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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

"The best mystery writers of all time" as ranked by the Gallup Poll

"Once-in-a-Lifetime Issue"

PUBLISHER: *Lawrence E. Spivak* EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

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"The best mystery writers of all time"

On October 14, 1950, George Gallup, Director of the American Institute of Public Opinion, published the results of a nation-wide survey on mystery writers — or, as the Institute so aptly expressed it, announced the winners in the "Whodunit Derby." The world-famous Gallup Poll is based, as you all know, on interviews with a representative cross-section of the American public; these widespread and scientific samplings revealed that

(*a*) *mystery stories are equally popular with men and women;*

(*b*) *40% of the American population read mystery stories; and*

(*c*) *the highest percentage of mystery fans come from college ranks.*

But the most important finding of the survey was the one which established the favorite mystery writers. To quote from the Gallup Poll report, "all persons who said they read mysteries were asked to volunteer the name of the writer, living or dead, whom they consider tops in the mystery field." Here are, in order of their ranking and by actual vote of American fans, "the best mystery writers of all time" —

1. **ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**
2. **A. CONAN DOYLE**
3. **ELLERY QUEEN**
4. **EDGAR ALLAN POE**
5. **AGATHA CHRISTIE**
6. **S. S. VAN DINE**
7. **MARY ROBERTS RINEHART**
8. **REX STOUT**
9. **DASHIELL HAMMETT**

Past the Number 9 spot, a virtual tie existed among the next group of nominees. In alphabetical order, they are:

Leslie Charteris, G. K. Chesterton, Wilkie Collins, Mignon G. Eberhart, Leslie Ford, Craig Rice, Sax Rohmer, Dorothy L. Sayers, Mabel Seeley

The results of this first national survey in the mystery field presented EQMM with the chance of a lifetime. Why not, we asked ourselves (and we were breathless at the very thought) — why not devote an entire issue

of EQMM to the Gallup Poll winners? Immediately, telephone calls, telegrams, cables began to hum . . .

So, we now offer you, in this issue of EQMM, the work of eight of the nine mystery writers voted "the best of all time." Only S. S. Van Dine, creator of Philo Vance, is not included — for the regrettable and insurmountable reason that Mr. Van Dine never wrote a short story about his celebrated dilettante detective . . .

A toast, then, to the 'tec Titans of today — to the tops in thrills, throbs, and terror!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: *We welcome this opportunity to express our deep appreciation to all those who helped make possible the publication of a special Gallup Poll issue: our sincere gratitude to George Gallup and the American Institute of Public Opinion, and to William A. Lydgate for their generous cooperation; and in the order of the stories in this issue, to Thayer Hobson of William Morrow & Company, Inc., for making it possible to reprint a Perry Mason novelette; to Erle Stanley Gardner and Willis Kingsley Wing; to Agatha Christie; to Harold Ober and Ivan Von Auw, Jr.; to Dodd, Mead & Company and Raymond T. Bond; to Herbert R. Mayes, Supervising Editor of "Cosmopolitan" for making it possible to reprint a Mary Roberts Rinehart story; to Mary Roberts Rinehart; to William M. Sladen of Rinehart & Company, Inc.; to Rex Stout and The Viking Press; to Dashiell Hammett and Muriel Alexander for making it possible to give you an "unknown" Hammett story; and to those colleagues and coworkers who remain forever in the background, unnamed and unsung, but who also serve . . .*

— ELLERY QUEEN

THE CASE OF THE CRIMSON KISS

by ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

PREOCCUPIED WITH PROBLEMS of her own happiness, Fay Allison failed to see the surge of bitter hatred in Anita's eyes. So Fay, wrapped in the mental warmth of romantic thoughts, went babbling on to her roommate, her tongue loosened by the cocktail which Anita had pre-

pared before their makeshift dinner.

"I'd known I loved him for a long time," she said, "but honestly, Anita, it never occurred to me that Dane was the marrying kind. He'd had that one unfortunate affair, and he'd always seemed so detached and objective about everything. Of course, underneath all that reserve he's romantic and tender. . . . Anita, I'm so lucky, I can hardly believe it's true."

Anita Bonsal, having pushed her dinner dishes to one side, toyed with the stem of her empty cocktail glass. Her eyes were pinpricks of black hatred which she was afraid to let Fay Allison see. "You've fixed a date?" she asked.

"Just as soon as Aunt Louise can get here. I want her to be with me. I — and, of course, I'll want you, too."

"When will Aunt Louise get here?"

"Tomorrow or next day, I think. I haven't heard definitely."

"You've written her?"

"Yes. She'll probably take the night plane. I mailed her my extra keys so she can come right on in whenever she gets here, even if we aren't home."

Anita Bonsal was silent, but Fay Allison wanted to talk. "You know how Dane is. He's always been sort of impersonal. He took you out at first as much as he did me, and then he began to specialize on me. Of course, you're so popular, you didn't mind. It's different with me. Anita, I was afraid to acknowledge even to myself how deeply I felt, because I thought it might lead to heartache."

"All my congratulations, dear."

"Don't you think it will work out, Anita? You don't seem terribly enthusiastic."

"Of course it will work out. It's just that I'm a selfish devil and it's going to make a lot of difference in my personal life — the apartment and all that. Come on; let's get the dishes done. I'm going out tonight and I suppose you'll be having company."

"No, Dane's not coming over. He's going through a ceremony at his bachelor's club — one of those silly things that men belong to. He has to pay a forfeit or something, and there's a lot of horseplay. I'm so excited I'm just walking on air."

"Well," Anita said, "I go away for a three-day weekend and a lot seems to happen around here. I'll have to start looking for another roommate. This apartment is too big for me to carry by myself."

"You won't have any trouble. Just pick the person you want. How about one of the girls at the office?"

Anita shook her head, tight-lipped.

"Well, of course, I'll pay until the fifteenth and then —"

"Don't worry about that," Anita said lightly. "I'm something of a lone wolf at heart. I don't get along too well with most women, but I'll find someone. It'll take a little time for me to look around. Most of the girls in the office are pretty silly."

They did the dishes and straightened up the apartment, Fay Allison talking excitedly, laughing with lighthearted merriment, Anita Bonsal

moving with the swift, silent efficiency of one who is skillful with her hands.

As soon as the dishes had been finished and put away, Anita slipped into a long black evening dress and put on her fur coat. She smiled at Fay and said, "You'd better take some of the sleeping pills tonight, dear. You're all wound up."

Fay said, somewhat wistfully, "I am afraid I talked you to death, Anita. I wanted someone to listen while I built air castles. I — I'll read a book. I'll be waiting up when you get back."

"Don't," Anita said. "It'll be late."

Fay said wistfully, "You're always so mysterious about things, Anita. I really know very little about your friends. Don't you ever want to get married and have a home of your own?"

"Not me. I'm too fond of having my own way, and I like life as it is," Anita said, and slipped out through the door.

She walked down the corridor to the elevator, pressed the button, and when the cage came up to the sixth floor, stepped in, pressed the button for the lobby, waited until the elevator was halfway down, then pressed the *Stop* button, then the button for the seventh floor.

The elevator rattled slowly upward and came to a stop.

Anita calmly opened her purse, took out a key, walked down the long corridor, glanced swiftly back toward the elevator, then fitted the key to Apartment 702, and opened the door.

Carver L. Clements looked up from his newspaper and removed the cigar from his mouth. He regarded Anita Bonsal with eyes that showed his approval, but he kept his voice detached as he said, "It took you long enough to get here."

"I had to throw a little wool in the eyes of my roommate, and listen to her prattle of happiness. She's marrying Dane Grover."

Carver Clements put down the newspaper. "The hell she is!"

"It seems he went overboard in a burst of romance, and his attentions became serious and honorable," Anita said bitterly. "Fay has written her aunt, Louise Marlow, and as soon as she gets here they'll be married."

Carver Clements looked at the tall brunette. He said, "I had it figured out that you were in love with Dane Grover, yourself."

"So that's been the trouble with you lately!"

"Weren't you?"

"Heavens, no!"

"You know, my love," Clements went on, "I'd hate to lose you now."

Anger flared in her eyes. "Don't think you own me!"

"Let's call it a lease," he said.

"It's a tenancy-at-will," she flared. "And kindly get up when I come into the room. After all, you might show some manners."

Clements arose from the chair. He was a spidery man with long arms and legs, a thick, short body, a head almost bald, but he spent a small for-

tune on clothes that were skillfully cut to conceal the chunkiness of his body. He smiled, and said, "My little spitfire! But I like you for it. Remember, Anita, I'm playing for keeps. As soon as I can get my divorce straightened out."

"You and your divorce!" she interrupted. "You've been pulling that line —"

"It isn't a line. There are some very intricate property problems. They can't be handled abruptly. You know that."

She said, "I know that I'm tired of all this pretense. If you're playing for keeps, make me a property settlement."

"And have my wife's lawyers drag me into court for another examination of my assets after they start tracing the checks? Don't be silly."

His eyes were somber in their steady appraisal. "I like you, Anita. I can do a lot for you. I like that fire that you have. But I want it in your heart and not in your tongue. My car's in the parking lot. You go on down and wait. I'll be down in five minutes."

She said, "Why don't you take me out as though you weren't ashamed of me?"

"And give my wife the opportunity she's looking for? Then you *would* have the fat in the fire. The property settlement will be signed within five or six weeks. After that I'll be free to live my own life in my own way. Until then — until then, my darling, we have to be discreet in our indiscretions."

She started to say something, checked herself, and stalked out of the apartment.

Carver Clements's automobile was a big, luxurious sedan equipped with every convenience; but it was cold sitting there, waiting.

After ten minutes, which seemed twenty, Anita grew impatient. She flung open the car door, went to the entrance of the apartment house, and angrily pressed the button of 702.

When there was no answer, she knew that Clements must be on his way down, so she walked back out. But Clements didn't appear.

Anita used her key to enter the apartment house. The elevator was on the ground floor. She made no attempt at concealment this time, but pressed the button for the seventh floor, left the elevator, strode down the corridor, stabbed her key into the metal lock of Clements's apartment, and entered the room.

Carver L. Clements, dressed for the street, was lying sprawled on the floor.

A highball glass lay on its side, two feet from his body. It had apparently fallen from his hand, spilling its contents as it rolled along the carpet. Clements's face was a peculiar hue, and there was a sharp, bitter odor which seemed intensified as she bent toward his froth-flecked lips. Since Anita had last seen him, he had quite evidently had a caller. The print of half-parted lips flared in gaudy crimson from the front of his bald head.

With the expertness she had learned from a course in first-aid, Anita

pressed her finger against the wrist, searching for a pulse. There was none.

Quite evidently, Carver L. Clements, wealthy playboy, yachtsman, broker, gambler for high stakes, was dead.

In a panic, Anita Bonsal looked through the apartment. There were all too many signs of her occupancy — nightgowns, lingerie, shoes, stockings, hats, even toothbrushes and her favorite tooth paste.

Anita Bonsal turned back toward the door and quietly left the apartment. She paused in the hallway, making certain there was no one in the corridor. This time she didn't take the elevator, but walked down the fire stairs, and returned to her own apartment. . . .

Fay Allison had been listening to the radio. She jumped up as Anita entered.

"Oh, Anita, I'm so glad! I thought you wouldn't be in until real late. What happened? It hasn't been a half-hour."

"I developed a beastly headache," Anita said. "My escort was a trifle intoxicated, so I slapped his face and came home. I'd like to sit up and have you tell me about your plans, but I do have a headache, and you must get a good night's sleep tonight. You'll need to be looking your best tomorrow."

Fay laughed. "I don't want to waste time sleeping. Not when I'm so happy."

"Nevertheless," Anita said firmly, "we're going to get to bed early. Let's put on pajamas and have some hot chocolate. Then we'll sit in front of the electric heater and talk for just exactly twenty minutes."

"Oh, I'm so glad you came back!" Fay said.

"I'll fix the drink," Anita told her. "I'm going to make your chocolate sweet tonight. You can start worrying about your figure tomorrow."

She went to the kitchen, opened her purse, took out a bottle of barbiturate tablets, emptied a good half of the pills into a cup, carefully ground them up into powder, and added hot water until they were dissolved.

When she returned to the living-room, carrying the two steaming cups of chocolate frothy with melted marshmallows floating on top, Fay Allison was in her pajamas.

Anita Bonsal raised her cup. "Here's to happiness, darling."

After they had finished the first cup of chocolate, Anita talked Fay into another cup, then let Fay discuss her plans until drowsiness made the words thick, the sentences detached.

"Anita, I'm *so* sleepy all of a sudden. I guess it's the reaction from having been so keyed up. I . . . darling, it's all right if I . . . You don't care if I. . . ."

"Not at all, dear," Anita said, and helped Fay into bed, tucking her in carefully. Then she gave the situation careful consideration.

The fact that Carver Clements maintained a secret apartment in that building was known only to a few of Clements's cronies. These people

knew of Carver Clements's domestic difficulties and knew why he maintained this apartment. Fortunately, however, they had never seen Anita. That was a big thing in her favor. Anita was quite certain Clements's death hadn't been due to a heart attack. It had been some quick-acting, deadly poison. The police would search for the murderer.

It wouldn't do for Anita merely to remove her things from that apartment, and, besides, that wouldn't be artistic enough. Anita had been in love with Dane Grover. If it hadn't been for that dismal entanglement with Carver Clements . . . However, that was all past now, and Fay Allison, with her big blue eyes, her sweet, trusting disposition, had turned Dane Grover from a disillusioned cynic into an ardent suitor.

Well, it was a world where the smart ones got by. Anita had washed the dishes. Fay Allison had dried them. Her fingerprints would be on glasses and on dishes. The management of the apartment house very considerately furnished dishes identical in pattern, so it needed only a little careful work on her part. The police would find Fay Allison's nightgowns in Carver Clements's secret apartment. They would find glasses that had Fay's fingerprints on them. And when they went to question Fay Allison, they would find she had taken an overdose of sleeping pills.

Anita would furnish the testimony that would make it all check into a composite, sordid pattern. A girl who had been the mistress of a rich playboy, then had met a younger and more attractive man who had offered her marriage. She had gone to Carver Clements and wanted to check out, but with Carver Clements one didn't simply check out. So Fay had slipped the fatal poison into his drink, and then had realized she was trapped when Anita returned home unexpectedly and there had been no chance for Fay to make a surreptitious removal of her wearing apparel from the upstairs apartment. Anita would let the police do the figuring. Anita would be horrified, simply stunned, but, of course, cooperative.

Anita Bonsal deliberately waited three hours until things began to quiet down in the apartment house, then she took a suitcase and quietly went to work, moving with the smooth efficiency of a woman who has been accustomed to thinking out every detail.

When she had finished, she carefully polished the key to Apartment 702 so as to remove any possible fingerprints, and dropped it in Fay Allison's purse. She ground up all but six of the remaining sleeping tablets and mixed the powder with the chocolate which was left in the canister.

After Anita put on pajamas she took the remaining six tablets, washed off the label with hot water, and tossed the empty bottle out of the back window of the apartment. Then she snuggled down into her own twin bed and switched off the lights.

The maid was due to come at eight

the next morning to clean up the apartment. She would find two still figures, one dead, one drugged.

Two of the tablets constituted the heaviest prescribed dose. The six tablets Anita had taken began to worry her. Perhaps she had really taken too many. She wondered if she could call a drug store and find out if — A moment later she was asleep. . . .

Louise Marlow, tired from the long airplane ride, paid off the taxicab in front of the apartment house.

The cab driver helped her with her bags to the entrance door. Louise Marlow inserted the key which Fay Allison had sent her, smiled her thanks to the driver, and picked up her bags.

Sixty-five years old, white-headed, steely-eyed, square of shoulder and broad of beam, she had a salty philosophy of her own. Her love was big enough to encompass those who were dear to her with a protecting umbrella. Her hatred was bitter enough to goad her enemies into confused retreat.

With casual disregard for the fact that it was now one o'clock in the morning, she marched down the corridor to the elevator, banged her bags into the cage, and punched the button for the sixth floor.

The elevator moved slowly upward, then shuddered to a stop. The door slid slowly open and Aunt Louise, picking up her bags, walked down the half-darkened corridor.

At length she found the apartment she wanted, inserted her key, opened the door, and groped for a light switch. She clicked it on, and called, "It's me, Fay!"

There was no answer.

Aunt Louise dragged her bags in, pushed the door shut, called out cheerfully, "Don't shoot," and then added by way of explanation, "I picked up a cancellation on an earlier plane, Fay."

The continued silence bothered her. She moved over to the bedroom.

"Wake up, Fay. It's your Aunt Louise!"

She turned on the bedroom light, smiled down at the two sleepers, said, "Well, if you're going to sleep right through everything, I'll make up a bed on the davenport and say hello to you in the morning."

Then something in the color of Fay Allison's face caused the keen eyes to become hard with concentration.

Aunt Louise went over and shook Fay Allison, then turned to Anita Bonsal and started shaking her.

The motion finally brought Anita back to semiconsciousness from drugged slumber. "Who is it?" she asked thickly.

"I'm Fay Allison's Aunt Louise. I got here ahead of time. What's happened?"

Anita Bonsal knew in a drowsy manner that this was a complicating circumstance that she had not foreseen, and despite the numbing effect of the drug on her senses, managed to make the excuse which was to be her first waking alibi.

