisted into a painful grimace. But within minutes he was almost his alert self, despite the swollen lips and bunged-up eyes.

Cobb lost his temper. He produced the note which had been found that evening, and recited the case against Travers. He demanded an explanation of this last attack, rounding off with:

"So you see, Mr. Travers, you've got a lot of explaining to do."

Tommy grinned. "If you really take that loopy theory seriously, I suppose I'll have to spill the beans." He raised himself painfully on the couch. "But first, he added quietly, "I'm going to ask you chaps to let me have ten minutes with Helen—alone."

Cobb and I waited in the living room. We did not speak.

After about ten minutes the butler came to summon us back to the room where we had left Travers. His wife was there. Mrs. Travers smiled as we entered. The anxiety had left her eyes now.

"Tommy's told me everything," she said softly. "And it's not so terrible, Inspector. He's a bit tired. I hope you won't mind if I do the talking for him."

Cobb nodded solemnly.

"And you mustn't be impatient, Inspector, if I go into things which may not seem important. I'm going to tell you a love story—a rather tragic story about a young girl. You see, Anne Grimshawe was very young when she fell in love with my husband."

Cobb and I stared at her in astonishment.

"Oh, there was no harm in it," said Helen, smiling. "And at first I think I was the only person who realized it. Neither of them did. Of course, Tommy isn't handsome, but there's that English accent, and—well, he's got a way with him."

She laughed again, infectiously.

"I sensed it three months ago when at

last Tommy realized Anne loved him. She told him so one day when they met by accident in Top Woods. Poor Anne! She hated her home. It was Tommy's fault that she couldn't bring herself to marry Berg."

Helen's smile was full of human sympathy.

"But Anne made one mistake. She suggested that there was a way to stop her going to the devil. If only she could have what she wanted—just for a little while. Half a loaf—"

I saw Tommy's fingers move slightly on his wife's lap.

"There's no need to go into it in detail," said Helen. "She didn't want to make trouble for Tommy or me. But she got very neurotic after it was over. Thought she was going to have a baby. Frightened poor old Tommy into making a stupid mistake."

"You mean," I said, "that he should have come to me—or to you?"

"Exactly, Doctor Westlake. Instead he confided in that nurse I had—Susan Leonard. I guessed what he'd done, and I'm ashamed to say that's why I fired the girl.

"The nurse went to see Anne and found the poor child in a shocking state of nerves. Wouldn't leave the neighborhood because she had no money of her own until her next birthday, wouldn't accept a penny from Tommy, and she wouldn't see a doctor. Finally Nurse Leonard decided that the only way to get her to go was to let her believe she was going to have a baby and to warn her that her father would find out. Then, apparently, Anne *did* have a row with Elias and quit. Soon after Louella Howell dismissed the nurse—and that's all we know."

COBB leaned forward, gazing at Helen solemnly.

"I appreciate your telling me this, Mrs. Travers. Especially as you must realize how deeply it implicates your husband. It is believed that Anne Grimshawe was murdered by a man with whom she had been having an affair—with Nurse Leonard as an accomplice."

Helen Travers returned his gaze with steady eyes.

"I told you the truth. There's no need to say that my husband had nothing whatsoever to do with that poor girl's murder."

"Nothing at all," broke in Tommy. "My only sin was making a blithering idiot of myself and having a wife who's much too good for me."

"I'd like to believe you, Mr. Travers." The inspector produced the letter to Nurse Leonard. "But how do you explain this?"

Travers took the note and scanned it thoughtfully.

"I suppose it does have sinister implications, but surely you see what it was. I just wrote to the nurse, sending her money to book a place for Anne in a nursing home. Louella Howell must have read that note. That explains why she acted so queerly when I saw her on the night of the Hunt Club meeting."

"Mr. Travers," replied Cobb, without smiling, "Mrs. Howell thought you killed Anne. And Mrs. Howell was murdered."

Tommy flushed. "If you think the Leonard girl was mixed up in this beastly business, you're barking up the wrong tree."

"You don't know anything about her movements recently?" asked Cobb.

"Don't know a thing about anything," said Travers. "I swear I'm not a murderer, even if I was almost a murderee this evening."

"I was hoping to hear about that," said Cobb quietly.

"Right-ho," Travers glanced quizzically at his bandaged hands. "But I won't prefer charges or anything. It was Berg—you know, that Scandinavian mountain that lives on Grimshawe's land. He accused me of the seven deadly sins and said he was going to knock me down for the degenerate I was. I was not the man to stop him."

"What made Berg realize all of a sudden that you were the man Anne had an affair with?" Cobb asked.

"You've got me there. Said something about guessing last night and making sure this afternoon. Incidentally, you

can cross off one of your mysteries. Berg was the man my wife saw outside her window last night."

Cobb left me at my front gate and I went upstairs, relishing the prospect of a long night's rest. As I passed my daughter's door I heard a soft but relentless voice call:

"Daddy."

I ENTERED to find my daughter sitting up in bed.

"You ought to be asleep, brat," I said sternly.

"I know. But I woke up specially because I wanted to say I was sorry I was mean to you." My daughter did her best to look contrite.

Resignedly I sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Well, did you have a nice time with Mr. Faulkner?"

"Oh yes, lovely—but so terribly sad." Dawn's eyes lighted up ecstatically. "Mr. Faulkner told me how his cup had been stolen, and I told him he was silly to have it stolen."

"You're just talking so's you won't have to go to sleep," I said. "Well, it won't work tonight. You've tried this too often, brat."

Firmly I rose, switched out the light and kissed the top of my daughter's head.

In my own room, I sat down on the edge of my bed, only to jump up again, thoughts tumbling crazily after one another into my tired brain. A sentence of Cobb's just after our discovery on the hunt was the first of those confused memories to crystallize. "Instead of giving the animals a chance to expose the body, he used them to get rid of it." Animals!

My mind raced to my little scene with Rosemary in Pytcher's Lane. I could hear her quiet young voice—"The barn was drafty and infested with rats."

These few, utterly disconnected recollections had suddenly forged themselves into a chain of unbreakable logic. Rats eat anything. There were rats in the barn. And I had first traced Nurse Leonard by that tumbledown old building.

THE bloodhounds had been unsuccessful in their search for the most vital part of the body. It was possible that Cobb's men had not yet had time to explore that remote, deserted building. Taking a large pocket torch from a drawer I ran down to the hall, chose my thickest overcoat and hurried out into the cold night.

I decided upon traveling cross-country to the barn rather than to risk observation by using the car. In my exhausted condition it seemed an interminable distance.

It took me almost half an hour before I slipped through the fringe of trees and felt the familiar pine needles crunch beneath my feet. In the wood it was incredibly dark, but I had no hesitancy in using my torch.

Paths in woods are liable to be confusing at night. That time, however, my hunting instinct made me ruthlessly efficient, and at last I came out on the track which led to the barn.

The wide beam of my torch revealed its crumbled walls, the ancient wooden door, the blind windows. There was no handle to the door, but by inserting a finger through a hole and lifting the latch I managed to swing it back.

As I stepped over the threshold, there was a scuffling sound as though a strong wind had come in with me, scattering a pile of dead leaves. I flashed on my torch just in time to see half-a-dozen gray forms jostling each other in a frenzied attempt to reach the decaying walls. Rats!

I closed the door and started a systematic search. In the walls the rats kept up an unbroken clamor, tumbling over each other, squeaking, fighting. I banged the walls, banged the floor, inspected cracks and holes. It took many minutes before I reached the window which, paneless and splintered, loomed palely in the far left-hand wall.

I was just about to switch my torch upward to the spider-haunted ceiling when a faint sound outside made me press myself against the wall. It might just have been some animal of the woods. Or it might have been human footsteps. It filled me with alarm.

I spent some very unpleasant moments squatting there beneath the window. Only gradually did it dawn on me that, now that my torch was extinguished, I could look through the window. Slowly I pushed myself up and peered out.

The moon selected that moment to swoop arrogantly above the clouds and shake its pale rays across the broad clearing outside. For an instant I thought I saw a vague shadow slipping into the trees.

Impulsively I leaned forward, slipping my head through the broken pane in an attempt to see more clearly. As I did the moon passed behind a cloud, and all light faded from the clearing.

At last I managed to convince myself that the shadowy figure had been a figment of my imagination. I turned away from the window and continued with the search.

Keeping my torch low, I started to climb the ancient ladder.

Within a few seconds I had pushed up the trap-door and was scrambling into the loft.

The atmosphere downstairs had been dreary enough. Here it was even drearier. The rats added the final touch of desolation. They were even more numerous than below. And the unpleasant part was that they showed no interest in me, no fear.

My nerves must have been pretty much on edge, for I found myself suddenly stamping like a maniac. It was a relief to see them scuttle away into their shadowy holes.

I was almost in the middle of the loft when I made my first discovery. There, almost at my feet, was a longish scar on the board. Scarcely any dust had gathered in it. I picked up the torch and swung it around. There were more scars—cuts that might have been made by an ax or a hatchet. And then I noticed a dark stain on the woodwork.

I KNELT there without moving, shattered by this unexpected discovery. Except for a little circle of light around myself the barn was in darkness. And from the darkness I heard faint, furtive sounds, broken by scufflings and squeaks. The rats had come back.

I swung my torch forward. And I saw them. About a half a dozen were grouped around a corner of the loft. They were trying to gnaw through a floor board.

I could hear the crunching of their sharp teeth.

Feeling nauseated, I rose and started to move toward them. They did not disperse until I was almost on top of them. Then they moved only with reluctance.

In the light from the torch I could see the indentations of their teeth. I saw something else, too. Gleaming against the dirty floor boards were a few strands of blond hair.

My fingers held the torch poised over one particular board. It did not lie as flat as the others.

I started to wrench at it wildly. It gave.

There must have been a space almost two feet deep between the floor of the loft and the ceiling of the barn below. I pointed the torch into the dark hole I had made. Gleaming in the torchlight, incongruously modern in this ancient building, was a small portable typewriter. It was an Elliot portable, Number Five.

Something else was thrusting out from beneath the next board. I began tearing up the floor like a madman. First I found Nurse Leonard's suitcases, then a hatchet, its blade gleaming evilly. Thrown around it was a pile of woman's clothes. I noticed the dark stains on them.

I knelt there, gazing at the one board I had not yet ripped up—the board nearest the wall where the jagged marks of rats' teeth scrawled a bizarre pattern. Then with trembling fingers I grasped it and pulled.

The board came up. I pointed the torch downward.

It is difficult to explain how I felt as I gazed dazedly into that hole which the garish illumination from the torch bathed with a cruel light. Horror, surprise—I had grown accustomed to them, but nothing that had happened in Kenmore had prepared me for this.

XI

EXACTLY what I did for the next few minutes, I cannot recall. I believe I just knelt there on the hard, dirty floor staring with eyes that did not see. I can remember the horror of being faced with a problem which was too big for a man to solve. The thing in front of me was in half-shadow now. Only the hair gleamed—golden, horribly young-looking and alive.

It is curious that I was conscious only of these slight, immediate details when so much was going on beneath me of which I was utterly unaware. The first hint I had of anything wrong was that small spiral of smoke, twisting slowly upward from the boards at my feet. It seemed as incredible as the sudden appearance of a cobra.

Only gradually did the other unmistakable signs of fire seep through to me—the sour, pungent odor, the harsh, steady crackle of flames.

With a wild, hurried glance at the thing at my feet I dashed across the loft to the trap-door. I swung it up, and a great cloud of smoke surged in like a geyser. I staggered back, coughing. A faint rosy tint stained the smoke, and I could hear the flames roaring louder.

Seeing that all hope of escape by the trap-door was gone, I slammed it down.

I racked my brains, trying to recall the setup of the floor below and remembered a pile of old sacks lying around the foot of the ladder. The blaze had obviously started there.

But how had it started? Then the truth dawned on me. Either the murderer had tracked me to the barn, or he had planned, in any case, to destroy the building which held so much damning evidence of guilt.

I weighed a series of impractical schemes and decided that my only hope lay with the window. It must have been a good twelve feet above me, and if I *did* succeed in reaching it I doubted whether there was enough room for me to squeeze through.

Ever since I had noticed the first smoke the rats had been curiously quiet. Now they burst into sudden activity. I could hear them fighting, clawing, screaming in the walls. I suppose the smoke had crept through to them.

It is difficult to remember now how exactly I did reach that window. Gradually, however, I grew familiar with the surface of the wall and by clutching and clawing succeeded in grabbing the sill and holding on. I swung myself up, to perch precariously on the sill with my face pressed against the window. Then I came upon my second major difficulty. All the windows downstairs had been paneless and frameless. This one, however, was firm.

I took the torch from my pocket and started beating at the window fiercely. Soon I had disposed of all the glass, but the wooden framework remained.

I tried battering it with the torch, but the net result of this was to reduce the flashlight to twisted aluminum. I tossed it through one of the panes and clung to my perch. Time was short now, and it was a question of do or die.

I decided to do.

Squatting on the sill I gripped firmly onto a crack in the wall and swung violently sideward against the window frame with my hip. After several attempts I felt the woodwork giving. Then it cracked. I broke it down with my hands, and squeezed through the gap, sitting poised there some forty feet from the ground.

As the cold impact of the night air refreshed me, I realized with a sudden pang that this might be one of my last moments on earth. I had escaped from the burning loft only to find myself faced with a sheer drop onto frosty ground some forty feet below. Both legs would certainly be broken—most likely my back, too.

I was just steeling myself for the jump when below me, running swiftly along the side of the barn, I saw a figure. I did not stop to think that it might be the murderer. I yelled a vigorous:

"Hey!"

The figure stopped dead beneath me, and then I saw it was Rosemary Stewart. I waved an arm and shouted:

"How about getting me down?"

I could see her straining her eyes to

see who it was.

"Hugh!" she exclaimed at length. "Stay there. I'll find something."

Like a streak she ran along the barn. I saw her slip through the door and disappear into the blazing building. She emerged from the barn and was dragging behind her one of the old ladders.

"It's all right!" she shouted. "I've found a ladder."

AS SHE struggled to set it up against the wall I thanked my stars she was no drooping violet, but a healthy outdoor girl. It seemed ages before the ladder was set up against the wall beneath me. Then we discovered it was a good ten feet too short.

"Won't work!" I shouted. "Stand away. I'm going to jump."

"No. You mustn't, Hugh. You'll kill yourself." Rosemary's voice rang out excitedly. "There's a sort of knob underneath you to the right. I think you can reach it."

I gripped the sill and let myself down so that my legs dangled. They were a good four feet from the top of the ladder.

"To the right, Hugh. Just above your knee."

I let go with my right arm and started to fumble down the wall. My fingers grasped something that projected about six inches from the wall. It must have been a faulty beam.

"Okay," I heard Rosemary's voice say. "It'll hold, won't it?"

"I hope so."

Gripping it as fiercely as I could I let go the sill with my left hand. I felt myself rushing downward, and my right arm seemed on the verge of being pulled from its socket. Then I managed to get my left hand, also, on the projection. I swung from side to side, but I was safe.

Below, I could hear Rosemary moving the ladder. Within a few seconds I felt the top rung beneath my feet. I clambered to the ground, hoping heartily that I should never see that barn again.

And it looked as though my hopes would speedily be realized. As Rosemary and I stood there the whole right-hand half of the roof fell in, shooting a gigantic spout of flame through the smoke-laden air. I thought of my gruesome discovery up there in the loft. The murderer had succeeded in destroying it, but he had been a little too late.

"You're well out of that, Hugh."

I started slightly at the sound of Rosemary's voice.

"Sorry if I was slow," she added. "But when I saw you up there I just couldn't believe it."

"You saved my life," I said softly, "and I thank you. Whatever other people may think about it, it's valuable to me."

She smiled slightly. Her dress was singed and stained with ash. We must have made a pretty disheveled couple.

"I won't ask questions," she said. "But I can't understand why Berg or one of the Grimshawes didn't notice the fire and—" She broke off, turning her head away. "We'd better get away from here. That barn's going to collapse soon." She gave a soft laugh. "Quite a suitable end to my little romance, isn't it? The rendezvous going up in flames!"

Reassuring myself that there was no chance of the fire spreading across the clearing to the trees, I followed Rosemary away into the wood.

"I don't want to seem ungrateful," I murmured, "but I'd very much like to know how you happened to appear at the crucial moment."

"It does seem suspicious," broke in Rosemary with a faint laugh. "I've made a fool of myself to you already today. Do I have to do it again?"

"You mean—Walter?"

She did not reply for a moment. Her hand found mine in the darkness and slipped into it.

"It was awful this afternoon," she said slowly, "seeing you dash away up Pytcher's Lane and realizing that because of something I'd said you thought —thought Walter was mixed up in all that dreadful business. You did. I know it. And—well, I—I couldn't have things end that way. I had to see him again."

She paused, and the pressure of her fingers on mine tightened.

"When you left me I rode home and wrote him a note asking him to meet me at the barn after midnight. I—I took it up to the Grimshawes' and slipped it into the mailbox. I—well, I turned up tonight, but he didn't. I went away, came back again. It was then I noticed the fire."

We had reached the edge of the woods now and were standing together in Pytcher's Lane.

"I can tell you one thing," I said gently. "I know why Walter didn't turn up. I also know why neither he nor his father noticed the fire. They've gone away. I don't know why they went, or where. They may even be back now for all I know. But promise me one thing, Rosemary. Don't worry too much. Things may not be as—as complicated as you think."

IT WAS late when I arrived home, but without waiting even to assuage a fierce thirst I hurried to the telephone and called Cobb.

Cobb listened while I ran through all that had happened. He was silent when I told him of the possible explanation that had occurred to me, and where I thought he would find the one piece of tangible evidence which had not been destroyed by the fire. . . .

He would be around at eleven the next morning, he said, and we could try to clear the matter up once and for all.

"See to it your Hunt Club committee's ready to stand by for a session," he added. "Call them for eleven-thirty at your house."

"Must it be my house?" I asked. "I don't want Dawn in on this."

"Okay. Make it the Faulkners'. He's master of the hounds."

"But what about Berg and the Grimshawes?" I asked anxiously.

Cobb gave a short laugh. "I'll have them there all right."

I slept soundly that night. . . .

The next morning the inspector appeared at eleven to drive me to the Faulkners'.

"Well, I guess it's all sewed up," he grunted as the car sped through the morning sunlight. He handed me a telegram with a grim smile. "There's corroboration for you, Westlake."

I read the telegram and saw definite proof of my theory. It was rather exciting—and depressing, too.

When Cobb and I arrived, the Hunt Club committee was already assembled in the Faulkners' living room. Clara, of course, dominated the room—a tweedy, Epstein Diana. Francis, smart but weary-looking, did his best as host. Rosemary and her uncle sat together in silence, their eyes fixed on their hands. I was most surprised to see Tommy Travers. Despite bandages and bruises, the English sense of duty had compelled him to put in an appearance.

Cobb broke the ice with admirable tact. A series of unexpected circumstances, he said, coupled with a certain amount of luck, had enabled him and me to come to a conclusion which we both felt was the correct one. As respected citizens of the neighborhood and sufferers from the tragedies, he felt that they should hear what he had to say.

A car drove up outside, but I think I was the only one who noticed it. The others were giving their complete attention to the inspector's slow, almost gentle voice.

"We'd better start by running through the facts," he was saying. "Anne Grimshawe quarreled with her father last Wednesday and left his house. No one knew where she went. But she was seen again on Thursday by Mr. Howell to whom she sold an option on some land. On Saturday the body was found in the fox's earth, and other parts—elsewhere. But an extensive search failed to discover the head. That same Saturday afternoon, Mr. Faulkner's prize hunter, Sir Basil, was found in his stall asphyxiated by carbon monoxide.

"The very next day—Sunday—the murderer broke into several houses in an attempt to find Nurse Leonard's suitcases and later killed Mrs. Howell. Both Westlake and I made a lot of wrong deductions. But it was not until Westlake discovered the most vital evidence last night, and almost got himself

killed doing so, that we realized just how wrong we had been!"

Clara stabbed a match to a cigarette. Rosemary's eyes met mine, wide and searching. Tommy Travers looked a little relieved, I suppose because his own embarrassing problems had not been brought to light.

"Strange as it may seem to you," the inspector was murmuring, "Westlake and I had worked out an almost perfect case against Mr. Howell, Mr. Faulkner and Mr. Travers as the murderer of Anne Grimshawe." His blue eyes twinkled slightly. "But I'm afraid we were wrong—very wrong. No one in this room did murder Anne Grimshawe."

He rose and moved to the door amid a vague ripple of comment. Francis stared after him blankly. Cyril Howell's plump face was pale and agitated. On the threshold Cobb turned and held out his hand as someone joined him. It was a girl—a young, pretty girl with a little red hat tilted over blond curls.

The effect of her appearance was electric. The group froze into complete silence. At length, someone—I think it was Clara Faulkner—exclaimed, hoarse, incredulous:

"Anne Grimshawe!"

A girl whom one has thought of as murdered suddenly appearing, very much alive—it was a shock, to say the least.

"Yes," murmured Cobb placidly, "Anne Grimshawe."

SMART in her red costume, Anne strolled to the chair which Cobb was holding for her and sat down, crossing her legs.

"Well, here I am," she said. "I left with a bad reputation, and I return a celebrity. That's far more than I expected or deserved."

"I'm asking Miss Grimshawe to give you her own story," put in the inspector.

His audience still seemed stunned. In particular, I noticed Rosemary and Tommy Travers. They were gazing at the girl as though she were some spectre from the grave.

"It's flattering to have aroused all this interest," she said. "As it happens, I've been in almost the only place where the police couldn't find me—a private clinic under an assumed name. You see, recently I—well, I got into a hopelessly neurotic condition about one thing and another." A second glance at Travers. "I palled up with Nurse Leonard, and she suggested my going away to a clinic to rest up. Last Wednesday I happened to have a row with Pa and found myself thrown out of the house. That decided me. I went to a clinic in Grovestown. I spent the night there, but when they found out I didn't have any money they told me, politely, that I could either go to a general hospital or go home."

She paused, flicking ash from her cigarette onto Clara's carpet.

"I was scared of the idea of a general hospital. And I couldn't go home. Then I remembered that land that was due to come to me. I scribbled some sort of document about it, hiked to Kenmore and waited in Top Woods, where I knew Mr. Howell usually rode in the afternoons. I met him and managed to get some money. That was on Thursday. I returned with the cash and was accepted with open arms at the clinic. My brother, of course, knew all about it, but I hadn't liked to ask him for money. Poor dear, Pa keeps him so low in funds. But I did call Walter Friday just to let him know where I was. I asked him to get in touch with Nurse Leonard and to bring me some clothes."

She smiled at me.

"Walter came to see me on Saturday morning, bringing the clothes. He'd met Doctor Westlake on the way and was terrified he might have guessed. It was then that Walter told me how a girl's body had been found, and how everyone thought it was me. He suggested I should lie low for a while and let them think it. And it turned out to be easy, because Father went and identified the body."

Francis Faulkner was the first to break the attentive silence. "Why on earth did your father identify the body?"

Anne shrugged. "Poor Pa. He suspected I was a wicked woman, and he

believes implicitly in divine retribution."

Elias had acted perfectly in character. Anne was smiling at me again.

"By the way, Doctor Westlake, I have you to thank for our grand family reunion. Pa wanted to turn me out again yesterday evening, but he was so delighted at routing you with the bull that he developed a marvelously good temper and was all forgiveness."

Rosemary glanced up quickly.

"Yes," Anne was saying. "Yesterday I got fed up with the clinic. Besides, I realized that I'd been making an idiot of myself here in Kenmore and decided to snap out of it. So I telephoned to Walter and asked him to meet me by the old barn in the woods."

"So it was you!" Rosemary's voice suddenly broke in.

"Yes, I met him there. I'd made up my mind to something, and he was to be the peacemaker. He was to go to Adolf Berg and do his best to explain while I went to tell Father I was alive and about to be made an honest woman. When Walter got to Berg's house he had a frightful time with the inspector and Dr. Westlake. He didn't dare have anything come out till I was duly forgiven and disposed of. Besides, he didn't know how Berg would react. Poor Adolf's terribly temperamental. Before Walter could stop him, he rushed away, swearing he'd beat up—"

She broke off with another momentary glance at the bandaged face of Tommy Travers.

"Well, Walter ran him to earth eventually and brought him home. Pa said he'd forgive me just as soon as he saw me a married woman. And Walter said the sooner the better, or we'd all be in jail for withholding evidence or something. So off we went. Adolf's not exactly a romantic husband, but he's been dear and sweet to me. The blessed union took place somewhere just across the state border. Pa came along to make sure nothing would go wrong. The inspector's men caught up with us during our little wedding celebration at an ice cream parlor."

"You mean you're married?" exclaimed Clara.

"Yes." Anne pointed to a wedding ring. "I'm Mrs. Adolf Berg now." She glanced at Cyril Howell. "And I'm afraid that option won't go through. My husband wants me to keep the land—here he is now."

XII

PROMPTLY the door opened to reveal the enormous figure of Adolf Berg. The Scandinavian farmer boasted two black eyes and a large patch on his cheek. He glanced rather grudgingly at Travers, then crossed and shook him vigorously by the hand.

"It is forgotten, yes?" he said.

"It is forgotten, yes," replied Tommy solemnly.

Berg sat down at his wife's side with obvious pride, as Elias and Walter entered. The young farmer's eyes met Rosemary's immediately. A sudden smile lighted up the girl's face, then Walter was at her side. Stiff and disapproving, Elias found a chair at some distance from the others. He was making it plain he was here only under protest.

Gazing coldly at these uninvited guests, Clara turned brusquely to the inspector and exclaimed:

"This is all very touching and domestic. But I thought you came here to discuss a murder. If it wasn't Anne Grimshawe, who—who was it we found on the hunt?"

Slowly Cobb raised his eyes to hers.

"The body you found on the hunt was the body of another woman who had left the neighborhood suddenly."

"You mean—" broke in Cyril Howell.

"I mean Susan Leonard." The bold statement caused a gust of startled comment. "It was Westlake who pieced it all together first," the inspector was saying. "Last night he found the—er—head. And saw with his own eyes what a big mistake we'd made. I think it'd be best if, from now on, he took things over."

Immediately attention shifted to me.

"Yes," I began slowly, "we were like the bloodhounds, off on the wrong scent

from the start. And the mistake was a reasonable one. In fact, I think it was the mistake the murderer planned us to make. He guessed, perhaps, that neither Anne nor her family would be anxious to correct our misapprehension —at least, not for a while. He could not have guessed that Mr. Grimshawe would have assisted him to the extent of identifying the body."

"I did not lie!" Elias Grimshawe glared at me from his remote seat. "That description you read—it was of my daughter. And already she was dead to me in spirit."

"Oh, we don't blame you, Mr. Grimshawe," I said patiently. "Miss Stewart and I made the same mistake in reverse. We expected to see Nurse Leonard rather than Anne in the woods yesterday. Naturally, we never even thought of Anne.

"Cobb and I had a few ideas as to why the body had been dismembered in that beastly way," I went on. "But we missed the only logical one. The murderer hoped that the body would be identified as Anne's if it was discovered. Maybe we'd still be guessing if a chance remark of my daughter's hadn't given me the idea of going to the barn last night."

Briefly I outlined my discoveries. I told how the last tangible clues had been destroyed by the fire, how all the missing objects had been there—except one which we hoped to find later. When I described my discovery of the head, and my surprise at recognizing it as that of Nurse Leonard, Clara Faulkner broke in quickly:

"But how could anyone want to kill that nurse? No one knew her, no one even knew anything about her."

"You're right there, Mrs. Faulkner. We still know very little about her. But what we know's just enough for us to piece together her movements and motives. We found out that she was anxious to find positions in the Kenmore district. We were also told that she was surprised one evening in the woods with a man. The obvious conclusion is that she was eager to stay in the neighborhood because she wanted to be near that man. He turned out to be her murderer. And that man is in the room at this very moment."

Rosemary and Walter looked at each other swiftly. The others stirred and shuffled their feet.