"Something happened," she said thickly. "The chocolate . . . We

drank chocolate and it felt like . . . I can't remember . . . can't remember . . . I want to go to sleep."

She let her head swing over on a limp neck and became a dead weight in Louise Marlow's arms.

Aunt Louise put her back on the bed, snatched up a telephone directory, and thumbed through the pages until she found the name *Perry Mason, Attorney.*

There was a night number: Westfield 6-5943.

Louise Marlow dialed the number.

The night operator on duty at the switchboard of the Drake Detective Agency, picked up the receiver and said, "Night number of Mr. Perry Mason. Who is this talking, please?"

"This is Louise Marlow talking. I haven't met Perry Mason but I know his secretary, Della Street. I want you to get in touch with her and tell her that I'm at Keystone 9-7600. I'm in a mess and I want her to call me back here just as quick as she can. . . . Yes, that's right! You tell her it's Louise Marlow talking and she'll get busy. I think I may need Mr. Mason before I get done; but I want to talk with Della right now."

Louise Marlow hung up and waited.

Within less than a minute she heard the phone ring, and Della Street's voice came over the line as Aunt Louise picked up the receiver.

"Why, Louise Marlow, whatever are *you* doing in town?"

"I came in to attend the wedding of my niece, Fay Allison," Aunt Louise said. "Now, listen, Della. I'm at Fay's apartment. She's been drugged and I can't wake her up. Her roommate, Anita Bonsal, has also been drugged. Someone's tried to poison them!

"I want to get a doctor who's good, and who can keep his mouth shut. Fay's getting married tomorrow. Someone's tried to kill her, and I propose to find out what's behind it. If anything should get into the newspapers about this, I'll wring someone's neck. I'm at the Mandrake Arms, Apartment 604. Rush a doctor up here, and then you'd better get hold of Perry Mason and —"

Della Street said, "I'll send a good doctor up right away, Mrs. Marlow. You sit tight. I'm getting busy."

When Aunt Louise answered the buzzer, Della Street said, "Mrs. Marlow, this is Perry Mason. This is 'Aunt Louise,' Chief. She's an old friend from my home town."

Louise Marlow gave the famous lawyer her hand and a smile. She kissed Della, said, "You haven't changed a bit, Della. Come on in."

"What does the doctor say?" Mason asked.

"He's working like a house afire. Anita is conscious. Fay is going to pull through, all right. Another hour and it would have been too late."

"What happened?" Mason asked.

"Someone dumped sleeping medicine in the powdered chocolate, or else in the sugar."

"Any suspicions?" Mason asked.

She said, "Fay was marrying Dane Grover. I gather from her letters he's

a wealthy but shy young man who had one bad experience with a girl years ago and had turned bitter and disillusioned, or thought he had.

"I got here around one o'clock, I guess. Fay had sent me the keys. As soon as I switched on the light and looked at Fay's face I knew that something was wrong. I tried to wake her up and couldn't. I finally shook some sense into Anita. She said the chocolate did it. Then I called Della. That's all I know about it."

"The cups they drank the chocolate from?" Mason asked. "Where are they?"

"On the kitchen sink — unwashed."

"We may need them for evidence," Mason said.

"Evidence, my eye!" Louise Marlow snorted. "I don't want the police in on this. You can imagine what'll happen if some sob sister spills a lot of printer's ink about a bride-to-be trying to kill herself."

"Let's take a look around," Mason said.

The lawyer moved about the apartment. He paused as he came to street coats thrown over the back of a chair, then again as he looked at the two purses.

"Which one is Fay Allison's?" he asked.

"Heavens, I don't know. We'll have to find out," Aunt Louise said.

Mason said, "I'll let you two take the lead. Go through them carefully. See if you can find anything that would indicate whether anyone might have been in the apartment shortly before they started drinking the chocolate. Perhaps there's a letter that will give us a clue, or a note."

The doctor, emerging from the bedroom, said, "I want to boil some water for a hypo."

"How are they coming?" Mason asked, as Mrs. Marlow went to the kitchen.

"The brunette is all right," the doctor said, "and I think the blonde will be soon."

"When can I question them?"

The doctor shook his head. "I wouldn't advise it. They are groggy, and there's some evidence that the brunette is rambling and contradictory in her statements. Give her another hour and you can get some facts."

The doctor, after boiling water for his hypo, went back to the bedroom.

Della Street moved over to Mason's side and said in a low voice, "Here's something I don't understand, Chief. Notice the keys to the apartment house are stamped with the numbers of the apartments. Both girls have keys to this apartment in their purses. Fay Allison also has a key stamped 702. What would she be doing with the key to another apartment?"

Mason's eyes narrowed for a moment in speculation. "What does Aunt Louise say?"

"She doesn't know."

"Anything else to give a clue?"

"Not the slightest thing anywhere."

Mason said, "Okay, I'm going to take a look at 702. You'd better come along, Della."

Mason made excuses to Louise Marlow: "We want to look around on the outside," he said. "We'll be back in a few minutes."

He and Della took the elevator to the seventh floor, walked down to Apartment 702, and Mason pushed the bell button.

They could hear the sound of the buzzer in the apartment, but there was no sound of motion inside.

Mason said, "It's a chance we shouldn't take, but I'm going to take a peek, just for luck."

He fitted the key to the door, clicked back the lock, and gently opened the door.

The blazing light from the living-room streamed through the open door, showed the body lying on the floor, the drinking glass which had rolled from the dead fingers.

The door from an apartment across the hall jerked open. A young woman with disheveled hair, a bathrobe around her, said angrily, "After you've pressed a buzzer for five minutes at this time of the night you should have sense enough to —"

"We have," Mason interrupted, pulling Della Street into the apartment and kicking the door shut behind them.

Della Street, clinging to Mason's arm, saw the sprawled figure on the floor, the crimson lipstick on the forehead, looked at the overturned chair by the table, the glass which had rolled along the carpet, spilling part of its contents, at the other empty glass standing on the table.

"Careful, Della, we mustn't touch anything."

"Who is he?"

"Apparently he's People's Exhibit A. Do you suppose the nosy dame in the opposite apartment is out of the hall by this time? We'll have to take a chance anyway." He wrapped his hand with his handkerchief, turned the knob on the inside of the door, and pulled it silently open.

The door of the apartment across the hall was closed.

Mason warned Della Street to silence with a gesture. They tiptoed out into the corridor, pulling the door closed behind them.

As the door clicked shut, the elevator came to a stop at the seventh floor. Three men and a woman came hurrying down the corridor.

Mason's voice was low, reassuring: "Perfectly casual, Della. Just friends departing from a late card game."

They caught the curious glances of the four people, and moved slightly to one side until the quartet had passed.

"Well," Della Street said, "they'll certainly know us if they ever see us again. The way that woman looked me over!"

"I know," Mason said, "but we'll hope that — oh — oh! They're going to 702!"

The four paused in front of the door. One of the men pressed the buzzer button.

Almost immediately the door of the opposite apartment jerked open. The woman with the bathrobe shrilled,

"I'm suffering from insomnia. I've been trying to sleep, and this —" She broke off as she saw the strangers.

The man who had been pressing the button grinned and said in a booming voice, "We're sorry, ma'am. I only just gave him one short buzz."

"Well, the other people who went in just before you made enough commotion."

"Other people in here?" the man asked. He hesitated a moment, then went on, "Well, we won't bother him if he's got company."

Mason pushed Della Street into the elevator and pulled the door shut.

"What in the world do we do now?" Della Street asked.

"Now," Mason said, his voice sharp-edged with disappointment, "we ring police headquarters and report a possible homicide. It's the only thing we can do."

There was a phone booth in the lobby. Mason dropped a nickel, dialed police headquarters, and reported that he had found a corpse in Apartment 702 under circumstances indicating probable suicide.

While Mason was in the phone booth, the four people came out of the elevator. There was a distinct aroma of alcohol as they pushed their way toward the door. The woman, catching sight of Della Street standing beside the phone booth, favored her with a feminine appraisal which swept from head to foot.

Mason called Louise Marlow in Apartment 604. "I think you'd better have the doctor take his patients to a sanitarium where they can have complete quiet," he said.

"He seems to think they're doing all right here."

"I distrust doctors who *seem* to think," Mason said. "I would suggest a sanitarium immediately."

Louise Marlow was silent for a full three seconds.

"I think the patients should have *complete quiet*," Mason said.

"Damn it," Louise Marlow sputtered. "When you said it the first time I missed it. The second time I got it. You don't have to let your needle get stuck on the record! I was just trying to figure it out."

Mason heard her slam down the phone at the other end of the line.

Mason grinned, hung up the phone, put the key to 702 in an envelope, addressed the envelope to his office, stamped it, and dropped it in the mailbox by the elevator.

Outside, the four persons in the car were having something of an argument. Apparently there was some sharp difference of opinion as to what action was to be taken next, but as a siren sounded they reached a sudden unanimity of decision. They were starting the car as the police radio car pulled in to the curb. The siren blasted a peremptory summons.

One of the radio officers walked over to the other car, took possession of the ignition keys, and ushered the four people up to the door of the apartment house.

Mason hurried across the lobby to open the locked door.

The officer said, "I'm looking for a man who reported a body."

"That's right. I did. My name's Mason. The body's in 702."

"A body!" the woman screamed.

"Shut up," the radio officer said.

"But we know the — Why, we told you we'd been visiting in 702 — We —"

"Yeah, you said you'd been visiting a friend in 702, name of Carver Clements. How was he when you left him?"

There was an awkward silence; then the woman said, "We really didn't get in. We just went to the door. The woman across the way said he had company, so we left."

"Said he had company?"

"That's right. But I think the company had left. It was these two here."

"We'll go take a look," the officer said. "Come on."

Lieutenant Tragg, head of the Homicide Squad, finished his examination of the apartment and said wearily to Mason, "I presume by this time you've thought up a good story to explain how it all happened."

Mason said, "As a matter of fact, I don't know this man from Adam. I had never seen him alive."

"I know," Tragg said sarcastically; "you wanted him as a witness to an automobile accident and just happened to drop around in the wee, small hours of the morning.

"But," Tragg went on, "strange as it may seem, Mason, I'm interested to know how you got in. The woman who has the apartment across the corridor says you stood there and rang the buzzer for as long as two minutes. Then she heard the sound of a clicking bolt just as she opened her door to give you a piece of her mind."

Mason nodded gravely. "I had a key."

"A key! The hell you did! Let's take a look at it."

"I'm sorry; I don't have it now."

"Well, now," Tragg said, "isn't that interesting! And where did you get the key, Mason?"

Mason said, "The key came into my possession in a peculiar manner. I found it."

"Phooey! That key you have is the dead man's key. When we searched the body we found that stuff on the table there. There's no key to this apartment on him."

Mason sparred for time, said, "And did you notice that despite the fact there's a jar of ice cubes on the table, a bottle of whiskey, and a siphon of soda, the fatal drink didn't have any ice in it?"

"How do you know?" Tragg asked.

"Because when this glass fell from his hand and the contents spilled over the floor, it left a single small spot of moisture. If there had been ice cubes in the glass they'd have rolled out for some distance and then melted, leaving spots of moisture."

"I see," Tragg said sarcastically, "and then, having decided to commit suicide, the guy kissed himself on the forehead and —"

He broke off as one of the detectives, walking down the hallway, said,

"We've traced that cleaning mark, Lieutenant."

The man handed Tragg a folded slip of paper.

Tragg unfolded the paper. "Well, I'll be —"

Mason met Tragg's searching eyes with calm steadiness.

"And I suppose," Tragg said, "you're going to be surprised at this one: Miss Fay Allison, Apartment 604, in this same building, is the person who owns the coat that was in the closet. Her mark from the dry cleaner is on it. I think, Mr. Mason, we'll have a little talk with Fay Allison, and just to see that you don't make any false moves until we get there, we'll take you right along with us. Perhaps you already know the way."

As Tragg started toward the elevator, a smartly dressed woman in the late thirties or early forties stepped out of the elevator and walked down the corridor, looking at the numbers over the doors.

Tragg stepped forward. "Looking for something?"

She started to sweep past him.

Tragg pulled back his coat, showed her his badge.

"I'm looking for Apartment 702," she said.

"Whom are you looking for?"

"Mr. Carver Clements, if it's any of your business."

"I think it is," Tragg said. "Who are you and how do you happen to be here?"

She said, "I am Mrs. Carver L. Clements, and I'm here because I was informed over the telephone that my husband was secretly maintaining an apartment here."

"And what," Tragg asked, "did you intend to do?"

"I intend to show him that he isn't getting away with anything," she said. "You may as well accompany me. I feel certain that —"

Tragg said, "702 is down the corridor, at the corner on the right. I just came from there. Your husband was killed some time between seven and nine o'clock tonight."

Dark brown eyes grew wide with surprise. "You — you're sure?"

Tragg said, "Someone slipped him a little cyanide in his whiskey and soda. I don't suppose you'd know anything about that?"

She said slowly, "If my husband is dead — I can't believe it. He hated me too much to die. He was trying to force me to make a property settlement, and in order to make me properly submissive, he'd put me through a softening-up process, a period during which I didn't have money enough even to dress decently."

"In other words," Tragg said, "you hated his guts."

She clamped her lips together. "I didn't say that!"

Tragg grinned and said, "Come along with us. We're going down to an apartment on the sixth floor. After that I'm going to take your fingerprints and see if they match up with those on the glass which contained the poison."

Louise Marlow answered the

buzzer. She glanced at Tragg, then at Mrs. Clements.

Mason, raising his hat, said with the grave politeness of a stranger, "We're sorry to bother you at this hour, but —"

"*I'll* do the talking," Tragg said.

The formality of Mason's manner was not lost on Aunt Louise. She said, as though she had never seen him before, "Well, this is a strange time —"

Tragg pushed his way forward. "Does Fay Allison live here?"

"That's right," Louise Marlow beamed at him. "She and another girl, Anita Bonsal, share the apartment. They aren't here now, though."

"Where are they?" Tragg asked.

She shook her head. "I'm sure I couldn't tell you."

"And who are you?"

"I'm Louise Marlow, Fay's aunt."

"You're living with them?"

"Heavens, no. I just came up tonight to be here for — for a visit with Fay."

"You said, I believe, that they are not here now?"

"That's right."

Tragg said, "Let's cut out the shadow-boxing and get down to brass tacks, Mrs. Marlow. I want to see both of those girls."

"I'm sorry, but the girls are both sick. They're in the hospital. It's just a case of food poisoning. Only —"

"What's the doctor's name?"

"Now, you listen to me," Louise Marlow said. "I tell you, these girls are too sick to be bothered and —"

Lieutenant Tragg said, "Carver L. Clements, who has an apartment on the floor above here, is dead. It looks like murder. Fay Allison had evidently been living up there in the apartment with him and —"

"What are you talking about!" Louise Marlow exclaimed indignantly. "Why, I —"

"Take it easy," Tragg said. "Her clothes were up there. There's a cleaner's mark that has been traced to her."

"Clothes!" Louise Marlow snorted. "Why, it's probably some junk she gave away somewhere, or —"

"I'm coming to that," Lieutenant Tragg said patiently. "I don't want to do anyone an injustice. I want to play it on the up-and-up. Now, then, there are fingerprints in that apartment, the fingerprints of a woman on a drinking glass, on the handle of a toothbrush, on a tube of tooth paste. I'm not going to get tough unless I have to, but I want to get hold of Fay Allison long enough to take a set of fingerprints. You try holding out on me, and see what the newspapers have to say tomorrow."

Louise Marlow reached an instant decision. "You'll find her at the Crestview Sanitarium," she said, "and if you want to make a little money, I'll give you odds of a hundred to one that —"

"I'm not a betting man," Tragg said wearily. "I've been in this game too long."

He turned to one of the detectives and said, "Keep Perry Mason and his charming secretary under surveillance

and away from a telephone until I get a chance at those fingerprints. Okay, boys, let's go."

Paul Drake, head of the Drake Detective Agency, pulled a sheaf of notes from his pocket as he settled down in the big clients' chair in Mason's office.

"It's a mess, Perry," he said.

"Let's have it," Mason said.

Drake said, "Fay Allison and Dane Grover were going to get married today. Last night Fay and Anita Bonsal, who shares the apartment with her, settled down for a nice, gabby little hen party. They made chocolate. Fay had two cups; Anita had one. Fay evidently got about twice the dose of barbiturate that Anita did. Both girls passed out.

"Next thing Anita knew, Louise Marlow, Fay's aunt, was trying to wake her up. Fay Allison didn't recover consciousness until after she was in the sanitarium.

"Anyhow, Tragg went out and took Fay Allison's fingerprints. They check absolutely with those on the glass. What the police call the murder glass is the one that slipped from Carver Clements's fingers and rolled around the floor. It had been carefully wiped clean of all fingerprints. Police can't even find one of Clements's prints on it. The other glass on the table had Fay's prints. The closet was filled with her clothes. She was living there with him. It's a fine mess.

"Dane Grover is standing by her, but I personally don't think he can stand the gaff much longer. When a man's engaged to a girl and the newspapers scream the details of her affair with a wealthy playboy all over the front pages, you can't expect the man to appear exactly nonchalant. The aunt, Louise Marlow, tells me he's being faced with terrific pressure to repudiate the girl, to break the engagement and take a trip.

"The girls insist it's all part of some sinister over-all plan to frame them, that they were drugged, and all that, but how could anyone have planned it that way? For instance, how could anyone have known they were going to take the chocolate in time to —?"

"The chocolate was drugged?" Mason asked.

Drake nodded. "They'd used up most of the chocolate, but the small amount left in the package is pretty well doped with barbiturate.

"The police theory," Drake went on, "is that Fay Allison had been playing house with Carver Clements. She wanted to get married. Clements wouldn't let her go. She slipped him a little poison. She intended to return and get her things out of the apartment when it got late enough so she wouldn't meet someone in the corridor if she came walking out of 702 with her arms full of clothes. Anita, who had gone out, unexpectedly returned, and that left Fay Allison trapped. She couldn't go up and get her things out of the apartment upstairs without disturbing Anita. So she tried to drug Anita and something went wrong."

"That's a hell of a theory," Mason said.

"Try and get one that fits the case any better," Drake told him. "One thing is certain — Fay Allison was living up there in that Apartment 702. As far as Dane Grover is concerned, that's the thing that will make him throw everything overboard. He's a sensitive chap, from a good family. He doesn't like having his picture in the papers. Neither does his family."

"What about Clements?"

"Successful businessman, broker, speculator. Also a wife who was trying to hook him for a bigger property settlement than Clements wanted to pay. Clements had a big apartment where he lived officially. This place was a playhouse. Only a few people knew he had it. His wife would have given a lot of money to have found out about it."

"What's the wife doing now?"

"Sitting pretty. They don't know yet whether Clements left a will, but she has her community property rights, and Clements's books will be open for inspection now. He'd been juggling things around pretty much, and now a lot of stuff is going to come out — safe-deposit boxes and things of that sort."

"How about the four people who met us in the hall?"

"I have all the stuff on them here," Drake said. "The men were Richard P. Nolin, a sort of partner in some of Clements's business; Manley L. Ogden, an income tax specialist; Don B. Ralston, who acted as dummy for Clements in some business transactions; and Vera Payson, who is someone's girl-friend, but I'm darned if I can find out whose.

"Anyhow, those people knew of the hideout apartment and would go up there occasionally for a poker game. Last night, as soon as the dame across the hall said Clements had company, they knew what that meant, and went away. That's the story. The newspapers are lapping it up. Dane Grover isn't going to stay put much longer. You can't blame him. All he has is Fay Allison's tearful denial. Louise Marlow says we have to do something fast."

Mason said, "Tragg thinks I had Carver Clements's key."

"Where *did* you get it?"

Mason shook his head.

"Well," Drake said, "Carver Clements didn't have a key."

Mason nodded. "That is the only break we have in the case, Paul. We know Clements's key is missing. No one else does, because Tragg won't believe me when I tell him Clements hadn't given me his key."

Drake said, "It won't take Tragg long to figure the answer to that one. If Clements didn't give you the key, only one other person could have given it to you."

Mason said, "We won't speculate too much on that, Paul."

"I gathered we wouldn't," Drake said dryly. "Remember this, Perry, you're representing a girl who's going to be faced with a murder rap. You may be able to beat that rap. It's

circumstantial evidence. But, in doing it, you'll have to think out some explanation that will satisfy an embarrassed lover who's being pitied by his friends and ridiculed by the public."

Mason nodded. "We'll push things to a quick hearing in the magistrate's court on a preliminary examination. In the meantime, Paul, find out everything you can about Carver Clements's background. Pay particular attention to Clements's wife. If she had known about that apartment —"

Drake shook his head dubiously. "I'll give it a once-over, Perry, but if she'd even known about that apartment, that would have been all she needed. If she could have raided that apartment with a photographer and had the deadwood on Carver Clements, she'd have boosted her property settlement another hundred grand and walked out smiling. She wouldn't have needed to use any poison."

Mason's strong, capable fingers were drumming gently on the edge of the desk. "There has to be *some* explanation, Paul."

Drake heaved himself wearily to his feet. "That's right," he said without enthusiasm, "and Tragg thinks he has it."

Della Street, her eyes sparkling, entered Mason's private office and said, "He's here, Chief."

"Who's here?" Mason asked.

She laughed. "Don't be like that. As far as this office is concerned, there is only one *he*."

"Dane Grover?"

"That's right."

"What sort?"

"Tall, sensitive-looking. Wavy, dark brown hair, romantic eyes. He's crushed, of course. You can see he's dying ten thousand deaths every time he meets one of his friends. Gertie, at the switchboard, can't take her eyes off of him."

Mason grinned, and said, "Let's get him in, then, before Gertie either breaks up a romance or dies of unrequited love."

Della Street went out, returned after a few moments, ushering Dane Grover into the office.

Mason shook hands, invited Grover to a seat. Grover glanced dubiously at Della Street. Mason smiled. "She's my right hand, Grover. She takes notes for me, and keeps her thoughts to herself."

Grover said, "I suppose I'm unduly sensitive, but I can't stand it when people patronize me or pity me."

Mason nodded.

"I've had them do both ever since the papers came out this morning."

Again, Mason's answer was merely a nod.

"But," Grover went on, "I want you to know that I'll stick."

Mason thought that over for a moment, then held Grover's eyes. "For how long?"

"All the way."

"No matter what the evidence shows?"

Grover said, "The evidence shows the woman I love was living with Carver Clements as his mistress. The

evidence simply can't be right. I love her, and I'm going to stick. I want you to tell her that, and I want you to know that. What you're going to have to do will take money. I'm here to see that you have what money you need — all you want, in fact."

"That's fine," Mason said. "Primarily, what I need is a little moral support. I want to be able to tell Fay Allison that you're sticking, and I want some facts."

"What facts?"

"How long have you been going with Fay Allison?"

"A matter of three or four months. Before then I was — well, sort of squiring both of the girls around."

"You mean Anita Bonsal?"

"Yes. I met Anita first. I went with her for a while. Then I went with both. Then I began to gravitate toward Fay Allison. I thought I was just making dates. Actually, I was falling in love."

"And Anita?"

"She's like a sister to both of us. She's been simply grand in this whole thing. She's promised me that she'll do everything she can."

"Could Fay Allison have been living with Carver Clements?"

"She had the physical opportunity, if that's what you mean."

"You didn't see her every night?"

"No."

"What does Anita say?"

"Anita says the charge is ridiculous."

"Do you know of any place where Fay Allison could have had access to cyanide of potassium?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you about, Mr. Mason. Out at my place the gardener uses it. I don't know just what for, but — well, out there the other day, when he was showing Fay around the place —"

"Yes, yes," Mason said impatiently, as Grover paused; "go on."

"Well, I know the gardener told her to be very careful not to touch that sack because it contained cyanide. I remember she asked him a few questions about what he used it for, but I wasn't paying much attention. It's the basis of some sort of spray."

"Has your gardener read the papers?"

Grover nodded.

"Can you trust him?"

"Yes. He's very loyal to all our family. He's been with us for twenty years."

"What's his name?"

"Barney Sheff. My mother — well, rehabilitated him."

"He'd been in trouble? In the pen?"

"That's right. He had a chance to get parole if he could get a job. Mother gave him the job."

"I'm wondering if you have fully explored the possibilities of orchid growing."

"We're not interested in orchid growing. We can buy them and —"

"I wonder," Mason said in exactly the same tone, "if you have fully investigated the possibilities of growing orchids."

"You mean — Oh, you mean we should send Barney Sheff to —"

"Fully investigated the possibilities

of growing orchids," Mason said again.

Dane Grover studied Mason silently for a few seconds. Then abruptly he rose from the chair, extended his hand, and said, "I wanted you to understand, Mr. Mason, that I'm going to stick. I brought you some money. I thought you might need it." He carelessly tossed an envelope on the table. And with that he turned and marched out of the office.

Mason reached for the envelope Grover had tossed on his desk. It was well filled with hundred-dollar bills.

Della Street came over to take the money. "When I get so interested in a man," she said, "that I neglect to count the money, you know I'm becoming incurably romantic. How much, Chief?"

"Plenty," Mason said.

Della Street was counting it when the unlisted telephone on her desk rang. She picked up the receiver, and heard Drake's voice on the line. "Hi, Paul," she said.

"Hi, Della. Perry there?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Drake said wearily, "I'm making a progress report. Tell him Lieutenant Tragg nabbed the Grover gardener, a chap by the name of Sheff. They're holding him as a material witness, seem to be all worked up about what they've discovered. Can't find out what it is."

Della Street sat motionless at the desk, holding the receiver.

"Hello, hello," Drake said; "are you there?"

"I'm here," Della said. "I'll tell him." She hung up the phone.

It was after nine o'clock that night when Della Street, signing the register in the elevator, was whisked up to the floor where Perry Mason had his offices. She started to look in on Paul Drake, then changed her mind and kept on walking down the long, dark corridor, the rapid tempo of her heels echoing back at her from the night silence of the hallway.

She rounded the elbow in the corridor, and saw that lights were on in Mason's office.

The lawyer was pacing the floor, thumbs pushed in the armholes of his vest, head shoved forward, wrapped in such concentration that he did not even notice the opening of the door.

The desk was littered with photographs. There were numerous sheets of the flimsy which Paul Drake used in making reports.

Della stood quietly in the doorway, watching the tall, lean-waisted man pacing back and forth. Granite-hard of face, the seething action of his restless mind demanded a physical outlet, and this restless pacing was just an unconscious reflex.

After almost a minute Della Street said, "Hello, Chief. Can I help?"

Mason looked up at her with a start. "What are you doing here?"

"I came up to see if there was anything I could do to help. Had any dinner?" she asked.

He glanced at his wrist watch, said, "Not yet."

"What time is it?" Della Street asked.

He had to look at his wrist watch again in order to tell her. "Nine forty."

She laughed. "I knew you didn't even look the first time you went through the motions. Come on, Chief; you've got to go get something to eat. The case will still be here when you get back."

"How do we know it will?" Mason said. "I've been talking with Louise Marlow on the phone. She's been in touch with Dane Grover and she knows Dane Grover's mother. Dane Grover says he'll stick. How does *he* know what he'll do? He's never faced a situation like this. His friends, his relatives, are turning the knife in the wound with their sympathy. How can he tell whether he'll stick?"

"Just the same," Della Street insisted, "I think he will. It's through situations such as this that character is created."

"You're just talking to keep your courage up," Mason said. "The guy's undergoing the tortures of the damned. He can't help but be influenced by the evidence. The woman he loves on the night before the wedding trying to free herself from the man who gave her money and a certain measure of security."

"Chief, you simply *have* to eat."

Mason walked over to the desk. "Look at 'em," he said; "photographs! And Drake had the devil's own time obtaining them. They're copies of the police photographs — the body on the floor, glass on the table, an overturned chair, a newspaper half open by a reading chair — an apartment as drab as the sordid affair for which it was used. And somewhere in those photographs I've got to find the clue that will establish the innocence of a woman, not only innocence of murder, but of the crime of betraying the man she loved."

Mason leaned over the desk, picked up the magnifying glass which was on his blotter, and started once more examining the pictures. "Hang it, Della," he said, "I think the thing's here somewhere. That glass on the table, a little whiskey and soda in the bottom, Fay Allison's fingerprints all over it. Then there's the brazen touch of that crimson kiss on the forehead."

"Indicating a woman was with him just before he died?"

"Not necessarily. That lipstick is a perfect imprint of a pair of lips. There was no lipstick on his lips, just there on the forehead. A shrewd man could well have smeared lipstick on his lips, pressed them against Clements's forehead after the poison had taken effect, and so directed suspicion away from himself. This could easily have happened if the man had known some woman was in the habit of visiting Clements in that apartment.

"It's a clue that so obviously indicates a woman that I find myself getting suspicious of it. If there were only something to give me a starting point. If only we had more time."

Della Street walked over to the desk. She said, "Stop it. Come and

get something to eat. Let's talk it over."

"Haven't you had dinner?"

She smiled, and shook her head. "I knew you'd be working, and that if someone didn't rescue you, you'd be pacing the floor until two or three o'clock in the morning. What's Paul Drake found out?"

She picked up the sheets of flimsy, placed them together, and anchored everything in place with a paperweight. "Come on, Chief."

But he didn't really answer her question until after he had relaxed in one of the booths in their favorite restaurant. He pushed back the plates containing the wreckage of a thick steak, and poured more coffee, then said, "Drake hasn't found out much — just background."

"What, for instance?"

Mason said wearily, "It's the same old seven and six. The wife, Marline Austin Clements, apparently was swept off her feet by the sheer power of Carver Clements's determination to get her. She overlooked the fact that after he had her safely listed as one of his legal chattels, he used that same acquisitive, aggressive tenacity of purpose to get other things he wanted. Marline was left pretty much alone."

"And so?" Della asked.

"And so," Mason said, "in the course of time, Carver Clements turned to other interests. Hang it, Della, we have one thing to work on, only one thing — the fact that Clements had no key on his body.

"You remember the four people who met us in the corridor. They had to get in that apartment house some way. Remember the outer door was locked. Any of the tenants could release the latch by pressing the button of an electric release. But if the tenant of some apartment didn't press the release button, it was necessary to have a key in order to get in.

"Now, then, those four people got in. How? Regardless of what they say now, one of them must have had a key."

"The missing key?" Della asked.

"That's what we have to find out."

"What story did they give the police?"

"I don't know. The police have them sewed up tight. I've got to get one of them on the stand and cross-examine him. Then we'll at least have something to go on."

"So we have to try for an immediate hearing and then go it blind?"

"That's about the size of it."

"Was that key in Fay Allison's purse Clements's missing key?"

"It could have been. If so, either Fay was playing house or the key was planted. In that case, when was it planted, how, and by whom? I'm inclined to think Clements's key must have been on his body at the time he was murdered. It wasn't there when the police arrived. That's the one really significant clue we have to work on."

Della Street shook her head. "It's too deep for me, but I guess you're going to have to wade into it."

Mason lit a cigarette. "Ordinarily I'd spar for time, but in this case I'm afraid time is our enemy, Della. We're going to have to walk into court with all the assurance in the world and pull a very large rabbit out of a very small hat."

She smiled. "Where do we get the rabbit?"

"Back in the office," he said, "studying those photographs, looking for a clue, and —" Suddenly he snapped to attention.

"What is it, Chief?"

"I was just thinking. The glass on the table in 702 — there was a little whiskey and soda in the bottom of it, just a spoonful or two."

"Well?" she asked.

"What happens when you drink whiskey and soda, Della?"

"Why — you always leave a little. It sticks to the side of the glass and then gradually settles back."

Mason shook his head. His eyes were glowing now. "You leave ice cubes in the glass," he said, "and then after a while they melt and leave an inch or so of water."

She matched his excitement. "Then there was no ice in the woman's glass?"

"And none in Carver Clements's. Yet there was a jar of ice cubes on the table. Come on, Della; we're going back and *really* study those photographs!"

Judge Randolph Jordan ascended the bench and rapped court to order.

"People versus Fay Allison."

"Ready for the defendant," Mason said.

"Ready for the Prosecution," Stewart Linn announced.

Linn, one of the best of the trial deputies in the district attorney's office, was a steely-eyed individual who had the legal knowledge of an encyclopedia, and the cold-blooded mercilessness of a steel trap.

Linn was under no illusions as to the resourcefulness of his adversary, and he had all the caution of a boxer approaching a heavyweight champion.

"Call Dr. Charles Keene," he said.

Dr. Keene came forward, qualified himself as a physician and surgeon who had had great experience in medical necropsies, particularly in cases of homicide.

"On the tenth of this month did you have occasion to examine a body in Apartment 702 at the Mandrake Arms?"

"I did."

"What time was it?"

"It was about two o'clock in the morning."

"What did you find?"

"I found the body of a man of approximately fifty-two years of age, fairly well fleshed, quite bald, but otherwise very well preserved for a man of his age. The body was lying on the floor, head toward the door, feet toward the interior of the apartment, the left arm doubled up and lying under him, the right arm flung out, the left side of the face resting on the carpet. The man had been dead

for several hours. I fix the time of death as having taken place during a period between seven o'clock and nine o'clock that evening. I cannot place the time of death any closer than that, but I will swear that it took place within those time limits."

"And did you determine the cause of death?"

"Not at that time. I did later."

"What was the cause of death?"

"Poisoning caused by the ingestion of cyanide of potassium."

"Did you notice anything about the physical appearance of the man's body?"

"There was a red smear on the upper part of the forehead, apparently caused by lips that had been heavily coated with lipstick and then pressed against the skin in a somewhat puckered condition. It was as though some woman had administered a last kiss."

"Cross-examine," Linn announced.

"No questions," Mason said.

"Call Benjamin Harlan," Linn said.

Benjamin Harlan, a huge, lumbering giant of a man, promptly proceeded to qualify himself as a fingerprint and identification expert of some twenty years' experience.

Stewart Linn, by skillful, adroit questions, led him through an account of his activities on the date in question. Harlan found no latent fingerprints on the glass which the Prosecution referred to as the "murder glass," indicating this glass had been wiped clean of prints, but there were prints on the glass on the table which the Prosecution referred to as the "decoy glass," on the toothbrush, on the tube of tooth paste, and on various other articles. These latent fingerprints had coincided with the fingerprints taken from the hands of Fay Allison, the defendant.