"But it's hardly time for the murderer yet," I continued quietly. "I'd like to run through the facts of the actual crime as I think it happened. From a note in our possession we know the murderer used to meet Nurse Leonard somewhere which he referred to as 'the usual place.' That rendezvous, I'm pretty certain, was the old barn. The day before he had planned to kill her, he sent her a note telling her to get herself fired so that her disappearance wouldn't be noticed. She met him at the barn where he killed her and—and took his first step in destroying her identity. He relied on the animals to do the rest of the gruesome job."

"But, Dr. Westlake," Walter Grimshawe interrupted me. "Why did Susan Leonard obey this man like that? Doesn't it seem strange to you?"

I looked at him solemnly. "Those are questions which only the murderer can answer definitely, Mr. Grimshawe. Either she wanted to be near this man because she was fond of him, or because she was blackmailing him. The note we have proves that he had her confidence. But in asking Susan Leonard to get herself fired he had counted without Mrs. Howell's temperament. The girl did such a good job of getting herself dismissed that Mrs. Howell turned her out of the house without giving her a chance to get her baggage. And there was a frightfully important note which Nurse Leonard hadn't destroyed. The murderer must have realized this. That's why he sent that telegram, supposed to be signed by Nurse Leonard, asking Mrs. Howell not to open the bags. Cobb and I naturally thought Nurse Leonard had sent it herself, but I expect the inspector's men will be able to find out who actually sent it."

"We checked up on it this morning," broke in the inspector quietly. "We know who handed in that telegram. And it fits our case."

I GLANCED once again around my audience.

"That telegram was another psychological mistake. Just because she'd been asked not to open the bags Mrs. Howell opened them, and that was the cause of her death."

As shortly as possible I outlined to them Aunt Lulu's pathetic part in the case. Without mentioning Travers' name I explained how she had read the letter from him and deduced from it that the Englishman and Nurse Leonard had conspired together to kill Anne.

"You see, Mrs. Howell thought she had solved the case. Her theories weren't correct, but the killer wasn't to know that. She started to throw out hints, and probably thought she'd seen the really dangerous note, the typewritten one. That's why he took no chances and killed her after his first attempt to retrieve the suitcases had failed."

"But this—this other note, the typewritten one." It was Louella's husband who spoke, his voice low and diffident. "What did it say?"

"It's not what it said that matters so much," I explained. "It's what it *was*. It was the only thing that definitely linked Nurse Leonard with the murder. And it was to try to keep us from thinking about her that her murderer did all he did. That's why he burned the barn last night. When the bloodhounds were on the trail of Anne, he knew his cache was fairly safe. But as soon as we began talking about Nurse Leonard he had to destroy the old building. As it was, he was too late. Too late, that is, unless he'd been successful in burning me with it."

"And Sir Basil?" Francis lifted his eyes slowly. "Why did he have to kill Sir Basil?"

His eyes flicked to the window. In the distance we could see the freshly dug earth which marked the place where the horse had been buried. Suddenly Francis jumped to his feet. Clara did, too. She must have seen them at exactly the same moment—those men with picks and spades grouped around Sir Basil's grave.

"Stop them!" Clara's voice was sharp and angry. "Stop those men."

"Sorry—my instructions," Cobb said. "Westlake had an idea we might find some evidence hidden there in the horse's grave, something that will link the murderer up with Susan Leonard once and for all."

There was mingled surprise and indignation on Clara's sallow face. But she did not speak again.

Cobb glanced at me to continue.

"I want you all to think about Nurse Leonard," I said slowly. "If we hadn't been so eager to stick to our first premise we might have guessed that she was an unlikely accomplice for a murderer. She had excellent references; she was quiet, devout. We also learned, although we paid no attention to it at the time, that she had been known in St. Louis as Mrs. Susan Vaughan. Now, there was no hint that she was a widow. Being a Catholic she would not have been divorced. It is logical to suppose that the man in this neighborhood she had come to look for, and who finally murdered her, was her husband."

"Her husband!" echoed Rosemary blankly.

"Yes. Let's suppose that Susan Vaughan's husband got tired being married to an obscure hospital nurse. He tries to have her divorce him, but it is against her faith. She refuses. Finally he leaves her in search of the kind of life that appeals to him. Then suppose that husband finds a woman who typifies for him all that is desirable in life. She wants to marry him. He knows there's no hope of a divorce. He takes a chance and commits bigamy."

The little circle of listeners was as still now as the stuffed animals on the walls.

"Now let's think about Susan Leonard again," I said. "She takes back her maiden name, goes on being a nurse. But she hasn't forgotten her husband. Maybe she still loved him; maybe the fact that he is still married to her becomes a fixation with her. At any rate, years after he's left her she hears he's in Kenmore. She gets a job in the district and confronts her husband. Per-

haps she asks him to come back to her or tries to get money from him. Whatever her motive, she would obviously be a terrible embarrassment."

I heard sounds in the hall, gruff voices and the stamping of shoes. The door swung open, and three of Cobb's men marched in. One of them was carrying Francis Faulkner's golden cup, the trophy presented by the California Hunt Club.

"It wasn't a foot below the surface," he said, handing the cup to the inspector. "We found it in the horse's grave with the rest of the stuff that was supposed to have been stolen."

"That's what I expected," I said. I turned to Francis Faulkner. "You buried it in Sir Basil's grave, didn't you, Francis? When your wife saw you out there the night before last?"

FRANCIS returned my stare blankly.

"You couldn't bear to destroy that cup, could you?" I went on. "But you couldn't take a chance on it, either. You'd taken one chance when you brought it here in the first place. But it was too risky to have those initials staring at the police after they knew Susan Leonard was married and—"

Still Francis did not move. Clara sprang to her feet. She strode toward me, staring me straight in the eyes. I hated myself, but I had to go on.

"Look at the cup, Clara," I said softly. "See the initials there? F.F.V.—Francis Faulkner Vaughan."

"But it's—"

"I'm terribly sorry. If you don't believe me read this." I handed her the telegram Cobb had given me that morning. "It says that the winner of the California Hunt Club Steeplechase in Nineteen - twenty - eight was Francis Faulkner Vaughan. He explained the initials to you by saying that his mother always had him change his name when she married again. But he also said he had stopped doing it when he ceased to be a minor. In Nineteen-twenty-eight he wasn't a minor. In fact, Vaughan was always his real name. The first time he changed was when he married you. He —he was in Grovestown having his wrist attended to by Dr. Carmichael that afternoon the telegram came for Mrs. Howell from Nurse Leonard!"

Throughout this speech the faces around me grew gradually tense, more horrified. Francis covered his eyes with a hand. Cyril's mouth dropped open. Rosemary and Walter sat close together, gazing glassily. But it was Clara I was watching.

I have seen women taken suddenly by surprise. I have seen that blind, almost dead expression come into their eyes. But there had always been something rather grand about Clara. And she was grand then in her moment of extreme trial. The short, thin-lipped mouth was tight. The cold eyes tried desperately to conceal the agony behind them.

I sat motionless, saying nothing, waiting for some move from Clara. Slowly she turned her eyes toward the pale face of the husband who had never been legally hers.

"I could have forgiven you," I heard her saying without a quaver in her voice. "I think I could have forgiven you everything if it had not been for Sir Basil. Francis, why did you kill Sir Basil?"

"I think I can tell you why he killed Sir Basil." My own voice sounded faint, faraway. "You remember how he shied on the hunt? It was by the barn. You remember how he went crazy when we—we got the body out of the fox's earth? I think Sir Basil knew what was there before we did ourselves. He had seen it already, on the night of the murder.

"You see, it would have been risky for Francis to drive a car to the barn. And yet he needed something to help him carry—what he had to carry. I think he took Sir Basil. He was a high-strung horse, you know. And horses are strange about seeing death. It scares them. And they remember."

Clara's eyes were staring into mine.

"Yes," I continued. "Sir Basil was a witness. He betrayed the scene of the murder, but we did not realize it. And he almost betrayed the murderer. He threw Francis on the hunt. You yourself told me he tried to bite him in the

stables. Sir Basil had lost faith in his master and turned against him. Sooner or later the whole neighborhood would have noticed—and wondered why."

I looked down at my hands. "That was why Francis had to kill him. I expect it was the hardest of all the hard things he had to do. But he did it mercifully. He must have attached the hose to the exhaust of the car before he left for Grovestown. And then when he came back and found Sir Basil dead, he thought about taking the same way out himself. It might have been better if—"

Francis half-rose. "I wanted—" he whispered to his wife.

But he did not finish his sentence. For Clara had turned her back and was moving steadily toward the door. . . .

When I got home Dawn was playing in the living room. It seemed incredible that it had been largely through a random remark of hers that we had come by a solution.

She asked me where I'd been. I told her there had been a party at the Faulkners.

"Was Rosemary there?" she asked.

"Yes," I murmured absently. "And a little bird tells me she'll soon be married to Walter Grimshawe."

"Oh, Daddy, how lovely!" Dawn's face cleared. "A wedding in Kenmore! Nothing ever happens in this dull old place."

"Nothing," I repeated tonelessly. "Absolutely nothing."

A CHANCE MOLLOY MYSTERY

LADY TO KILL

by LESTER DENT

FLESHMAN heard, finally, the Streamliner moan in the distance, the sound hurtling through the ice-glazed night. All ready with his bag in hand, he strode forward and wrenched open the station door. The blizzard, its wind sleet-riddled, sprang on him instantly, beating his hat brim down over his friendly brown eyes, ballooning his topcoat about his chubby thighs.

The other passengers lunged heedlessly past him through the door he was holding open. Drawing back a little, politely, he kept the door for them by jamming a knee against it. Then, grasping his bag again, he dived outside, shuddering and baring his teeth at the cold.

A docile man, placid, Fleshman had

The stillness in the room was broken apart by two shots (CHAP. X)

A killer with a black-gloved fist prowls through a transcontinental train in quest of a lovely girl involved in an unlovely conspiracy!

no love for adventure or hardship, nor was he interested in competition with the malignant weather. Beside him the grimy little station was jacketed in ice and shiny as a wet seal.

Grimly drawing his lips over his customary smile, he staggered after the other passengers, who now suddenly grouped like sheep and waited. He joined them, huddled close to them, as awkwardly helpless as a small fat brown hen.

The headlight apruptly burst out of the semi-concealment of the void, grew swiftly to become a fabulous splintering glare. Hot, steaming, the Diesel materialized as a great monster plunging behind the light. The baggage cars glided past, the mail cars; air brakes hissed strongly, there was a wailing of flange friction, clanking of coupler knuckles, the coaches glided past, and the Streamliner came to a halt.

"'*Boarrrd*!" the conductor shouted.

Shivering passengers clambered inside. Fleshman's eyes were watering from the wind, he was shivering, but he waited his turn meekly.

"I have a berth reservation," he explained.

"What car?"

"Car Eleven, Lower Four."

"That's five to the rear. But you better get on here. You'll have to walk back. Porter'll take your bag." The conductor's voice jumped directly at the porter. "Charlie—Lower Four, Car Eleven."

"Yes suh!"

The porter relieved him of his bag. It was flung inside, and he followed, eager for the warmth and protection, the security, of the cars. He was the last aboard.

"Car Eleven, Lower Four. Yes suh!" The porter swept up his bag.

Wheeling to follow the porter, he saw the station lights wink away, heard for a ghostly instant the *clang-clang* of the crossing warning.

AT ONCE he liked the disorder, homely and human, of the day coaches through which he passed, but he saw he was going to like even more the quieter luxury of the Pullmans.

"Yes suh, Lower Four!"

He allowed the porter to help him off with his overcoat, take his hat. He noted cheerily that he had the section to himself. He liked the air of well-bred comfort he saw. He passed the porter a dollar bill.

"Thank *you*, suh!"

"Where is the diner?"

"The second car back."

"Have I time?"

"Yes suh, plenty of time. They serve until eight-thirty." A quick flick shot a cuff back from the thick wrist. "It is now seven-ten."

He thanked the porter, then seated himself comfortably. A moment later he leaned forward and, breathing heavily because he was so plump, removed his rubbers. Then he produced a telegram from his vest pocket and consulted it, confirming his recollection of car and compartment numbers.

He arose lazily and walked toward the head of the train, to Car 10. At Compartment 2 in Car 10 he halted, and knocked.

"Yes? What is it?" demanded Walheim's voice.

"Fleshman," he said softly, lips close to the door.

Immediately the compartment door whipped open.

"Come in!" Walheim said sharply.

Walheim's hair was light, a yellowish white, but he was not old—thirty-two, it might be—and he was dressed with casual neatness in a brown tweed coat and natural tan covert slacks. There was about Walheim, particularly in his face, a wiry muscularity.

"How are you, Walheim?" Fleshman said. Then he added, not truthfully, "It's good to see you again."

Walheim whipped shut the door and locked it, then swung about.

"So you made it. Have any trouble?"

"No."

Walheim was not satisfied. "I want to know exactly what you did after I telephoned you. Every move."

Fleshman, upset by the younger man's directness—there had hardly been greetings, not even a shaking of hands — hesitated uncomfortably. He momentarily postponed a decision by taking a chair, the one chair in the compartment, seating himself loosely.

"Is that necessary?" he parried.

"I want to know."

"Why?"

"If there's a slip anywhere—you can never tell about slips—I want to know what might need covering up."

Fleshman dropped his eyes. "After your telephone call," he said, "I made arrangements with a neighbor to take care of my chickens, feed my pig, and take my two cats home with him. I told him I was going to Florida to do some fishing. I have done that before. I then drove to New York in my car and put the car in a garage—the Argus Garage, Seventy-first Street—and registered at the Hotel Claxon, as you instructed. Your telegram was waiting for me, instructing me to board this train if possible.

"I was able, fortunately, to charter a privately owned plane. The pilot—Cal Rice, the Rice Flying Service—was the owner of the plane. I told him that I was a businessman, a Mr. Borzoi, in the furniture business, hot on the trail of a deal. The plane brought me to Perryville where this train stopped a few minutes ago. I got on there. There was plenty of time, and I was able to get a berth reservation on this train. I even arrived in Perryville ahead of

CHANCE MOLLOY

the storm. That about covers it."

"You married?" Walheim demanded bluntly.

"No."

"Girl friend? One who might get ideas about where you are or what you are doing?"

"She thinks I am in Florida."

"Sure?"

"Yes," Fleshman said. "I'm sure."

"What is her name?"

Fleshman was shocked. "Lucille"—his eyes dropped, fixed on the green carpet— "Stevens. Lucille Stevens, of One-hundred and twenty-eight Armdale Avenue, Farmington."

HIS gaze remained uncomfortably downcast. He had lied—there was no girl friend. He had started lying—bragging—about women a long time ago, when he was a fat, soft, uninviting youth who seemed unable to attract girls.

Walheim demanded, "How much did the plane cost you?"

"Four hundred and sixty miles at forty cents a mile."

"A hundred and eighty-four dollars?"

"Yes."

"Your train ticket?"

"Less than forty dollars."

"Will a hundred cover the rest?"

"Yes."

Walheim grunted with satisfaction, leaned forward. "Will you accept the same fee you got for the job two years ago?"

"Yes."

"Good."

"The expenses are extra of course."

"That's all right. The same fee and say four hundred dollars for expenses. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes."

With a quick hard gesture, a bringing up of a hand, the hand a clamped fist, Walheim signified it was a deal.

"Care for a drink?"

Fleshman shook his head. "No, thank you," he said. He had nothing against alcohol, but he did not wish to trust it tonight.

Crouching, Walheim hauled a cowhide bag from under the seat, planted it on the cushion, and snapped it open. The clothing in the bag had an unruly masculinity, a tweedy expensiveness. Fleshman had glimpses of brown shoes hand-made, a twenty-dollar cravat. The traveling flask that came out was of pigskin and was silver-mounted.

"Sure you won't join me?" Walheim demanded. The fine smoky odor of good Scotch came from the flask.

"No, thanks."

He watched Walheim strike a balance, toss Scotch into a glass, and drink it neat, without a chaser. The man had, Fleshman reflected, complete muscular control at all times, like a cat; he made Fleshman feel uncomfortable. The blunt fact was that he did not like Walheim and was somewhat afraid of the man.

The train whistle hooted long defiant blasts, the trucks attacked a switch-over with detonating force. The suitcase snapped shut; Walheim whipped it back beneath the seat.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

"I'll walk ahead of you," Walheim said. "When I pass her I'll run my hand over my hair. That will point her out to you."

"What does she look like?"

"Gray suit, black bag, black shoes, size about average. Twenty-two, I'd say, or twenty-five. Brown hair, blue eyes, no jewelry except a class ring."

"She know you?"

"No."

"Noticed you?"

"I hope not."

Fleshman nodded. He rested both chubby hands on the arms of the chair for a moment, then sighed and got to his feet.

"I'm ready," he said.

Walheim confronted him solidly. "I want her killed before she reaches New York," he said.

Fleshman's nod was agreeable. . . .

Fleshman was relieved when the girl started for the diner.

He followed her.

Murder was not, any more, very difficult for Fleshman. It was a job. It was the way he made a living, for his chicken farm, which he loved, was not a paying proposition. Murder was a disagreeable and frightening business during the act, but it was soon over with, and afterward, to Fleshman, it was not particularly shocking; his mind simply did not retain much absorption with it.

There were times, infrequent ones, when he wondered if there was something wrong with him. He always decided there wasn't. People were different, was all.

He had learned of this dissimilarity in people early in life. Between the ages of five to twelve he had been pudgy, soft, and something of a crybaby, with no desires for rivalry, no wish to do anything in particular. He had found himself, as a result, associating mostly with misfits, crippled or smaller children, or with girls a *little older, usually,* than himself. Boys his own age poked fun at him. He acquired the ability to forget quickly even the most tragic events.

IN COLLEGE he formed no friendships whatever. He had been a grossly fat boy, made violently unlikable by a cynical, sophisticated manner he had assumed. It was this sophistication that got him involved with bootleggers and led, eventually, to his killing a man for five hundred dollars. One murder merely led to another.

A much older man now, still overly fat and with no tendency toward aggressiveness, and now understanding clearly that all he wanted out of life was pure physical comfort, he worked less often and for high prices.

The girl, he saw for sure, was going to the diner.

His step quickened. He considered, coldly, fairly, his chances of catching her alone between two of the cars. That was where he intended doing it. Between two of the cars, using his hands and a skill he had learned. Then he would chuck the body off the train, consign it to the storm, to the mad snowflakes pinging past in the darkness.

He threw his weight against a door, it flew open with a hard gasp. He stepped into the vestibule.

Too late! Food smells told him the next car must be the diner. It was, and he saw the girl seating herself. The

The fist was enclosed in a tight black glove of hard, shining leather — and its target was the head of the unsuspecting Julie Edwards. . . .

steward held her chair for her. The steward swung and saw Fleshman, held aloft a finger, shot his eyebrows up questioningly.

Fleshman—he had the shocking feeling that the girl had also looked squarely at him—shook his head and turned back.

Shaken, he retraced his steps through two coaches and took a position in another dark, noisy vestibule. He stood hard on his heels, feeling the wild, frenzied hammering of wheels on rails. Presently he cursed bitterly, first at the steward for having noticed him, then at the girl for possibly having seen him.

He would wait. . . .

Her name was Julie Edwards. An alert, tall girl, she had a face somewhat longer than oval, a restrained manner. She looked twenty or twenty-two—she was twenty-six—and the youthful appearance was a source of satisfaction. Her height, Walheim's statement that she was average-sized to the contrary, was above average for her weight—five feet seven and a hundred and twelve. She had an expressive face, especially around eyes and mouth.

"Yes ma'am!" The waiter, teeth shining, whisked away the damp napkin, snapped another into its place. "The broiled trout is sho' fine, miss!"

"Thank you."

The waiter saw her order was not yet written. He bustled away, active, sure-footed, the giddy lunging of the diner not bothering him at all.

She had practically decided on the Special Dinner. Her tentative choice was the soup *du jour*, the roast duck, french fries, asparagus tips, parfait, coffee. Then, noticing the price of the Special Dinner, she was shocked. She began frowningly to study the *a la carte*.

Pooh! This was her vacation! The Special Dinner it would be! Decisively she wrote down the different items, beginning with script, but when the demented movement of the diner made the words illegible she scratched out the script and printed carefully in large letters. She examined what she had put down thoughtfully.

"Yes ma'am!" A hand swooped, carried away the pad. "Roast duck's sho' fine too!" The great white teeth glistened agreeably.

"Do you have drinks?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"I think I'll have a cocktail, if you please."

"A nice Scotch and soda?"

"A cocktail. Martini, a very dry one."

"Yes ma'am! A Martini comin' up!"

There! She leaned back, conscious of quite a feeling of having won a victory. She felt warmly about it, as if a necessary act had been accomplished.

She bowed her head, studied her clasped hands. Twenty-six was rather old to begin to remake oneself. But she had determined fiercely, irrevocably, to do that.

She was a small-town family doctor's office assistant. Her job, for twenty-two dollars a week, was making blood counts, urinalyses, filing prescriptions, developing X-ray films, soothing crying babies while old Dr. Cooper treated the mothers. She helped on OB cases. Dr. Cooper's patients were predominantly farmers, whose women birthed their babies at home. It was not work for a reserved, oversensitive person. She faced each day as a nightmare.

A family would have been an aid to adjustment. She had none now. Her father, particularly, could have given comfort. She remembered him as a kindly, tall, reserved man, direct in thought and action. He had taught American literature at the State Teachers College. Her mother, a small, active woman, she recalled as an outward personality, well adjusted to marriage. They had both been killed—an automobile accident—when she was sixteen.

SHE had few friendships, only one—Martha Baxter—that was close. She saw too, darkly, that she preferred too much to be alone and was a better lone worker than a team worker. She was at ease with ordinary people, but not at all at ease with superiors. Worst of all, while she knew all this, she did nothing about it.

Well! She was fighting now!

She threw out a hand, steadying herself against a riotous lunge the diner gave. Suddenly it occurred to her that her own mood was akin to the wild one of the coaches. She, like the train, was going somewhere in a headlong way. Impulsively, swiftly, desperately.

Wouldn't Martha be surprised? She smiled slightly, imagining Martha's amazement.

Of course she had telegraphed Martha that she was coming:

HAVE RECEPTION COMMITTEE GRAND CENTRAL 2 AM TRAIN FRIDAY BRINGING SECRET FOR YOU LOVE

JULIE

The secret? She was going to leave the small town, leave Kirksville. If she could, she would get a job in the city. Secret? Martha would love that. Martha—adventurous Martha—adored the unexpected. But probably she would guess it from the wire message, because she had urged Julie, often, to climb out of the rut.

"Dry Martini!" The cocktail was whisked before her. "Yes ma'am!"

She touched the thin-stemmed glass, explored its inviting coolness with her finger tips. She took it up.

To Martha! The closest friend she had ever had. To Martha!

II

IT WAS amazing—incredible, unbelievable—that someone should approach her the next moment and say:

"Hello! Hello there. Aren't you Martha's friend, Julie Edwards?"

He did not do it quite that abruptly. But almost.

She had been arrested by an awareness of him as soon as he entered the diner. He was a tall man with a bony but presentable face, and large hands, a man with a great deal of quiet force and a directness in using it. His gaze had brushed the diner in a heads-up fashion, small lights sprang from his shining blond hair. His eyes had met hers and held them, then his upthrown hand beckoned the steward.

The steward had hurried to him, bent a head deferentially. They conferred, the steward with his head tilted in attention. Then the steward had wheeled, come toward Julie's table. He snapped out the chair across the table, held it ready; his eyes signaled the man. The man came forward. He walked firmly, mastering the instability of the on-flying diner, carrying an air of competence and sureness.

"Thank *you*, sir!" The steward had received a dollar.

Upset, Julie gave the window close attention. Outside the night ribboned past, colored bone-gray by the snow.

His voice, deep and of good timbre, laid a firm hold on her attention.

"Aren't you Julie?"

She gave him her startled gaze.

"Hello! Hello there. Aren't you Martha's friend, Julie Edwards?"

She half rose, her lips parted.

"Why, yes. But who—Martha—yes, I'm Martha's friend."

"I was sure you must be."

"I don't believe I know you."

"Of course not. I'm Molloy—Chance Molloy. I know Martha too."

He did not present her with the necessity of shaking hands, and she liked that. She lowered her eyes, carrying an impression of strong character, a wide and rather serious mouth, pleasant brown eyes. Looking at him again, she noted the businesslike and nearly hard neatness with which he wore his clothes, the careful barbering, the rugged sweep of jaw and shoulders, neatly manicured nails. Thirty-five, or a bit over, she decided; a man who mixed thinking with action.

"I'm—this must be some sort of a coincidence."

"It is indeed."

"How did you—"

"Know you? I recognized you from a picture Martha keeps on her table."

"Oh!"

"Did I startle you?"

"Yes, you did."

"I was startled myself. My seat is three cars forward. I saw you pass, and something clicked, but I did not

Julie had hold of the handle of the door when Fleshman's fist, enclosed in a tight black glove, came against the side of her head (CHAP. II)

place you at once. Then I suddenly realized you must be Martha's friend."

"I'm surprised you recognized me."

"I was lucky."

"It's hard to know people when you've only seen their picture."

"It is a good likeness."

"Yes, I remember the photograph."

He's Martha's type, she thought. He would—she felt certain she could safely translate him in terms of Martha—like adventure. He would prefer adventure movies, adventure stories. He would be an adept planner and schemer, but have a direct purpose.

"I hope you don't mind my speaking to you."

"Not at all."

"Are you going to New York?"

"Yes."

"You must look up Martha. You plan to, don't you?"

"I'm going to visit Martha."

"Swell!"

"Yes suh!" The waiter was there, napkin-flourishing. "The broiled trout is sho' nice!"

"A T-bone steak, French fries, a crisp salad, blue cheese, coffee, a brandy with the coffee if you have a good one." Chance Molloy had not glanced at the bill of fare.

"Ain't no steak on the menu."

MOLLOY matched the waiter's shining smile with one of his own.

"Trot out that special big one, Charlie. Medium rare, and tell the cook to throw on plenty of mushrooms."

"Yes suh!" said the big waiter delightedly. "Yes suh, indeed! Steak comin' up!" He lunged away.

Julie was surprised. "Do they really have steaks when they're not on the menu?"

"Usually. Want one?"

"No, thank you. I have ordered. . . . Mr. Molloy—"

"Yes?"

"I wonder—do you know—is Martha in the city?"

"I imagine so."

"Would you—could you tell me when you saw her last?"

"Yesterday."

"Martha didn't say anything about going out of town?"

"No."

She gave him an embarrassed smile. "You see, I decided suddenly, to make this trip. I wasn't sure that Martha would be there."

"She probably will be."

"Thank you, Mr. Molloy. You've relieved my mind."

"So Martha doesn't know you're coming?"

"Oh yes! Yes, she does, if she got my telegram. I sent her one."

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

He nodded amiably. "Then she surely received it."

"Well, I certainly hope so. I was afraid I might be on a wildgoose chase. I don't ordinarily throw orderly planning to the winds, but Dr. Cooper—I work for the doctor—decided to close the office for three weeks and go elk hunting in Wyoming. I've wanted to visit Martha for a long time. I couldn't wait. You see, I wanted to use my three weeks to find a job in New York."

"A job?"

She nodded. "I don't like what a small town is doing to me."

"That might be imagination."

She frowned, shook her head gravely. "No, it isn't imagination."

"Did you mention the train you would be on?"

"I said the two o'clock morning train Friday. Oh! Martha could have wired me on the train then, couldn't she? She hasn't!"

"No need to be alarmed. She probably got your message."

"I wish I knew though. It would be so silly if she wasn't in the city. I did try to telephone her, but her apartment didn't answer, and I supposed she was at the office."

"Did you think of trying her office?"

"Her employer, Mr. Copeland? Yes, but there must have been a mix-up, because the New York operator professed to be unable to find a phone listed for a Transfa Air Industries."

"You asked for Transfa?"

"Yes."

"That explains it then. Transfa Air Industries no longer has a New York office. Everything, all the closing out of the concern's assets, is being handled from the West Coast. If you had thought to ask for Mr. Paul Roger Copeland, no doubt you would have had better luck, although I am not sure that Mr. Copeland any longer maintains a Manhattan office."

"It's no wonder the telephone operator didn't find Martha then."

"No. Martha, I understand, does her work at Copeland's place on Long Island. Huntington."