Harlan also identified a whole series of photographs taken by the police showing the position of the body when it was discovered, the furnishings in the apartment, the table, the overturned chair, the so-called murder glass, which had rolled along the floor, the so-called decoy glass on the table, which bore unmistakably the fresh fingerprints of Fay Allison, the bottle of whiskey, the bottle of soda water, the jar containing ice cubes.

"Cross-examine," Linn said triumphantly.

Mason said, "You have had some twenty years' experience as a fingerprint expert, Mr. Harlan?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, you have heard Dr. Keene's testimony about the lipstick on the forehead of the dead man?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that lipstick, I believe, shows in this photograph which I now hand you?"

"Yes, sir; not only that, but I have a close-up of that lipstick stain which I, myself, took. I have an enlargement of that negative, in case you're interested."

"I'm very much interested," Mason said. "Will you produce the enlargement, please?"

Harlan produced the photograph from his brief-case, showing a section

of the forehead of the dead man, with the stain of lips outlined clearly and in microscopic detail.

"What is the scale of this photograph?" Mason asked.

"Life size," Harlan said. "I have a standard of distances by which I can take photographs to a scale of exactly life size."

"Thank you," Mason said. "I'd like to have this photograph received in evidence."

"No objection," Linn said.

"And it is, is it not, a matter of fact that the little lines shown in this photograph are fully as distinctive as the ridges and whorls of a fingerprint?"

"Just what do you mean?"

"Isn't it a fact well known to identification experts that the little wrinkles which form in a person's lips are fully as individual as the lines of a fingerprint?"

"It's not a 'well-known' fact."

"But it *is* a fact?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"So that by measuring the distance between the little lines which are shown on this photograph, indicating the pucker lines of the skin, it would be fully as possible to identify the lips which made this lipstick print as it would be to identify a person who had left a fingerprint upon the scalp of the dead man."

"Yes, sir."

"Now, you have testified to having made imprints of the defendant's fingers and compared those with the fingerprints found on the glass."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you made any attempt to take an imprint of her lips and compare that print with the print of the lipstick on the decedent?"

"No, sir," Harlan said, shifting his position uneasily.

"Why not?"

"Well, in the first place, Mr. Mason, the fact that the pucker lines of lips are so highly individualized is not a generally known fact."

"But *you* knew it."

"Yes, sir."

"And the more skilled experts in your profession know it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you do it, then?"

Harlan glanced somewhat helplessly at Stewart Linn.

"Oh, if the Court please," Linn said, promptly taking his cue from that glance, "this hardly seems to be cross-examination. The inquiry is wandering far afield. I will object to the question on the ground that it's incompetent, irrelevant, immaterial, and not proper cross-examination."

"Overruled," Judge Jordan snapped. "Answer the question!"

Harlan cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "I just never thought of it."

"Think of it now," Mason said. "Go ahead and take the imprint right now and right here. . . . Put on plenty of lipstick, Miss Allison. Let's see how your lips compare with those on the dead man's forehead."

"Oh, if the Court please," Linn said wearily, "this hardly seems to be cross-examination. If Mr. Mason

wants to make Harlan his own witness and call for this test as a part of the defendant's case, that will be one thing; but this certainly isn't cross-examination."

"It may be cross-examination of Harlan's qualifications as an expert," Judge Jordan ruled.

"Oh, if the Court please! Isn't that stretching a technicality rather far?"

"Your objection was highly technical," Judge Jordan snapped. "It is overruled, and my ruling will stand. Take the impression, Mr. Harlan."

Fay Allison, with trembling hand, daubed lipstick heavily on her mouth. Then, using the make-up mirror in her purse, smoothed off the lipstick with the tip of her little finger.

"Go ahead," Mason said to Harlan; "check on her lips."

Harlan, taking a piece of white paper from his brief-case, moved down to where the defendant was sitting beside Perry Mason and pressed the paper against her lips. He removed the paper and examined the imprint.

"Go ahead," Mason said to Harlan; "make your comparison and announce the results to the Court."

Harlan said, "Of course, I have not the facilities here for making a microscopic comparison, but I can tell from even a superficial examination of the lip lines that these lips did not make that print."

"Thank you," Mason said. "That's all."

Judge Jordan was interested. "These lines appear in the lips only when the lips are puckered, as in giving a kiss?"

"No, Your Honor, they are in the lips all the time, as an examination will show, but when the lips are puckered, the lines are intensified."

"And these lip markings are different with each individual?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"So that you are now prepared to state to the Court that despite the fingerprints of the defendant on the glass and other objects, her lips definitely could not have left the imprint on the dead man's forehead?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"That's all," Judge Jordan said.

"Of course," Linn pointed out, "the fact that the defendant did not leave that kiss imprint on the man's forehead doesn't necessarily mean a thing, Your Honor. In fact, he may have met his death *because* the defendant found that lipstick on his forehead. The evidence of the fingerprints is quite conclusive that the defendant was in that apartment."

"The Court understands the evidence. Proceed with your case," Judge Jordan said.

"Furthermore," Linn went on angrily, "I will now show the Court that there was every possibility the print of that lipstick could have been deliberately planted by none other than the attorney for the defendant and his charming and very efficient secretary. I will proceed to prove that by calling Don B. Ralston to the stand."

Ralston came forward and took the stand, his manner that of a man who wishes he were many miles away.

"Your name is Don B. Ralston? You reside at 2935 Creelmore Avenue in this city?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you knew Carver L. Clements in his lifetime?"

"Yes."

"In a business way?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, on the night — or, rather, early in the morning — of the 10th of this month, did you have occasion to go to Carver Clements's apartment, being Apartment Number 702 in the Mandrake Arms Apartments in this city?"

"I did, yes, sir."

"What time was it?"

"Around — well, it was between one and two in the morning — I would say around one thirty."

"Were you alone?"

"No, sir."

"Who was with you?"

"Richard P. Nolin, who is a business associate — or was a business associate — of Mr. Clements; Manley L. Ogden, who handled some of Mr. Clements's income tax work; and a Miss Vera Payson, a friend of — well, a friend of all of us."

"What happened when you went to that apartment?"

"Well, we left the elevator on the seventh floor, and as we were walking down the corridor, I noticed two people coming down the corridor toward us."

"Now, when you say 'down the corridor,' do you mean from the direction of Apartment 702?"

"That's right, yes, sir."

"And who were these people?"

"Mr. Perry Mason and his secretary, Miss Street."

"And did you actually enter the apartment of Carver Clements?"

"I did not."

"Why not?"

"When I got to the door of Apartment 702, I pushed the doorbell and heard the sound of the buzzer on the inside of the apartment. Almost instantly the door of an apartment across the hall opened, and a woman complained that she had been unable to sleep because of people ringing the buzzer of that apartment, and stated, in effect, that other people were in there with Mr. Clements. So we left immediately."

"Now, then, Your Honor," Stewart Linn said, "I propose to show that the two people referred to by the person living in the apartment across the hallway were none other than Mr. Mason and Miss Street, who had actually entered that apartment and were in there with the dead man and the evidence for an undetermined length of time."

"Go ahead and show it," Judge Jordan said.

"Just a moment," Mason said. "Before you do that, I want to cross-examine this witness."

"Cross-examine him, then."

"When you arrived at the Mandrake Arms, Mr. Ralston, the door to the street was locked, was it not?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do?"

"We went up to the seventh floor and —"

"I understand that, but how did you get in? How did you get past the entrance door? You had a key, didn't you?"

"No, sir."

"Then how *did* you get in?"

"Why *you* let us in."

"*I* did?"

"Yes."

"Understand," Mason said, "I am not now referring to the time you came up from the street in the custody of the radio officer. I am now referring to the time when you *first* entered that apartment house on the morning of the tenth of this month."

"Yes, sir. I understand. You let us in."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, because you and your secretary were in Carver Clements's apartment, and —"

"You, yourself, don't *know* we were in there, do you?"

"Well, I surmise it. We met you just after you had left the apartment. You were hurrying down the hall toward the elevator."

Mason said, "I don't want your surmises. You don't even know I had been in that apartment. I want you to tell us how you got past the locked street door."

"We pressed the button of Carver Clements's apartment, and you — or, at any rate, someone — answered by pressing the button which released the electric door catch on the outer door. As soon as we heard the buzzing sound, which indicated the lock was released, we pushed the door open and went in."

"Let's not have any misunderstanding about this," Mason said. "Who was it pushed the button of Carver Clements's apartment?"

"I did."

"I'm talking now about the button in front of the outer door of the apartment."

"Yes, sir."

"And having pressed that button, you waited until the buzzer announced the door was being opened?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long?"

"Not over a second or two."

Mason said to the witness, "One more question: Did you go right up after you entered the house?"

"We — no, sir, not *right* away. We stopped for a few moments there in the lobby to talk about the type of poker we wanted to play. Miss Payson had lost money on one of these wild poker games where the dealer has the opportunity of calling any kind of game he wants, some of them having the one-eyed Jacks wild, and things of that sort."

"How long were you talking?"

"Oh, a couple of minutes."

"And then went right up?"

"Yes."

"Where was the elevator?"

"The elevator was on one of the upper floors. I remember we pressed the button and it took a little while to come down to where we were."

"That's all," Mason said.

Della Street's fingers dug into his arm. "Aren't you going to ask him about the key?" she whispered.

"Not yet," Mason said, a light of triumph in his eyes. "I know what happened now, Della. Give us the breaks, and we've got this case in the bag. First, make him prove we were in that apartment."

Linn said, "I will now call Miss Shirley Tanner to the stand."

The young woman who advanced to the stand was very different from the disheveled and nervous individual who had been so angry at the time Mason and Della Street had pressed the button of Apartment 702.

"Your name is Shirley Tanner, and you reside in Apartment 701 of the Mandrake Arms Apartments?"

"Yes, sir."

"And have for how long?"

She smiled, and said, "Not very long. I put in three weeks apartment hunting and finally secured a sublease on Apartment 701 on the afternoon of the eighth. I moved in on the ninth, which explains why I was tired almost to the point of hysterics."

"You had difficulty sleeping?"

"Yes."

"And on the morning of the tenth did you have any experiences which annoyed you — experiences in connection with the ringing of the buzzer in the apartment next door?"

"I most certainly did, yes, sir."

"Tell us exactly what happened."

"I had been taking sleeping medicine from time to time, but for some reason or other this night I was so nervous the sleeping medicine didn't do me any good. I had been unpacking, and my nerves were all keyed up. I was physically and mentally exhausted but I was too tired to sleep.

"Well, I was trying to sleep, and I think I had just got to sleep when I was awakened by a continual sounding of the buzzer in the apartment across the hall. It was a low, persistent noise which became very irritating in my nervous state."

"Go on," Linn said. "What did you do?"

"I finally got up and put on a robe and went to the door and flung it open. I was terribly angry at the very idea of people making so much noise at that hour of the morning. You see, those apartments aren't too soundproof and there is a ventilating system over the doors of the apartments. The one over the door of 702 was apparently open and I had left mine open for night-time ventilation. And then I was angry at myself for getting so upset over the noise. I knew it would prevent me from sleeping at all, which is why I lay still for what seemed an interminable time before I opened the door."

Linn smiled. "And you say you *flung* open the door?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you find?"

"Two people across the hall."

"Did you recognize them?"

"I didn't know them at the time, but I know them now."

"Who were they?"

She pointed a dramatic finger at

Perry Mason. "Mr. Perry Mason, the lawyer for the defendant, and the young woman, I believe his secretary, who is sitting there beside him — not the defendant, but the woman on the other side."

"Miss Della Street," Mason said with a bow.

"Thank you," she said.

"And," Linn went on, "what did you see those people do?"

She said, "I saw them enter the apartment."

"Did you see how they entered the apartment — I mean, how did they get the door open?"

"They must have used a key. Mr. Mason was just pushing the door open and I —"

"No surmises, please," Linn broke in. "Did you actually see Mr. Mason using a key?"

"Well, I heard him."

"What do you mean?"

"As I was opening my door I heard metal rasping against metal, the way a key does when it scrapes against a lock. And then, when I had my door all the way open, I saw Mr. Mason pushing his way into 702."

"But you only know he must have had a key because you heard the sound of metal rubbing against metal?"

"Yes, and the click of the lock."

"Did you say anything to Mr. Mason and Miss Street?"

"I most certainly did, and then I slammed the door and went back and tried to sleep. But I was so mad by that time I couldn't keep my eyes closed."

"What happened after that?"

"After that, when I was trying to sleep — I would say just a few seconds after that — I heard that buzzer again. This time I was good and mad."

"And what did you do?"

"I swung open the door and started to give these people a piece of my mind."

"People?" Linn asked promptingly.

"There were four people standing there. The Mr. Ralston, who has just testified, two other men, and a woman. They were standing there at the doorway, jabbing away at the button, and I told them this was a sweet time to be calling on someone and making a racket, and that anyway the gentleman already had company, so if he didn't answer his door, it was because he didn't want to."

"Did you at that time see Mr. Mason and Miss Street walking down the corridor?"

"No. I did not. I had my door open only far enough to show me the door of Apartment 702 across the way."

"Thank you," Linn said. "Now, you distinctly saw Mr. Mason and Miss Street enter that apartment?"

"Yes."

"And close the door behind them?"

"Yes."

"Cross-examine!" Linn said triumphantly.

Mason, taking a notebook from his pocket, walked up to stand beside Shirley Tanner. "Miss Tanner," he said, "are you certain that you heard me rub metal against the keyhole of that door?"

"Certain," she said.

"My back was toward you?"

"It was when I first opened my door, yes. I saw your face, however, just after you went in the door. You turned around and looked at me over your shoulder."

"Oh, we'll stipulate," Linn said, with an exaggerated note of weariness in his voice, "that the witness couldn't see through Mr. Mason's back. Perhaps learned counsel was carrying the key in his teeth."

"Thank you," Mason said, turning toward Linn. Then, suddenly stepping forward, he clapped his notebook against Shirley Tanner's face.

The witness screamed and jumped back.

Linn was on his feet. "What are you trying to do?" he shouted.

Judge Jordan pounded with his gavel. "Mr. Mason!" he reprimanded. "That is contempt of court!"

Mason said, "Please let me explain, Your Honor. The Prosecution took the lip-prints of my client. I feel that I am entitled to take the lip-prints of this witness. I will cheerfully admit to being in contempt of court, in the event I am wrong, but I would like to extend this imprint of Shirley Tanner's lips to Mr. Benjamin Harlan, the identification expert, and ask him whether or not the print made by these lips is not the same as that of the lipstick kiss which was found on the dead forehead of Carver L. Clements."

There was a tense, dramatic silence in the courtroom.

Mason stepped forward and handed the notebook to Benjamin Harlan.

From the witness stand came a shrill scream of terror. Shirley Tanner tried to get to her feet. Her eyes were wide and terrified, her face was the color of putty.

She couldn't make it. Her knees buckled. She tried to catch herself, then fell to the floor. . . .

It was when order was restored in the courtroom that Perry Mason exploded his second bombshell.

"Your Honor," he said, "either Fay Allison is innocent or she is guilty. If she is innocent, someone framed the evidence which would discredit her. And if someone did frame that evidence, there is only one person who could have had access to the defendant's apartment, one person who could have transported glasses, toothbrushes, and tooth paste containing Fay Allison's fingerprints, one person who could have transported clothes bearing the unmistakable stamp of ownership of the defendant in this case. . . . Your Honor, I request that Anita Bonsal be called to the stand."

There was a moment's silence.

Anita Bonsal, there in the courtroom, felt suddenly as though she had been stripped stark naked by one swift gesture. One moment, she had been sitting there, attempting to keep pace with the swift rush of developments. The next moment, everyone in the courtroom was seeking her out with staring, prying eyes.

In her sudden surge of panic, Anita did the worst thing she could possibly have done: She ran.

They were after her then, a throng of humanity, motivated only by the mass instinct to pursue that which ran for cover.

Anita dashed to the stairs, went scrambling down them, found herself in another hallway in the Hall of Justice. She dashed the length of that hallway, frantically trying to find the stairs. She could not find them.

An elevator offered her welcome haven.

Anita fairly flung herself into the cage.

"What's the hurry?" the attendant asked.

Shreds of reason were beginning to return to Anita's fear-racked mind. "They're calling my case," she said. "Let me off at —"

"I know," the man said, smiling. "Third floor. Domestic Relations Court."

He slid the cage to a smooth stop at the third floor. "Out to the left," he said. "Department Twelve."

Anita's mind was beginning to work now. She smiled at the elevator attendant, walked rapidly to the left, pushed open a door, and entered the partially filled courtroom. She marched down the center aisle and calmly seated herself in the middle seat in a row of benches.

She was now wrapped in anonymity. Only her breathlessness and the pounding of her pulses gave indication that she was the quarry for which the crowd was now searching.

Then slowly the triumphant smile faded from her face. The realization of the effect of what she had done stabbed her consciousness. She had admitted her guilt. She could flee now to the farthest corners of the earth, but her guilt would always follow her.

Perry Mason had shown that she had not killed Carver Clements, but he had also shown that she had done something which in the minds of all men would be even worse. She had betrayed her friend. She had tried to ruin Fay Allison's reputation. She had attempted the murder of her own roommate by giving her an overdose of sleeping tablets.

How much would Mason have been able to prove? She had no way of knowing. But there was no need for him to prove anything now. Her flight had given Mason all the proof he needed.