"Do you know Mr. Copeland?"

"Martha's employer? Not well. I have met him."

"He is in ill-health, I understand."

"Yes, so I have heard."

"Martha seems to love working for him."

"That is understandable. Mr. Copeland is a charming, efficient gentleman who managed to take many millions of dollars from the aircraft industry during the war."

"By any chance, are you in the aircraft business too?"

His gaze lowered to his cigarette. "In a slightly different branch of it," he said.

Startled, Julie shifted her own attention to the window. Why, he's pumping me, she thought! This man was enormously adept! Or what was her imagination doing to her?

"Do you really know Martha?" she asked dubiously.

"Fairly well." His voice was quiet, modulation unchanged, but suddenly somehow she felt tension in him. "Care to see Martha's latest picture?"

"Picture?"

"I have it here."

THE wallet that came from his inner coat pocket was of ostrich with neat pockets for currency, a window for a photograph. He spread it open, pushed it toward her, presenting the photograph for her attention. Her eyes low-

ered, touched the picture, and became rigidly fixed on it.

"My God!" she thought in shocked wonder.

The train jerked, groaned, wrenched convulsively. In the outer world the lights of a large town reeled past at decreasing speed.

Chance Molloy spoke drily. "Rochester, I imagine," he said.

Julie said nothing, did not move, did not take her eyes off the photograph.

The train had slowed greatly, and now the brake shoes locked, skidding the cars to a stop. All activity in the diner stopped, jaws became still, hands poised holding forks, and this arrested animation held until there exploded a raucous shout of:

"Telegrams! Take your telegrams!"

A uniformed messenger sprang into the diner.

Molloy bent toward Julie. "Has Martha changed much?" He touched the photograph.

"This—is not Martha!"

"Oh, but it is."

"It isn't Martha—I'm positive," Julie said tensely.

Molloy, catching the uniformed telegraph messenger's roving eye, lifted a hand, beckoned. Grim humor flickered darkly around his thinly compressed lips as he wrote out a telegram, the pad resting on his knee, away from Julie's eyes.

A. C. KIGGINS, HOTEL REGIS NYC.
GIRL NAMED JULIE EDWARDS IS MARTHA'S FRIEND BUT DOES NOT RECOGNIZE MARTHA'S PICTURE HER CONNECTION WITH MATTER IS PUZZLE ADVISE YOU USE GREAT CAUTION

M

Molloy took two one-dollar bills from the wallet and handed those with the telegram to the messenger. He said, "No change." The boy counted the words. His, "Say, mister, thanks!" was pleased.

Molloy fell to watching Julie's face.

"So you think that isn't Martha?"

"It isn't!"

"It must be. I took it myself. It is a very good likeness."

Julie leaned forward to look closely at the photograph. She was upset. The shock of being shown this picture—not Martha's picture—in the way it had been shown her had given her a banging around.

She shook her head decisively. "It is not, absolutely is not, Martha Baxter."

"Do you know this girl?"

"No."

"Ever see her before?"

"No."

Gently and with an air of great power, as if it had regenerated and renewed its strength for a further attack on darkness and distance, the train went into motion. Presently it regained its headlong tide of speed.

Julie Edwards gathered purse and gloves, opened the purse, put fifty cents—forty for the Martini and ten cents tip—on the table, then looked squarely at Molloy.

"I don't know what you're pulling," she said. "But I don't like it."

"No?"

"Unless you have an explanation, I'm not going to stay!"

"No explanation," he said.

She stood up and left the table, eyes straight ahead. The door of the diner surged open at her shove. She was in the dark, boisterous vestibule, skirts windwhipped.

She was angry with this man, this Chance Molloy. She was puzzled, too, to know why he had shown her a girl's picture and said it was Martha. It wasn't Martha at all!

She moved into a compartment car. Here was cozy warmth, and she moved calmly, fending with her shoulders against the corridor walls whenever a skittish motion of the car set her off balance. Ahead of her, as she remembered, were five cars to her seat. . . .

FLESHMAN used his fist first. Julie had hold of the handle of the door of the next coach when his fist, enclosed in a tight black glove, came against the side of her head. He went up on the balls of his feet with the effort.

She was made instantly unconscious. She gave out one small sound; it was like the noise of a cupful of water plunging down a sink drain.

Her purse fell to the steel floor plates, lay in the thin powdering of snow.

Fleshman's left arm went around her waist like a snake. He stepped swiftly, with her body, into the vestibule niche by the outward door.

Hooking a toe around her purse, he skidded it to him. He searched the purse swiftly and skillfully, even tore the lining out to see if anything was inside. He kept the money. All this time his left arm held the girl to him.

The outer door was in two sections, upper and lower, which opened separately. He seized the handle of the top half, twisted, and the door sprang violently toward him. He flung the purse out. The darkness took it, the wind spun it, and it vanished.

The door banged shut. Suction as from the lung of a monster had seized it. He laid hold of the door to open it again. He tugged and wrenched. His soft face began to bulge with horror. The door wouldn't open! It was stuck!

The girl was as limp as a strip of unfried bacon in his arms, and the door would not open. It would not budge. And then, abruptly, there was a change in the air; a softening of the uproar. Someone was coming into the vestibule!

"What's the matter there?"

The conductor!

"What's going on?" demanded the conductor. "What ails the girl?"

"She fainted."

"You her husband?"

"Oh no!" said Fleshman hastily. "I —I found her lying here."

"Where?"

"On the floor."

"I'll be damned—on the floor!" the conductor said. An old man, long in service with the company, he resented jarring breaks in the regular routine of train business. He added explosively, "Take her to the ladies' room! Here— I'll help you . . . ."

* * * * *

Chance Molloy hated indirection. Yet much of his adult life had been spent in artifice, either using it himself or guarding warily against the cunning of others.

Kind, gentle, considerate, he kept his ideals clean, intact, but he could box them up and stow them below decks in clearing for action when, and only when his antagonist wasn't cluttered up with ideals himself. Chance Molloy had become, at thirty-nine, rich and powerful. The turn of a deft intrigue no longer was a novelty, but Molloy still took a sour view of cunning, in himself as well as others.

He consumed his steak heartily, however.

He had learned not to let tension interfere with an essential like eating.

The check was three seventy-five. He added a dollar tip, and the thought, unspoken, that air lines served free meals.

Compartment 7, Car 10, was his. He passed it by.

He walked on through the train, the noise between cars hardly intruding on his attention.

George had Section 4 in Car 9. The section was not made up for sleeping, and George was seated there.

George was Molloy's employe, and in many ways somewhat more—George was an instrument, a weapon, a force, depending on how he was used. He occupied about the same status in Molloy's equipment as the bone saw in a surgeon's kit.

Molloy seated himself beside George.

"He's got a friend on the train," George said.

"Walheim has?"

"That's right."

Molloy leaned back and glanced, with mild revulsion, at the magazine George held open on his crossed knees, a thick finger on the picture of a nearly nude girl. George's lechery invariably irritated him, as did other of George's traits, notably a protruding self-assurance. But dependability, indisputable loyalty, plus a lot of foxy intelligence, outweighed the less palatable facets of George.

Molloy switched his attention back to the matter at hand and asked, "Man or woman?"

"Well, he's a small fat man who looks soft but might not be, except his body. Brown suit, brown shoes, white shirt, a plain necktie, also brown. Ring on his left hand has a yellow rock of some kind. Is in Section Four, Car Eleven. He got on the train at Perryville.

"Who gave you that information?"

"Porter."

"Will the porter keep his mouth shut?"

"He'd better."

MOLLOY, unseeing, contemplated the ice-rimmed window.

"There is a small airport at Perryville," he said. "The storm front is moving east ahead of us, and he could have reached Perryville by plane before the weather closed in."

George considered this, said, "Reason I got wise to him, he paid Walheim a visit."

"You have any luck eavesdropping?"

"Not a bit. There's more noise in this train than in a boiler factory. But they took a funny kind of a stroll through the train."

"Funny?"

"Just a walk ahead through two day coaches. Walheim walked about twenty feet ahead of the fat guy. In the second coach Walheim stopped to get a drink, and the fat boy turned back without speaking to him."

"Then what?"

"Nothing. Walheim went back to his compartment, the fat friend to his seat." George stopped and stared at him. "What's the matter?"

Molloy, leaning forward, jaw muscles ridged, in a harsh, urgent voice said, "When they were walking, did Walheim give any kind of a sign?"

"Sign?"

"A signal, gesture, anything to draw attention to a girl in one of the coach seats. Think! Think hard!"

George pondered, stroked his jaw. "I didn't catch anything," he said uncomfortably. "But for a thing like that, fingering somebody, they would use something hard to spot. I missed it, if that's why they took the walk."

"It was!" Molloy made a quick, decisive gesture. "Walheim pointed out the girl to this fat man."

"Is that bad?"

"Bad enough"—Molloy struck deliberately at George's composure—"if it is their plan to kill the girl!"

III

ANNOYED, Molloy leaned back and, frowning darkly, let his thoughts handle the ugly chance that Walheim had brought a hired murderer aboard the train. He must warn the girl, Julie Edwards. Doing that meant he would have to tell her what was happening, and this eventuality, quite alarming because it would entail betraying his position and plans to the girl, was one he had hoped to avoid. He felt the matter demanded secrecy.

So far he had given no one, not even George, the details. There had been barely time to assign George the job of shadowing Walheim and set Kiggins to watching Martha. He would, he decided, give George the story now.

"Thirty days ago I bought a quarter of a million dollars' worth of aircraft engine parts and shop equipment," he said.

George, swinging his eyes to Molloy, gave attention, respect.

Molloy said, "Something queer is happening to the deal."

"Queer?"

"Damned strange! But let me give you the rest of the background. A man named Paul Roger Copeland built up, during the war, large aircraft and engine holdings on the Pacific Coast. The concern is named Transfa Air Industries. Copeland, because of ill-health, began liquidating his business slightly more than a month ago. Because of his illness he handed the job of selling his property to a Mr. N. N. Nesbitt, general manager of Transfa." He paused and asked, "How much of that did you already know?"

"I knew Transfa was going out of business," George said.

"Do you know Copeland?"

"Not personally. I might know him on sight."

"What about Nesbitt, the general manager? Know him?"

"No."

"Martha Baxter—know her?"

"No."

"Employed by Transfa as purchasing agent. Tall girl, red hair, blue eyes, an active, direct, and confident sort. A quite pretty girl who, almost invariably, dresses in shades of gray."

"I don't know her."

Molloy said, "I took her out a few times, about a year ago. Martha called me, thirty days ago, with the tip that Transfa was going to sell engine parts and tools. She happened to know that I—that BETA—needed such equipment. I went to Los Angeles and closed a deal with her. I was to take delivery in thirty days and pay cash. The deal was made entirely with Martha, who had authority to negotiate for Transfa."

He removed a cigarette from the case, closed the case.

"I was to pay Martha Baxter ten thousand dollars. It was not a bribe. Engine parts and shop equipment aren't growing on trees right now. BETA needs such supplies urgently—so do others. I had told Martha Baxter previously it was worth such a sum to find me the equipment." He added sharply, "Don't get any wrong ideas about Martha. She is more innately honest than nine out of each ten people I know!"

George nodded. "Okay."

"Martha has disappeared!"

George's head came up. "Yeah?"

"A week ago, wishing to prepare to take delivery and make payment, I cabled Martha. The reply I received, while signed with Martha's name, obviously was not from Martha. I had arranged for the use of a simple code. The person sending the cablegram signed 'Martha' clearly did not know the code. I came to New York at once."

He leaned forward, hard of jaw, bleak of eye.

"There is a girl in New York pretending to be Martha who isn't Martha!" he said.

George blinked. "Martha isn't Martha?"

"This Martha," said Molloy grimly, "is tall, has red hair—dyed, I imagine—and wears grays. But her face does not resemble Martha's, and her energetic manner and directness are not genuine."

"What's this phony doing?" George asked.

"Working for Paul Roger Copeland."

"As Martha?"

"Yes."

"I'll be damned!"

Molloy said bitterly, "Here is something that belongs in the story. Martha wrote me, three weeks ago, that she was going to New York to work as Copeland's executive secretary. He did not, Martha said, know her personally, had never met her."

"Oh!" George grinned thinly. "If Copeland didn't know Martha, any girl who looked like her might take her place."

"It wouldn't be that simple. The substitute would have to know a great deal about Transfa."

"Yeah, that's right. The odds are against this Copeland being a dope. Guys who make the dough he has usually aren't."

"Copeland could be a party to the deceit."

"You think—"

"I don't know that he is. The possibility must be kept in mind. The motives involved are yet to be unearthed."

GEORGE peered thoughtfully into the end of the tight-rolled magazine.

"Walheim? Where does he hook in?"

Molloy shook his head. "That is not yet clear. Walheim is a friend of Martha's—the fake Martha. He may be a fellow conspirator. He has visited her repeatedly, taken her out evenings, and, on two nights of the past four, slept with her."

"Boy friend, eh?"

"Yes—along with whatever else he is. I have not, naturally, performed any act that would draw their attention to me. Too much is involved—Martha's safety, and now the safety of this girl on the train—for careless or abrupt action. I searched the woman's apart-

ment, and found many of Martha's personal things, including, incidentally, a photograph of the girl on this train. There was nothing to indicate Martha's whereabouts or fate.

"I lifted the woman's fingerprints from the apartment, taking prints from a water glass, a hand mirror, a cold-cream jar. These prints, together with copies of a snapshot of the woman I made without being observed, have gone to the FBI, the New York Police Department, the Los Angeles Police Department. The New York police reported no record. There has been no time to hear from the others.

"The first action break"—Molloy was winding it up—"came last evening. A telegram was delivered to Martha's apartment, causing immediate excitement. Martha, the interloper, went wildly to Walheim's hotel. Walheim caught a plane to Chicago at once. We caught the same plane."

"This Martha—if she's not found—does that blow up the deal for engine parts and shop equipment?"

"Conceivably."

"That would be bad, wouldn't it?"

"Very bad." Molloy put his gaze on the window coldly. It was difficult, when he felt the appalling need for action that he felt now, to go carefully. He said, "I talked with this girl on the train."

"Yeah?" George's interest was sharp.

"Name is Julie—Julie Edwards. She is Martha's friend. Employed in a doctor's office, and presented with an unexpected vacation when the doctor went elk hunting. She is using the vacation to visit Martha and to seek employment in the city."

"As innocent as that!" George said.

"Yes." The color of Molloy's mood, dark red, was reflected in the cast of his jaw. "Yes, as innocent as that."

"I wouldn't," George said, "care to be in her shoes, not if Walheim's fat friend is a hired killer."

"I plan to warn her. Incidentally, I showed her the woman's photograph. She became upset, understandably so, when I said it was Martha. She arose and left the table."

"She know the dame? The phony Martha?"

"No."

"Then, if she gets to New York and finds Martha ain't Martha, the cat will be out of the bag."

"That is obvious." The tension Molloy felt was getting into his voice and manner. "Here is her description: name, Julie Edwards. Five feet seven or eight, rather thin, about a hundred and fifteen, dark gray suit, black bag, black shoes. She appears to be about twenty-two."

George had come upright in his seat. "Didn't you say she left the diner ahead of you?"

Molloy frowned. "Yes."

"Then she should have come through this car ahead of you? She'd have to, to reach the day coaches."

"About ten minutes ahead of me—What is wrong?"

"She didn't. I remember a girl of that description headed toward the diner. She hasn't come back."

Molloy considered this information bleakly. His "For God's sake!" was spoken in a guttural voice.

He arose and went toward the rear of the train. George got to his feet and followed. . . .

A PILLOW, smelling tartly of antiseptic, was under her head. Also—and this was the first thing she understood with any clarity—a hand lay on her forehead.

"How do you feel, miss?"

She dragged her eyes open, and light struck like a shower of needles.

"I am on a train," she thought. She could feel the throbbing clamor of speed in the car, hard, onward, reckless. Beyond that she was unable to grope through the mists.

"She's conscious!" The stewardess, a colored girl crisp in a mint-green uniform sounded pleased.

"Awake, is she!" exclaimed the conductor. He pushed forward. "Hello there, young lady," he said heartily. "Feeling better, I see!"

In the ladies' lounge, in addition to conductor and stewardess, stood four

women passengers, staring, curious, sympathetic. The conductor leaned over Julie Edwards, a frown of alarm placing creases in his forehead. He thought she had fainted again.

"Miss!" The conductor touched her uncertainly. "Miss, aren't you awake?"

She groped in the mists, came up with fragments of thoughts, scraps which did not make sense. Angry with herself, she deliberately opened her eyes and said, "Where am I? What happened?"

"Ah!" The conductor gasped with relief.

"You fell!" said one of the women passengers, a large woman, firm-fleshed and apple-cheeked.

"Oh no!" the conductor corrected. "No, she fainted!" He drew himself up. He had decided this was the best way to handle it. He had the company's interests to think of. "You fainted, miss. And then you fell!"

"I have never fainted before."

"This time you did," said the conductor. The company could hardly be held responsible if a passenger chose to faint.

"Humph!" said the large, bright-cheeked woman.

The conductor brought a much-thumbed notebook from his pocket. He had decided to get, if possible, a signed statement, thus protecting his own record and the company's interests.

The large woman snorted. "No, you don't!"

The conductor swung about, glared at the woman. "Madam—"

"Don't pull that!" roared the big woman. As formidable as a battleship, she stepped to Julie's side. "Don't you sign anything, dearie!" she boomed.

Indignation came near hurtling brass buttons from the conductor's vest.

"Madam!" he shouted. "I can see you have never had any dealings with this railroad!"

The Pullman porter thrust his head into the lounge, and withdrew. He told someone in the corridor, "She's in here, suh!"

Molloy's voice, outside, said quietly, "Thank you." Stepping inside, he saw that Julie Edwards was conscious and staring at him.

"I was worried about you, Miss Edwards," he said. His eyes queried her sharply, and he asked, "You are all right, aren't you?"

Julie nodded, gasped, closed her eyes. Molloy turned to the stewardess.

"What do you think? Is she badly hurt?"

"It's hard to say, sir." Apprehension touched the stewardess' dark eyes. "She was hurt, unconscious—but she is conscious now."

"Has a doctor looked at her?"

"No."

"Are you a registered nurse?"

"No sir."

Molloy compressed his lips. "Has she said what happened to her?"

"She fainted!" said the conductor vehemently. "Then she fell!"

Molloy looked blankly at the conductor for a moment. He did not indicate any opinion other than that conveyed by the expression—shocked, incredulous—on his face. When he moved it was to turn back to Julie Edwards, and, his tone extending friendship and assurance, say, "Miss Edwards, if you feel up to being moved, I offer you my compartment."

"But I—"

"Accept, do!" he urged pleasantly. "I insist on it. By the way, how do you feel?"

"I—feel fair, if I don't move my head."

"Good! We'll be careful of the head when we move you." He was pushing to get her a compartment where she would be more readily protected.

He stood back, in order that his physical touch would not crystallize her doubts.

George was standing in the noisy, windy, cold-stung vestibule. He pretended only mild interest and no recognition of Molloy. Julie Edwards' suitcase was at his feet.

WHEN the others were out of earshot Molloy demanded, "What more did you learn?"

"She had a hell of a narrow escape,"

George said.

"Was the man who said he found her unconscious Walheim's fat friend?"

"Correct."

"Who told you?"

"Porter. He had a description."

"Try to find a doctor. Miss Edwards will be in my compartment. Put her suitcase in there."

"Right." George departed.

Molloy was shaken. Murder—nearly a murder, anyway—was enough to strike hard. He felt an awareness of things and deeds unseen. The crisp edge of danger, acrid, biting, stimulating, was very real. Nor was it to his liking. Martha's safety was a nightmarish question mark. He had liked Martha and still remembered with warmth many things about her. He was bitterly anxious about her. This mystery—a Martha who wasn't Martha—was an improbable hobgoblin thing that had upset him greatly.

He carried his dire anxiety with him into the Pullman, to his compartment, and told the conductor, "I have a friend looking for a doctor."

"Fine! I'm glad of that!"

The conductor seemed bent on discussing matters, but Molloy escaped into the compartment. He closed the door.

Julie Edwards was already there sitting down, and not as pale as she had been. She looked at Molloy intently and doubtfully, shifted her attention to the stewardess, who was making up the berth.

"Feeling better?" Molloy inquired.

"Yes. I—I believe I am."

"I have a friend looking for a doctor for you, just in case."

"Thank you."

"Smoke?"

She hesitated. "Maybe I'd better not."

"It won't hurt you, I'm sure."

"Well—all right." She accepted a cigarette, then a light, from him.

Molloy, carrying his cigarette to an ash tray, managed to be occupied while Julie Edwards swung into the berth. When he turned, the stewardess was dragging a blanket up to her chin, giving it little pats.

"You're fine now," the stewardess said. "Just fine!" She told Molloy, "It was nice of you to give up your room."

He accepted the approval with inclined head. "Miss Edwards appreciates your kindness too, I'm sure," he said. "If she needs anything more I'll call you," he added. His hand went to a pocket.

"Yes sir!" The stewardess left. His bill had vanished in her hand.

"Drink?" Molloy asked Julie.

She did not answer. She had not liked, he saw, his remaining in the compartment.

"I could use a drink of whisky," she said suddenly.

"Good girl!" He was surprised. "I imagine that's exactly what the doctor would prescribe."

He plumped his bag on the bench, extracted Scotch from it, and poured two fingers in a water glass. He carried that glass and another containing ice water to her.

"Careful with the head," he said.

Presently he carried both glasses to the door to answer a knock. It was George and another man who was stocky and gray-haired.

"The doctor," George said.

Molloy waited in the corridor with George for the doctor to make his examination. He said, "George, did you make certain he is a doctor?"

"He's got cards that say he is. A wife too. The wife thought it was as funny as a barrel of monkeys, me wanting him to prove he was a doctor."

"Just so we know he is not another assassin," Molloy said.

He fell into an attitude of contemplative waiting. Presently he was thinking of his own stake in this mess. His material stake. He had a dollars and cents interest as well as an emotional one. If he didn't get those engine parts and shop equipment, his air line, BETA Airways, might well be ruined.

BETA had recently expanded throughout the South American continent, sinking every dollar of resource and credit in terminal facilities and planes acquired as surplus from the United

States Army, and converted to cargo and passenger use. The fact was that BETA had to have parts or curtail service, making insufficient income to meet obligations, a vicious spiral chute to ruin. Yet it was not as important as Martha's safety, he was finding. Concern for her and this girl on the train stood first.

"Good! Good! Yes, that's the idea —take it easy!"

THIS from the doctor, backing out of the compartment.

"And watch yourself, particularly if the headache doesn't clear up," the doctor admonished. He drew the door shut, gave Molloy an amiable smile, said, "Don't look so worried, young man!"

"Is she all right?"

The doctor shrugged. "A headache—a bruise—slight shock. I would recommend keeping her in bed and under observation at least twelve hours. Head injuries should never be trifled with, you know."

Molloy inclined his head. "We will keep an eye on her." He pressed a twenty-dollar bill on the doctor. "If you could find time again, later—"

"Certainly! Glad to. I'll look in from time to time."

The doctor went away. George muttered, "Not a bad joe."

Molloy threw his head up and breathed deeply, letting the good news ease some of the tension in him.

"You come in with me," he told George. "I want her to meet you. We should, I think, tell her the facts—enough of them to convince her she is in danger. And, given the facts, she may realize the reason for the attempt on her life."

"Hell, the reason is clear enough. Those guys wanted to knock her off so she wouldn't learn Martha is a fake Martha."

"I doubt that."

"Huh?"

"That motive, while obvious, hardly seems sufficient."

George's eyebrows went up and he looked, momentarily, densely stupid.

"Why murder her?" Molloy asked grimly. "They could have headed her off a dozen ways."

"Say! You got something!"

"It could be."

Molloy, knuckles up, and poised before the compartment door, said, "Let's hope she knows—and can be talked into telling us—the reason." He rapped on the door.

Julie Edwards was sitting up in the berth. She looked much better.

"Oh, it's you!"

Uncertainty, doubt, gratefulness for his gallantry about the room, seesawed for position on her face.

"I would like you to meet George. George, this is Miss Edwards, for whom you found the doctor."

George's eyes came to rest on her legs.

"A pleasure," he said appreciatively.

Molloy indicated the bench. "Close the door, sit down, and stay awhile, George. That is"—he swung to the girl amiably—"if Miss Edwards doesn't mind."

She hesitated. "I'm not so sure—"

With smile, lifted hand, he halted her objection. "I can understand that you should be rather—shall we say, dubious —about me, because of the mumbo jumbo with the snapshot. The time has come, however, for explanations."

"The—that picture, you mean?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't Martha in the snapshot."

"I know."

Her eyes sharpened suspiciously. "If you can explain that I'd like to hear it."

"You shall hear it right now," he said. He gave the appearance of being relaxed. His hands were knitted together on a knee. He said, "My name is Chance Molloy."

"You gave me your name in the diner!" Julie Edwards said sharply.

"I thought it might mean something to you."

"It doesn't."

"Such is fame," he said wryly. "Seriously, though, I thought Martha might have mentioned it."

"She didn't."

He unlaced his hands, turned them

palms upward. "You're perfectly right to be wary." He slid his billfold out and produced his passport. He handed the passport and a business card to her, saying, "Will you take a look at them?"

IV

LEANING back, Molloy watched Julie examine the passport. She was, he reflected, nice-looking. Quite lovely in a reserved way which he liked. This girl would not be monotonous. She would be intense. Suddenly she stared at him.

"B.M.!" she exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"You're B.M. Martha called you that in her letters!" She was smiling, relieved, delighted. "She wrote about you often! Pages and pages!"

He was puzzled. "B.M.?" he ventured doubtfully.

"She meant Big Moment."

Molloy winced. He had the silly feeling he was blushing. A muscle at George's mouth corner twitched.

"I'm sorry I didn't recognize your name," Julie Edwards said quickly. "You see, Martha didn't actually mention your name in her letters. But she did write that you owned BETA Airways, in South America, and that you were very successful and influential." She extended a hand. "Will you forgive me?"

Her hand, resting briefly in his, was cool and firm. He asked, "We're on speaking terms then?"

"Of course! I feel, from Martha's letters, that I know you well."

"Excellent!" he said. He was still a little warm with embarrassment. "Then you'll listen while I tell you something?"

"To anything you want to say."

Her delight at finding he was not someone to be feared, had a swift, sobering effect. He said, "Some of it is going to be unpleasant."

"You mean—bad news?" she demanded.

"Not good," he said. "But suppose you listen."

He underplayed the urgency of the matter of engine parts and tools, his purchase of which might be thwarted if Martha was not found. He included the fact of the purchase, however, as his motive for cabling Martha, thus discovering there was a fake Martha. The rest he told concisely.

She listened attentively, wide-eyed. When he halted his recital she lay back on the berth, drew the blanket up to her chin. He had the feeling she was appalled.

He asked, "Did you really faint and fall?"

She said, "I was going through the vestibule. I didn't hear or see anyone. There was just, suddenly, nothing. Nothing at all!" She shuddered violently.

"You don't definitely know what happened, then?"

"No."

"You see what we suspect, don't you?" he asked.

"I—they—"

"Attempted murder." The planes in his face had arranged themselves in flat hard lines. "Either Walheim or the fat man, probably the latter."

Slowly her lips took a slashed shape.

"I think I'd like another drink," she said.

He arose with alacrity, for he felt a strong need to do something. He wanted urgently, at this moment, to strike the enemy down. He felt great admiration for the way she had taken it. He handed her the drink.

"I can't believe it!" she said clearly. "I mean—there are other ways I could have been kept from seeing Martha."

He liked her perception there. "That's a point that needs looking into."

She was gripping the glass with both hands and staring at it. "Why should they want to murder me?"

"Can you think of a reason?"

"None! No!"

"It would be something connected with Martha," he said thoughtfully. "We can safely assume that much, I think. It might be something Martha wrote you."

She shook her head. "I can think of nothing."

"We might feed our minds some pos-

sibilities. Often that helps. Has there been any change in the tone of Martha's letters the past weeks?"

"No. Yes—that is, she was excited about her promotion, about going to New York to work personally for Mr. Copeland. She wrote that."

"Wasn't Martha's decision rather sudden?"

"Sudden?"

"I was under the impression she first intended to turn the job down, feeling that, since Copeland was trimming his business holdings because of health, the job might have a limited future."

"Yes, that is true."

"Then she suddenly accepted the position three weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"Did Martha write you any special thing about that time?"

"I don't recall anything special."

"Notice any difference in the tone of her letters?"

SHE considered the question, frowning.

"Not unless it was that her letters seemed to become more flowery in description. Oh! I recall something else that I hadn't thought about. Martha had lots of little phrases, funny names for things, like—well, calling you B.M. After the letters began coming from New York, lots of the phrases and names were used over again, but not many new ones invented."

Molloy nodded grimly. "Martha didn't write those letters, obviously. That gives us, approximately, the time the phony Martha stepped into the picture. Did you save the letters?"

"Why, yes! Yes, I did." Her hands made small movements, joining the excitement in her eyes. "I could wire my landlady, Mrs. Norton, to airmail them to New York."

"An excellent suggestion," he said. "Write the telegram, so it can be sent at the next stop."

"Where—"

"The Hotel Regis. We'll put you up there."

George arose stolidly, lifted a pad of telegraph blanks from the holder that also contained stationery, and handed it to Julie Edwards.

"Shall I stay here, Mr. Molloy?" George asked.

Molloy shook his head. "No. You may go back to watching Walheim and the other one." Molloy's shoulders had an angry slope, his eyes a thwarted violence. "The devils! Whether we like it or not, there is no real evidence against them."

A heavy hand on the door, George asked, "You will be here, Mr. Molloy, in case I wanta see you?"

"Yes, probably. In any case, use a signal when you knock. Tap once for each quarter after the hour at the time you knock. One tap for fifteen past or less, two for half past, and so on. Repeat the sequence immediately. And be careful!" Molloy flung a grim warning. "They're blind if they haven't learned that we've taken Miss Edwards under our wing."

George opened the door calmly. "I've had that on my mind," he said.

Molloy locked the door ostentatiously, posing an example he wished Julie Edwards to follow in case she were left alone. He took the seat by the window. Presently she held out what she had written.

"This all right, do you think?" she asked.

He read. "Good. You have made it urgent enough." He consulted the watch on his wrist, then drew a timetable from his topcoat pocket and examined that. "We're lucky! There's a station stop in just a few minutes."

"You'll send it?"

He was lifting down the topcoat. "Yes." He put on the coat.

Alarm threw her eyes wider. "You'll be gone for a time?"

He nodded, experiencing some warmth at this sign that, already, she regarded him as necessary to her safety and composure.

Stepping outside, he turned with the door still held open and said, "Better lock it." He closed the door, listened for the click of the fastener, got it, and walked to the Pullman where George was sitting. He knew from George's

disinterested air that George was watching the quarry.

"Where is he?"

"Third back from the front, left-hand side," George said. "It's the fat one. You can see his foot. Same suit."

Molloy passed George the telegram.

"Send this, next stop. I'll keep an eye on him."

George arose and carried the telegram back to the vestibule. Porter and conductor were already there.

"You get off here, suh?" The porter was looking at George.

"No. Going to send a telegram."

"We don't stop more'n five minutes."

"Okay," George said, as the train gradually lost headway.

The station platform came to a standstill. Molloy gave it approximately half of his stolid attention. The other half he was keeping with unwavering force on a seat, seven removed from his own toward the front of the train. The shoes on the feet, the trousers on the attached legs, were not distinctive.

"The fat man—hired killer if he is that, and there isn't much doubt about it—is a subdued dresser," Molloy reflected.

The other half of Molloy's attention that was on the platform outside saw George go past. George was hurrying.

Miss Edwards, Molloy reflected, was genuinely nice. Not a movie star for looks, still if someone got hold of her who knew how to put on glitter, he imagined the effect would be striking. But nice. She had a personality that grew on you.

"'Boarrrd!"

The conductor's yell came faintly. A bell started whanging. A whistle tooted. The station platform began to move past.

MOLLOY bolted upright. He had not seen George return. He planted two strong hands on the seat, poised for action, but shocked, unsure, hardly believing.

Movement—a fat man running—drew his gaze to the platform. Molloy jammed an eye to the window and stared. He said, "Ahhhhh!" hollowly, for the man running to make the train was, from description, surely Fleshman.

Molloy came out of his seat and pounded down the aisle to the seat George had pointed out to watch. He glared at the occupant.

The man in Fleshman's seat—not Fleshman, obviously—was tall and not fat. Molloy wheeled and plunged along the aisle. He gained the vestibule. A porter was slamming the steel door shut.

"A fat man just get on?" Molloy demanded.

The porter was startled. "Jes' now? Yes suh!" His white teeth sparkled.

"Which way did he go?"

"Didn't happen to notice, suh," the porter said.

"Did George get back?"

"Who?"

"A short, heavy-set man, tan suit, no hat. Went to send a telegram. Did he make it back?"

"Ah didn't see. Foah Gawd's sake, did we go off and leave somebody?"

None of the tension and urgency left Molloy, but he said, "Never mind, never mind!" He wheeled away.

He walked through Pullmans and compartment cars. In Car 10 he stopped before Compartment 7, and glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes past ten. He knocked twice, repeated the signal.

Julie Edwards opened the door. He shoved past her and he could not speak when he saw George was not there.

"Has—something happened?" Julie was staring at him.

"I don't know," Molloy said heavily. "George didn't get back. I sent him to dispatch that telegram. He did not return. The fat man, the one we suspect of trying to kill you, was off the train. No telling what happened."

* * * * *

Marcus Walheim admitted Fleshman into his compartment when the latter knocked. Several drinks had pumped a ruddiness into Walheim's dark face, but this color, as he listened to Fleshman's story, faded to a sallow shade the hue of old lead.

"That complicates things," he said.

"It does that," Fleshman admitted.

"She saw you!"

"No."

"You fool! How else did they get wise?" Walheim said angrily.

Fleshman stated, "You amateurs are always so ready to get upset. Why don't you do these things yourself if you're so hot?"

Walheim controlled himself, but only with actual muscular effort.

He blurted, "Are you positive she didn't identify you?"

Fleshman arose and took up the Scotch bottle and a glass. He poured himself an uninvited drink, and resumed his seat.

"She never saw me," he said.

Neither man spoke for a time. Fleshman downed his drink in three great swallows. Plucking a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the glass carefully, rim and outside.

Thus far Fleshman, by tension and excitement that were foreign to his placid manner, had dominated the compartment. Walheim, far the fiercer personality of the two, had momentarily become the lesser.

Fleshman lifted a rectangular pigskin fold wallet from his pocket. It was George's wallet.

"This might give you a line on who he is." Fleshman tossed George's billfold to Walheim. "I took it off him. After I did what I did to him."

Walheim flipped the wallet open. He glanced first into the currency compartment, found it empty, and scowled at Fleshman, who pretended not to notice. Walheim extracted George's passport and said, "Hah, the guy travels!" He turned the cover and end papers and came to George's personal data. He read George's name, then read: "Business, BETA Airways!" He stiffened, blurted hoarsely, "This guy—he works for Chance Molloy! The other one must be Molloy himself!"

"Molloy? Somebody you've heard of?"

"Yeah," Walheim mumbled. "Yeah, I've heard of him, all right." Shock, surprise, alarm, had suddenly given Walheim a whitened, drawn look.

"Who is he?"

Walheim gazed fixedly at the passport. "Let me think this out!"

IT GAVE Fleshman some satisfaction to see that Walheim was worried. He watched Walheim distastefully for a moment, then proceeded to relax. He was not disturbed by Walheim's obvious alarm. Any danger that had menaced them five minutes ago had not been changed by the mere fact that they had learned Chance Molloy's name.

He did go over, in his mind, what he knew about Walheim. He had been acquainted with Marcus Walheim, sketchily, for about fifteen years. Once, twelve years ago, he had been an overnight guest at Walheim's home, and he recalled Walheim's father as a stocky man, intensely active, with great physical strength. The father was a successful clothing manufacturer. Walheim's mother was a huge beefy woman, who dominated the family, usually by shouting in a loud voice, in Polish or in very poor English.

His later contacts with Walheim, while not intimate, had kept him aware that Marcus was making a great deal of money, legally and often otherwise. Years ago Walheim had been in the pinball and slot-machine business, the manufacturing end. Two years ago Fleshman had done a murder for Walheim, a matter of a man in Los Angeles who was about to go to the district attorney with something. The services had been well paid for, and there had been no repercussions. Walheim, as a whole, was a satisfactory employer.

With a bitter intake of breath, followed by a violent expulsion, Walheim lifted his head.

"You better knock off the one on the train too," he said.

"And the girl?"

Walheim nodded. "Yes, the girl also." His voice was thin with alarm. "She can't be allowed to live."

"All right."

"I'll pay you well!"

"I understand that," Fleshman said. "I'm sorry about the slip earlier. That conductor shouldn't have shown up when he did. The odds were all against

it. Next time I'll get her."

"Molloy, too."

"I understand."

Walheim frowned at the fat man. He asked, "Would you like to know what is behind this?"

"Not particularly."

"I'll be damned if I see why you prefer to work in the dark!"

"Oh, there are two reasons," Fleshman explained mildly. "First, I am a specialist. Second, the police have something to take information out of the most unwilling man. Scopolamine, I think the drug is called."

"I see your point. But if the johns used truth serum on you they'd get enough to electrocute me, anyway. For our own safety, I think you should know a couple of things."

"Suit yourself."

Bluntly, directly—he had already decided what he would and would not tell —Walheim launched his words.

"A man named Paul Roger Copeland owns Transfa Air Industries and I'm an officer in the company. Copeland's health has gone to hell and he's liquidating his business. He turned the job of selling it over to the officers of the company. There's about twenty millions' worth of property being sold."

Fleshman, who had not expected to be impressed, was impressed. He said, "That is a great deal of money." Money meant a great deal to him.

"No, no, the take isn't that big!" Walheim said. "We're not stealing the whole company. That would be nice if it could be done, but we couldn't figure out a way. The take will run somewhere between five and ten percent. It figures about eight and a quarter percent so far, but some overhead comes off. You're overhead, for example."

After mentally computing eight and a quarter per cent of twenty millions, Fleshman was still floored.

"My God!" he said softly.

"It's big," Walheim agreed.

"But so much money. How—"

"Any kind of factory equipment, tools, airplane parts, engines and engine parts, even factory buildings are as scarce as hen's teeth right now. If you need a dozen automatic gear planers worth a hundred grand apiece, you're willing to slip someone ten per cent, get the goods right now, and keep your mouth shut."

"But so much money!" Fleshman repeated in dumb wonder.

"Copeland has been sick two years and doesn't know much about Transfa. The price we're getting for his stuff—market prices current, in most cases—will seem okay to him. That's how simple it is." Walheim scowled bleakly. "Or was!"

"Was?"

"A dame tried to blow it up. Her name was Martha Baxter. This Martha, a sharp wench, was purchasing agent for Transfa. She made a legitimate deal to sell BETA Airways, which is Chance Molloy, a quarter of a million order of engine parts and tools. Naturally we didn't like to see ourselves not getting a cut on that kind of a deal, so we tried to crumb things up for her. We put phony orders on file showing the engine parts were already sold. It didn't fool her. She was slick as hell. I found out she had gone out with one of my customers, got him drunk, and found out what we were doing. After that—well, things got complicated."

WALHEIM scowled, crossed his legs, glowered at the billfold and passport which were still in his hands.

He said, "Martha had suddenly accepted a job as Copeland's private adviser in New York. She had wired Copeland she would be there in five days. She'd had Copeland's secretary rent her an apartment in New York. We decided it would be too risky, too much chance of stirring up Copeland's suspicions, if she didn't go to New York. So we sent Martha to New York."

"Bought her off, eh?" Fleshman commented mildly.

"No. She wouldn't buy."

The fat man opened his eyes. He was puzzled. "I don't get it. Wasn't it apparent this Martha was going to New York and spill what she knew to Copeland?"

Walheim laughed fiercely. "The Mar-

tha we sent to New York wasn't Martha. We sent a girl from the office instead. She had worked for Transfa, in the head office, three years. She had shared an apartment with Martha until Martha threw her out. So she knew all Martha's little habits and who her friends were. This girl had the habit of observing people closely."

"A bit complex, wasn't it?"

"No. Everything fitted in."

"But Copeland—"

"Copeland had never seen Martha. So what we did was make this girl up—red hair, gray suits and frocks—to somewhat resemble Martha."

"Copeland was fooled?"

"Perfectly." Walheim flung himself back, laughing. "You see what we had? A spy right in Copeland's nest, in case anything did come up! A truly nice bit of planning. One of the nicest that I believe I have ever seen. But there was one hitch!"

"Ah!"

"The real Martha told us she had mailed the evidence against us to a party who would turn it over to Copeland if she didn't reach New York safely."

"Oh!" Fleshman looked as if he had been struck in the face. "She— Was it true?"

The dark, sinewy hands turned palms up, the fingers splayed apart. "We hoped it was a bluff. We took that chance."

"I see," said Fleshman, nodding. "Yes, such a story is a hackneyed device. What else developed?"

"A telegram from Missouri!"

"Ah!"

The thin lips compressed angrily. "Listen to this! Just listen!" Walheim jutted his head forward. "'Have reception committee Grand Central two A.M. train Friday. Bringing secret for you. Love. Julie.'" He paused dramatically. "What do you think of that?"

"It would alarm me, I believe."

"It alarmed us! The telegram came yesterday afternoon, from this Julie, a girl friend of Martha's in Missouri. You see what it means, don't you?"

"Martha mailed the stuff to Julie?"

Walheim's head jerked down, up, in emphatic agreement. "Exactly! That's the answer." He flung himself back on the seat. "Now you see that this Julie"—he leveled an arm again for emphasis—"must be disposed of."

"Yes, it seems clear," Fleshman replied. For Walheim's benefit he wore a snickering smile, but it was not genuine.

"However"—he threw, quietly, a barb into Walheim—"there is the matter of Chance Molloy."

Walheim winced. "He's snooping to find out what happened to his engine parts of course!"

Fleshman said diffidently, "For three instead of one— You have in mind a fee?"

Walheim mentioned a sum. "That's the absolute top," he added.

"It seems ample." Fleshman was quite satisfied.

"Let's not have any more slips!" Walheim said harshly. "Molloy is a rough customer."

"Yes, yes, his appearance indicates as much," Fleshman agreed. He sighed and moved to the door. "You know—"

"Know what?" Walheim asked sharply.

"Oh, I was thinking. Murder—past, not present or future—has a tongue-binding effect on one, does it not?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"Martha. She's dead, isn't she?"

"No—"

"Murdered! Wasn't she?"

Walheim, after a moment, said thickly, "Suit yourself."

V

PATIENCE was a garment Chance Molloy did not wear well. Particularly when the enemy had struck, and struck close to his heart, restraint was difficult to manage.

Molloy was bitterly concerned about George. What had happened to George? Molloy considered Fleshman in the light of his reasons for believing Fleshman was a hired assassin, and the ax of anxiety bit deep.

He treasured George's loyalty. High

on Molloy's list was loyalty, a quality he had found to be not so much scarce as it was uncertain; the allegiance of too many men changed with their thoughts of the moment. George's was ironbound, unshakable.

"I am going to yank this out into the open," he told Julie Edwards. "Have those two arrested!"

"But you haven't found Martha!" she said.

He nodded. "That is true."

She asked, "Won't the police—their appearance in the picture—frighten the enemy into hiding, covering up, protecting themselves?"

His nod, a stiff inclination of his head, corroborated this.

"And won't you, personally, stand to lose a great deal? I gathered that your airline needs that material you dealt for."

"That," he said, "is of small consequence! I am going to send two telegrams, one to ascertain what George's mishap was, the other to the New York police to arrest the fat man. I want that fat man arrested. He is much too dangerous to have running loose." He moved to the door, wheeled to add, "Lock the door!"

The Pullman conductor had already been told by the porter that a passenger might have been left behind, he explained to Molloy, adding, "There is no scheduled stop until we make a change-over of an electric locomotive for the Diesel. However, I can throw your message off at an intermediate station."

Molloy gave him the telegrams and money.

Julie Edwards, when Molloy returned, opened the compartment door immediately on his signal.

He said, "The thing to do now is wait." He closed the door and locked it.

"If you want to watch the fat man I won't be afraid to stay alone," she offered.

He shook his head. "It's probably best I stay here."

"I may not be very good company," she explained. "I'm—scared."

He smiled, the smile loosening the grave lines of his face and conveying appreciation of her courage, and seated himself. He lighted cigarettes for them both.

"No harm in being scared," he remarked.

"But I—don't like it!"

His cigarette described a vague gesture. "I do not like it either. No one does. Walheim and the fat man may try to escape from the train. That will have to be watched."

She debated his words seriously. "That is the logical thing for them to do, isn't it? They're alarmed now, I imagine."

Molloy was silent. He leaned back, composed and patient. . . .

Softly, as if it had run into cotton, the train stopped. Molloy, for a long time silent, had been sitting with head lowered.

Now he swung to the window, saw outside many tracks, narrow concrete platforms, but no baggage carts, no sacks of mail pouches, no porters—no town.

"This must be where they hook on an electric locomotive," he said. He spun from the window, added, "I'm going to watch and see that Walheim and his friend do not get off here." He unlocked the door and whipped it open. "Lock this after me! Better keep the lights out and stay away from the window!"

He heard her lock the door and gave it a hard try to make sure it was secure. Wheeling, he went along the corridor to the vestibule where dank night air and the creosote smell of coal smoke met him. The vestibule was open to the platform and he started down the steps, wary of eye.

The Pullman conductor abruptly stood before Molloy. His outthrown forefinger indicated Molloy.

"This is the man!" he declared.

There were four uniformed policemen behind him. One of these stepped forward.

"Mr. Molloy?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"You have an employee named George?"

"Yes."

"Good! We got a telephone call from this George. He said he stepped off the train in Albany and was blackjacked by a passenger from the train."

GLAD shock whipped Molloy's face taut. He breathed deeply and with effort, and presently he said, "Thank God!"

"Eh?"

"I was worried." Molloy's voice was pitched a little higher now. "I was very worried. I had wired—"

"The conductor told us about that." The policeman was impatient. "We didn't get your wire yet. We got the phone call, is all. We're here to pick up the guy who sapped this George. A fat man. George said you'd know the guy by sight. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Okay. How about pointing him out to us?"

"Very well."

"Angelo!" The officer wheeled to another policeman. "You stay here! Jerry, you kinda drift down toward the other end." He sprang up the steps, crossed the vestibule, and wrenched open the other door. "Okay, Sheldon, okay!" he said to someone on the other side. "Just wanted to make sure you were there!" He stepped back, slammed the door. "You know where Fat Boy is?" he asked Molloy.

"I know two places where he might be."

"Let's try there first, then."

Molloy led the way. He was unsteady, he fumbled the door handle, and he smiled gently. He was intensely relieved about George. He reached Walheim's compartment and indicated it.

"In there, perhaps," he said, and stepped back.

The policeman laid a hand under his coat. He glanced at his fellow officer; he, too, was fully prepared. The first officer gave the door two firm taps.

"Conductor!" he called. "May I have your room checks? This is the conductor!"

After thirty seconds he tried the door cautiously. It was unlocked. He flung it open. He was in the compartment but briefly. He came out, looked at Molloy, and said, "Water haul."

"Not there?"

"No."

"Baggage?"

"No baggage."

Chance Molloy said, "That is very disappointing." He wheeled. "Let's try the other possibility." He hurried toward the Pullman sleepers.

But Fleshman was not in his section, neither was the intruder who had sat there earlier. He now sat with his wife across the aisle. Fleshman's bag was gone.

Molloy confronted the man across the aisle, demanding, "Did you see anything of the fat man who had this seat?"

"What? Oh, him—yes, he came back." The man batted his eyes curiously at the two officers. "He came back and got his bag and topcoat and hat. Then he left."

"When was that?"

"Why—some time ago. I should say it was an hour. Yes, at least an hour!"

"Which way'd he go?"

"Really, I'm not sure. That way, I think." He pointed toward the rear of the train.

The policeman turned back to the man, said, "Thank you, Mr.—"

"Norton," the man supplied. "Thomas R. Norton."

"Could I see a driver's license or something?" the officer asked.

The man hastily produced a cardcase and the officer glanced at it briefly, returned it with a, "That's fine. You're okay." Walking down the aisle, the policeman got out a notebook and wrote in the name, Thomas R. Norton, and the address, 1101 Vestry Avenue, Chicago, leaned out of the side door and called, "Angelo!"

"Yes, Jack?"

"Fat Boy may have scrammed. Tell Jerry and Sheldon to scout around the railway yards after the train pulls out. They better notify the State boys too. You swing aboard when the train starts."

"Okay," Angelo said.

The officer pushed his cap back and

rubbed his forehead. His gaze was on Chance Molloy now, and it was vaguely doubtful.

"What's Fat Boy's name?" he asked.

Molloy shrugged. "I have not the least idea." Molloy was wary. He had decided that he did not want the whole matter laid in the laps of the police just yet. Not that he distrusted the police, or doubted their ability, but their end—except for seeing justice done—might not be his ends. He added, "We had noticed this chap."

"Noticed him? How come?"

"We had an idea," Molloy said quietly, "that he was showing a sneaking interest in George."

"I don't get it," said the officer, suspicion half formed back of his words. "You didn't know the guy but you noticed him, and you knew right off, when this George missed the train, that the fat boy was responsible." The officer's head shot forward. "How come?"

Molloy said, "George was carrying quite a roll of money. We noticed the fat man begin to follow us after he got a flash of the roll."

"Oh! It was that way, huh?"

"Exactly!" Molloy spoke with just the right firmness.

Satisfied, the policeman said half apologetically, "The fat man must be a dumb cluck. A good dip wouldn't give himself away. Well, we got forty minutes before this train is due in New York. We may get him yet, if he's aboard."

"He may not be."

"That would be my guess." The policeman thrust out a hand. "My name's Horney, Mr. Molloy. We might as well get at it, don't you think? We've got quite a job of train searching ahead of us. . . ."

WHEN Molloy did not come back, Julie Edwards was hurled eye to eye with a frightening crisis, and she reacted to it exactly the way her suppressive nature dictated—by whipping into cold, stony tension and slamming upon her mind the responsibility for both decision and action.

Julie Edwards was embroiled in a terrible thing. Poor Martha! She was afraid—she knew Chance Molloy had been deeply concerned too—for Martha. Martha, her closest friend, might very well be dead. Those men were probably capable of anything. She would put no crime, however evil and horrifying, beyond Walheim and Fleshman.

Abruptly, violently, her ideas came to focus. She knew what she must do. Firm now and intent, she unlocked the door and jerked it open.

"Oh!" she gasped.

"Why, hello!" The doctor, smiling, stood there with hand uplifted to knock.

"I— Oh, you scared me!"

"I was to drop around and see how you were," the doctor explained pleasantly. "The head still ache?"

"No—yes. It doesn't hurt much." The truth was she'd forgotten the headache some time ago. "I'm all right. I was just going to find the conductor. Have you seen him?"

"Conductor? Let's see. Why, certainly! Of course! I passed him on my way here. The conductor, three policemen"—his eyes on her became thoughtful, tainted slightly by suspicion—"and the gentleman who first asked me to have a look at your injury."

"Molloy?" she asked.

"I don't believe I know who Molloy is."

"The man who first got you to examine me. That's Mr. Molloy. A tall, blond man."

"In that case Molloy is with the conductor—and three policemen."

Her hands fell away from the door edge. "In that case I won't bother the conductor." Her voice came out clear and strong. "I really feel—my head feels much better, Doctor. The pain has almost disappeared."

"Perhaps I'd better check you over anyway."

"Well, if you wish. Only—" She stepped back, bringing the door with her, and said frankly, "I don't know whether I can afford this."

"It's paid for." The doctor indicated the bench. "Will you just sit there?" He had blunt, capable fingers, and his gray hair was redolent of tonic. There

was a Masonic pin in his lapel, and an Elk's tooth dangled on an old-fashioned gold watch chain. He said, "H'mmm!" and "Uh-huh."

He clucked amiably. He sounded pleased, like a mother hen with a fine chick. He poked a thermometer into her mouth. He inspected her eyes.

She said, "I don't think there was any contrecoup. And, while I know it's hard to tell, I don't believe there has been any rupture of the meninges."

"Hah!" The doctor was astonished. "Don't tell me *you're* a doctor?"

"Oh, no! I work for one. Office assistant."

"Well, well, that's fine! Where? The Middle West?"

"Missouri," she said.

The doctor said he was from Minnesota himself, and added a well, well.

"I won't worry about you now," he said. Waiting for the thermometer to reach its temperature, he ducked his head and looked out of the window. "It's misting rain, isn't it? I do hope the weather in New York is decent. This will be the first visit for my wife and me."

Her face was composed, inscrutable, giving no hint of racking tension within. She had no intention of telling the doctor her troubles.

The doctor took the thermometer and held it to catch the ceiling light just right.

"Fine! No temperature at all!"

"Thank you, Doctor," she said.

"Just keep an eye on yourself," he warned. "You know all that, don't you! No need to scare you, is there?"

"No, no need to scare me," she said woodenly.

He took her hand and gave it a hearty shake, then backed to the door.

"I'm sorry you fell," he said. He opened the door. "But you seem to be getting along so nicely—Well, good-by."

The door closed partially, not completely. A gap remained. Julie was rising to close and lock the door, but the door came the rest of the way open before she reached it, flung open, disclosing the two men who stood there.

"I am the man who found you after you fell," Fleshman said, stepping inside. "I have a friend with me." He indicated Walheim. . . .

PAUL ROGER COPELAND, the owner of Transfa Air Industries, threw up his head and listened. His hands dropped the papers they had been holding and left the desk to rest, to perch, birdlike, on the shining brown leather arm rests of his swivel chair. His thoughts had been wrenched from his dictation by a sound in the night.

The fluorescent light from the desk lamp, rich in daylight qualities, accentuated the reddish shading in his hair. He was at fifty a handsome man, with good coloring, a fine skin, and being underweight gave him a thin, whiplike quality.

The sound he had heard came again. It was a steamship whistle. Somewhere off Lloyds Neck, in Long Island Sound, he decided, and probably from a New York-bound vessel. He had become an expert on the unimportant matter of craft traveling the part of the Sound which his Huntington estate overlooked. These last weeks, more than usually beset by boredom, ennui, dark worries, he had spent much time watching the vessels pass.

He got, watching them, a feeling of purpose which his own life lacked and, too, a spirit of far adventure which had been denied him. These things threw him back to his youth when, watching the ships from this same vast old mansion, he had pictured himself as a swashbuckling, throat-slitting, dominating corsair. Copelands had been pirates long ago. Two brothers, Ezra and Jento Copeland, it was said, had founded the family fortune on the Spanish Main.

Paul Roger Copeland sighed and swung back to his desk. He smiled.

"Where was I, Martha?"

The flame-haired woman flashed back his smile.

"I was reading you a letter from Sisson, of CAA, about Type Certificate Zero-zero-nine-three, for the K-twenty-two-R controllable pitch prop," she said.

Copeland nodded. She sat at the end

of the desk, a tall girl with round curves, an inviting figure.

"The CAA turned us down, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"What will that piece of stubbornness cost us?" he asked. "Have you any idea?"

She said, "We have ninety-six K-twenty-two-R props on inventory. With CAA approval, they would sell for around eleven hundred dollars each. Without—well, they'll fetch hardly more than junk price."

His face fell, petulantly, into lines of discouragement. "They were good enough for the Army," he complained. "But that old mother hen, the CAA, has its own damned ideas about what civilian aircraft can use."

"It's going to be very expensive," she agreed. "This wouldn't have happened, would it, if Transfa had obtained a Type Certificate, or reasonable assurances that one would be granted, when the propellers were in the design stage?"

"We couldn't wait to get approvals. There was a war going on!"

Copeland's eyes, studying her, lost their peevish anger. The smile came back. He said, "Baby, you're much too pretty to have a head full of figures."

She lowered her gaze. "Shall I write Mr. Nesbitt to accept the best offer?"

Copeland turned his hands up and dropped his shoulders.