She must disappear, and that would not be easy. By evening her photograph would be emblazoned upon the pages of every newspaper in the city. . . .

Back in the courtroom, almost deserted now except for the county officials who were crowding around Shirley Tanner, Mason was asking questions in a low voice.

There was no more stamina left in Shirley Tanner than in a wet dishrag. She heard her own voice answering the persistent drone of Mason's searching questions.

"You knew that Clements had this apartment in 702? . . . You deliberately made such a high offer that you were able to sublease Apartment 701? . . . You were suspicious of Clements and wanted to spy on him?"

"Yes," Shirley said, and her voice was all but inaudible, although it was obvious that the court reporter, standing beside her, was taking down in his notebook all she said.

"You were furious when you realized that Carver Clements had *another* mistress and that all his talk to you about waiting until he could get his divorce was merely bait which you had grabbed?"

Again she said, "Yes." There was no strength in her any more to think up lies.

"You made the mistake of loving him," Mason said. "It wasn't his money you were after, and you administered the poison. How did you do it, Shirley?"

She said, "I'd poisoned the drink I held in my hand. I knew it made Carver furious when I drank, because whiskey makes me lose control of myself, and he never knew what I was going to do when I was drunk.

"I rang his bell, holding that glass in my hand. I leered at him tipsily when he opened the door, and walked on in. I said, 'Hello, Carver darling. Meet your next-door neighbor,' and I raised the glass to my lips.

"He acted just as I knew he would. He was furious. He said, 'You little devil, what're you doing here? I've told you I'll do the drinking for both of us.' He snatched the glass from me and drained it."

"What happened?" Mason asked.

"For a moment, nothing," she said. "He went back to the chair and sat down. I leaned over him and pressed that kiss on his head. It was a goodbye kiss. He looked at me, frowned; then suddenly he jumped to his feet and tried to run to the door, but he staggered and fell face forward."

"And what did you do?"

"I took the key to his apartment from his pocket so I could get back in to fix things the way I wanted and get possession of the glass, but I was afraid to be there while he was — dying."

Mason nodded. "You went back to your own apartment, and then, after you had waited a few minutes and thought it was safe to go back, you couldn't, because Anita Bonsal was at the door?"

She nodded, and said, "She had a key. She went in. I supposed, of course, she'd call the police and that they'd come at any time. I didn't dare to go in there then. Finally, I decided the police weren't coming, after all. It was past midnight then."

"So then you went back in there? You were in there when Don Ralston rang the bell. You —"

"Yes," she said. "I went back into that apartment. By that time I had put on a bathrobe and pajamas and ruffled my hair all up. If anyone had said anything to me, if I had been caught, I had a story all prepared to

tell them, that I had heard the door open and someone run down the corridor, that I had opened my door and found the door of 702 ajar, and I had just that minute looked in to see what had happened."

"All right," Mason said; "that was your story. What did you do?"

"I went in and wiped all my fingerprints off that glass on the floor. Then the buzzer sounded from the street."

"What did you do?"

She said, "I saw someone had fixed up the evidence just the way I had been going to fix it up. A bottle of whiskey on the table, a bottle of soda, a jar of ice cubes."

"So what did you do?"

She said, "I was rattled, I guess, so I just automatically pushed the button which released the downstairs door catch. Then I ducked back into my own apartment, and hadn't any more than got in when I heard the elevator stop at the seventh floor. I couldn't understand that, because I knew these people couldn't possibly have had time enough to get up to the seventh floor in the elevator. I waited, listening, and heard you two come down the corridor. As soon as the buzzer sounded in the other apartment, I opened the door to chase you away, but you were actually entering the apartment, so I had to make a quick excuse, that the sound of the buzzer had wakened me. Then I jerked the door shut. When the four people came up, I thought you were still in the apartment, and I had to see what was happening."

"How long had you known him?" Mason asked.

She said sadly, "I loved him. I was the one that he wanted to marry when he left his wife. I don't know how long this other romance had been going on. I became suspicious, and one time when I had an opportunity to go through his pockets, I found a key stamped, 'Mandrake Arms Apartment, Number 702.' Then I thought I knew, but I wanted to be sure. I found out who had Apartment 701 and made a proposition for a sublease that couldn't be turned down.

"I waited and watched. This brunette walked down the corridor and used *her* key to open the apartment. I slipped out into the corridor and listened at the door. I heard him give her the same old line he'd given me so many times, and I hated him. I killed him — and I was caught."

Mason turned to Stewart Linn and said, "There you are, young man. There's your murderess, but you'll probably never be able to get a jury to think it's anything more than manslaughter."

A much chastened Linn said, "Would you mind telling me how you figured this out, Mr. Mason?"

Mason said, "Clements's key was missing. Obviously he must have had it when he entered the apartment. Therefore, the murderer must have taken it from his pocket. Why? So he or she could come back. And if what Don Ralston said was true, *someone*

must have been in the apartment when he rang the bell from the street, someone who let him in by pressing the buzzer.

"What happened to that someone? I must have been walking down the corridor within a matter of seconds after Ralston had pressed the button on the street door. Yet I saw no one leaving the apartment. *Obviously, then, the person who pressed the buzzer must have had a place to take refuge in a nearby apartment!*

"Having learned that a young, attractive woman had only that day taken a lease on the apartment opposite, the answer became so obvious it ceased to be a mystery."

Stewart Linn nodded thoughtfully. "It all fits in," he said.

Mason picked up his brief-case, smiled to Della Street. "Come on, Della," he said. "Let's get Fay Allison and —"

He stopped as he saw Fay Allison's face. "What's happened to *your* lipstick?" he asked.

And then his eyes moved over to take in Dane Grover, who was standing by her, his face smeared diagonally across the mouth with a huge, red smear of lipstick.

Fay Allison had neglected to remove the thick coating of lipstick which she had put on when Mason had asked Benjamin Harlan, the identification expert, to take an imprint of her lips. Now, the heavy mark where her mouth had been pressed against the mouth of Dane Grover gave a note of incongruity to the entire proceedings.

On the lower floors a mob of eagerly curious spectators were baying like hounds upon the track of Anita Bonsal. In the courtroom the long, efficient arm of the law was gathering Shirley Tanner into its grasp, and there, amidst the machinery of tragedy, the romance of Fay Allison and Dane Grover picked up where it had left off. . . .

It was the gavel of Judge Randolph Jordan that brought them back to the grim realities of justice.

"The Court," announced Judge Jordan, "will dismiss the case against Fay Allison. The Court will order Shirley Tanner into custody, and the Court will suggest to the Prosecutor that a complaint be issued for Anita Bonsal, upon such charge as may seem expedient to the office of the District Attorney. And the Court does hereby extend its most sincere apologies to the defendant, Fay Allison. And the Court, personally, wishes to congratulate Mr. Perry Mason upon his brilliant handling of this matter."

There was a moment during which Judge Jordan's stern eyes rested upon the lipstick-smeared countenance of Dane Grover. A faint smile twitched at the corners of His Honor's mouth.

The gavel banged once more.

"The Court," announced Judge Randolph Jordan, "is adjourned."

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BLUE CARBUNCLE

by A. CONAN DOYLE

MY FRIEND SHERLOCK HOLMES was deeply engrossed with perplexing problems when I called upon him that second morning after Christmas, with the intention of wishing him the compliments of the season. He was lounging upon the sofa in a purple dressing-gown, a pipe-rack within his reach upon the right, and a pile of crumpled morning papers, evidently newly studied, near at hand. Beside the couch was a wooden chair, and on the angle of the back hung a very seedy and disreputable hard-felt hat, much the worse for wear, and cracked in several places. A lens and a forceps lying upon the seat of the chair suggested that the hat had been suspended in this manner for the purpose of examination.

"You are engaged," said I; "perhaps I interrupt you."

"Not at all. I am glad to have a friend with whom I can discuss my results. The matter is a perfectly trivial one" — he jerked his thumb in the direction of the old hat — "but there are points in connection with it which are not entirely devoid of interest and even of instruction."

I seated myself in his armchair and warmed my hands before his crackling fire, for a sharp frost had set in, and the windows were thick with the ice crystals. "I suppose," I remarked, "that, homely as it looks, this thing has some deadly story linked on to it — that it is the clue which will guide you in the solution of some mystery and the punishment of some crime."

"No, no. No crime," said Sherlock Holmes, laughing. "Only one of those whimsical little incidents which will happen when you have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space of a few square miles. Amid the action and reaction of so dense a swarm of humanity, every possible combination of events may be expected to take place, and many a little problem will be presented which may be striking and bizarre without being criminal. We have already had experience of such."

"So much so," I remarked, "that of the last six cases which I have added to my notes, three have been entirely free of any legal crime."

"Precisely. You allude to my attempt to recover the Irene Adler papers, to the singular case of Miss Mary Sutherland, and to the adventure of the man with the twisted lip. Well, I have no doubt that this small matter will fall into the same innocent category. You know Peterson, the commissionaire?"

"Yes."

"It is to him that this trophy belongs."

"It is his hat?"

"No, no; he found it. Its owner is unknown. I beg that you will look upon it not as a battered billycock but as an intellectual problem. And, first, as to how it came here. It arrived upon Christmas morning, in company with a good fat goose, which is, I have no doubt, roasting at this moment in front of Peterson's fire. The facts are these: about four o'clock on Christmas morning, Peterson, who, as you know, is a very honest fellow, was returning from some small jollification and was making his way homeward down Tottenham Court Road. In front of him he saw, in the gaslight, a tallish man, walking with a slight stagger, and carrying a white goose slung over his shoulder. As he reached the corner of Goodge Street, a row broke out between this stranger and a little knot of roughs. One of the latter knocked off the man's hat, on which he raised his stick to defend himself and, swinging it over his head, smashed the shop window behind him. Peterson had rushed forward to protect the stranger from his assailants; but the man, shocked at having broken the window, and seeing an official-looking person in uniform rushing towards him, dropped his goose, took to his heels, and vanished amid the labyrinth of small streets which lie at the back of Tottenham Court Road. The roughs had also fled at the appearance of Peterson, so that he was left in possession of the field of battle, and also of the spoils of victory in the shape of this battered hat and a most unimpeachable Christmas goose."

"Which he restored to their owner?"

"My dear fellow, there lies the problem. It is true that 'For Mrs. Henry Baker' was printed upon a small card which was tied to the bird's left leg, and it is also true that the initials 'H. B.' are legible upon the lining of this hat; but as there are some thousands of Bakers, and some hundreds of Henry Bakers in this city of ours, it is not easy to restore lost property to any one of them."

"What, then, did Peterson do?"

"He brought round both hat and goose to me on Christmas morning, knowing that even the smallest problems are of interest to me. The goose we retained until this morning, when there were signs that, in spite of the slight frost, it would be well that it should be eaten without unnecessary delay. Its finder has carried it off, therefore, to fulfill the ultimate destiny of a goose, while I continue to retain the hat of the unknown gentleman who lost his Christmas dinner."

"Did he not advertise?"

"No."

"Then, what clue could you have as to his identity?"

"Only as much as we can deduce."

"From his hat?"

"Precisely."

"But you are joking. What can you gather from this old battered felt?"

"Here is my lens. You know my methods. What can you gather yourself as to the individuality of the man who has worn this article?"

I took the tattered object in my hands and turned it over rather ruefully. It was a very ordinary black hat of the usual round shape, hard and much the worse for wear. The lining had been of red silk, but was a good deal discolored. There was no maker's name; but, as Holmes had remarked, the initials "H. B." were scrawled upon one side. It was pierced in the brim for a hat-securer, but the elastic was missing. For the rest, it was cracked, exceedingly dusty, and spotted in several places, although there seemed to have been some attempt to hide the discolored patches by smearing them with ink.

"I can see nothing," said I, handing it back to my friend.

"On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing your inferences."

"Then, pray tell me what it is that you can infer from this hat?"

He picked it up and gazed at it in the peculiar introspective fashion which was characteristic of him. "It is perhaps less suggestive than it might have been," he remarked, "and yet there are a few inferences which are very distinct, and a few others which represent at least a strong balance of probability. That the man was highly intellectual is of course obvious upon the face of it, and also that he was fairly well-to-do within the last three years, although he has now fallen upon evil days. He had foresight, but has less now than formerly, pointing to a moral retrogression, which, when taken with the decline of his fortunes, seems to indicate some evil influence, probably drink, at work upon him. This may account also for the obvious fact that his wife has ceased to love him."

"My dear Holmes!"

"He has, however, retained some degree of self-respect," he continued, disregarding my remonstrance. "He is a man who leads a sedentary life, goes out little, is out of training entirely, is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which he has had cut within the last few days, and which he anoints with lime-cream. These are the more patent facts which are to be deduced from his hat. Also, by the way, that it is extremely improbable that he has gas laid on in his house."

"You are certainly joking, Holmes."

"Not in the least. Is it possible that even now, when I give you these results, you are unable to see how they are attained?"

"I have no doubt that I am very stupid, but I must confess that I am unable to follow you. For example, how did you deduce that this man was intellectual?"

For answer Holmes clapped the hat upon his head. It came right over the forehead and settled upon the bridge of his nose. "It is a question of cubic capacity," said he; "a man with so large a brain must have something in it."

"The decline of his fortunes, then?"

"This hat is three years old. These flat brims curled at the edge came in

then. It is a hat of the very best quality. Look at the band of ribbed silk and the excellent lining. If this man could afford to buy so expensive a hat three years ago, and has had no hat since, then he has assuredly gone down in the world."

"Well, that is clear enough, certainly. But how about the foresight and the moral retrogression?"

Sherlock Holmes laughed. "Here is the foresight," said he, putting his finger upon the little disc and loop of the hat-securer. "They are never sold upon hats. If this man ordered one, it is a sign of a certain amount of foresight, since he went out of his way to take this precaution against the wind. But since we see that he has broken the elastic and has not troubled to replace it, it is obvious that he has less foresight now than formerly, which is a distinct proof of a weakening nature. On the other hand, he has endeavored to conceal some of these stains upon the felt by daubing them with ink, which is a sign that he has not entirely lost his self-respect."

"Your reasoning is plausible."

"The further points, that he is middle-aged, that his hair is grizzled, that it has been recently cut, and that he uses lime-cream, are all to be gathered from a close examination of the lower part of the lining. The lens discloses a large number of hair-ends, clean cut by the scissors of the barber. They all appear to be adhesive, and there is a distinct odor of lime-cream. This dust, you will observe, is not the gritty, gray dust of the street but the fluffy brown dust of the house, showing that it has been hung up indoors most of the time; while the marks of moisture upon the inside are proof positive that the wearer perspired very freely, and could, therefore, hardly be in the best of training."

"But his wife — you said that she had ceased to love him."

"This hat has not been brushed for weeks. When I see you, my dear Watson, with a week's accumulation of dust upon your hat, and when your wife allows you to go out in such a state, I shall fear that you also have been unfortunate enough to lose your wife's affection."

"But he might be a bachelor."

"Nay, he was bringing home the goose as a peace-offering to his wife. Remember the card upon the bird's leg."

"You have an answer to everything. But how on earth do you deduce that the gas is not laid on in his house?"

"One tallow stain, or even two, might come by chance; but when I see no less than five, I think that there can be little doubt that the individual must be brought into frequent contact with burning tallow — walks upstairs at night probably with his hat in one hand and a guttering candle in the other. Anyhow, he never got tallow-stains from a gas-jet. Are you satisfied?"

"Well, it is very ingenious," said I, laughing; "but since, as you said just now, there has been no crime committed, and no harm done save the

loss of a goose, all this seems to be rather a waste of energy."

Sherlock Holmes had opened his mouth to reply, when the door flew open, and Peterson, the commissionaire, rushed into the apartment with flushed cheeks and the face of a man who is dazed with astonishment.

"The goose, Mr. Holmes! The goose, sir!" he gasped.

"Eh? What of it, then? Has it returned to life and flapped off through the kitchen window?" Holmes twisted himself round upon the sofa to get a fairer view of the man's excited face.

"See here, sir! See what my wife found in its crop!" He held out his hand and displayed upon the centre of the palm a brilliantly scintillating blue stone, rather smaller than a bean in size, but of such purity and radiance that it twinkled like an electric point in the dark hollow of his hand.

Sherlock Holmes sat up with a whistle. "By Jove, Peterson!" said he, "this is treasure trove indeed. I suppose you know what you have got?"

"A diamond, sir? A precious stone? It cuts into glass as though it were putty."

"It's more than a precious stone. It is *the* precious stone."

"Not the Countess of Morcar's blue carbuncle!" I ejaculated.

"Precisely so. I ought to know its size and shape, seeing that I have read the advertisement about it in *The Times* every day lately. It is absolutely unique, and its value can only be conjectured, but the reward offered of £1000 is certainly not within a twentieth part of the market price."

"A thousand pounds! Great Lord of mercy!" The commissionaire plumped down into a chair and stared from one to the other of us.

"That is the reward, and I have reason to know that there are sentimental considerations in the background which would induce the Countess to part with half her fortune if she could but recover the gem."

"It was lost, if I remember aright, at the Hotel Cosmopolitan," I remarked.