"The hell with it!" he said. "We've done enough work for tonight."

"Yes sir."

She arranged the papers she was holding. He watched her below lowered lids. The sensuous appeal of the woman engulfed him.

"How about a drink?" he suggested.

She turned her face up to him lazily and gave him a look that was maddeningly indifferent.

"Why not?" she said.

They went into the south library, he walking a half pace behind, his eyes on her hungrily, his breathing disturbed. He took, unnecessarily, her arm and led her to the bar. He stepped around behind the bar, lifted his eyebrows questioningly.

She shrugged. "Anything."

"Scotch?"

"That sounds good."

He got liquor, glasses, soda, ice cubes from the built-in freezer. She slid upon a bar stool, regarding him thoughtfully.

"Want to mix your own?" he asked.

"You do it." She laid a hand, palm up, on the bar top. "How about a cigarette?"

"There's some around—I'll find them." He spoke nervously, over a mounting excitement.

WHEN he held the match his hand trembled.

"You're nervous." She blew smoke downward casually so that some of it touched his chest, rebounded. "Your hand is shaking."

"Is it?" He grinned at the hand, shook out the match.

"You have a nice place here," she said. "I haven't told you that before, have I? Well, it's swell."

"Like it?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, a lot." She threw up her arms and leaned back luxuriously against the bar. "To live like this—golly, wouldn't that be something!"

He turned, reluctantly, to pick up an ice cube and drop it in a glass. "It isn't so hot," he said.

Her laugh, pleasantly laden with sarcasm, came at him.

"No, really!" he insisted.

"You—"

"No, actually— Well, perhaps you're right. It may be just—well, I'm not happy."

She turned, twisting her body with a rich animal vitality, so that her dress was pulled and outlined the fullness of ample breasts.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Me?"

"Sure. You're, like you say, not happy. I don't get it. A guy like you, with all this—it just doesn't make sense."

He grinned, had the feeling he was grinning foolishly, and suggested, "Business worries, maybe."

"Nah, not you!" She refuted this instantly. "You go through the motions of being a serious business tycoon, but it doesn't ring. What's really

wrong? No play?"

"No play," he answered.

She lifted her drink, looked across it at him. "Then—to play," she said.

He put his glass down and circled the bar. He stood close to her and slid his arm around her waist. Her lips were hot but not particularly yielding, nor was there much response, and when she broke away he let her.

He said, "It was nice of you to give up your apartment temporarily."

"That? It wasn't much of a sacrifice. My apartment is a genteel, middle-class dump."

"That bad?"

"Oh, just at times. I think our friend who is staying there now will like it."

He nodded. "You're a good judge of character. Our friend is exactly like that."

She said, "I've always lived in genteel, middle-class dumps, it seems to me."

VI

THIS was, Copeland knew, an interval that was nothing more than mere delay. A bit of retiring, on both their parts, after the first skirmish.

"This house"—he gestured idly with his glass—"is a museum. It's full, chock to the gills, with stuff my family called tradition."

Her laugh drove smoke out toward him. "I heard your family was pretty strait-laced," she said.

"Stuffy," he corrected. "You've no idea." He put his second drink down. "What about you?" he said. "I'm more interested in you."

"I'm not a very exciting subject," she said.

"The hell you aren't," he thought. He said, "You know what I'll bet? I'll bet you had a lot of fun as a kid, and not in a gilded trap like this."

"Hah, that's what you think." She was vehement. "Listen, I was small-town. In—in Missouri. Place called Kirksville." She shuddered.

"I always thought small towns were friendly places."

"You can"—she finished her drink—"take them."

"No friends, eh?"

She hesitated a moment, wariness gliding into her eyes. "Oh, one," she said. "One good one."

"This—what's her name who's coming to visit you?"

"Julie Edwards." She nodded. "Yes, Julie's a nice kid."

"Is she like you?"

"Julie! Me? Heaven forbid. Julie is—you can't tell what she'll do." She turned her glass thoughtfully in her fingers. "You know, Julie might not even show up in New York. She might not get this far. She might stop in Chicago."

He asked, "You say Julie is going to be met by—our friend?"

"Yes. To show appreciation for being allowed to use my apartment."

Copeland scowled. "I'm glad our friend is good for something." He reached for her glass.

Pouring, stirring ice with soda, he was again intensely aware of Martha. He pushed the glass across to her slowly and asked, "You don't mind sleeping out here for the time being?"

She reached over and lifted his cigarettes out of his robe pocket. "I haven't regretted it yet," she said. "You know, you don't seem like a millionaire."

Copeland laughed. "I'm not a millionaire."

She threw back her head. "Oh-ho-ho—I know better."

"Do you, Martha?"

"Uh-huh."

He said, chuckling, "I'll give you a trade last. You don't seem like the fiercely efficient Martha I've always heard about from the West Coast plant."

She lowered her head, touched the glass to her lips, said into it, "Don't I? Let's not start talking about me again. Don't you have any music down here?"

"Ummmmmm," he said. "Want to dance?"

"Why not?"

He went over and fiddled with the record player. He set the thing in operation and, when he turned, she was ready for his arms.

He said, near the middle of the second

record, "I'm going to be trite and say it this way: I'm crazy about you, baby."

She said, "What's trite about it?"

His arms tightened around her, and presently he said, "I'd like to sleep with you, baby."

Her laugh mocked him. "That is trite," she said.

The machine playing the records finished them one at a time until all five had been transcribed into sound, then the pickup part shut itself off. The radio portion, the amplifier, made a single pale red eye in the murk in that corner of the room. . . .

MURDER meant little to Fleshman. Not nearly as much as it once had. The thrill of it was no longer crisp, bitter, stimulating, like a shot of acid. What bother there was came only at the time and was quickly put away. It was a job he did. Something to be done carefully, of course, because the one treasure he had was his life here and now. He did not believe in a hereafter.

He said, "We're coming into the station."

Walheim said a brassy-faced nothing.

Having passed 125th Street station without stopping, the train had been for some time running in the tunnel, going as gently as a fishworm in its hole.

Fleshman drew his eyes from the window, sighing. "A nasty feeling, being underground," he remarked.

Walheim asked woodenly, "You going to wait?"

"I believe it best."

"Why?"

Fleshman's hands spread palms upward placidly. "The odds are not too good."

"And the luck is damned bad," Walheim amended.

Fleshman moved to the berth. He stood looking down at Julie Edwards.

"Do you understand what we're talking about?" he asked her.

"The same thing, I suppose," she said.

"Oh, no." Fleshman shook his head slowly. "You see, we have decided you intend to be stupid. So-o-o-o." He raised his shoulders lazily. "So-o-o-o, I must kill you."

The voice that was hardly hers said, as it had said many times before during the last thirty minutes:

"Martha did not send me anything to keep for her."

Walheim strode over, bent down, said harshly, "Listen, if you don't talk—" His hand came up in front of his chest and the fingers spread, then clenched.

"I think she knows that as soon as we're in the station I'm going to kill her," Fleshman said. "So what more is there to say?"

"She's a crazy fool!" Walheim scowled at Julie. "Listen—how far do you think you can ride your luck?"

"A couple of minutes, we'll be there," Fleshman said.

Walheim stepped back. "While the passengers are leaving the train, that'll be the best time."

The train went slowly now. There were soiled gray platforms outside, a redcap running beside the train. . . .

Julie Edwards had great fortitude. The ability to take shock and pain without showing outward stress had been natural equipment for her as long as she could remember, but for the last year or two she had had the idea that it was a symptom of the inwardness which she was becoming alarmed about. So she had stopped regarding it with pride and instead had begun viewing it with resentment.

She was a good swimmer and played a nice game of golf. She danced well, if precisely. In fact in everything which involved muscular activity, she was usually excellent, or if not, her grasp of the form and fundamentals was good. She was learning to fly and had eighteen hours solo and twelve dual. She had soloed in the usual eight hours. Her flight instructor considered her the safest student he had ever had.

For parties, socials, town projects, she was sought after more than she sought. As a small girl, she had been a wallflower. She still was, but it was better covered.

Actually she had an acute need for affection—for attention, love, appreciation, coddling. Loneliness came sud-

denly, with smashing effects, yet she seemed constitutionally unable to do anything about it. She was not glacial. Her sex impulses were quick, intense, climactic, but of short duration.

Fortunately she was not neurotic, and certainly there was no pathology. Being intelligent, she had not resigned herself to increasing inwardness. She was fighting it.

Here on the train, faced with real danger, violence, connivance, suspense —now murder—she was internally adequate. Outwardly she was, if not calm, able to show a glacial self-sufficiency. But it did not change the fact that she did not want to die.

The train stopped. In the corridor passengers were stirring, crowding against each other, luggage was banging against the walls.

"We're in." Walheim leaned forward and laid hand on his suitcase. His face had a slight shine of perspiration that had come out in a film rather than in droplets. "This is it," he added.

Fleshman slid his limpid eyes across Walheim's face. "Is there a hurry?"

"You expect to stay here?"

"That is a nice thought." Fleshman nodded appreciatively. "Stay here, make the policemen feel silly. They'll be at the exit gates, of course." His sigh was regretful. "But I think the porters will soon come."

"Ah!" Walheim swung on Julie Edwards. "Hold up your arms now, do you hear!"

SHE already lay on the berth, which they had searched. Walheim snapped the blanket over her, up under her chin.

"Arms down!" he ordered. Then he tucked the outer edges of the blanket around her arms so that she would probably become entangled in it if she tried to move swiftly. "You've been asleep. Get it? You're our sister, and you overslept—in case a porter looks in."

She shuddered. The man had a raw animal force that she could almost smell. Fleshman was more difficult to index. He was temperamentally greedy, comfort-loving, but with something left out of his make-up so that he was far the more terrible of the two.

She waited. Her fingers were dry and unnatural and smooth, as if they were feeling of a piece of silk. Sounds were loud, or seemed so. The passengers had moved out of the car. Some still passed the window, carrying baggage. A baggage hand truck went grinding and hammering past, a redcap pushing, another pulling.

A knock sounded. In a moment another.

Fleshman sighed deeply. His soft face was shades paler.

Walheim, a hand suddenly at Julie Edwards's throat, whispered, "Ask who it is!"

Her eyes lifted to Walheims' in a detached way. She knew what she would do. She'd had time to decide, plan, to lay a direct course. If this was Chance Molloy she would warn him.

"Is it Doctor Williams?" she called.

"Yes, it is," came an amiable male voice through the door. "How are you?"

"Oh, much better, Doctor."

"May I come in?"

"I—I'm not dressed yet. I'm sorry."

"Well, okay. As long as you're feeling all right, I won't need to come in."

"Thank you for checking up, Doctor."

"Don't mention it. Good-by—Oh! Oh, by the way, I saw Mr. Molloy a moment ago. He and some policemen have been searching the train for some footpad. They think he's left the train along the line somewhere, but they're searching the train again. Mr. Molloy asked me to tell you. He said not to worry. They're in the next car, just starting on it, I think. So Mr. Molloy will be here presently."

"Thank you," Julie said. "And good-by."

"Right. Take care of yourself."

Footsteps went away along the corridor.

Fleshman swung to Walheim a face that was, except for a lack of hearty color, not greatly discomposed.

He said, "In the next car." He passed the tip of his tongue over his lips. He moved his gaze to Julie. "Huh-uh!" he said. "Not with johns in the next car.

Maybe at the exit gate too. Huh-uh." His eyes whipped back to Walheim. "I think she's been lucky twice," he said.

Stooping, Fleshman grasped his Gladstone, picked his topcoat from the hook where it was hanging, and left the compartment without a backward glance.

Walheim accepted, stunned, the fat man's flight. Presently he secured his own bag and topcoat, then Julie Edwards' bag, and went out. . . .

It was two-nineteen when Chance Molloy looked at his watch. He gave the correct signal of taps on the door of Compartment 7 in Car 10.

"Dr. Williams is back again," Molloy said pleasantly.

The door whipped open. Julie Edwards gasped, "They're gone!" She clung to the door and repeated, "They're gone!"

Molloy's gaze passed over her swiftly, searching for signs of injury. He was reassured.

"All right, all right, you can relax now," he said.

"They went that way!" She pointed.

"Never mind them." He took both her hands. "Let's worry about you. Let's sit down over here until we find out whether you're going to throw a whing-ding."

"They'll get away!"

"Probably—for the time being. The officers, after they watched all the passengers go up the ramp, gave it up."

It did not occur to him to make an excuse. He was a man who made his decisions, even the snap ones, with the greatest care expediency permitted—once made, he let them stand. In this case, presumably Walheim and Fleshman were armed, while he was not. They would be desperate and would shoot if cornered. Only fools tackle mad dogs barehanded, except in utter necessity.

He said with genuine admiration, "That was a nice slickie you pulled on them—the Williams thing."

"I had to do something."

"You certainly did! And you delivered in the pinch, where it counted." His words were sincere, but he was also searching her face for indications of hysterics. "Good! I imagine we both could use a little drink."

THE halves of his bag, when his thumb pressed the snap fastener, sprang apart explosively. His things—crisp shirtings, a Shetland tweed suit—overflowed. The handbag had been searched. He poured drinks into two glasses and gave one to Julie. He drank, put the glass down, began repacking.

Underlying his air of calm there was dark self-disgust. To forgive stupidity in himself was unthinkable—he was inclined to hurl aside all excuses. He should not have believed, never for an instant, that Walheim and Fleshman had left the train. The policemen had pulled the same boner, but he did not include them in his disapproval. Their mistakes were their own business. He, Molloy, stood guilty of inadequate forethought. That burned him.

Having closed the bag, neatness restored within it, he finished his drink, then asked, "Do you feel up to going to a hotel now?"

"Yes. Only—" She looked up at him uncertainly. "My purse," she explained. "It's gone. I had it when I left the diner. I haven't seen it since. He must have—"

His tone indicated sympathy. "Was there anything vitally important in it?"

"Only my money, every cent!" she said bitterly. "My return ticket! Everything! How will—what can I—"

"Now, now, let's not worry about that." He was adding, deftly, reassurance to sympathy. "You'll have funds. That, I'm sure, will not embarrass you." He saw her alarm was not being lessened, and, adept at catching a mood and changing its direction, he asked quickly, "Did you have anything from Martha in the purse? Letters?"

"No!" She thought for a moment. "No, no letters. But there was a compact Martha had sent me. And a cigarette case."

Instantly alert, he asked, "The compact—how long ago did Martha give it to you?"

"Two years, almost. It was Christmas."

"The cigarette case?"

"A few months later. Nearly a year and a half ago."

"Well, they probably don't account for this violent interest in you." He saw that she was sidetracked from her own troubles to Martha's, which was where he wanted her thinking to be. "They took your suitcase, didn't they?"

"Yes! All my clothes!" She was distressed.

"Merely proves they're after something you carried—something from Martha," he said. "We'll see what we can do about the clothes. Don't fret about it."

She stood on her feet firmly enough. "I'm in a mess, aren't I?" she said wryly.

"We all are, until we straighten it out."

He swung the door open and went out ahead of her, first dipping his head in apology for doing so. He led the way off the train.

A mess, Molloy thought bitingly, is exactly the word for it. He felt that things had fallen apart generally, that his carefully laid plans had come to naught, or worse, and his mood was caustic, sharp, bitter. He was, he decided, through with web-spinning. New plans, different tactics, seemed called for. He did not regret the changed conditions. A threading of plot against counterplot had never been to his liking.

In a way, he was relieved. Now he could go after the fake Martha openly —confront her, demand answers, get them, if necessary, with hard methods. He would immediately dump the whole mess before Paul Roger Copeland, owner of Transfa Air Industries. He would drag Mr. N. N. Nesbitt, president of Transfa, into the thing, by demanding delivery of the order of parts and tools he had negotiated for with Martha.

They moved through iron gates past a barrier of shining brass railing into the station. A redcap took the bag from Molloy's hand, listened attentively to Molloy's, "A taxi," and wheeled. They followed the redcap. Before they had gone far, a man, lean and gray-haired, stepped around Molloy and stood before Julie.

"I believe," said the man, smiling, "that you are Julie Edwards. Am I right?"

"Why?" asked Molloy, inwardly disturbed by something he could not quite put a finger on.

"Martha sent me," the man said. . . .

STEVE BAEDECKER, the man in the traffic-control tower at LaGuardia Field, watched the landing lights of a civilian plane skim along Runway 36 and settle safely onto the pavement.

"The damned fool finally made it!" he said explosively.

Because both ceiling and visibility were below instrument-flight minimums, the field was supposed to be closed down for the time being, with traffic at a halt and take-offs and landings prohibited. This information had been conveyed to the civilian plane by radio, but the pilot had said he had to come in, and he had.

"I'm going to cite that guy for a violation!" Steve said angrily.

He clamped a thumb on the microphone switch, gave the civilian pilot taxiing instructions, and ordered him to report personally to the traffic control.

The civilian pilot scowled at this news. He jerked the radio headphone off his left ear, and said, "I'm gonna get a violation popped to me!"

George, who occupied the dual-control seat, was not disturbed. "I'll take the rap," he said.

George lifted the radio mike off its hook, gave the tower man his own name as pilot, said he had chartered the plane, that this was an emergency, that he was damned if he was going to come to anybody's traffic-control office right now because there wasn't time, but he would take full responsibility. He was asked for his pilot's license number, and gave it. He replaced the mike.

"I think that might give you an out," he said. "If it doesn't I'll do anything else I can. I want you to know I appreciate you getting me down here in a hurry."

George paid the pilot, thanked him and entered the passenger terminal. He carried his hat in his hand because, if he wore it, it would hurt the bruise where Fleshman's blackjack had struck him. He walked toward the pay telephone booths, but halted when he heard his name.

"George!"

"Kiggins!" George said, surprised. "Hiyah, babe!"

"Are you hurt?" Kiggins asked anxiously.

"My, my! Worried about old Georgie, were you? How about a kiss, baby?"

Kiggins visibly retreated to coolness. She was a strange, frigid woman who almost never displayed a trace of emotion.

She said, "I presume the attack was made on your head, since you weren't damaged."

George grinned. "What the hell are you doing here, kiddo?"

"Orders."

"Oh! The boss got my message, did he?"

"Yes. It was waiting for him at his hotel, I believe he said."

"Is he okay?"

"Yes."

"The girl?"

"If you mean Miss Edwards, yes."

George said heartily, "That takes a load off my mind! Them two cookies on the train, Walheim and his fat hatchet boy, got wise to us somehow. By the way, did the cops latch on to them?"

"The pair escaped."

"Whoeee! I still got them in my future then!" George tried to look alarmed but did not succeed very well, being too relieved over learning that Chance Molloy and the girl were safe. He asked, "I wonder if I'm fired?"

"I gathered not — unfortunately," Kiggins said drily.

"Hah! I should be! What a sucker that fat guy made of me!" George placed his hat on his head, then—after wide-flying eyes and mouth, upjerking shoulders had registered a twinge of pain—he lifted the hat off again with care.

"This way," Kiggins said primly. "I have a car waiting."

"Yeah? What's the program?"

"You are to follow my instructions."

"Okay."

"I imagine," said Kiggins precisely, "you are to be my protector."

"That's ridiculous," George said. "Anyone molesting you would soon be frozen to death."

Kiggins ignored him and walked out of the terminal lobby. George followed her, an appreciative eye on her hip and thigh lines, which were not much disguised by the severe suit she wore.

The car, a rented one, was neither new enough nor large enough to stand out particularly. Kiggins drove. George leaned back in the opposite corner of the seat and complained, "I wonder when I'm supposed to sleep?"

VII

KIGGINS occupied a rather unique place in George's theme of things. His first impression had been that she was the coldest customer he had ever gone up against, but later began to suspect that appearances were deceiving, and that under the cool granite shell was a volcano.

He still was not sure.

He often thought of Kiggins as a neat white beehive. If somebody could pry the lid off, he'd bet there would be plenty of sting and honey inside. Once he had seriously proposed marriage to her. She had laughed at him in a way that had made him feel not exactly right for several days.

She was Chance Molloy's executive secretary. She had a precise, razor-edged efficiency that stood George's hair on end. Her salary was exactly equal to that of the vice-president of BETA. She lent an austere air to everything she did. With a look she could make George feel he had been handed a cake of laundry soap for use on his soul. George sometimes suspected she was in love with Molloy, but he was positive Molloy had never made a pass at her. Furthermore, if anything like that hap-

pened, George intended to quit BETA instantly.

George told her how he and Molloy had trailed Walheim to Chicago, to find that Walheim had flown to Chicago in order take the train back to New York which Julie Edwards had wired Martha she would be riding. He told of Fleshman, of the attempt on Julie's life, their conviction that Julie had—or Walheim thought she had—something of great danger to Walheim. He described Julie's loveliness with verve and enthusiasm, to see if Kiggins would react in any way, but she didn't.

"Now I come to the part I'm proud of," he said gloomily. "I hurried to the Western Union counter and got the message off. Going back, I'm in too much of a hurry to be my usual alert, wide-eyed self, or something. Anyway, up pops Bozo the fat boy—and *whammo!* I get it. Blackjack!" George snorted bitterly.

Kiggins drove silently, heading for Jackson Heights.

"This is the point for you to show sympathy," George said.

"Continue," she said.

"Okay," said George. "When I woke up I was minus my billfold and dough. I get off a phone call to the cops down the line—you know I was packing four hundred bucks!—to pinch Fatso. Then I scram out to the airport and find—it was lucky I was carrying another thousand in traveler's checks—me a guy with a plane. We bust out of there right ahead of the cold front, race it all the way down here."

They were moving slowly. The car windows, the windshield, except where the wipers were keeping two half disks clear, were frosted with tiny raindrops.

George sighed. "What are the local developments?"

Kiggins saw green light become red, precisely meshed gears and manipulated clutch, accelerated pedal. "I was assigned the job of watching the false Martha, as you know. At fifteen past four day before yesterday afternoon Martha left Walheim's hotel downtown, where she had gone in considerable excitement with the telegram from the girl in Missouri. She walked on Fifth Avenue for about an hour. She had dinner alone at a very noisy place on Broadway. She then visited four bars in succession, taking one drink in each, paying for one herself, and permitting men to pay for three. The men were trying to pick her up, apparently. This filled her time until nine, when she took a cab to her apartment in Jackson Heights."

The bookkeeperlike facility for detail had irritated George.

"All this time she was worrying?"

"Her actions so indicated. At her apartment she was handed a message by the telephone operator, saying a man had called and would call again."

"What name?"

"No name given."

"H'mmmmm!"

"The man," Kiggins added, "phoned again about twenty minutes later. He said he was coming right out. At ten minutes to twelve he appeared. Height about five feet ten, wiry build, gray hair, apparent age near fifty. Dressed in a light tan business suit, brown moccasin-type shoes, a hand-painted necktie, brown and yellow. Waiting in the apartment house for the operator to phone Martha, he lit a cigarette, using the last match in a folder, which he discarded. The folder was from the Arctic Castle Drive-in, on Hollywood Boulevard."

"From California, eh?"

"Possibly. Not necessarily."

"This guy from the West Coast—if he is—get to see Martha?" he asked.

"He went up to her apartment."

"Stay long?"

"All night."

"What do you know!" said George. "All night, eh? I thought that was Walheim's territory."

KIGGINS' disapproval — uplifted chin, severe line of lip—was sharply unlike. "You have a foul mind." Her words had keen edges, like a doctor's lancet. "In thirty minutes Martha left with an overnight bag and rode in a cab to the Copeland estate, where she spent the night. Her visitor remained

in her apartment. He had, incidentally, brought along a suitcase."

"Was she calmed down when she left?"

"On the contrary, no." Kiggins slowed the car and, ducking her head a little, tried to distinguish a street name sign, but without success, evidently, for she frowned. "Martha was more upset when she left, I would say."

George grinned slightly and said, "If I may venture into the sewer again—I wonder if there's anything between her and Copeland? She stayed all night out there, you said."

"The man we are discussing spent all of today at the Copeland place."

"The hell he did!"

A cat-spitting of raindrops had come in when the window was lowered and fallen across Kiggins' left cheek, her shoulder. She ignored it.

She said, "Profanity is the resort of a shallow mind and a starved vocabulary."

"That's the truth," George agreed. "From what I hear, this phony Martha babe looks as if she was put together with the facts of life in mind. I wonder whose bed—ahem—where she is sleeping tonight?"

Kiggins replied coolly, in an impartial, untouched way, "The Copeland estate."

"Tonight again!"

"Yes."

"And the new guy?"

"Presumably his plans included his occupying Martha's apartment again tonight. The telephone operator so indicated to me."

George grinned. "You bribed the PBX operator at the apartment, eh?"

"Yes," Kiggins said with sharp self-disapproval.

"That's what I like about you, baby," George told her. "Your high moral tone doesn't interfere with the facts of life. Where are we going now?"

"Martha's apartment house."

"Why?"

"The phone operator was supposed to find out for me, if possible, the man's name." Kiggins swung the car carefully around a corner, wary of the increasing wind and madly driven rain. "I reported to Mr. Molloy the information I have given you. Mr. Molloy's orders were to pick you up at the airport, then drop by Martha's apartment and learn whether the operator had ascertained the man's name."

George leaned back on the seat. His mind dealt with Kiggins' efficiency. She had permitted herself not an ounce of pride during the account she had just given him, yet he knew darned well she had done a job that would have stumped many a good detective.

Presently Kiggins curbed the car.

"I will be gone five minutes," she said.

"Which building is it?"

"Six-eight-seven-eight."

George watched Kiggins slide out of the car, draw a grass-green raincoat about her shoulders, and move away, coping quite calmly with the bustling wind. He surrendered to the temptation to drop his head back against the back cushion. He closed his eyes—oh-ho! None of that. No dozing off. He held the conviction that awakening him would be a job for a blacksmith with a hammer. He consulted his watch, then began, suddenly, to worry about Kiggins' welfare. What the hell was keeping her?

"Oh," he said, and watched Kiggins come to the car. He said, "Six minutes, that's what you took! You said five."

Kiggins said, "The man is away. He is supposed to be back and spend the night. He is supposed to be unable to find a suitable hotel room—which is quite possible—and be using Martha's apartment while she stays in emergency quarters at her employer's residence."

"Okay," George said.

"His name," said Kiggins, "is N.N. Nesbitt."

George's eyes grew round. "Who?"

"And we are going to search his luggage."

"Wait a minute! Who told you—"

Kiggins was coolly matter-of-fact. "That he was Nesbitt? The phone operator."

George gave his jaw a violent rubbing as if to erase surprise.

"Nesbitt—there's a guy, general man-

ager of Transfa Air Industries, Copeland's company."

"The same, evidently."

"Nesbitt!" he exclaimed. "So Nesbitt's in it with Walheim!"

SILENT, serene, Kiggins was pulling on dark gloves.

She said, "If you have gloves it might be well to wear them."

"We gonna search this Nesbitt's stuff now?"

"Yes."

"How do we get in?"

"The superintendent leaves his master key with the night phone operator. I have arranged with her."

"Wouldn't it be funny," George said grimly, "if this Nesbitt manages to get at Molloy or Julie?"

* * * * *

Chance Molloy, head up, eyes straight ahead, contemplated the part of the city before his hotel room window which night and snow did not obscure. Only a moment ago snow had come. The glassy flakes snapped and tinkled against the windowpane a few inches from his eyes.

"Really—really, now!" Nicholas N. Nesbitt's voice came at him. "I say, again, this is ridiculous, don't you think?" The man mixed wrath and mystification nicely.

Molloy's smile was thin. He said nothing.

"I should"—Nesbitt tried again—"walk right out of here!"

"Go ahead."

"You mean you would let me?"

The look on Molloy's face as he turned from the window was not calculated to ease the other man.

"You could try it," he said lightly. He walked to the telephone, swept up the handset, and said presently, "Operator, is there anything you can do to speed up my call to Los Angeles? Yes, please. And thank you." He dropped the instrument back in place.

Nicholas Nesbitt, poised on the chair edge, hands clamped to the armrests, elbows sticking out like half-folded wings, was glaring.

"Sir, are you threatening me?" he snapped.

"Threaten?"

"It sounded that way!"

The thin smile touched Molloy's face again. He said, "Put it this way: I don't feel that you could, having listened to as much of my story as you have—you could not, conscientiously, walk out. Not at this point. You are, Mr. Nesbitt, general manager of Transfa, a man who sees a thing through. A man of character." There was no more sincerity in this flowery speech than there had been in the patting movements which Molloy's hands had made.

Nesbitt held his poised-to-fly position on the chair.

"A very pretty speech, Mr. Molloy!" he said bitingly. "I wonder how much of it comes from the heart?"

"Oh, every bit," Molloy assured him.

"Then why do you think I'm a liar?"

"I don't."

"Your words, Mr. Molloy, bear blessed little relation to your actions, I must say!" He smacked the hands on his knees twice more for emphasis, added, "I certainly must say!"

"I believe you are N. N. Nesbitt," Molloy said.

"Hah! Then why are you calling the West Coast to check on it?"

"Oh, that! Merely to prove to myself that I am right in believing you are Nesbitt."

"Indeed! I am to swallow that?"

"Yes."

Nesbitt shot his head forward. "Next thing, you'll be saying you believe my statement that Martha is Martha."

"I believe in its sincerity."

"What?"

"You tell me the Martha here is the real Martha. I feel you sincerely want me to believe so for the time being."

"Hah! I'm a liar, and also a poor one. Is that it?"

Molloy shrugged, said, "You are a direct and outspoken man, Mr. Nesbitt, and that's a quality I like also."

Walking to the bedroom door, which was closed, Molloy bent his head attentively to the polished wooden panel, called, "Is all this keeping you awake?"

"Yes—no—I mean, I couldn't sleep anyway," Julie Edwards responded from the bedroom.

"It would be better if you got rest," Molloy said.

"Is Martha really here in New York after all?"

"Mr. Nesbitt says so."

"But is she?"

Patiently Molloy said, "Get what rest you can. We'll check on the Martha situation as soon as I check on Mr. Nesbitt."

HE HAD seen, by now, that Nesbitt was a sharp man. He supposed the fellow was really Nesbitt. The call to the West Coast—to Dike Pines, aviation editor of the *Times*, whom Molloy knew—should settle that. In the meantime he was studying Nesbitt, and firing arrows of suspicion at the story Nesbitt had told.

According to Nesbitt's story he had come to New York on company business—a special matter, an offer received for a large part of Transfa—and had been unable to find a hotel room. He had, rather than bother Paul Roger Copeland, telephoned Martha about the predicament, whereupon Martha suggested he occupy her apartment; she would stay at the Copeland estate, something she had done on other occasions. To this Nesbitt had agreed.

"Tonight," he had said, "Martha had to work late—Transfa is being liquidated, you know, and there is a lot of detail checking to do—and she could not get away. Martha said she had a friend named Julie Edwards arriving on the two o'clock train and asked me if I would meet the young lady for her. I, naturally, was quite willing."

Molloy had said, "So you were doing Martha a favor and meeting Julie at the station?"

"Exactly."

"Then what disposal was to be made of Julie?" Molloy's voice, asking this, had been deceptively unstirred.

"Why, there still aren't any hotel rooms. So I was going to take Miss Edwards out to the Copeland estate."

"And Martha is Martha?"

"What a crazy idea to think she isn't!" Nesbitt said explosively.

The man's voice rang with truth. That might mean nothing, and Molloy did not permit himself to be sold; not, actually, sold on anything. Nesbitt's story disagreed with facts. Martha was not the girl who was pretending to be Martha, Molloy knew absolutely.

His hand, as the telephone began ringing, was instantly clamped on the instrument. He listened to an operator's voice mixed with the voice of Dike Pines.

He said, "Dike? Chance Molloy—Oh, from New York. I'm up here on a sort of vacation. How are things?" He watched Nesbitt and listened to Dike Pines say things were all right. Molloy said, "That's fine, Dike. Listen, you may be able to help me out. Do you know N. N. Nesbitt, of Transfa? Uh-huh. What does he look like, what sort is he, and where is he now? Is he on the Coast? Tell me anything you think might help. I may have to go up against him in a business deal."

Nesbitt snorted.

Presently Molloy said, "Thanks, Dike. That will do it." He added good-bys, replaced the telephone on its cradle, swung his gaze to Nesbitt, and said, "Dike gave you a clean slate. Said he knew you personally."

"He does," Nesbitt said briefly.

"I was afraid he wouldn't. After all, Dike has only been on the *Times* a couple of months. Before that he was in San Francisco."

Nesbitt nodded. "It was in San Francisco I got acquainted with him. He did aviation for the morning paper."

"Yes, so Dike said. You had personal charge of the Frisco plant of Transfa, he said."

"That's right."

"A nice guy, Dike."

"He's okay."

"It's a small world." Molloy seemed interested in a faint bubbling, that came from the steam radiator. "Yes, a small world," he added. "Dike said he looked around for a house for you to rent when you transferred to Los Angeles last month. That does make it a small

world, doesn't it?"

There was no friendliness in Nesbitt's eyes. "I don't consider it remarkable enough to be a subject for endless conversation."

Molloy smiled amiably.

"Anyway, now I can put you down in my book as okay, Nesbitt," he said.

"That," snapped Nesbitt, "overwhelms me!"

Molloy's smile retained its pleasantness, widened. He said, "Does it?"

"I don't like" — Nesbitt's hands banged down on the chair arm rests— "to be made a fool of!"

"No one enjoys being made a fool of," Molloy agreed.

Nesbitt glared his feelings.

"Molloy!" He brought his arm up, leveled it. "I've heard of you! Heard some things that lead me to think you're a hard customer." He followed the pointing arm up out of the chair and shouted, "I understand, Molloy, that you've done well for yourself! They say you've got the whole South American aviation business by the tail, and, for you, a tail hold is as good as having a collar and chain on it. How do you do it? By methods that aren't always orthodox, I understand."

THE tirade had no effect at all on Molloy. He said quietly, "The word 'crook' has been applied to me—thoughtlessly in each case—before. Do you want to use it?"

"If I did I'd probably have to thrash you. I don't believe I could do that."

"I don't believe so either," Molloy said drily. "What are you leading up to with these theatrics, Nesbitt?"

"Theatrics? Hah!" The man thrust his head forward. "Molloy, I think you're playing a conniving game on me. A devious, hard, scheming skin game. That's what I think."

Molloy's laughter, hearty, actually amused, tumbled into the room. After he had gotten sincere enjoyment from the moment he rubbed a hand against the side of his face, chuckling as he did so. He slid off the table.

"Now we understand each other," he said.

Nesbitt's voice shook. "I warn you, warn you fairly, Molloy, you're not getting away with anything!"

"You—"

"I'm going to stop it, right now!" Nesbitt yelled. "How? I'll tell you how! Right now, this instant, we're going out and talk to Martha. And Copeland. He's going to know about these mysterious goings on."

Molloy shrugged. "It's all right with me."

"What?" Suspicion crossed Nesbitt's flushed face. "You're willing to talk to Martha and Copeland?"

"I had planned to do so."

"This Julie—"

A hardness came around Molloy's mouth.

Nesbitt wheeled, jabbed a hand toward the bedroom, said, "That girl goes along with us."

"I'll be the judge of that, my friend," Molloy said coldly.

Nesbitt was impressed. He locked gaze with Molloy, held the stair long enough to demonstrate that he was unafraid, then fell to contemplating the ceiling.

Molloy, lazily almost, went to the bedroom door. His knuckles hit firmly against the bedroom door.

VIII

JULIE EDWARDS called, and Molloy went in. She sat, fully dressed, in a chair.

"I gave up trying to sleep," she explained. "He's awfully mad, isn't he?" Julie nodded toward the other room.

He was oddly stirred by this girl. He already saw qualities in her that were strangely stirring, enough so that he was surprised at himself. Susceptibility wasn't a particular weakness with him. His requirements were set high.

Wondering, he thought, "I feel as if I knew a great deal about her."

He was not usually like that. His judgment was not usually so quick. Personalities, to him, were to be explored warily and at leisure, watching cause and effect. He preferred to measure the strength — buoyancy

against dashed hopes, greed against temptation, stoicism against pain. But he had drawn an affinity for this girl, a comfortable feeling of knowing her well. Emotionally, he felt, she contained great fires.

He said, "He's noisy, at any rate."

"Is he really N. N. Nesbitt?"

"There isn't much doubt."

"He—for the general manager of a big airplane company, he seems awfully excitable."

"Probably he's scared."

"Of you?"

He leaned over, bracing with an arm against the bed.

"He probably hasn't—this is a guess—told all he knows. Or suspects. He strikes me as someone, not particularly brilliant, who has worked hard and faithfully and applied himself to a groove for a long time, as a result achieving some success. Now, presented with a startling, a horrifying development—this is another assumption—which is far from the sort of thing he is used to coping with, he finds himself rattled. He's covering up disorganization with loudness. You'll notice he hasn't done the natural things, like calling a cop. He already knew we intended to confront the phony Martha and tell Copeland she was a fake. As for any effect I have on him, I think he purposefully exaggerated that. Part of the smoke screen."

"Is he—about Martha—lying?"

"Let's not go into that now." He was shocked by the apprehension that shook her. He leaned forward, took her hands, and added, "Listen, what I really came in here for was to decide whether to take you out to see this Martha."

"Yes! Yes, you must!"

"Okay." He came to his feet. "We'll go out to Copeland's now and wind up this nasty mess . . . ."

THE frozen wind came through the bedroom window of Martha's apartment that was open two inches. The inrushing air was holding out the heavy drapes. There was a Venetian blind, but its snapping, crackling, and whanging against the window casing had annoyed George, and he had raised it. The radiator under the window was wet from melted snow the gale had carried in.

Early in their search of the apartment Kiggins had made the remark that the place had a schizophrenic atmosphere. George hadn't known what she meant; she told him it was a split personality. Two personalities in one body. This was about all Kiggins had said during the hunt. She had worn her customary composure and an air of bitter disapproval. George didn't disapprove of what they were doing, but he did not like it. If a cop should bust in, or Walheim or Fleshman, it would be unhandy.

A moment ago they had found the newspaper clipping in N. N. Nesbitt's Gladstone which they were reading.

George scowled. His jaw took hard square angles. He stabbed a finger at the clipping, which they had placed on the end table.

"This, if you ask me, this is it!" he exclaimed.

"I think so, too," Kiggins said.

George threw breath out in a long, horrified rush. He was upset, shocked, by what he had read. He now realized the meaning of the text and his sympathy had automatically gone out to Chance Molloy.

He seized, with great effort, control of his voice.

"You wouldn't think a prominent guy, a man like Nesbitt, would leave a thing like this in his suitcase. He's general manager of Transfa, isn't he? Lord, what a fool!"

Kiggins gave no answer. She was reading again:

The mutilated body of a young woman, as yet unidentified, was taken from the sea near Palos Verdes Point at 3 P. M. today. Paulos Teracio, 123 Dine Avenue, Hermosa Beach, a fisherman, found the body lodged in a fish net. Dr. J. W. Walberger, of the crime laboratory, stated that the body, decapitated and handless, is apparently that of a woman about twenty-five years of age, above average height, red-headed—

George was shaking his head from side to side. "You'd think—right in his suitcase—he'd have better sense," he exclaimed.

KIGGINS folded the clipping slowly and neatly. She opened her purse and placed it inside. Then she arose and went to N. N. Nesbitt's suitcase, and, after placing her purse aside on the bed, began restoring Nesbitt's belongings to the positions they had previously occupied. That done, she lowered to exactly where it had been the Venetian blind George had raised. Retreating, she sank to a knee, tilted her head right, then left, observing whether the carpet retained their footprints noticeably.

In the living room her eyes made an appraising search, in the course of which they rested on a large hand-tinted photograph of Julie Edwards which stood on the table.

George noticed her examination of the photograph. "A nice babe," he said.

"Julie?" Kiggins asked emotionlessly.

"Oh-uh. Looks like her too. Good likeness."

Kiggins said nothing more. She turned and went to the hall door, tucked her purse under her left elbow, and employed her right hand to unsnap the door safety chain. She wore the air of being scandalized by what they had done. . . .

Iva Hurley, the telephone operator, lifted a hand that trembled with terror, and beckoned. George saw the signal as he and Kiggins got out of an elevator.

"A minute ago—a man!" Iva gasped. "He seemed to know you were upstairs. He—yonder!"

George looked and saw Chance Molloy.

"It's okay, sugar," he told the phone girl.

Molloy was standing in the space between the outer and inner doors, and he looked—silhouetted in a hard-planted, jaw-out attitude—to be a darkly formidable figure. George went toward him. Reluctantly, though, for George carried bad news.

"Is anything wrong?" George asked anxiously.

"No," Molloy said quietly. "It's fine." He looked beyond George and added, "Kiggins—"

"Yes, Mr. Molloy?"

"I want you to go downtown. The investment banking firm of Cranston, Gorr, and Dunlap—their office on Wall somewhere will be in the phone book—handles the Transfa financing. Find out, as soon as you can, all about Transfa, whether anyone connected with the management has been turning any financial handsprings lately. If they don't pump readily, and they probably won't, have someone—Gorr, if possible; I've heard he's all right—call me at Copeland's place. I'm going out there now."

"Yes sir." Kiggins gave him the same restrained, aesthetic disapproval she had been turning on George.

"Find anything upstairs?"

Kiggins bent her head suddenly. "Yes sir."

"What?"

She opened her purse and gave him the clipping.

"This," she said.

She lapped her raincoat over at the throat and buttoned it, and, seizing the brim of her severe dark hat, went out into the blizzard.

* * * * *

Copeland, standing on one foot, raised the other foot carefully off the floor. Encouraged, he swung the lifted foot back and forth vigorously and retained his balance. The maneuver, intended to verify his sobriety, was successful.

"Copey—" The girl was watching him. "Copey, you want to know a secret?"

"What, Martha?"

"It's a secret. I don't think I'll tell you after all."

His eyes, turned away from her, had taken a narrow sharpness. He made his expression bland and casual before he turned to her.

He said, "Want another drink?"

"Do you?"

"Not especially."

"Well, I do. And you're going to have one too, darling. I'm way ahead of you. I'll mix you one."

She came to her feet, and the effort of her first step met resistance from

the blanket she had thrown about herself, her surprised efforts to free the entangled leg came to disaster, and she she lost balance. She came down on the floor.

"The damn blanket!" she said.

He laughed.

She glared up at him. "What are you laughing at?" She hurled the luxuriant strands of wine-colored hair away from her face with a flouting motion of her head. "What's the idea?"

"I'm sorry," he said. He came over to help her up.

SHE pointed an angry finger up at him.

"So you think I'm funny! I suppose you think you're not smug, too."

"Okay," he said, without much meaning.

"You know what else you are?"

"Martha—"

"Tricky!" she said. "You're tricky."

He asked gravely, "Do you, or don't you, want me to help you get up?"

"No!"

"All right," he said. He went over and sat on the edge of the bed.

He had stopped drinking about two hours ago. He was not a man who needed alcohol; he had never been really drunk in his life. He was at a stage now of almost complete clarity of mind, somewhere about normal. He was also at a point where the girl, quite drunk, was disgusting him. Her lush beauty and voluptuous body were no longer as appealing as they had been.

He watched the girl. She was, he thought, essentially as coarse as any he had known. Quite a clever girl, of course, but with the soul of a tramp. A few drinks—well, a lot of drinks—had certainly changed her.

"Copey—" She was gazing at him coyly.

"Yeah?"

"You mad?"

"No. Why should I be?"

She held out her hands. "Come 'n' help me up, honey."

He sighed, went to her, and, standing behind her with his hands under her arms, got her on her feet. He took her to an armchair and placed her there.

When he would have turned away she seized his hand, said, "Don't run off, darling."

After hesitating, he pulled a footstool near the chair and sat on that. She kept hold of his hand.

She pouted up at him. "You're angry with me, aren't you?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

"You are. You are too." She squeezed his hand. "I'm always making nice people mad at me."

He said amiably, "I'll bet you don't."

She turned her mouth to him. "Kiss me," she said.

He kissed her, dutifully at first, then quite willingly as he was stirred.

Presently she drew away from him and said, "You know something though?"

"Eh?"

"You're tricky."

"So what?" he said.

"I am too," she said. "I'm tricky too. I know a lot of things."

His head was turned, and she could not see the narrowing of his eyes.

"For instance?" he said.

She leaned back. "Things some little girls never learn," she said.

"For instance?" he repeated.

She laughed. "You think I'll tell you? I won't. I never tell."

His gaze on the window was speculative, his thoughts inward. Presently he shrugged and said, "How about some sleep? It's almost daylight outside." He stood up. "I'll tuck you in."

Afterward he stood at the window—he had gone there to raise it, let some of the stale air out of the room—and he frowned out. He was not sleepy, but he was tired. Two or three inches of new, hard, diamondlike snow had fallen on the rounded, frozen drifts of old snow that were nearly two feet deep.

Copeland saw automobile headlights, blurred until they were like spots of cream, approaching. They were following, cautiously, the turns of the lane that led to the house. When the car drew closer he could distinguish the headlight beams as such, even see the mad-driven buckshot passage of snow-

flakes. The car stopped.

A man got out of the automobile, a woman, a second man. The first man stood, erect, motionless, eying the great house. He swung quickly, spoke a word, then came toward the door, and Copeland saw that this man was Chance Molloy. . . .

TENSION had taken a tight hold on Copeland's office. It stood, together with other emotions of which the most predominant was horror, on the faces of the four who were present.

"This is fact, Copeland," Molloy said. "All fact. I am leaving out nothing, that I know."

Copeland dampened his lips with the end of his tongue. "Proceed—to the end," he said.

The rampant blizzard, thanks to heavily storm-sashed windows and good heating, was present in the room in no way except in spirit; in faces still ruddy from exposure to it, in wind-rumpled clothing. In the form of three glistening water drops, two on N. N. Nesbitt's left shoe, one on his right, which melting snow had deposited.

Nesbitt, to all appearances, had been intensely absorbed in watching the globules of water for the last five minutes, and his interest continued unwavering. His breathing was quick, however, and his skin color, where the icy wind had not beaten ruddiness into it, was shades of cadaver gray.

Crumpled and gripped in a tight ball in Julie Edwards' fingers was a handkerchief she had not used. Silently, breathlessly, she listened. She had at no time broken her composure, as far as outward appearances went. When Molloy told her, on the way here, that the body described in the clipping from a Los Angeles newspaper was probably Martha's body—when she heard that, even, her emotions did not escape the forged steel chains of restraint.

She had no need, really, for sobs, tears, moans, hysterics. She was quite sufficient within herself to deal with suffering. She did not show much feeling, but it did not mean that she felt nothing. On the contrary, her taste for emotion, the bitter as well as other flavors, was highly developed. Pain to her meant more hurt than to most, just as ecstasy had more flavor to her than it had to an extroverted person.

A few drops of melted snow gave a bejeweled touch to her hair. She sat on a beige chair, and the placing of her arms, hands, the precise arrangemeant of her legs, all bespoke the self-awareness that, as she regarded it, was her burden.

Paul Roger Copeland likewise occupied a chair in an acutely nervous posture. His was a frozen attitude. He had dressed hastily, drawing a pair of slacks over his pajamas, thrusting his feet into Morocco slippers. He wore his pajama coat and a terry robe. He had combed his hair and it was quite neat.

From time to time he seized his lower lip between his teeth; at other times his jaw merely tightened, and wens of muscle would form ahead of his long and rather narrow ears. He looked much less composed than Julie, but more coldly controlled than Nesbitt.

Molloy spoke in a straight line. His words were chosen without hesitation; not once did he go back to rearrange a phrase or change a word to clarify his meaning. His tone, as coldly direct as the way he was telling the story, had timbre and precision that would have dominated those in the room even if he had been telling nothing that was important. His words had a hewing force. Each word cut a chip.

The story as Molloy told it was just the skeleton and the necessary sinew. At first he did do one thing he had not done when he told Julie Edwards the tale much earlier—he brought up the importance, to him, to BETA, his airline, of the engine parts and tools he had arranged with Martha to buy. He made it clear he needed the order, intended to get it. Elsewhere the story did not differ.

The phraseology of the cablegrams from Martha which had aroused his suspicions he gave word for word. He told of his discovery that Martha was not Martha, of Walheim's association with this Martha, the arrival of Julie's tele-

gram, the wild alarm of the plotters, Walheim's frantic trip to Chicago to intercept Julie, and the appearance of Fleshman, obviously a hired killer.

He said, "It is clear that they thought Miss Edwards carried evidence against them which Martha had sent her. That was my first belief also. I am now inclined to doubt its correctness." He swung to Julie Edwards, asked, "You recall the exact wording of your telegram?"

Julie had, visibly almost, to break her tension. "My wire to Martha, you mean?"

"Yes."

She nodded. "It was: 'Have reception committee Grand Central two A.M. train Friday. Bringing secret for you. Love Julie.' " She released each word with care, as if there was danger of more than one word at a time escaping.

"What was the secret?" Molloy asked.

"It—referred to my condition."

She saw Nesbitt's eyebrows shoot up, saw a knowing look cross Copeland's eyes briefly. They thought, she realized, that she meant she was pregnant.

She added quickly, "It meant that I was finally fed up with becoming an inward person. I felt that I was becoming more and more involved, to the exclusion of external things, in the system and detail of my own consciousness. Martha and I had discussed this. We had dealt with it in our letters. We had come to refer to it as my battle against my secret self—or simply as the secret."

Copeland swung his right hand in a surprised gesture, said, "System and detail of your consciousness. Isn't that thin?"

"A perfectly valid reason," Molloy said firmly. "There, gentlemen, is the probable reason for Walheim's murderous intent—a mistaken meaning which he read into the telegram!"

IX

WITH a single sentence Molloy now wound up his part of the explanations.

"Walheim and his henchman failed to murder anyone," he said, "and Mr. Nesbitt met us at the station, because he had been asked to do so by the phony Martha—the act an effort on her part to appear innocent in case the telegram was traced to her as a consequence of Julie's being murdered."

He swung to Nesbitt.

"All right, Nesbitt," he said. "Let's have yours."

Nesbitt stiffened, paled. "You don't think I'm— Are you accusing me?"

"The truth." Molly was impatient. "Just tell the truth."

Nesbitt's face grew turgid with emotion. "I—had hoped—" He put his hands together, clenched them. "All this—I couldn't believe—so fantastic." His gaze went to Paul Roger Copeland; his eyes pleaded with Copeland.

Copeland leaned forward. "Nesbitt, you came East from the Coast because of this, didn't you? You suspected that things were not well. Is that why you came to New York day before yesterday?"

"Yes, Mr. Copeland," Nesbitt said.

"You knew!"

"Yes—no—I mean, I wasn't certain."

Copeland shook with anger. "And you didn't tell me! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I—"

"Such an important thing, and you said nothing!" Copeland stormed bitterly.

Both of Nesbitt's hands made frantic gestures. "My position—the company's reputation—such a critical time—" He floundered desperately.

Molloy thrust in his direct, purposeful voice. He said, "Suppose we skip recriminations and find out from Mr. Nesbitt what aroused his suspicions. Can you tell us that, Nesbitt?"

"Oh yes!" Nesbitt assured him. "Although nearly all of my time has been spent at the San Francisco plant, I had once met Miss Martha Baxter. Before this girl, this fake Martha, came to New York I was introduced to her. I was shocked to realize she did not seem to be the Martha I had met. But Mr. Walheim, who performed the introduction, accepted her as Martha. I—

frankly—believed I must be mistaken. My memory, perhaps, had been at fault. But later—" He fell silent, shaking his head grimly.

"Later what?" Molloy's voice was sharp.

"Later, that newspaper clipping—the body found. A red-haired woman of Martha's age."

Molloy held the same solid stance he had held throughout, except that now his hands were together behind his back.

He said, "That wasn't all, was it?"

"Well—"

"Come on, come on—we haven't all day," Molloy said briskly.

"I had discovered"—Nesbitt's head came up—"signs of irregularities. A rumor came to me—a trusted employee of the company, his word given in confidence—told me that Walheim was selling Transfa property only to those who paid him substantial secret sums. These sums could be extorted because aircraft materials were scarce. They were over and above the sale price shown on company books."

"How were the book prices?"

"Eh?"

"Higher or lower than the current market?"

"Lower, if anything, never higher," Nesbitt said. Then he added quickly, "There was, you must understand, no marked discrepancy. It had merely seemed to me that in cases more money could have been obtained for given lots, but in the face of Walheim's assurances to the contrary—I was not, I should explain at this point, too familiar with selling; my end had always been production—I was deceived. Perhaps I was guilty of stupidity. I don't think so.

"In case you are not familiar with the Transfa setup, I will say that the San Francisco plant did the bulk of manufacturing, but that assemblage and distribution centered in the Los Angeles plant, hence the dissolution sales were almost entirely in Los Angeles. In a measure that helps explain my ignorance and my unfortunate reliance, on Walheim, whose position with the company, I also want to add, was almost the equal of my own."

"To put it in the nutshell," Molloy said, "a man had to pay a little graft to get scarce material at market price or a bit below."

"Yes. Exactly."

Molloy struck his palms together. "Now I know what happened to my engine parts and tools," he said.

NESBITT met Copeland's sardonic gaze for a moment, then avoided it. Silence came to rest in the room. The morning sun, rising, penetrating the somber pall of the snowstorm, had thrown more and more pearl-colored light through the windows. The electric lights seemed pale and were hardly necessary any longer.

The vehemence slowly left Molloy. He noticed the white-drawn composure on Julie Edwards' face and read, rightly, the strain that was within her. He went over and placed a hand on her shoulder, but did not speak, because he had too much understanding to try to help her with words. Words, even the gentlest ones, would be like brickbats.

He had feelings himself. He had been touched deeply by tragedy—Martha Baxter had once been very close to him. He still carried much of that closeness. So he was stabbed, tragically stabbed, by Martha's death, and the circumstances of the crime doubled the stomach-pit force of the blow. But he held his feelings with a display of the hard strength that was one of his strong points.

Paul Roger Copeland cleared his throat, came forward on his chair, and said, "Molloy, would it surprise you to say I've suspected chicanery?"

Molloy's eyebrows climbed slightly.

"Have you?" he said.

"Yes," Copeland said. "I have."

"I see."

Copeland brought up a hand and held it poised, saying, "You seem doubtful. Don't be. Listen to me before you doubt. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"I'm no mental wizard, but I'm not completely a fool either." Copeland

dropped the hand. A wry grimace twisted his mouth. "A fool, perhaps, but not completely. You see, I had never met Martha Baxter. It was easy for the impostor to deceive me. All she needed, actually, was red hair and a good general knowledge of Transfa affairs. This woman has both."

He hesitated, and the grimace played on his lips again. "Oh yes. I'll admit I was, for a while, taken in. She suckered me. I don't know too much about Transfa, and that helped her. Oh-ho! She took me in, all right." He doubled his hands into fists and scowled. "The best I've been able to do is become vaguely suspicious of something wrong. I'll admit that too."

Molloy was composed. He commented quietly, "Your misgivings were too vague to act upon?"

"Oh, I acted."

"Yes?"

Copeland came suddenly to his feet. "By God!" he exclaimed. "Tricky—that's what she said. And what she meant. 'Things some little girls never learn!' She said that! Hell, it's as clear now as mud!"

"What are you talking about?" Molloy asked.

"The phony!" said Copeland excitedly. "She got—I got her—pretty drunk last night. I did it deliberately. And I found out what was what. Well—I did find out this—she's cunning, and knows it."

"Where is she now?"

"Upstairs, drunk." Copeland swung purposefully to the door. "You know what I'm going to do? Bring her down here right now. Surprise her with you. She's tight—you can work on her, scare the whole thing out of her. I'll go get her."

Molloy was offhand. "Do that," he said.

The stairs lifted, in the grand old-fashioned way, in a spiral sweep to the second floor. The color motif of balustrade and walls was cream touched with gilt, and the carpeting on the stair risers was absinthe green. There was a tone of self-conscious dignity overlaid with decadent richness.

Paul Roger Copeland went up the steps heavily, twice breaking his stride, lapsing into half pauses, as if he were weighing whether to turn back. The indecision left him, however. By the time he reached the top he had charted a course, and he went down the corridor with firmness.