"Precisely so, on December 22nd, just five days ago. John Horner, a plumber, was accused of having abstracted it from the lady's jewel-case. The evidence against him was so strong that the case has been referred to the Assizes. I have some account of the matter here, I believe." He rummaged amid his newspapers, glancing over the dates, until at last he smoothed one out, doubled it over, and read the following paragraph:

> Hotel Cosmopolitan Jewel Robbery. John Horner, 26, plumber, was brought up upon the charge of having, upon the 22nd inst., abstracted from the jewel-case of the Countess of Morcar the valuable gem known as the blue carbuncle. James Ryder, upper-attendant at the hotel, gave his evidence to the effect that he had shown Horner up to the dressing-room of the Countess of Morcar upon the day of the robbery in order that he might solder the second bar of the grate, which was loose. He had

remained with Horner some little time, but had finally been called away. On returning, he found that Horner had disappeared, that the bureau had been forced open, and that the small morocco casket in which, as it afterwards transpired, the Countess was accustomed to keep her jewel, was lying empty upon the dressing-table. Ryder instantly gave the alarm, and Horner was arrested the same evening; but the stone could not be found either upon his person or in his rooms. Catherine Cusack, maid to the Countess, deposed to having heard Ryder's cry of dismay on discovering the robbery, and to having rushed into the room, where she found matters as described by the last witness. Inspector Bradstreet, B division, gave evidence as to the arrest of Horner, who struggled frantically, and protested his innocence in the strongest terms. Evidence of a previous conviction for robbery having been given against the prisoner, the magistrate refused to deal summarily with the offense, but referred it to the Assizes. Horner, who had shown signs of intense emotion during the proceedings, fainted away at the conclusion and was carried out of court.

"Hum! So much for the police court," said Holmes thoughtfully, tossing aside the paper. "The question for us now to solve is the sequence of events leading from a rifled jewel-case at one end to the crop of a goose in Tottenham Court Road at the other. You see, Watson, our little deductions have suddenly assumed a much more important and less innocent aspect. Here is the stone; the stone came from the goose, and the goose came from Mr. Henry Baker, the gentleman with the bad hat and all the other characteristics with which I have bored you. So now we must set ourselves very seriously to finding this gentleman and ascertaining what part he has played in this little mystery. To do this, we must try the simplest means first, and these lie undoubtedly in an advertisement in all the evening papers. If this fails, I shall have recourse to other methods."

"What will you say?"

"Give me a pencil and that slip of paper. Now, then:

> Found at the corner of Goodge Street, a goose and a black felt hat. Mr. Henry Baker can have the same by applying at 6:30 this evening at 221B Baker Street.

That is clear and concise."

"Very. But will he see it?"

"Well, he is sure to keep an eye on the papers, since, to a poor man, the loss was a heavy one. He was clearly so scared by his mischance in breaking the window and by the approach of Peterson that he thought of nothing but flight, but since then he must have bitterly regretted the impulse which caused him to drop his bird. Then, again, the introduction of his name will cause him to see it, for everyone who knows him will direct

his attention to it. Here you are, Peterson, run down to the advertising agency and have this put in the evening papers."

"In which, sir?"

"Oh, in the *Globe*, *Star*, *Pall Mall*, *St. James's*, *Evening News Standard*, *Echo*, and any others that occur to you."

"Very well, sir. And this stone?"

"Ah, yes, I shall keep the stone. Thank you. And, I say, Peterson, just buy a goose on your way back and leave it here with me, for we must have one to give to this gentleman in place of the one which your family is now devouring."

When the commissionaire had gone, Holmes took up the stone and held it against the light. "It's a bonny thing," said he. "Just see how it glints and sparkles. Of course it is a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits. In the larger and older jewels every facet may stand for a bloody deed. This stone is not yet twenty years old. It was found in the banks of the Amoy River in southern China and is remarkable in having every characteristic of the carbuncle, save that it is blue in shade instead of ruby red. In spite of its youth, it has already a sinister history. There have been two murders, a vitriol-throwing, a suicide, and several robberies brought about for the sake of this forty-grain weight of crystallized charcoal. Who would think that so pretty a toy would be a purveyor to the gallows and the prison? I'll lock it up in my strong box now and drop a line to the Countess to say that we have it."

"Do you think that this man Horner is innocent?"

"I cannot tell."

"Well, then, do you imagine that this other one, Henry Baker, had anything to do with the matter?"

"It is, I think, much more likely that Henry Baker is an absolutely innocent man, who had no idea that the bird which he was carrying was of considerably more value than if it were made of solid gold. That, however, I shall determine by a very simple test if we have an answer to our advertisement."

"And you can do nothing until then?"

"Nothing."

"In that case I shall continue my professional round. But I shall come back in the evening at the hour you have mentioned, for I should like to see the solution of so tangled a business."

"Very glad to see you. I dine at seven. There is a woodcock, I believe. By the way, in view of recent occurrences, perhaps I ought to ask Mrs. Hudson to examine its crop."

I had been delayed at a case, and it was a little after half-past six when I found myself in Baker Street once more. As I approached the house I saw a tall man in a Scotch bonnet with a coat which was buttoned up to his chin waiting outside in the bright semicircle which was thrown from the fanlight. Just as I arrived the door was opened, and we were

shown up together to Holmes's room.

"Mr. Henry Baker, I believe," said he, rising from his armchair and greeting his visitor with the easy air of geniality which he could so readily assume. "Pray take this chair by the fire, Mr. Baker. It is a cold night, and I observe that your circulation is more adapted for summer than for winter. Ah, Watson, you have just come at the right time. Is that your hat, Mr. Baker?"

"Yes, sir, that is undoubtedly my hat."

He was a large man with rounded shoulders, a massive head, and a broad, intelligent face, sloping down to a pointed beard of grizzled brown. A touch of red in nose and cheeks, with a slight tremor of his extended hand, recalled Holmes's surmise as to his habits. His rusty black frock-coat was buttoned right up in front, with the collar turned up, and his lank wrists protruded from his sleeves without a sign of cuff or shirt. He spoke in a slow staccato fashion, choosing his words with care, and gave the impression generally of a man of learning and letters who had had ill-usage at the hands of fortune.

"We have retained these things for some days," said Holmes, "because we expected to see an advertisement from you giving your address. I am at a loss to know now why you did not advertise."

Our visitor gave a rather shamefaced laugh. "Shillings have not been so plentiful with me as they once were," he remarked. "I had no doubt that the gang of roughs who assaulted me had carried off both my hat and the bird. I did not care to spend more money in a hopeless attempt at recovering them."

"Very naturally. By the way, about the bird, we were compelled to eat it."

"To eat it!" Our visitor half-rose from his chair in his excitement.

"Yes, it would have been of no use to anyone had we not done so. But I presume that this other goose upon the sideboard, which is about the same weight and perfectly fresh, will answer your purpose equally well?"

"Oh, certainly, certainly," answered Mr. Baker with a sigh of relief.

"Of course, we still have the feathers, legs, crop, and so on of your own bird, so if you wish ——"

The man burst into a hearty laugh. "They might be useful to me as relics of my adventure," said he, "but beyond that I can hardly see what use the *disjecta membra* of my late acquaintance are going to be to me. No, sir, I think that, with your permission, I will confine my attentions to the excellent bird which I perceive upon the sideboard."

Sherlock Holmes glanced sharply across at me with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

"There is your hat, then, and there your bird," said he. "By the way, would it bore you to tell me where you got the other one from? I am somewhat of a fowl fancier, and I have seldom seen a better grown goose."

"Certainly, sir," said Baker, who

had risen and tucked his newly gained property under his arm. "There are a few of us who frequent the Alpha Inn, near the Museum — we are to be found in the Museum itself during the day, you understand. This year our good host, Windigate by name, instituted a goose club, by which, on consideration of some few pence every week, we were each to receive a bird at Christmas. My pence were duly paid, and the rest is familiar to you. I am much indebted to you, sir, for a Scotch bonnet is fitted neither to my years nor my gravity." With a comical pomposity of manner he bowed solemnly to both of us and strode off upon his way.

"So much for Mr. Henry Baker," said Holmes when he had closed the door behind him. "It is quite certain that he knows nothing whatever about the matter. Are you hungry, Watson?"

"Not particularly."

"Then I suggest that we turn our dinner into a supper and follow up this clue while it is still hot."

"By all means."

It was a bitter night, so we drew on our ulsters and wrapped cravats about our throats. Outside, the stars were shining coldly in a cloudless sky, and the breath of the passers-by blew out into smoke like so many pistol shots. Our footfalls rang out crisply and loudly as we swung through the doctors' quarter, Wimpole Street, Harley Street, and so through Wigmore Street into Oxford Street. In a quarter of an hour we were in Bloomsbury at the Alpha Inn, which is a small public-house at the corner of one of the streets which runs down into Holborn. Holmes pushed open the door of the private bar and ordered two glasses of beer from the ruddy-faced, white-aproned landlord.

"Your beer should be excellent if it is as good as your geese," said he.

"My geese!" The man seemed surprised.

"Yes. I was speaking only half an hour ago to Mr. Henry Baker, who was a member of your goose club."

"Ah! Yes, I see. But you see, sir, them's not *our* geese."

"Indeed! Whose, then?"

"Well, I got the two dozen from a salesman in Covent Garden."

"Indeed? I know some of them. Which was it?"

"Breckinridge is his name."

"Ah! I don't know him. Well, here's your good health, landlord, and prosperity to your house. Good night.

"Now for Mr. Breckinridge," he continued, buttoning up his coat as we came out into the frosty air. "Remember, Watson, that though we have so homely a thing as a goose at one end of this chain, we have at the other a man who will certainly get seven years' penal servitude unless we can establish his innocence. It is possible that our inquiry may but confirm his guilt; but, in any case, we have a line of investigation which has been missed by the police, and which a singular chance has placed in our hands. Let us follow it out to the bitter end. Faces to the south, then!"

We passed across Holborn, down Endell Street, and so through a zigzag of slums to Covent Garden Market. One of the largest stalls bore the name of Breckinridge upon it, and the proprietor, a horsy-looking man, with a sharp face and trim side-whiskers, was helping a boy to put up the shutters.

"Good evening. It's a cold night," said Holmes.

The salesman nodded and shot a questioning glance at my companion.

"Sold out of geese, I see," continued Holmes, pointing at the bare slabs of marble.

"Let you have five hundred tomorrow morning."

"That's no good."

"Well, there are some on the stall with the gas-flare."

"Ah, but I was recommended to you."

"Who by?"

"The landlord of the Alpha."

"Oh, yes; I sent him a couple of dozen."

"Fine birds they were, too. Now where did you get them from?"

To my surprise the question provoked a burst of anger from the salesman.

"Now, then, mister," said he, with his head cocked and his arms akimbo, "what are you driving at? Let's have it straight, now."

"It is straight enough. I should like to know who sold you the geese which you supplied to the Alpha."

"Well, then, I shan't tell you."

"Oh, it is a matter of no importance; but I don't know why you should be so warm over such a trifle."

"Warm! You'd be as warm, maybe, if you were as pestered as I am. When I pay good money for a good article there should be an end of the business; but it's 'Where are the geese?' and 'Who did you sell the geese to?' and 'What will you take for the geese?' One would think they were the only geese in the world, to hear the fuss that is made over them."

"Well, I have no connection with any other people who have been making inquiries," said Holmes carelessly. "If you won't tell us the bet is off, that is all. But I'm always ready to back my opinion on a matter of fowls, and I have a fiver on it that the bird I ate is country-bred."

"Well, then, you've lost your fiver, for it's town-bred," snapped the salesman.

"It's nothing of the kind."

"I say it is."

"I don't believe it."

"D'you think you know more about fowls than I, who have handled them ever since I was a nipper? I tell you, all those birds that went to the Alpha were town-bred."

"You'll never persuade me to believe that."

"Will you bet, then?"

"It's merely taking your money, for I know that I am right. But I'll have a sovereign on with you, just to teach you not to be obstinate."

The salesman chuckled grimly. "Bring me the books, Bill," said he.

The small boy brought round a

small thin volume and a great greasy-backed one, laying them out together beneath the hanging lamp.

"Now, then, Mr. Cocksure," said the salesman, "I thought that I was out of geese, but before I finish you'll find that there is still one left in my shop. You see this little book?"

"Well?"

"That's the list of the folk from whom I buy. D'you see? Well, then, here on this page are the country folk, and the numbers after their names are where their accounts are in the big ledger. Now, then! You see this other page in red ink? Well, that is a list of my town suppliers. Now, look at that third name. Just read it out to me."

"Mrs. Oakshott, 117 Brixton Road — 249," read Holmes.

"Quite so. Now turn that up in the ledger."

Holmes turned to the page indicated. "Here you are, 'Mrs. Oakshott, 117 Brixton Road, egg and poultry supplier.' "

"Now, then, what's the last entry?"

" 'December 22nd. Twenty-four geese at *7s. 6d.*' "

"Quite so. There you are. And underneath?"

" 'Sold to Mr. Windigate of the Alpha, at *12s.*' "

"What have you to say now?"

Sherlock Holmes looked deeply chagrined. He drew a sovereign from his pocket and threw it down upon the slab, turning away with the air of a man whose disgust is too deep for words. A few yards off he stopped under a lamp-post and laughed in the hearty, noiseless fashion which was peculiar to him.

"When you see a man with whiskers of that cut and the 'Pink 'un' protruding out of his pocket, you can always draw him by a bet," said he. "I daresay that if I had put £100 down in front of him, that man would not have given me such complete information as was drawn from him by the idea that he was doing me on a wager. Well, Watson, we are, I fancy, nearing the end of our quest, and the only point which remains to be determined is whether we should go on to this Mrs. Oakshott tonight, or whether we should reserve it for tomorrow. It is clear from what that surly fellow said that there are others besides ourselves who are anxious about the matter, and I should ——"

His remarks were suddenly cut short by a loud hubbub which broke out from the stall which we had just left. Turning round we saw a little rat-faced fellow standing in the centre of the circle of yellow light which was thrown by the swinging lamp, while Breckinridge, the salesman, framed in the door of his stall, was shaking his fists fiercely at the cringing figure.

"I've had enough of you and your geese," he shouted. "I wish you were all at the devil together. If you come pestering me any more with your silly talk I'll set the dog at you. You bring Mrs. Oakshott here and I'll answer her, but what have you to do with it? Did I buy the geese off you?"

"No; but one of them was mine all the same," whined the little man.

"Well, then, ask Mrs. Oakshott for it."

"She told me to ask you."

"Well, you can ask the King of Proosia, for all I care. I've had enough of it. Get out of this!" He rushed fiercely forward, and the inquirer flitted away into the darkness.

"Ha! This may save us a visit to Brixton Road," whispered Holmes. "Come with me, and we will see what is to be made of this fellow." Striding through the scattered knots of people who lounged round the flaring stalls, my companion speedily overtook the little man and touched him upon the shoulder. He sprang round, and I could see in the gas-light that every vestige of color had been driven from his face.

"Who are you, then? What do you want?" he asked in a quavering voice.

"You will excuse me," said Holmes blandly, "but I could not help overhearing the questions which you put to the salesman just now. I think that I could be of assistance to you."

"You? Who are you? How could you know anything of the matter?"

"My name is Sherlock Holmes. It is my business to know what other people don't know."

"But you can know nothing of this."

"Excuse me, I know everything of it. You are endeavoring to trace some geese which were sold by Mrs. Oakshott, of Brixton Road, to a salesman named Breckinridge, by him in turn to Mr. Windigate, of the Alpha, and by him to his club, of which Mr. Henry Baker is a member."

"Oh, sir, you are the very man whom I have longed to meet," cried the little fellow with outstretched hands and quivering fingers. "I can hardly explain to you how interested I am in this matter."

Sherlock Holmes hailed a four-wheeler which was passing. "In that case we had better discuss it in a cosy room rather than in this wind-swept market-place," said he. "But pray tell me, before we go farther, who it is that I have the pleasure of assisting."

The man hesitated for an instant. "My name is John Robinson," he answered with a sidelong glance.

"No, no; the real name," said Holmes sweetly. "It is always awkward doing business with an alias."

A flush sprang to the white cheeks of the stranger. "Well, then," said he, "my real name is James Ryder."

"Precisely so. Head attendant at the Hotel Cosmopolitan. Pray step into the cab, and I shall soon be able to tell you everything which you would wish to know."

The little man stood glancing from one to the other of us with half-frightened, half-hopeful eyes, as one who is not sure whether he is on the verge of a windfall or of a catastrophe. Then he stepped into the cab, and in half an hour we were back in the sitting-room at Baker Street. Nothing had been said during our drive, but the high, thin breathing of our new companion, and the clasp-

ings and unclaspings of his hands, spoke of the nervous tension within him.

"Here we are!" said Holmes cheerily, as we filed into the room. "The fire looks very seasonable in this weather. You look cold, Mr. Ryder. Pray take the basket-chair. I will just put on my slippers before we settle this little matter of yours. Now, then! You want to know what became of those geese?"

"Yes, sir."

"Or rather, I fancy, of that goose. It was one bird, I imagine, in which you were interested — white, with a black bar across the tail."

Ryder quivered with emotion. "Oh, sir," he cried, "can you tell me where it went to?"

"It came here."

"Here?"

"Yes, and a most remarkable bird it proved. I don't wonder that you should take an interest in it. It laid an egg after it was dead — the bonniest, brightest little blue egg that ever was seen. I have it here in my museum."