He went into the bedroom. Like all the rooms, this one had high-flung ceilings, frescoed walls, towering windows. The heavy drapes were drawn; the diffused pale sunlight came through the windows and spilled, like a poor grade of skim milk, over floor, a chair, the bed on which the woman slept.

Copeland closed the door softly. His hand on the knob kept the latch withdrawn until the door was closed, then he released the knob gently. He moved to the bed, making almost no sound.

AS HE looked down at the woman his breathing bated. His face became congested with feeling. His hands clenched. Somewhere on the house the gale seized a shutter, wrenched it free of its fastenings, banked it violently closed. He gave a frenzied start at the sound. He trembled violently, arms and knees; a furious tic made his left cheek twitch.

"Martha," he said hoarsely.

She slept on her back. Her breathing was heavy, just short of snoring. She did not stir.

"Martha!" He shook her. "Hey—wake up."

"Mmmmmmm," she mumbled. She did not awaken.

He leaned down. Her breath was heavily fumed with alcohol; about her already was the full-bodied odor of a woman sleeping.

"Wakeup!" He slapped her, shook her, hauled her to a sitting position by seizing her shoulders, and shook her again.

She stared at him through a bleary film. "G'way!" she said thickly. "Lemme sleep. Lemme alone."

"Martha—"

"Whatsa matter a girl can't sleep?"

His hands, clamped hard on her shoulders, wrenched her violently from

side to side, backward and forward. Her darkly red hair was tossed about, tangled.

"Cut that out!" she gasped angrily.

"You're drunk." He seized her hair, held her head up by the grip. "You're drunk, but you've got to get this. Listen! Can you understand me?"

"Ouch! You're hurting me!"

"Chance Molloy is here," he said bitterly. "Are you too drunk to get that?"

She struck at his hand, tried, unsuccessfully, to break its grip on her hair.

"Who's Molloy? The hell with him! I'm sleep—leggo me!" She endeavored to scratch his face.

He said, "Martha's friend, Julie Edwards, is here."

"The hell with Mar—" Her face sagged. Terror mixed with the stupor in her eyes. "Martha—how'd she—she can't be here! Martha's dead. You killed her yourself."

"Not Martha," he said coldly. "Martha's friend, Julie Edwards. The one who sent the telegram."

She mumbled, "Martha—come back to life? The hell you say." She giggled crazily at him. "The hell with you, Mr. Lots-of-bucks. There is no such thing as a ghost. You can't kid me."

"You're too drunk to understand anything!" he threw at her.

"I wanna sleep. The hell with the spooks."

He took his hand away from her hair. She flopped back, closed her eyes, mumbled, "Always somebody takin' joy outa life." She fell to breathing deeply, and her lower lip fluttered with each outthrown breath.

Copeland withdrew a single swift step backward, pallid with rage. A foot came down on the empty liquor bottle, and the bottle rolled, but he caught himself. He kicked the bottle, but it did not roll far. It spun around and around on the thick carpet.

Lost in desperation, Copeland raised a hand and gave his chin long thoughtful pulls; the dark lean fingers crowded the flesh together, and the day-old beard rasped with the harshness of sandpaper. He was, in many ways, more emotionally stable than he had been. His purpose was settled and black. He knew what he would—had to do. He did not particularly dislike the job. Successive shocks had driven him into a detached condition of mind where anything he did would not grip him much.

When a door opened—the door to the connecting sitting room—and he looked up and saw Walheim, and Fleshman behind Walheim, he was not even specially shocked.

"Hello, Paul," Walheim said.

"Hello."

"We didn't know if it was you," Walheim explained. "We stepped in here to wait." His back-tilted head indicated the room behind him.

"I didn't know you had arrived."

"We got here about five minutes ago." Walheim walked to the bed and looked down at the woman. There was no particular feeling in his gaze. Presently he said, "She climbs in everybody's bed, doesn't she?" There was not much feeling in that either.

Fleshman had moved forward a couple of paces and paused uncertainly. He gave the appearance of being relaxed, but there was perspiration on his round, soft face. He was not wearing his hat. He carried it in his hands, politely. There were unmelted sprinklings of snow on his overcoat, quite a bit of it lodged in one trouser cuff, mute corroboration of Walheim's statement that they had but lately arrived.

"Chance Molloy is here," Copeland said.

"Uh-huh. We were afraid of that. We saw the car out front and figured you had him for a visitor. That's why we eased in the back way." Walheim pocketed his hands, turned from his contemplation of the woman. "Who's with him?"

"That girl, Julie Edwards. And Nesbitt."

"Nesbitt too, eh?" Walheim said wryly. "That nosy so-and-so!"

Fleshman parted moist lips, asked, "The police?"

"No cops."

"Ah." Fleshman brought out a handkerchief, wiped mouth and face. "I was afraid there would be police."

COPELAND spoke to Walheim.

"We made a mistake, a tragic mistake, about Julie Edwards."

"Yeah?"

"She has nothing against us." Copeland's voice climbed. "Nothing! You hear me? Martha mailed her nothing. The telegram—the phrase about a secret—referred to the Edwards girl becoming a small-town poky, or something like that."

Walheim laughed bitterly. "A lot of whoop over nothing," he said. "Well, I still say we were wise not to take chances." Shaking his head, he happened to notice Fleshman and realize introductions had not been performed. He indicated the fat man. "This is Fleshman."

"He is the one you mentioned?"

"Uh-huh."

Copeland wheeled, went into the bathroom, and came out with a straight-edged razor. He handed the razor to Fleshman. He pointed at the woman on the bed.

"Suicide," he said.

Fleshman held the razor in gloved hands. It had carved mother-of-pearl side plates and a shining spotless blade. He bent his head agreeably.

"Is this a good idea?" Walheim asked.

"Why not? She commits suicide. You and Fleshman hide out. I saddle the whole blame on her, or as much of it as I can." Copeland shoved his head forward savagely. "Listen! Molloy hasn't a damned shred of proof that will stand up in court, if that woman is out of the way. I want her out! Understand!" Rage carried his tone upward. "She knows too much. She knows I'm in it. She's guessed that."

Unfeelingly Walheim said, "I was afraid she'd get too smart for her health."

"Do it as soon as I'm outside—immediately. Then leave."

"Right."

Copeland gave Fleshman a wild look. "Is he—will he—"

Walheim was buttoning his overcoat. "Don't worry about Fleshman," he said. "He hasn't done too well on the Edwards girl, but I'm sure he can cut an unconscious woman's throat. It would be too hard on his reputation if he fell down this time." He opened the corridor door for Copeland and whispered, "You have nothing to fret about, Paul."

Copeland left the room, and Walheim closed the door behind him. Copeland descended the stairs slowly, troubled with a looseness of the knee joints. . . .

Chance Molloy knew he did not have enough evidence to convict anyone of murder. He could not, in a court of law, back up his dark suspicions.

He sent a direct warning to Nesbitt. "Sit down in that chair and wait, Nesbitt," he said.

"It's been—several minutes. Perhaps the woman has escaped." Nesbitt's lips shook. He sank back on the chair.

Molloy seemed relaxed. Actually he was not. He was taking a hard chance. He was following a line of action that was daring, risky; it might come to no good end. But he was going through with it. If it failed he would take the consequences, and try again. Those guilty, he was unalterably determined, would pay for Martha's murder.

Julie Edwards swung toward the office door, stiffened.

"I hear footsteps!"

Molloy nodded. He had heard the footsteps too. He called, "Who is it?"

"It's me—Copeland," came a sick voice.

"Well, come in, man. Is the woman with you? Bring her in."

Copeland came into the office alone. He did not look well.

"She — killed — herself," he said hoarsely.

"What?"

"Molloy, she—Oh, my God, man!" Copeland put his hands over his face.

"What's that?" Nesbitt yelled. "You say she killed herself?"

"Y-yes."

"How did it happen?"

"A razor. She—"

Molloy was composed. He said, "You were going to bring her down here without letting her know what she was in for."

"Yes. Yes, I was. I—that is what

I intended." He got a good effect with jerking his words out. "But—but she wasn't as drunk as I supposed. She got suspicious. She said some nasty things —she has an awful tongue. I think—suppose—I lost my temper and gave it away. I think I said: 'Cut that out. We know all about you. We've got the goods on you.' Yes, I think that's what I said. She—she became terrified." He clamped both hands to his face, which was pale enough, and continued, "She ran into the bathroom. My razor —she took it and she—" He threw out his hands wildly and moaned, "God, I hope never to see another such sight as long as I live."

"Dead!" Nesbitt cried. "She's dead!" He whirled on Molloy, screamed, "Molloy, you are responsible for this!"

MOLLOY brought up one hand. The gesture, commanding, was enough to silence Nesbitt; the frown that followed it commanded Nesbitt to restrain himself.

"We will go up and look into this," Molloy said.

Copeland cried, "First, a doctor!"

"Didn't you say she was dead?" asked Molloy drily.

"I don't— Man, if you had seen that razor!" Hands, arms, cheeks, all participated in the shudder that Copeland gave.

Molloy was not much affected. He saw with satisfaction, however, that Julie was outwardly tranquil.

"You had better come along," he said to her. "Safety in numbers, you know."

He used the polished toe of his shoe to touch the door, swing it a little wider. The tone in which he spoke to Copeland was reserved, bleakly expressionless.

He said, "Will you show us the way upstairs, Mr. Copeland?"

"But a doctor—"

"Later."

Mounting the grand sweep of staircase, they were in dispersed order—Copeland ahead, then Nesbitt, and Julie beside Molloy, quite silent. They were all silent. The absinthe-colored carpeting was thick; it took their footsteps and made them nearly noiseless.

Julie's hand found Molloy's arm. He glanced down at her, gave her, over his concentration on the grim business at hand, warmth and encouragement. He had sensed that she was appealing to him silently, and he was gratified. And again he wished for more normalcy, so that he might investigate the emotions she seemed to arouse in him. He wanted to test the feelings, weigh them, and balance them against the many other factors that infatuation should be balanced against.

They were in a hall. There came, momentarily, a lapse in the force of the blizzard, and the absence of the storm as a background sound effect was acutely noticeable. For a few seconds the wind no longer pounced on gables or breathed hard around eaves, or made beams creak, or clattered shingles. The resulting silence, by comparison, was much too intense.

It seemed an abnormal and too clear stillness.

"What door?" asked Molloy.

"That one." Paul Roger Copeland pointed shakily.

"Go in."

"I—" Copeland held back.

"Go in," Molloy said.

Copeland opened the door and, head down, eyes averted, went slowly into the room.

George's voice sounded bleakly in the room.

"Come in," George said. "But be careful."

Molloy stepped inside himself.

"So you made it."

"Uh-huh," George said. "I ain't made it all the way though. They still got whatever they're packing in the way of guns. I ain't quite got up the nerve to search 'em."

In the bedroom it was now still, except when the wind nuzzled the window and rattled its sash. The hard sugar-like snow, driven against the sides of the house and rebounding, was occasionally carried past the window in streamers that resembled trailing tobacco smoke. But in the bedroom it was cozy. . . .

X

VASTLY troubled, George had watched Walheim and Fleshman. He had watched them as a cat would eye two rats, confident of dealing with either rodent separately, but apprehensive lest one, perhaps both, escape if he moved on them together. "You haven't quite got us, you know," Walheim said.

"You think not?" George had asked.

"We're armed. Would it do any good to offer you money?" Walheim inquired.

"No."

"Say quite a large sum?"

"Shut up," George said stolidly.

He did not think of the money. There was no tremor in his loyalty. A solid man and unshakable, he was concerned only about how they could finish this without somebody getting shot. George stood firmly, his hat sat squarely on his head. There was a small pool of melted snow in the indented crown of his hat, and another pool was retained by the hat's upturned brim. His damp overcoat hung limply. The gun was steady in his hand, his eyes were alert, his face impassive.

Fleshman cleared his throat hoarsely. The fat man tried his hand.

"Use your head."

"I am. Use yours. Don't try to pull anything."

"You'll be sorry."

"Shut up."

Fleshman sulked. His head hung forward and his lips pouted and the upper one protruded. The fat man did not like suddenness, surprises, hardness, and George was all of these.

The fat man spoke to George peevishly. "You were watching the back door, huh?"

"No."

"But—"

"I was watching the woman," George said. "Mr. Molloy sent me ahead to keep an eye on her." Small beads of moisture that were not melted snow stood on George's upper lip. "That door I came out of, is a closet. I was there all the time. . . ."

Molloy stood poised, tense. He had, in an instant, weighed the situation, and it was bad. Walheim and Fleshman were trapped—and yet they weren't. They were not disarmed. Walheim, in particular, was on the edge of desperation and might do anything. Walheim was evidently like that, a man whose need was to meet a climax with physical action.

Walheim would be a man whose idea of hell, in a climax, was to do nothing. The man, inflamed, was dangerous.

"The woman alive?" Molloy asked.

"Yeah," George said. "They were going to work on her throat with a razor. I stopped that."

The razor, open, Molloy saw on the floor. Its mother-of-pearl handle, its unstained blade, glistened.

The woman lay on the bed. She was sleeping. Her face was loose and sensuous, petulant in sleep, rather than evil. The blanket concealed her body from the collarbone down, except for one pink curving leg that was uncovered. Her breathing made the most noticeable sound in the room.

Molloy's eyes went back to Walheim. The man, Molloy thought bitterly, is going to take the crazy chance.

Paul Roger Copeland pointed wildly at George. "This man—who is he?"

No reply came from Molloy. He was watching, laying grim plans for action. Preparing for the holocaust that, if he had read Walheim rightly, would break in a moment.

"I'm George," George said. He was not taking his eyes from Walheim.

"But—"

"How come I'm here?" George said. "How did that happen? You want to know? Brother, I'll tell you. Mr. Molloy figured no head of a big company like Transfa was dope enough to be fooled by a phony dame, specially a phony dame who had held a job as important as Martha held. That just wasn't reasonable. It wasn't logical. The only answer was that you were pretending to be fooled. And where did that reasoning lead us? It led us to figuring you were one of them. We didn't know you personally killed Mar-

tha, though."

"That's ridiculous!"

"Another thing," George said. "You're pretty damn healthy. You're supposed to be selling Transfa on account of illness. But you're pretty damn healthy, ain't you?"

"I'm not involved!" Copeland wailed.

"That's very funny."

"I tell you I know nothing of all this!"

"You think I wasn't in that closet there?" George asked. "You think I didn't listen to you tell these guys to knock off the woman? You think I didn't?"

"You heard?"

"Sure. I heard it."

MOLLOY was listening. It was coming now. Walheim's posture had not changed; he gave few outward signs; there was no do-or-die clenching of teeth and no clenched muscles. But it was coming now.

Fleshman was horrified. He had sensed Walheim's decision. He would, of course, go along with Walheim. But he was sick of the thought of violence, at the idea of George's bullets driving into his belly. The fat man's temperament was one that mostly revolved around his belly anyway. The only things he really valued had to do closely with his physical comfort—good food in his stomach, soft places to sit, silk underwear.

Now! It was now! Walheim was moving for George, and Fleshman moved too. The stillness in the room was broken apart by two shots, and it seemed in an instant that Marcus Walheim was quite dead there on the floor.

A silly pouting grin twisted Fleshman's lips, and he sat down. It was the hurt grimace of a fat man whose gluttony, laziness, and overdependence on others had led to disaster. He began to sob. There was no real hardness in him anywhere. The big smeary tears rolled down his cheeks. Both his hands pressed tenderly over the place in his abdomen where George's bullet had entered.

George looked at his handiwork stupidly.

"They jumped me," George said. "They—I had to . . . Well, there wasn't anything else to do." He stared down dazedly at the gun dangling in his hands.

Molloy's attention went to the bed. The woman was sitting up there. Her eyes were wide open, too widely open, as if the alcoholic stupor had not been fully dispelled. Her lower lip drooped, her shoulders sagged, and she was pale, as if there was no warmth in her flesh.

George peered at her.

"Oh, the rumpus woke her up," he said. . . .

Paul Roger Copeland fled silently down the stairs. He knew each inch of the steps, because he had climbed them countless times as child, youth, and man, and he was able to go silently, without stumbling. It was on these same stairs that, as a boy, he had played and imagined himself as a dashing corsair, rapier-keen, seizing prizes at will—boldly, audaciously, without regard for the rights of others.

Copeland turned his head furtively, glancing back. Chance Molloy was still in the room, and Julie Edwards. Nesbitt too. They were, for the moment, too shocked by what had happened to notice Copeland's flight.

Copeland opened the front door, slipped out, taking the key, which he inserted in the lock from the outside, locking the door. He stumbled through the snow to Molloy's car.

The key was not in the ignition lock. Molloy must have taken it. Copeland began running away through the snow, head down against the wind.

There was a cry behind him but he did not turn his head. He knew, instinctively, it would be George leaning from the bedroom window. The snow hampered him and he applied more effort, drove muscles harder. He heard a vague yell:

"Stop! Stop!"

The icy air cut his lungs; it came into his throat like flame. He could now, strangely, see himself with cruel, naked clarity. A man of cruel cunning, a man who chose to seize rather than earn what he wanted, an opportunist.

His ears pounded now until he could hardly distinguish the hammer of shots behind him.

If only the frozen air didn't hurt his lungs so! The pain struck sudden and sharp now, and he stumbled—he stumbled and then went down tiredly, throwing his thin dark face into the snow and letting it remain there. Unwillingly he gave his last gasping breaths to the tiny hard flakes of snow. . . .

The Copeland servants, law-abiding, gathered in the kitchen as they arrived. A brief shrewd questioning each underwent at the hands of the police—Was Mr. Copeland away during the first two weeks of November? Was he in California at that time? Had he seemed upset after that date?—filled their honest hearts with shock, doubts, wide-eyed apprehensions.

Cramer, Jonathan Cramer, the butler, lived on Woodbury Av., near Cold Spring Harbor station, and owned a modest garage and two service stations. Effie Burt, upstairs maid, lived with her son and had savings of eighteen hundred dollars. She was fifty-four. Cramer was sixty-two. They were old family retainers. The Copeland tradition had thrown strong roots into them. They were horrified. They hardly believed it true.

"Lying there in the snow, so peaceful like." Mrs. Karen, the cook, dabbed her eyes. "He was a—a good boy. I don't care what they say. He wasn't bad, not really."

MRS. Karen always arrived earliest. She had seen the body before it was taken away.

"There in the snow!" She sniffed. Her red old eyes filled again. "They say he murdered some girl named Martha!" she wailed.

"Mr. Walheim was killed too," said Gruber, the chauffeur. He was younger, forty-six, and not much of a sentimentalist. "A fat guy—wonder who he was?—got plugged in the stomach. Walheim—you know, there's a lad I never went for. Never did like him." He lifted a toothpick from a holder, leaned back, picked his teeth. "To tell the truth, as for Mr. Copeland, I always wondered if he would come to a bad end."

The others glared at him. He subsided. Mrs. Karen sobbed loudly.

Ivan, the gardener, said, "Them cops, they ask me when we stop livin' here on the estate. I never did stay here. What they wanna know that for? Cramer and Effie, you're the only ones that lived here. They ask you about that, huh?"

"Yes—yes, I was asked that." Cramer, the butler, looked frightened. "I told them the way it was. After Mr. Copeland came back from that trip he took early in November, he said we needn't stay here. They—the police—wanted to know why. Why?" He threw up his hands. "Why? How do I know? That's what I told them—how would I know?"

"Maybe it had somethin' to do with this," suggested the chauffeur. . . .

Chance Molloy stood solidly before the window, head back, half-watching the frigid winds of the cold air mass, high in the sky, scrub away the last traces of storm clouds. The sun, now uncovered, shone blindingly in a clear heaven, but here on the ground the hard gale, piling the loose snow in drifts, then tearing the drifts apart, made it seem that the blizzard was unchecked.

He stirred. Kiggins had come into the room accompanied by a heavy, jovial man who was briskly palming the cold from his cheeks.

Kiggins said, "Mr. Albin Verrill Gorr, Mr. Molloy. Mr. Gorr is of Cranston, Gorr, and Dunlap."

But Chance Molloy already knew Gorr. He put out a genial hand and said, "Good to see you again, Gorr."

Then he introduced Gorr to Julie Edwards, George, to Officers King and O'Riley, to Assistant District Attorney Gerling, to a CAA inspector named Dodson, and omitted to introduce him to the phony Martha and N. N. Nesbitt, whom Gorr already knew.

Gorr didn't waste time.

"So you want a motive?" he said.

Molloy nodded. "Mr. Gerling"—he inclined his head toward the assistant

D.A.—"seems to feel that Copeland was a wealthy man, so why should he swindle himself?"

"Wealthy? Copeland?" Gorr snorted. "He was flat broke."

"What?" gasped Gerling.

"That's right. Copeland was just about the brokest man you could find anywhere. The facts are going to come out, so I don't see any reason for trying to keep it quiet now."

Gerling shoved his head forward, said, "Wait a minute! Who are you? On what authority do you base such a statement?"

"Authority! Hah!" Gorr slapped his hip where he kept his pocketbook. "Authority, he asks! Listen, brother, the firm of Cranston, Gorr, and Dunlap handled financing for Transfa Aviation, and we kept—it's lucky we did—a rein on the outfit. This pocketbook is my authority." He yanked a calfskin purse out of the hip pocket, waved it. "You see how flat this is? Well, it would be flatter if we hadn't forced Transfa on the market."

"I don't believe I understand."

"Figures? You want figures?"

"No, no. Just a broad picture."

"We're Copeland's bankers," Gorr said. "It's our money, our client's money, anyway, that went back of Transfa. We weren't too hot, even when we went into it we weren't too hot about Copeland. But he had a name—wealthy family tradition, already in the aircraft business with a small plant." Gorr shrugged. "We backed him figuring he couldn't fail to get rich in the aircraft business with a war going on. But Copeland was no good as a businessman. He barely made ends meet. During the war, mind you, he couldn't show a profit! Where do you think that put us? I'll tell you where it put us—we had to force sale of Transfa assets, get our money out before the bumbling idiot lost it for us. His health? Hah! An alibi!"

"Out of the proceeds of the Transfa sale Mr. Copeland would have gotten just how much?"

"The clothes he stood in, if he was lucky," Gorr said drily. "If you knew the investment business you'd know that."

THE assistant district attorney tugged at his chin. "Mr. Molloy has—ah—suggested a sum, perhaps reaching a figure of—shall we just say a shocking figure—"

"Shocking is right!" yelled Gorr. "Right out of our pockets, Copeland was stealing it!"

N. N. Nesbitt shuddered. This Mr. Gorr—he had heard of the fiery Mr. Gorr—would, he was almost certain, be the boss of Transfa from here on. Mr. Gorr's first act, Nesbitt thought with horror, would probably be to fire him, Nesbitt, together with everyone else who had been stupid enough to let a thing like this grow under their noses.

Fired! The thought turned Nesbitt's mouth dry. He felt helpless, the victim of circumstances. He had meant well. All his life Nesbitt had meant well, and he had worked hard and honestly for his employers, always. Now, to be trapped, tarred with the black brush of scandal—the thought cut to the heart.

He turned, distraught, his eyes to Chance Molloy. He wanted to appeal to Molloy for help. It seemed to him that Molloy was a man of keen perception, quite able to weigh and value another man. He wished Molloy would weigh and value him and place the result before these others. That was all he wanted, to be valued fairly.

Mr. Gorr was shouting now.

"Swindling us!" he bellowed. "Right under our noses! A swindler! A murderer! And right under the noses of all the dopes working for Transfa. What ailed them that they couldn't see it?"

Chance Molloy dropped a quiet statement. "Let us be fair to Mr. Nesbitt."

"Nesbitt. What did he do?"

"If any credit is due Nesbitt rates a full share." Molloy's pleasant smile, his genial hand movement, included Nesbitt. "Mr. Nesbitt had the insight, propelled by far less stimulus than some of us, to perceive all was not well with Transfa. With rare courage—it takes courage, I assure you, to accuse the

owner of your company of murder—with that kind of courage in his heart, Nesbitt came to New York to settle the business." Molloy's voice rang with complimentary mellowness as he finished, "Without Mr. Nesbitt, we might well have failed. We owe him everything."

Nesbitt blushed.

Gorr shot out his hand to Nesbitt. "I'm glad to hear about this, Nesbitt. I sure am. Glad to hear one man in Transfa had his eyes open."

Nesbitt glowed. Inwardly and outwardly he was suffused with warm relief. He was saved. His career, the shining tower he had built so carefully, was unblackened and unshaken; it could continue to grow cleanly. His gratitude to Chance Molloy was limitless; his eyes shone; he wished he might, spiritually at least, throw himself at Molloy's feet.

Later he did pump Molloy's hand warmly, say, "A great kindness, Mr. Molloy. I thank you. Mr. Gorr has just told me I will remain in charge of Transfa. That, I feel, is full justification."

Molloy's firm handclap fell on his shoulder.

"That's fine, Nesbitt," Molloy said genially. "I imagine you'll be off to the Coast soon, eh? I did hope we'd have more time together. Oh well, I can take up the matter of those engine parts and tools I bought from Martha. We can take that up by mail, eh?"

Nesbitt's shoulders squared. "You will, Mr. Molloy, get everything you bought. Every bolt. You have my word."

"Well, thanks," Molloy said.

Head up, eyes ahead, the square of his shoulders as exact as if a carpenter had laid them out, Nesbitt strode out of the room. Molloy—what a fine man! Nesbitt was completely impervious, wouldn't accept, any idea that Molloy might have contrived to set him back on his little stool as general manager of Transfa in order that he, Molloy, might be sure of getting his parts and tools. Never. Molloy had not done that.

Chance Molloy, watching him leave, employed a forefinger to rub a shrewd discerning expression from his lips. . . .

ANNA GRIEDES felt the firm hand of Officer O'Riley fall on her shoulder. Anna Griedes flinched. The policeman's touch had struck a sick note of finality. This, she thought dumbly, is the end of pretty, sharp-witted little Anna Griedes who was valedictorian of Indigo, Colorado, High School, class of 1935. The end of wiser, knowing Anna Griedes, who wanted to be an actress in pictures; and of Anna Griedes, calculating wench, courtesan, sometimes strumpet.

"Come on, Miss—uh—Martha, if that's what you still call yourself," said Officer O'Riley.

"I'm not Martha."

"That's no news to us," Officer O'Riley said.

Anna Griedes moved her head slowly and stupidly, her eyes searching the unfriendly faces in the room. Her gaze rested finally on Chance Molloy, not because his attitude was any less adamant—rather she sensed that if anyone was dominant here it was Molloy. She wanted to appeal to him, point out to him that she owed her life to him—hadn't Copeland-Walheim-Fleshman been about to murder her?—and that she was grateful.

Wouldn't he, Molloy, help her, at least to the extent of withholding his vengeance? He could. Oh, he could. And she would do anything in return for the mercy—take a prison term without whimper, testify to the truth. After all, she knew the details of almost every crooked deal involved. Her frantic unspoken appeal went out to Molloy.

"Let's go, toots," said Officer O'Riley. "The wagon's waiting."

Chance Molloy was casual. What he felt, what he thought, was an enigma back of his composed features.

He spoke quietly to Gerling, the assistant district attorney, saying, "By the way, Gerling, you might gain something by taking it easy with her." He passed over Gerling's disturbed look of doubt, turned to Albin Verrill Gorr, added, "Gorr, she probably knows the inside of all the off-color deals. She might save your firm money if you could work out something with Gerling

to get her cooperation. It might be beneficial all around."

"You've got something there, Molloy," Gorr said.

The frown loosened on Assistant District Attorney Gerling's face. Gerling intended to run for elective office soon. After all, the backing of such an important firm as Cranston, Gorr, and Dunlap was not to be sneezed at.

Anna Griedes bowed her head. She felt an inarticulate gratitude. She would, she knew, do anything to repay this mercy; she believed Molloy knew it. What she felt was more than just relief at a chance to escape the electric chair. It was in effect a regeneration, worked by Molloy whether or not he knew, or cared much, of a few finer things in her that probably had not been sullied beyond redemption.

"This way, lady," said Officer O'Riley.

Chance Molloy watched the woman and the policeman leave without any special feeling. He was not unduly tired, but his emotions, and his nerves, had taken a going over, and he was glad it was ended. There was no elation. He had not won in any sense that, just now, he cared about. He did not know exactly why he should feel that way, but he did, and he did not dig into it for reasons.