Our visitor staggered to his feet and clutched the mantelpiece with his right hand. Holmes unlocked his strong-box and held up the blue carbuncle, which shone out like a star, with a cold, brilliant, many-pointed radiance. Ryder stood glaring with a drawn face, uncertain whether to claim or to disown it.

"The game's up, Ryder," said Holmes quietly. "Hold up, man, or you'll be into the fire! Give him an arm back into his chair, Watson. He's not got blood enough to go in for felony with impunity. Give him a dash of brandy. So! Now he looks a little more human. What a shrimp it is, to be sure!"

For a moment he had staggered and nearly fallen, but the brandy brought a tinge of color into his cheeks, and he sat staring at his accuser.

"I have almost every link in my hands, and all the proofs which I could possibly need, so there is little which you need tell me. Still, that little may as well be cleared up to make the case complete. You had heard, Ryder, of this blue stone of the Countess of Morcar's?"

"It was Catherine Cusack who told me of it," said he in a crackling voice.

"I see — her ladyship's waiting-maid. Well, the temptation of sudden wealth so easily acquired was too much for you, as it has been for better men before you; but you were not very scrupulous in the means you used. It seems to me, Ryder, that there is the making of a very pretty villain in you. You knew that this man Horner, the plumber, had been concerned in some such matter before, and that suspicion would rest the more readily upon him. What did you do, then? You made some small job in my lady's room — you and your confederate Cusack — and you managed that he should be the man sent for. Then, when he had left, you rifled the jewel-case, raised the alarm, and had this unfortunate man arrested. You then ——"

Ryder threw himself down suddenly upon the rug and clutched at my companion's knees. "For God's sake, have mercy!" he shrieked. "Think of my father! Of my mother! It would break their hearts. I never went wrong before! I never will again. I swear it. I'll swear it on a Bible. Oh, don't bring it into court!"

"Get back into your chair!" said Holmes sternly. "It is very well to cringe and crawl now, but you thought little enough of this poor Horner in the dock for a crime of which he knew nothing."

"I will fly, Mr. Holmes. I will leave the country, sir. Then the charge against him will break down."

"Hum! We will talk about that. And now let us hear a true account of the next act. How came the stone into the goose, and how came the goose into the open market? Tell us the truth, for there lies your only hope of safety."

Ryder passed his tongue over his parched lips. "I will tell you it just as it happened, sir," said he. "When Horner had been arrested, it seemed to me that it would be best for me to get away with the stone at once, for I did not know at what moment the police might not take it into their heads to search me and my room. There was no place about the hotel where it would be safe. I went out, as if on some commission, and I made for my sister's house. She had married a man named Oakshott, and lived in Brixton Road, where she fattened fowls for the market. All the way there every man I met seemed to me to be a policeman or a detective; and, for all that it was a cold night, the sweat was pouring down my face before I came to the Brixton Road. My sister asked me what was the matter, and why I was so pale; but I told her that I had been upset by the jewel robbery at the hotel. Then I went into the back yard and smoked a pipe, and wondered what it would be best to do.

"I had a friend once called Maudsley, who went to the bad, and has just been serving his time in Pentonville. One day he had met me, and fell into talk about the ways of thieves, and how they could get rid of what they stole. I knew that he would be true to me, for I knew one or two things about him; so I made up my mind to go right on to Kilburn, where he lived, and take him into my confidence. He would show me how to turn the stone into money. But how to get to him in safety? I thought of the agonies I had gone through in coming from the hotel. I might at any moment be seized and searched, and there would be the stone in my waistcoat pocket. I was leaning against the wall at the time and looking at the geese which were waddling about round my feet, and suddenly an idea came into my head which showed me how I could beat the best detective that ever lived.

"My sister had told me some weeks before that I might have the pick of her geese for a Christmas present, and I knew that she was always as good as

her word. I would take my goose now, and in it I would carry my stone to Kilburn. There was a little shed in the yard, and behind this I drove one of the birds — a fine big one, white, with a barred tail. I caught it, and, prying its bill open, I thrust the stone down its throat as far as my finger could reach. The bird gave a gulp, and I felt the stone pass along its gullet and down into its crop. But the creature flapped and struggled, and out came my sister to know what was the matter. As I turned to speak to her the brute broke loose and fluttered off among the others.

" 'Whatever were you doing with that bird, Jem?' says she.

" 'Well,' said I, 'you said you'd give me one for Christmas, and I was feeling which was the fattest.'

" 'Oh,' says she, 'we've set yours aside for you — Jem's bird, we call it. It's the big white one over yonder. There's twenty-six of them, which makes one for you, and one for us, and two dozen for the market.'

" 'Thank you, Maggie,' says I; 'but if it is all the same to you, I'd rather have that one I was handling just now.'

" 'The other is a good three pounds heavier,' said she, 'and we fattened it expressly for you.'

" 'Never mind. I'll have the other, and I'll take it now,' said I.

" 'Oh, just as you like,' said she, a little huffed. 'Which is it you want, then?'

" 'That white one with the barred tail, right in the middle of the flock.'

" 'Oh, very well. Kill it and take it with you.'

"Well, I did what she said, Mr. Holmes, and I carried the bird all the way to Kilburn. I told my pal what I had done, for he was a man that it was easy to tell a thing like that to. He laughed until he choked, and we got a knife and opened the goose. My heart turned to water, for there was no sign of the stone, and I knew that some terrible mistake had occurred. I left the bird, rushed back to my sister's, and hurried into the backyard. There was not a bird to be seen there.

" 'Where are they all, Maggie?' I cried.

" 'Gone to the dealer's, Jem.'

" 'Which dealer's?'

" 'Breckinridge, of Covent Garden.'

" 'But was there another with a barred tail?' I asked, 'the same as the one I chose?'

" 'Yes, Jem; there were two barred-tailed ones, and I could never tell them apart.'

"Well, then, of course I saw it all, and I ran off as hard as my feet would carry me to this man Breckinridge; but he had sold the lot at once, and not one word would he tell me as to where they had gone. You heard him yourselves tonight. Well, he has always answered me like that. My sister thinks that I am going mad. Sometimes I think that I am myself. And now — and now I am myself a branded thief, without ever having touched the wealth for which I sold my character. God help me! God help

me!" He burst into convulsive sobbing, with his face buried in his hands.

There was a long silence, broken only by his heavy breathing, and by the measured tapping of Sherlock Holmes's fingertips upon the edge of the table. Then my friend rose and threw open the door.

"Get out!" said he.

"What, sir! Oh, Heaven bless you!"

"No more words. Get out!"

And no more words were needed. There was a rush, a clatter upon the stairs, the bang of a door, and the crisp rattle of running footfalls from the street.

"After all, Watson," said Holmes, reaching up his hand for his clay pipe, "I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies. If Horner were in danger it would be another thing; but this fellow will not appear against him, and the case must collapse. I suppose that I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul. This fellow will not go wrong again; he is too terribly frightened. Send him to jail now, and you make him a jail-bird for life. Besides, it is the season of forgiveness. Chance has put in our way a most singular and whimsical problem, and its solution is its own reward. If you will have the goodness to touch the bell, Doctor, we will begin another investigation, in which, also, a bird will be the chief feature."

THE EMPEROR'S DICE

by ELLERY QUEEN

WHEN CALIGULA BECAME emperor, one of the problems he faced was to appoint a consul. He nominated Incitatus, his horse. On evidence such as this, the grandson of Tiberius is considered by historians to have been crazy. The conclusion is questionable. Consuls in Caligula's day exercised high criminal jurisdiction; obviously, a man could turn his back on his horse. There have been appointments, and not only in Roman history, far less astute.

We are told, too, that Caligula had his adopted son, Lucius, murdered; that he commanded citizens who displeased him to enter the arena; that at the imperial gaming tables this legatee of Tiberius's mighty treasury played with crooked dice; and so on. That these are the historical facts seems indubitable, but do the facts warrant the historians' conclusions? We have already disposed of the episode of the praetorian horse. As for Lucius, by Tiberius's will he was Caligula's co-heir; and an emperor who murders his co-heir before his co-heir can murder him may be considered of nervous temperament, or overcautious, but he is certainly not irrational. Turning one's enemies into gladiators combines private interest with the public pleasure and is the sign of a political, not a psychotic, mind. And while loading one's dice is indefensible on moral grounds, there is no denying the fact that the practice reduces the odds against the dicer.

In short, far from being a lunatic, Caligula was a man of uncommon sense; demonstrating what was to be proved, namely, *caveat lector*.

We now leap nineteen centuries.

It was the time of the vernal equinox, or thereabout; in fine, the last day of the third month of the Queenian calendar, and a night of portents it was, speaking in wind, thunder, and rain. Even so, Mark Haggard's voice could be heard above the uproar. Haggard was driving a leaky station-wagon along the Connecticut road with the hands of a charioteer, sawing away at the wheel and roaring oaths against the turbulent heavens as if he were Martius himself. The Queens and Nikki Porter could only embrace one another damply and pray for midnight and the rise of a saner moon.

Ellery did not pine for Connecticut weekends at unmapped homes occupied by unexplored persons. He had too cartographic a memory of hosts floating fizzily about in seas of alcohol or, as happened with equal frequency, forty-eight becalmed hours of Canasta. But the Inspector appeared sentimental about this one.

"Haven't seen Mark, Tracy, or Malvina Haggard since their dad kicked off ten years ago," the In-

spector had said, "and I hadn't much contact with Jim's children before that except when they were little. But if they've turned out anything like Jim or Cora. . . ."

"They rarely do," Ellery had said irritably. "Anyway, did Mark Haggard have to include me in?"

"Jim and I went through the police academy together, son. I was Jim Haggard's best man when he married Cora Maloney in — yep, 1911, just forty years ago. I can see the big lug now," said the Inspector mistily, "standing in front of the preacher in his monkey suit . . . Cora buried Jim in that suit, Ellery."

"Hadn't he gained any weight? But I still don't see why —"

"Ellery's too lofty to mix with ordinary folks, Inspector," Nikki had put in gently. "Too much of a brain, you know. It gets *so* bored. Besides, he knows I can't go unless he does —"

"All right!" howled Ellery; and so here they were, and he hoped they were both thoroughly satisfied.

It had begun with a train that was late, a whistle-stop station that was wrong, no taxi service, and an hour's wait in splashy darkness. Then their host found them, and even the Inspector began to look as if he regretted the whole thing. Haggard was a staring man with a week's black stubble, given to sudden convulsions of laughter, and he drove like a madman.

"Can't tell you how happy I was to hear from you, Mark," said the old gentleman, bouncing and hanging on to his denture. "I feel like a heel having neglected your mother so long. It'll be good seeing Cora again."

"In hell," screamed Mark Haggard, rocketing over a patch of ice left over from the last snowfall.

"What did you say, Mark?"

"Ma's in hell!"

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear it," the Inspector said confusedly. "I mean, when did she —?"

"Two years ago."

"But not in the hot place," muttered the Inspector. "Not Cora."

Mark Haggard laughed. "You didn't know her. You don't know any of us."

"Yes, people change," sighed the Inspector. Then he tried to sound chatty again. "I remember when your father resigned from the Force, Mark. Your mother was against it. But he'd inherited all that money, and I guess it went to his head."

"What makes you think his head was any different before, Inspector? He was crazy. We're all crazy!"

Ellery thought that was an extremely bright remark.

"Is it much farther, Mark?" asked the old gentleman desperately.

"Yes, I'm so very wet," said Nikki in a gay voice.

"Threw money around like a maniac," said Mark Haggard angrily. "The great collector! Who did he think he was — Dr. Rosenbach?"

"Books?" asked Ellery, rousing himself.

"My father? He could hardly read. Gambling collection! Crummy old

roulette wheels, medieval playing cards, ancient dice — junk filled the whole Gun Room. . . . Get over on your side of the road, you ——!"

"Sounds like a — harmless enough — hobby," said Nikki jouncily. The other car was lost in the weeping night. Lightning showed them Haggard's face. Nikki closed her eyes.

"Harmless?" chortled their host. "Nothing about our family is harmless. Including the ancestral dump that pop inherited from Uncle Jonas."

"I suppose," said Nikki, keeping her eyes shut, "you live in a haunted house, Mr. Haggard?"

"Yes!" said Mark Haggard gleefully.

Nikki screeched. But it was only another icy drop pelting the side of her neck.

"Any ghost I know?" asked the Inspector wittily.

"It's the ghost of an unsolved murder mystery."

"Murder mystery!"

"Unsolved?" said Ellery.

"The house was then occupied by a family of five," chuckled their chauffeur, "a father, a mother, and three grown children. The two sons were bugs on hunting and they had a regular arsenal. One night the father's body was found in the Gun Room. He'd been shot to death. It couldn't have been suicide. The servants were away, and from the physical evidence an outside murderer was out of the question. It had to be someone in the house that night, and the only ones in the house that night were the mother and the three grown children. Revolting, hey?"

Ellery stirred.

"Humor him!" whispered Nikki.

"Mark's just making this up," said Inspector Queen heartily. "Mark, I'm soaked to the hide. Have you lost your way?"

Haggard laughed again. But then he hurled the station-wagon around another car, cursing, and Ellery shuddered. "And the best part of it was that nobody ever suspected the father had been murdered. Not even the police."

"You see?" said the Inspector in a beamy voice. "Fairy tales. Mark, get there!"

"But keep talking," said Ellery. "Just how was the murder concealed?"

"Simplest thing in the world. One of the sons was a medical doctor and the other was an undertaker. The son who was a doctor made out a false death certificate and the son who was an undertaker prepared the body for burial." Haggard's laugh mingled with the rain and the thunder. "So murder didn't out after all. And it won't, unless somebody can read those clues."

"Oh, there were clues," said Ellery.

"This has gone far enough," said the Inspector sharply. "Are you sure, Mark, you're not driving around in circles?" He peered through a window, but they might have been crossing the Styx.

"What were they, Mark?"

"Ellery," moaned Nikki.

"The bullet which killed the father came from a .38 revolver. There were two .38 revolvers in the Gun Room. So the two .38s were clues —"

"Ballistics check-up," mumbled the Inspector.

"Oh, no," chuckled Mark Haggard. "The bullet passed right through the body and smashed against the bricks of the fireplace. And both guns had been cleaned after the murder."

"And the third clue?"

"You'll love it, Ellery. It was found by the two sons in their father's hand."

"Oh? What was it?"

"A pair of dice. Very famous bones they are, too, bloody as hell." And Haggard laughed and laughed.

After a moment Ellery said, "All this happened . . . when did you say, Mark?"

"I didn't. Ten years ago."

"Ten —!" The Inspector checked himself.

"Would you care to see the two revolvers and the dice?"

"Do you have them?"

"Oh, yes," said Mark. "In a wooden box at home."

"Now that's going too far!" exploded the Inspector. "Mark, either stop this foolishness or turn around and drive us back to the railroad station!"

Mark Haggard laughed again. The lightning flashed, and for a photographic instant they saw his lumpish eyes, the blueness about the black stubble, the dance of his hands on the wheel.

Ellery heard Nikki's teeth. "M-Mister Haggard," she chattered, "what do you and your brother d-do for a living?"

"Tracy is a physician," Haggard cried, "and I'm an undertaker." The station-wagon slid to a cascading stop, throwing them violently forward. Mark Haggard sprang into the darkness, and from the darkness they heard him shout, "Get out, get out, we're here!" like some demon commanding them to his pleasure.

This was the beginning of an historic night . . . darkest history. They could make nothing of the house, but a porch creaked underfoot and things banged somewhere gleefully. Ellery could feel the revolt in Nikki as she held on to him. Mark Haggard's right fist crashed repeatedly against an invisible door. He was trying to rouse his sister and brother.

"Blast you, Malvina, open the door! Why'd you lock it?"

A creature in a white negligée of the flowing drapery variety stood there, holding aloft in her left hand — Nikki giggled something about a left-handed Statue of Liberty — a candle in a black candlestick. The face behind the candle was blanker than her robe. Only the eyes had life, a peering kind of life.

"I'm glad you've come back, Mark," she said in a perfectly lifeless voice. "The lights went out and then a hot flash followed me all over the house. Wherever I went, it was hot, and it burned, Mark, it burned me.

Why did the lights go out, Mark?"

"Hot *what?*" muttered the Inspector.

Haggard tried a wall switch. "Power failure!"

"It burns, Mark," his sister intoned.

"Malvina, these are some people visiting us. Give me that candle! I'll get a couple of flashlights." Mark Haggard's right hand seized the candlestick and the flame darted off, leaving them in darkness, with the white-robed woman.

"Malvina, you remember me, don't you?" The Inspector might have been wheedling a child. "Your father's friend? Richard Queen?"

"No." That was all she said, in the toneless tones; after that inhuman sound, no one said anything. They shivered in the dark among their weekend bags, waiting dully for Mark Haggard's return. The house was deathly cold, with a dampness that attacked like acid.

Mark returned in another rage. "No lights, no heat, no dinner prepared, Tracy gone out on a sick call, servants off somewhere — Malvina! Where are Bessie and Connors?"

"They left. They were going to kill me. I chased them with a kitchen knife and they ran away. And Tracy went away, too. My own brother a doctor, and he doesn't care that the hot flashes burn me. . . ." They heard a horrible snuffling, and they realized the creature was crying.