He got out a cigarette, and George was ready with a match.

He said, "Kiggins, you and George may as well get some sleep." He hesitated, then added, "You did a nice job on this."

Praise, when praise really came from his heart, was somehow difficult for him, and rarely given. George and Kiggins understood that.

George and Kiggins went out together, George, as Molloy suspected, to immediately get drunk. Kiggins, he imagined, would take care of George. She had done so before. Molloy was lost, for a moment, in puzzled contemplation of the strange attitude of Kiggins toward George, and vice versa, and what might eventually come of it.

Molloy stubbed the cigarette out. He had drawn only twice from it. He turned to Julie Edwards, said, "Care to ride into town with me?"

"Yes, thank you," she said.

He noticed her dry-eyed intensity. He took her arm, and they went downstairs, he envying her the restraint which she seemed to regard as an affliction.

THEY went outdoors and, the knife-edge cold whittling on them, dashed to the refuge, windless but still cold, of the automobile. They were inside, and he banged the door.

He turned the key, the engine took, and he palmed frost off the windshield. He waited, respectful of the needs of a good piece of machinery, for the engine to warm itself.

Silently he waited. There was, still, no high feeling at having won. He watched Julie lean forward, lay a hand on the view mirror, turn it until she could see herself. The eternal feminine, he thought. She had nice hair, and her face was, in all fairness, lovely.

He began to consider the attraction she seemed to have for him whenever the distractions had permitted—and several times in spite of them. There would be leisure now to probe this. He was pleased about that. He was after all a man who was impatient with indecision. Presently he knew inwardly a considerable content.

The car stirred, moved forward, traveled the sweep of driveway. Molloy turned the heater on, and it blew more warmth on them.

●

The Astonishing Career of the Chicago Killer

Holmes, Sweet Holmes

By LEO MARR

THERE was once a great detective named Holmes, but aside from the name there was little resemblance to the character whose career we are about to examine. H. H. Holmes, of Chicago, was a murderer by profession, though he was talented enough to have made a living by other means, and when a hangnoose snapped his neck at the highly advanced age of thirty-four, he had confessed to 27 murders, with many unofficial estimates running it up as high as 200. This, however, may be pardonable exaggeration.

In the year 1894, when the first hints of anything wrong about Mr. Holmes

A taxidermist disclosed that, on at least two different occasions, Holmes had brought him skeletons to mount

The notorious H. H. Holmes apparently knew how to get away with murder, but when it came to horse stealing in Texas that was a crime of another color!

began to leak out, he was already long in business as a killer and owned a fantastic mansion in Chicago, which came to be known as "Murder Castle."

Holmes had gone to medical school, supported by his first wife, whom he had deserted, and with the background of medical knowledge, he had put over a series of swindles all over the country. One typical swindle was the selling of "miracle healing spring water" at five cents a glass, which came right from the pipes of the Chicago water company.

This, of course, was small stuff. Holmes' real genius lay in the extension of these enterprises. He hired stenographers, "typewriters" they were called in those days, to help him run his enterprises. These typewriters were selected for their looks and for the curious fact that all of them had some money of their own.

It is a tribute to Holmes' salesmanship that he talked many of these women into becoming his accomplices. Certainly he never paid them any salary. On the contrary, he seduced, betrayed, robbed and finally murdered them.

Yet the first break came when Holmes cooked up a scheme to defraud an insurance company, the Fidelity Mutual Life Association of America.

Holmes had a sometime accomplice named B. F. Pitezel. To Pitezel and his wife, Holmes outlined a sure-fire plan to make money.

"We insure Pitezel for ten thousand dollars with Fidelity. After a suitable period, he goes into hiding. We then announce he is dead, show a body to satisfy the insurance company, and collect. Mrs. Pitezel identifies the body and it will be as simple as rolling off a log."

The Pitezels agreed. After all, $10,000, even split with Holmes, was not chicken feed. They made only one slight error. They forgot to ask Holmes where he was going to get that other body to show the insurance company.

AS FAR as Holmes went, he was two jumps ahead of them. He had it all figured out beforehand. Why go to the trouble of substituting a strange body, one which might be difficult to dig up in the first place, and with which there might be some hitch connected with identification, when the simplest, most beautifully fool-proof plan of all was to use the correct corpse which was so readily available?

The unhappy Pitezels never dreamed of such shrewd business dealings. B. F. allowed himself to be insured and all proceeded smoothly until the time when Holmes judged it was all right for the insured to die. Then a rag soaked liberally in chloroform terminated Mr. Pitezel's active partnership in the enterprise and from then on he became a silent partner entirely.

Holmes faked the identification in some way so that Mrs. Pitezel never did get a look at the "fake" corpse. He hired a crooked lawyer named Howe, who presented the claim to Fidelity in Mrs. Pitezel's name, though he was actually working for Holmes. And the insurance company paid off.

Happily, Mrs. Pitezel waited for her husband to come home. When he did not, she began to ask Holmes some leading questions. She also began to ask about their half of the money which Holmes had not paid over.

The astute businessman saw that Mrs. Pitezel was apt to prove an embarrassment to him, and he knew only one way to deal with such matters. He invited her and her three children to his Chicago home, saying that Pitezel was there, in hiding, and they could all be reunited there.

For some reason, Mrs. Pitezel did not go. She was not yet suspicious of Holmes, for she sent her three children, but she herself stayed home. Perhaps she had visions of her two small girls and boy bringing their father home with them, laden with ill-gotten, but very spendable greenbacks. She never saw the children again.

But, as so often happens in life, retribution was coming from an entirely unexpected quarter. Just before this insurance swindle had bloomed in Holmes'

active mind, he had spent a short time in prison for another swindle. There he had become acquainted with a convict named Hedgspeth, serving a twenty-year term for train robbery. To Hedgspeth, as a professional, Holmes had talked of a plan to swindle insurance companies, and had asked him for the name of a "reliable lawyer" who could be used as in-between. Hedgspeth had recommended Howe, and for this Holmes had promised to send him $500 if the plan worked.

Then Holmes was released and Hedgspeth heard no more from him. But in reading the newspapers, the train robber came across the Pitezel case and spotted the name of Howe as attorney for the widow. He guessed immediately that this was the plan of which Holmes had talked and for which Hedgspeth was supposed to have received $500.

Holmes disliked paying money intensely, and of course he had not bothered sending Hedgspeth the promised cut. The train robber was aggrieved at this flagrant breach of etiquette and began to brood about it. The result was that he went to the warden.

"I think," he said, "I can give you some information about a murder."

When the warden had heard Hedgspeth's story he at once called the insurance agency, who heard the tale, tore its hair and called in the famous Pinkerton Detective Agency.

Reviewing the events, the Pinkerton's decided that the shy and retiring Mr. Holmes was the guiding hand behind all this, so they began to check up on his career. This would have taken a lifetime, for he had been busy in most of the states in the Union. But at last they dug up an incredible charge, still open—a charge of horse-stealing in Texas! How the dapper Mr. Holmes had ever allowed himself to become involved with horses must be a fascinating story, but it remains a mystery.

However, with this charge to back them up, the Pinkertons got a warrant and broke into the big Chicago mansion known as "Holmes' Castle."

A search of the tremendous place turned up no valuable evidence, but hardly knowing what they were looking for, the detectives continued to hunt. Finally one of them got the inspiration of lifting the bathroom linoleum on the second floor.

A TRAP-DOOR was revealed in the floor. The only thing to do with a trap-door, when found, is to lift it and this disclosed a flight of steps which led down into a secret apartment that had no other entrance and was completely unsuspected.

The detectives, hard-boiled though they were, gave themselves a good case of shudders. This was like something out of a horror movie. There was a laboratory with operating tables and full sets of dissecting tools, knives, scalpels, saws, forceps and other instruments of torture. There was enough poison to liquidate the entire city of Chicago and there was a machine for making poison gas. There was also an air-tight chamber where it would have been quite possible to place a victim, let in a puff of poison gas and wait calmly for him to gasp away his life.

Most horrible of all was a huge vat of an extremely powerful acid, so corrosive that it was capable of destroying a human body completely, even to such difficult bits as teeth, hair and nails.

"This," muttered a detective, "is too much. It looks so blamed *professional,* as if he's doing a thriving business!"

"We've got a lead, boys," said another, "which is going to give us some surprising things, if we work it. Let's close up this place and see what we can get out of Holmes."

They closed the trap-door, put back the linoleum and waited for the master of the castle to return. When he did, they arrested him.

"On what grounds?" he bristled.

"Stealing a horse in Texas. We're arranging extradition now."

Holmes turned a light shade of green. He gulped as he saw himself arriving in Texas, to be greeted by a lynching party of Texas cowboys, bent on avenging the honor of their cowponies.

Horse stealing in Texas was a rather more serious crime than murder.

"Wait," he said, "you don't want to extradite me to Texas. There's something I want to confess." And he confessed to swindling the insurance company by "faking" Pitezel's death and substituting another body.

"Then where is Pitezel?" was the next question.

"Well he couldn't stay around when he was supposed to be dead," Holmes explained. "So he left the country and took his three children."

"Without telling his wife? She wants to know where he is pretty badly."

Holmes shrugged.. He didn't know how Pitezel ran his family affairs.

But the Pinkertons knew this was a lie and in a very short time they had the evidence to prove it. Other operators had been patiently unrolling Holmes' back trail and they had traced his movements since Pitezel's three children had gone to join him in Chicago to meet their father.

They found Holmes had gone to Toronto, taking the three children with him. He had rented a house there. A little digging in the cellar turned up the bodies of the two little Pitezel girls. The body of the boy was not there but later it was found in Chicago. Why Holmes had brought him back to Chicago before killing him, or killed him before leaving for Toronto, is one of those little unexplained mysteries.

Going back still further in Holmes' career, the detectives came across the mysterious disappearances of the "typewriters" and housekeepers who had gone to work for him at the Castle and somehow vanished from the face of the earth.

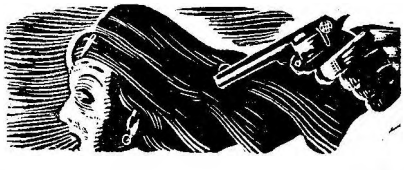
The testimony of a taxidermist shed some interesting light on Holmes' efficiency. The taxidermist testified that, on at least two different occasions, Holmes had brought him skeletons to mount. Holmes had represented himself as a doctor doing research and in legitimate need of articulated skeletons.

It would seem that the economical Mr. Holmes not only mulcted his victims of their money, but after killing them, made use of every bit of them by selling their skeletons to medical schools.

The trial of H. H. Holmes, whose real name was found to be Herman W. Mudgett, began on November 2, 1895. Holmes had a lawyer, but conducted his own defense rather brilliantly, as he had done so many other things. He also collected $7,500 from a newspaper for his memoirs, retaining his interest in money to the last. In these memoirs, he confessed to 27 murders.

Despite his glib defense, the jury did not believe him. The verdict was "guilty" with practically no hesitation. Holmes went to the scaffold at Moyamensing Prison.

And with him went one of those curiously twisted souls that see in other people, not humans like themselves, but only shadows, to be used, abused, killed or maltreated for profit or whim without a moment's thought about their feelings or rights. It is a strange streak in humanity, and always it leads to tragedy and death.



"This one will do," the Russian said

the PERFECT swindle

and how it was perpetrated by a bogus nobleman's aide

O. HENRY once wrote a series of stories about a swindler so adept at his trade that neither police nor victims ever had a legal leg of complaint left after he got finished with them.

Real life swindlers are not often that clever, but once upon a time there was a jewel swindle pulled that was—and is—the most perfect thing of its kind. Only the natural skepticism of jewelers themselves would be any protection against it today.

Because it was so good, it could really be accomplished only once, for after that no jeweler would ever trust such a set-up again. So the criminal genius who engineered it, also had the foresight to have men in six cities: London, Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Amsterdam and Rome, all to pull the job simultaneously, then quit. Which was playing it very smart, indeed.

This is the way it worked, taking London as the guinea-pig city:

There was a certain jeweler in Bond Street named Streeter, who was as exclusive in his trade as a jeweler can possibly be. His clientele had blood which was so blue it could have been used in fountain pens and he knew more nobles than a dog knows fleas.

Into this very exclusive shop there

A True Crime Narrative by SAMUEL MINES

came one day, a most distinguished foreign gentleman. Speaking with a strong Russian accent, he waved away the clerks and demanded to see Mr. Streeter himself. So impressive was his appearance, that Mr. Streeter was forthwith summoned from his inner sanctum.

"I should be delighted to serve you, sir," Mr. Streeter said with a gracious smile.

"Good," said the Russian. "I am confidential aide to his Highness, the Grand Duke Baronsky. The duke has commissioned me to select something special for a certain lady who is in his favor. And I have been informed that Streeter's is the place to come for the unusual in jewels."

Mr. Streeter beamed. "You came to the right place, sir," he agreed.

Promptly he opened the safe. He placed a black velvet cloth on the counter and under the glare of the lights, spread the wealth of the world in flashing, fiery gems.

The Russian took his time studying them. Finally he selected one of the most valuable stones of the lot. It was a large diamond of exceptional purity and brilliance.

"This one will do," he said.

"That one," Streeter beamed, "is four thousand pounds."

It was a tidy sale, even for Streeter's, but the Russian did not turn a hair at the price—$20,000 in American money.

"Naturally," he said, "I must show it to his Highness for the final decision. Would you be good enough to send it over?"

Mr. Streeter began to perspire slightly.

"With an ordinary diamond, sir," he said, "there would be no question. But with a jewel such as this, it is customary to have a bond—or at the least, to show unquestionable references!"

THE Russian drew himself up. "The grand duke—" he began frigidly, then broke off. "Well, perhaps you are right, as you see things. Here, kindly look at this."

He offered a letter of introduction. It was from one of Streeter's best customers, an Austrian millionaire, and it removed a considerable load from the jeweler's heart. If the Austrian vouched for this duke, the duke must be one of the right people. Apparently no thought of forgery crossed his mind.

He delivered the diamond to the duke's hotel. Later that day, the agent returned to the shop.

"The diamond was perfect," he announced. "The grand duke is most pleased. Now, he wishes you to match another stone to it and set them both into a pair of earrings. He will pay eight thousand pounds for the set."

The jeweler sadly shook his head.

"It is almost impossible," he said. "Gems like this are so rare that to find another to match would be a miracle. And if I did, it would be worth much more than twice the cost of one stone."

"What is your price?" the Russian asked crisply.

"Twelve thousand pounds, at least."

"We will pay it," the Russian said. "Provided you can make the match in two days, for we must leave London by that time."

Despite the magnitude of the task, Streeter was willing to make a try for $60,000. Besides, he knew all his sources of supply and realized it would not take long to canvass them all and determine whether or not it could be done.

Accordingly, he sat down and wrote a letter describing the kind of stone he needed and offering 6,000 pounds for it. This letter was then sent round the trade.

In the meantime, the bogus Russian agent took the diamond to one of the better pawnshops on the Strand.

"I need a hundred pounds on this," he told the pawnbroker.

The man examined the stone and repressed a whistle.

"I must tell you, sir," he said, "that this is a very valuable gem. I would gladly loan you much more on it."

"I need only a hundred pounds," the Russian said, "to meet an emergency. I will redeem the stone in a day or so."

He took his hundred pounds and departed. The next day he had not yet returned to redeem it, when Streeter's

form letter arrived. The pawnbroker read it and jumped. In his possession now was a diamond which seemed like a perfect match to Streeter's and which was worth thirty thousand pounds!

When the Russian came back later to redeem his stone, the pawnbroker was ready for him.

"Have you ever considered selling this stone?" he asked.

"No," said the Russian.

"I could give you an excellent price."

The Russian raised his eyebrows. "Such as?"

"Five thousand pounds."

"No." He reached for the stone.

"Don't be hasty," said the pawnbroker. "Perhaps I can do better. How about fifty-two hundred pounds?"

"No."

"Fifty-five hundred?"

The Russian yielded. And so the stone was sold for the American equivalent of $27,500. The Russian took it in cash and departed, losing no time.

He went straight to Streeter's jewelry shop.

"Have you matched the second stone?" he asked.

Streeter spread his hands. "I must have more time."

"Unfortunately," said the Russian, "I can give you no more time. We are leaving at once for Paris. However, the grand duke has decided to take the single diamond. Here are your four thousand pounds."

With which he turned over the cash, took a receipt and walked out the door and out of Mr. Streeter's life.

A short time later the pawnbroker arrived in great excitement, waving Streeter's form letter.

"By a remarkable coincidence," he panted, "I happen to have a diamond which seems to be a perfect match for the one you require. Here, look at it!"

Mr. Streeter looked and felt his blood run cold.

"It is a perfect match," he breathed. "In fact, it is my diamond!"

And then the pawnbroker realized what had been done to him.

The "Russian" had a neat profit of 1,500 pounds for a day's work. Multiply it by the six cities in which the scheme was pulled and the net profit to the gang comes to 9,000 pounds, or $45,000.

Profitable, but no longer recommended. The jewelers know the stunt by now and we wouldn't advise you to try it.

(Continued from page 8)

out the cases to be heard by The Readers' Jury. Your selections are evidence of your sharp insight and understanding into the true values of reading entertainment. We are certain that when the jury has considered all the evidence in "Punch With Care," "The Dogs Do Bark" and "Lady to Kill" they will render a verdict in complete agreement with your decision.

Now, to look ahead to the next meeting of the TRIPLE DETECTIVE court, we are happy to announce that The Readers' Jury will have three more great cases to consider: "Cottage Sinister" by Q. Patrick, "The Doll's Trunk Murder" by Helen Reilly and "Thursday's Blade" by Frederick C. Davis. That all adds up to another three-of-a-kind combination which is mighty hard to beat.

Q. Patrick is at his baffling best in "Cottage Sinister," which will hold the featured spot in the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. It is a compelling tale of a series of poison murders that occurred in a dreamy English village, putting fear into the heart of every villager until the pleasant little cottage known as Lady's Bower, where the murders occurred, was branded with the macabre title of Cottage Sinister.

The village answered to the name of Crosby-Stourton. The simple folk lived there were under the benevolent aegis of Crosby Hall, where Sir Howard and Lady Crosby lived in regal splendor. And old Mrs. Lubbock, who had once nursed Lady Crosby's dying mother, lived in particular favor in Lady's Bower.

Lady Crosby supplied all the food and other necessities that Mrs. Lubbock needed and there was added happiness for Mrs. Lubbock in the knowledge that young Dr. Christopher Crosby, the Crosbys' only son, was romantically interested in her youngest daughter, Lucy, a nurse at the Cottage Hospital.

Of course, there was a rumor that Sir Howard and Lady Crosby preferred that Christopher marry Vivien Darcy, a wealthy heiress. But Mrs. Lubbock did not worry about that. In fact, on the very evening when death was to begin its hideous stalking, she was celebrating the surprise visit of her two older daughters, Amy and Isabel.

Dr. Hoskins, the local physician, Christopher and Lucy were all there to have tea in honor of Amy's and Isabel's appearance. Then the two doctors were called away, leaving the family alone.

The Shape of a Shroud

Later, as the Lubbocks prepared for bed and Amy took a candle to light her way upstairs to her room, Mrs. Lubbock uttered a cry and took the candle away from her daughter.

"Amy," she said nervously, "see how the wind has blown the candle grease into the shape of a shroud! They do say as how it is a sign of ill fortune—or death!"

With trembling fingers she removed the piece of wax. Amy only laughed and went upstairs. Yet, Mrs. Lubbock's premonition of death was well-founded, for the next morning when she went to wake Amy she found her dead.

When Christopher and Dr. Hoskins came to examine Amy they both agreed that she had died of poison. And then, the very next night during another gathering, Isabel put down her cup of tea and rose to her feet. She staggered drunkenly, clutching at her throat and begging for water. Even as she cried out that she had been poisoned she fell unconscious to the floor.

The second murder brought Inspector Archibald Inge of Scotland Yard, commonly called The Archdeacon because he looked like a clergyman, to the scene. With the help of Christopher and Dr. Hoskins they discovered that the poison in both cases was hyoscine and that it had been given to the victims in their tea.

In each instance the murderer, knowing that a physician could administer an antidote if summoned in time, had

waited until all available doctors in the village were well beyond call.

Step by step the Archdeacon's investigation went on until all evidence began to point toward young Lucy Lubbock. It remained for young Christopher Crosby to come up with the crucial clue that helped the Archdeacon break the case, but even then they were too late to save the killer's third victim in Cottage Sinister!

A Helen Reilly Novel

The second great novel on the next TRIPLE DETECTIVE docket is "The Doll's Trunk Murder" by Helen Reilly, a compelling, suspense-filled tale of a group of travelers who were forced by a Pennsylvania blizzard to take refuge in a lonely mountain house only to find that they were marooned with murder and cut off from all outside help.

A few days after the death of seven-

[*Turn page*]

ty-two-year-old Mary Alice Greer the lawyer for the estate rented Three Mile House, in the midst of a range of Pennsylvania mountains, to a Miss Fenwick who took it because she was seeking a place where she could find solitude.

That was the reason she gave to the lawyer, but her real reason was a more sinister one. She was expecting a visitor and the meeting she planned was so important that she did not want to be disturbed. But she reckoned without the raging snowstorm that sent several unwanted guests in her direction.

Young Richard Brierly was driving through to Leechfield when he stopped off at the Tiverton Inn for luncheon. There, at one of the tables he saw a pretty girl he had once met in New York. In fact, he had given her refuge for a few moments at a time when, he had reason to believe, she was fleeing from the police.

She saw him and quite evidently recognized him, but gave no sign of it. She was with her mother and an elderly man. They left in a sudden rush after the mother, looking out one of the windows, became terrified at something she had seen and demanded that they ride on.

They had just departed when another car drew up and the occupant queried

the proprietor of the inn about them. Brierly left soon afterward. As he rode the storm became worse. Near dark his car skidded and slammed into another vehicle parked beside the road.

Climbing out of his car, he was met by a man with a flashlight and a gun. Surprised and alarmed, Brierly explained the circumstances of the accident. The other man nodded gruffly and led him up a long hill through drifts until they came to a house.

They were pushing their way through the rear door when they bumped into a terrified man who gasped:

"In the closet — upstairs — in the fourth bedroom—there was a noise—there's blood. . . ."

Seven Times Stabbed

The stranger with the flashlight and the gun led the way upstairs to the bed-

[*Turn page*]

room. With the first man holding a lamp, the stranger and Brierly saw the blood oozing from the closet. And when they forced the door open by removing the hinges and lowered it to the floor they were shocked by the sight of an elderly woman, dressed in black, who had been brutally stabbed seven times.

This is the dramatic opening of a novel that gains momentum in every succeeding page as Brierly learns that the mysterious girl and her companions of The Tiverton Inn have also taken refuge in Three Mile House together with the strange Mrs. Brown, a Mr. Jennings, a Mr. Boyd and others.

The savage clash of personal interests, the secret hates whirling between those people—some of whom are not there by chance—builds to a fever pitch while Brierly and the mysterious stranger, who turns out to be the sheriff, try to bring order out of chaos before death strikes again!

Cyrus Hatch, Crime-Fighter

The third great case on the TRIPLE DETECTIVE docket introduces Cyrus Hatch, college professor and criminologist, in his latest bout with crime, "Thursday's Blade," by Frederick C. Davis.

In "Thursday's Blade" Mr. Davis has fashioned a real chiller-diller that surpasses such recent Davis successes as "Let the Skeletons Rattle," "Deep Lay the Dead" and "The Graveyard Never Closes."

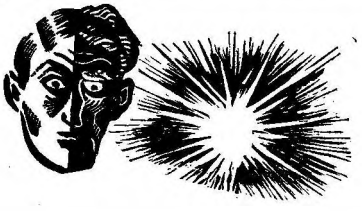
"Thursday's Blade" is a distinctly unusual novel about a killer with a mania for slitting people's throats with a spe-

cial set of straight razors, containing a razor for each day in the week.

While Rudy Farro awaits execution in the Death House on Thursday the elusive murderer, on three successive days and using razors respectively stamped "Monday," "Tuesday" and "Wednesday," speedily ends the lives of three people who are in a possible position to clear the doomed man. And by Wednesday Cy Hatch knows that only fast action and some miraculously accurate sleuthing could save another poor victim from Thursday's blade!

The story opens with Burr Melbourne, well-known radio dramatist, borrowing fifty dollars from his own secretary to pay off a man who has been blackmailing him for weeks and who

[*Turn page*]



Roy Marshall emerges from amnesia to find himself married to a girl he does not know—and wanted for a murder he does not remember—in

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has reduced Melbourne to such a point that he is deeply in debt to all his friends.

Ellis, the blackmailer, whose hold on Melbourne traces back to the night he gave Melbourne a lift to the apartment of a woman who was found shot dead minutes later, was waiting for Melbourne when the latter emerged from the Calypso Club. They rode a few blocks. Melbourne made his usual threats, his usual gripes while Ellis laughed at him. But this time there was an odd insistence in Melbourne's tone that he was "through being bled."

After Melbourne got out of Ellis' new station wagon, Ellis drove over toward Park Avenue where he was halted by a traffic light.

While he waited for the light to change a man came up to him. The man leaned inside the window, politely asked

Ellis to lift his head a little and then proceeded to slit his throat with a razor.

The man was gone before Ellis realized the significance of the pain at his throat, before he realized he was swiftly bleeding to death. But with his dying breath he murmured Melbourne's name. And it was Cy Hatch, coming upon him slumped down in the station wagon, who heard those last gasping words.

A Chain of Murder

Yet Ellis' throat-slitting was only the first link in a vicious chain of razor-edged murder that was inexorably tied up with that earlier killing for which Melbourne was blackmailed and for which a man waited in the Death House for execution.

Incident piles on incident and murder piles on murder in "Thursday's Blade" as Melbourne fights the web of circumstantial evidence that is slowly woven about him while Cy Hatch and his charming wife, Jane, struggle to prevent the evil stroke of Thursday's blade!

For chills and thrills, for suspense and unremitting excitement, look for-

[*Turn page*]

ward to the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. And don't forget that each of the three great novels will be carefully abridged for your reading entertainment.

JURY JOTTINGS

THE great host of TRIPLE DETECTIVE jurors from all sections of the country have been very faithful in sending in their verdicts on our first two issues. And we are delighted to say that everyone seems to be in full agreement with all cases, as presented by our presiding judges or guest editors.

Eugene Parker of Soper, Oklahoma, wrote us a very nice card. We quote:

Dear Editor: I have enjoyed reading TRIPLE DETECTIVE MAGAZINE very much. I look forward to many more issues of the same. Will you have more Jess Roden stories? I find him very entertaining. Could you possibly tell me when your magazine will come out next?

Well, Gene, we're glad you like TRIPLE DETECTIVE and Jess Roden. The backwoods sleuth is really among the best and we'll have to drop a line to his creator, A. B. Cunningham, and ask him to rush another one off his typewriter. TRIPLE DETECTIVE, at present, is published four times a year. You can watch for our next issue in about three months.

From Dave Pollen in Little Rock, Arkansas, comes a note about that tough redhead Mike Shayne:

Dear Editor: "The Uncomplaining Corpses," by Brett Halliday, was really a peach of a yarn. When all is said and done you can't find anyone better than Mike Shayne. I like my stories and

my detectives tough, which is why I'm not complaining about "The Uncomplaining Corpses." "Winter Kill," by Steve Fisher, was also good and quite an unusual yarn.

Let's see some more Mike Shayne yarns. Meanwhile, congratulations on a great job of magazine publishing.

Thanks, Dave, for your glad hand. Mike Shayne is one of our own favorites and we're glad to tell you that another Shayne mystery will be coming along very soon.

There were many other fine letters and notes of congratulations and we only wish we could print them all. They have all been carefully studied and are deeply appreciated. All the stories in both the first and second issues seem to have been equally well-liked. And we're going to continue to give you members of The Readers' Jury the best three-of-a-kind mystery novel combination we can find.

Letters and cards are always welcome, so please don't be shy. Address all communications to The Editor, TRIPLE DETECTIVE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thank you!

—THE EDITOR.

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