Mark thrust a flashlight into Ellery's hand, wielding his own in crazy swoops that touched bare floors, shrouded furniture, his weeping sister. "Stop it or you'll have another fit —" She had it, on the floor, writhing like a frying soul, and screaming.

Mark swore. "If Tracy hadn't — *No!* I'll handle her alone. Go to your rooms — head of the stairs. You'll find some bread and a can of sardines in the kitchen —"

"Couldn't eat a thing," mumbled Inspector Queen. "Wet clothes . . . go to bed. . . ."

But Haggard was gone, running with his sister in his arms, her draperies trailing, the beam of light painting wild parabolas on the darkness.

The Inspector said simply, "We'd better get dry, and then clear out."

"How about now?" said Nikki. "I sometimes enjoy being wet, and I'm not the least bit tired. I'm sure we could call a cab —"

"While a ten-year-old unsolved murder drifts around the premises?" Ellery glanced up into the black hole of the staircase, his jaw out. "I'm sticking it out."

Inspector Queen was stretched on one of the icy twin beds, and Nikki whimpered in the bedroom beyond — she had promised hysterics at the suggestion that the communicating door be shut in the interests of propriety — when the men's door burst open and light invaded the room. From the other room Nikki squealed, and the Inspector heaved twelve inches toward the ceiling. Ellery dropped a shoe, definitely.

But it was only Mark Haggard, grinning. He was carrying an electric lantern in one hand and a battered old wooden box the size of a cigar humidor in the other. "The clues to the murder," he chuckled. "Old Mark Elephant!" He slammed the box down on the highboy nearest the door.

Haggard kept looking at Ellery, teeth glittering from the underbrush of stubble. The Inspector scrambled out of bed in his nightshirt as Ellery slowly opened the box.

Two rusty revolvers, Colt .38s, nested in the box. On them lay a small squarish case that looked like gold.

"The dice," said Mark Haggard, smiling. "Open it."

"Hold the light higher," Ellery said. His father craned over his shoulder.

Two crystalline red dice incised in gold sparkled up at them from a bed of purple velvet.

"They look like jewels!" exclaimed the Inspector.

"That's what they are," said Mark. "Square-cut rubies inset with pure gold dots. These dice are almost as old as the Christian era. Supposed to have been the personal property of the Roman emperor Caligula. We gave them to Pop for his gambling collection."

"This inscription in the case?" Ellery squinted. "Hold the lantern up a bit, Mark. . . . *To Dad, from Mark, Malvina, and Tracy, on His Ruby Wedding Anniversary.* In what way, Mark, were these dice a clue to —?"

But Haggard was gone in the Arctic night of the hall.

The Inspector heard the sounds first. He reached across the abyss between their beds and touched Ellery on the shoulder. It was a little past three. Ellery awoke instantly.

"Ellery. Listen."

It was still raining — jungle music by a thousand drums. The wind slammed a shutter somewhere. In the next room Nikki's bedsprings complained as she turned restlessly over.

Then Ellery heard a floorboard give way and in the same moment ghastly lightning made the bedroom spring alive. A man was standing at the highboy, his right hand reaching for the box Mark Haggard had brought to the room a few hours before. With the first crack of thunder Ellery jumped out of bed and hurled himself across the room. His shoulder hit the intruder below the knees and the man toppled with a cry, striking his head against the highboy.

Ellery sat on him.

"Tracy Haggard!" Inspector Queen leaned over them, trying to hold the beam of his flash steady. From the other room Nikki was wailing, "What was that? What happened?" Dr. Haggard was a small, neat, graying man with a clever face; when his eyes opened they were pale and rather glassy. "This is a fine way to meet again after all these years, Tracy," growled the Inspector. "What's the

idea of playing the sneak thief in your own house?"

"Mark's box of clues, dad," murmured Ellery. "Apparently when Tracy Haggard got home, he learned that his brother had blabbed to us about the ten-year-old murder and left the clues in here. He's tried to get them back and dispose of them before we can dig too deeply into the crime."

"I don't know why I didn't destroy those guns and dice years ago," said Dr. Tracy Haggard, calmly enough. "Ellery — you are Ellery, aren't you? — would you mind removing the *derrière* from my alimentary canal? You're not exactly a featherweight."

"Then it's true." Ellery did not stir.

"And I attended Jim's funeral and never suspected," said Inspector Queen bitterly. "Tracy, which one of you shot your father? And for God's sake, why?"

"I don't know the answer to either question, Inspector. It's been unholy hell . . . the four of us living together all these years, knowing one of us did it. . . . It sent mother to her grave." Tracy Haggard tried to rise, failed, and hardened his stomach muscles. "I'm glad she's dead and out of it. And I suppose you saw what it's done to Malvina and Mark. Mark was always a little batty, but Malvina had a promising career in the theater when this happened and she cracked."

"What's going *on* in there?" shrieked Nikki.

"Dr. Haggard, your brother made no bones about the murder of your father," said Ellery. "Does Mark want the truth to come out?"

"When mother died," said Tracy Haggard, "the three of us split the income of a very large trust fund. By will, if there were only two of us, the income would be that much greater per individual. Mark is always broke — gambling mostly. Does that answer your question?"

"Won't anybody talk?" howled Nikki. "I *can't* come in there!"

"That's why he asked us up here, is it?" snarled the Inspector. "To pin Jim's death on you or Malvina. Mark must feel pretty safe. . . ."

"We're going to try to oblige your brother, Doctor." Ellery got off his host and reached for the box of clues.

Dr. Haggard rose, tight-lipped. "In the middle of the night?"

"Dad, get a robe on and throw me mine. . . . Why, yes, Doctor. Would you take us to the room where your father was shot to death?"

They trooped downstairs to the nervous accompaniment of the electric lantern, Ellery hugging the box, Nikki in a woolly robe and scuffs, insisting that death would be instantaneous if she were to stay upstairs alone. Toward the rear of the main hall Tracy Haggard paused before a heavy door.

"Understandably, none of us ever goes in here. Nothing's been touched since the night of the crime." Dr. Haggard unlocked the door, threw it open, and stepped aside. "I might add," he said dryly, "that neither

Mark nor I has done any hunting since . . . at least, with any of these weapons."

The walls of the Gun Room flanking the one door were hung with racks of shotguns, rifles, and small arms. On the other walls were cases containing James Haggard's gambling collection, and a great many larger gambling objects were grouped about the room. A thick coat of dust covered everything.

"Just where was your father's body found?" Ellery murmured.

"Seated behind that desk."

The desk was an elaborate production of inlaid woods, with gunstock-shaped legs and a sheathing of hammered gunmetal. A matching chair with a leather seat stood behind it.

"Was he facing this door, Dr. Haggard?"

"Squarely."

"The only door, notice," snapped Inspector Queen, "so the odds are the killer stood in the doorway when he fired the shot. Just one shot, Tracy?"

"Just one shot."

Ellery opened Mark's box and removed the two rusty revolvers. "I see the gunracks are numbered. In which rack, Doctor, were these .38s normally kept?"

"This one came from the rack immediately to the right of the door."

"To the *right* of the door, Doctor? You're positive?"

"Yes, this rack numbered 1. The other .38 was kept in the rack immediately to the left of the door. This one here, the rack numbered 6."

"Gun Exhibit A, right of door, rack number 1. Gun Exhibit B, left of door, rack number 6." Ellery frowned. "And it must have been done by one of these two guns, Mark said. . . . These ruby dice, Doctor — what did they have to do with the murder?"

"We found them in dad's hand."

"In his *hand*?" exclaimed Nikki.

"My examination of his body indicated that he lingered a few minutes before dying. You'll notice that one of the wall cases behind the chair is open and empty. That's where the Emperor's Dice, as dad used to call them, were displayed. When the shooter left, dad must have managed to reach up, open the case, and take out the ruby dice. Then he died."

"But why would he do a thing like that?" asked Nikki.

"Dad had police training. He was leaving a clue to his killer's identity. But we never could figure out whom the dice indicated. They'd been a gift from all three of us."

"Seems like an awfully peculiar anniversary gift to one's parents," Nikki said coldly.

"The dice were for dad. We gave mother a ruby pendant."

"Well, I don't get it," the Inspector said irritably. "Clues, ruby dice, emperors! Ellery, can you make anything out of this hash?"

"Let's hope he won't," said Dr. Haggard. "I could kill Mark for this stunt. . . ."

"The way you killed your father, Dr. Haggard?" asked Nikki.

Tracy Haggard smiled. "Shows how insidious Mark's little propaganda scheme is." He shrugged and disappeared in the black hall.

The Inspector and Nikki were staring into the darkness when Ellery said abruptly, "You and Nikki go to bed."

"What are you going to do?" asked his father.

"Stay down here," said Ellery, rolling the historic dice between his palms, "until I throw a natural."

Malvina Haggard screamed on and off for the remainder of the night, and the angry voices of the brothers raised in bitter argument penetrated to the Gun Room, but from that room there was no sound but the sound of rattling bones, as if the bimillennial ghost of the gambling emperor himself had returned to dice with Ellery. And finally, at the first smudge of the cold and streaming dawn, the sound stopped, and Ellery came upstairs and methodically roused the household, inviting them all — even the demented woman — to join him on the scene of the old crime. Something in his manner quieted Malvina, and she drifted downstairs with the others docilely.

They took places about the desk in the dusty Gun Room, Mark viciously alive, Malvina somnolent, the doctor suspended watchfully, and Nikki and Inspector Queen trying to contain their excitement.

"The case," announced Ellery, "is solved."

Mark laughed.

"Damn you, Mark!" That was his brother.

Malvina began to croon a wailing tune, smiling.

"I've been throwing these ruby dice for hours," continued Ellery, "with the most surprising result." He shook the dice briskly in his cupped right hand and rolled them out on the desk.

"Nine," said Tracy Haggard. "What's surprising about that?"

"Not merely nine, Dr. Haggard. A 3 and a 6."

"Well, that's nine!"

"Temper, Tracy," laughed Mark. Ellery rolled again.

"Eleven. Remarkable!"

"Not merely eleven, Dr. Haggard — a 5 and a 6." And Ellery rolled a third time. "And there's seven — a 1 and a 6. Never fails."

"What never fails?" asked Nikki.

"The 6, my pet. I've made several hundred rolls while you were tossing around upstairs, and while one of these dice behaves with self-respecting variability, the other comes up 6 every time."

"Crooked! Loaded!" said Inspector Queen. "Who'd you say these dice used to belong to?"

"According to Mark, to Gaius Caesar, better known as Caligula, Emperor of Rome from 37 to 41 A.D. And it may well be true, because Caligula was one of history's most eminent dicing cheats."

"And what does all this mean to you, Ellery?" asked Mark Haggard.

"Your father left these dice as a clue

to the one of you who shot him. There are two dice, there were two .38 revolvers. Theory: The dice were meant by your father to refer to those two revolvers. But we now find that one of these dice is 'loaded' — your word, dad — while the other is not. Conclusion: Jim Haggard meant to convey the message that *the murderer loaded one of these revolvers.*"

"Wonderful," said Mark Haggard.

"Ridiculous," said Tracy Haggard. "Of course he loaded one of them! But which one?"

Malvina Haggard kept smiling and crooning her little tune, keeping time with her sharp white fingers.

"The loaded die," explained Ellery, "always turns up at the number 6, and one of the revolvers comes from a gunrack numbered 6. It seems obvious that the revolver associated with the number 6 was the one the murderer 'loaded' . . . in other words, the one he chose to fire the fatal bullet into Jim Haggard."

"And a fat lot of good that does you," sneered Tracy Haggard. "How can knowing which of the two .38s killed dad possibly tell you which one of us murdered him?"

"In which direction in relation to the door," inquired Ellery, "is rack number 6 located?"

"The rack to the left of the doorway," the Inspector said slowly. "To the *left*. . . ."

"Killer opens door; to his right is a rack with a .38; to his left a rack with a .38. We now know he chose the .38 from the left-hand rack. What kind of person, when he has a choice of either side, automatically chooses an object to his left side? Why, a left-handed person, of course. And that pins the murder on . . ." Ellery stopped.

"Just marvelous," gloated the Inspector. "How this boy of mine comes through! Eh, Nikki?"

"Every time!" said Nikki.

"And that pins the job on which one, son?" The old gentleman rubbed his palms together.

"It was *supposed* to pin the crime on Malvina," said Ellery, "who held the candle prominently aloft in her left hand when she greeted us — as commented upon by Miss Nikki Porter, aloud — whereas the brothers conscientiously demonstrated by various actions during the night that they're both right-handed. Unfortunately, gentlemen and ladies, I'm going to prove a disappointment to you. Aside from a number of tremendous, not to say laughable, improbabilities in the plot, there was one enormous flaw."

"Plot? Flaw?" spluttered Inspector Queen.

The brothers glared. Even Malvina's clouded intelligence seemed shocked to clarity by Ellery's tone.

"I was told," murmured Ellery, "that the ruby dice were a gift to Jim Haggard on the occasion of Mr. and Mrs. Haggard's ruby wedding anniversary —"

"Sure they were, Ellery," said the Inspector. "You saw the inscription in the case yourself!"

"And you told me, dad, that you'd been best man at your old friend Jim Haggard's wedding forty years ago. You even mentioned the date — 1911."

"Yes, but I don't see —" began his father doubtfully.

"You don't? How long ago was Jim Haggard murdered?"

"Ten years ago, Ellery," said Nikki. "That's what they said."

"Married forty years ago, died ten years ago — so Jim Haggard could have been married no longer than thirty years at the time of his death. But ruby weddings commemorate which anniversary? Don't strain yourselves — ruby wedding is the *fortieth.* I must therefore inquire," said Ellery politely, "how Mr. and Mrs. Haggard could have been presented with gifts commemorating forty years of marriage if when Mr. Haggard died he'd only been married thirty years. No answer being forthcoming, I must conclude that the error in mathematics lies in the figures surrounding Mr. Haggard's 'death'; and this is confirmed by the dice, which these two innocent eyes saw in their gold case, dear children, proving that your parents celebrated an anniversary this very year. So I'm delighted to announce — as if you didn't know it — that your parents are very much alive, my friends, and that the whole thing has been a hoax! You lied, Mark. You lied, Tracy. And Malvina, your performance as Ophelia completely vindicates Tracy's judgment that you had a promising career on the stage.

"And *you,* my worthy father." Inspector Queen started. "You ought to apply for an Equity card yourself! Didn't you tell me emotionally that you attended Jim Haggard's funeral ten years ago? So you're one of this gang, too . . . and so are you, Nikki, with your screams and your squeals and the dramatic way in which you pointed out for my benefit the crucial fact that Malvina is left-handed."

There was a vast silence in Jim Haggard's Gun Room.

"All cooked up," said Ellery cheerfully. "The wild night ride, the prevailing lunacy, the lights that atmospherically failed, the carefully deposited dust in the Gun Room, and all the rest of it — cooked up by my own father, in collusion with his precious pals, the Haggard family! Object: apparently to lead me to deduce, from the herrings strewn across the trail, that Malvina killed her father. Then Jim Haggard could pop out of whatever closet he's skulking in with dear Cora and show me up for the gullible fathead I presumably am. My own father! Not to mention my faithful amanuensis. Reason totters and whimpers: Why? Why all these shenanigans? Then I remembered the date."

Ellery grinned. "Yesterday was the last day of March. Which makes today," and Ellery applied his outspread hand to the end of his nose and, using his thumb as a pivot, gently waved his celebrated fingers in their petrified direction, "*April Fool!*"

THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO

by EDGAR ALLAN POE

THE THOUSAND INJURIES of Fortunato were distressing and painful problems which I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. *At length* I would be avenged; this was a point definitely settled — but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved precluded the idea of risk. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong.

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation.

He had a weak point — this Fortunato — although in other regards he was a man to be respected and even feared. He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine. Few Italians have the true virtuoso spirit. For the most part their enthusiasm is adopted to suit the time and opportunity to practise imposture upon the British and Austrian *millionaires*. In painting and gemmary Fortunato, like his countrymen, was a quack, but in the matter of old wines he was sincere. In this respect I did not differ from him materially — I was skillful in the Italian vintages myself, and bought largely whenever I could.

It was about dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend. He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much. The man wore motley. He had on a tight-fitting parti-striped dress, and his head was surmounted by the conical cap and bells. I was so pleased to see him, that I thought I should never have done wringing his hand.

I said to him — "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met. How remarkably well you are looking today! But I have received a pipe of what passes for Amontillado, and I have my doubts."

"How?" said he. "Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival?"

"I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If anyone has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me ——"

"Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry."

"And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own."

"Come, let us go."

"Whither?"

"To your vaults."

"My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi ——"

"I have no engagement; come."

"My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre."

"Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed upon; and as for Luchesi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado."

Thus speaking, Fortunato possessed himself of my arm. Putting on a mask of black silk, and drawing a *roquelaure* closely about my person, I suffered him to hurry me to my palazzo.

There were no attendants at home; they had absconded to make merry in honor of the time. I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned.

I took from their sconces two flambeaux, and giving one to Fortunato, bowed him through several suites of rooms to the archway that led into the vaults. I passed down a long and winding staircase, requesting him to be cautious as he followed. We came at length to the foot of the descent, and stood together on the damp ground of the catacombs of the Montresors.

The gait of my friend was unsteady, and the bells upon his cap jingled as he strode.

"The pipe," said he.

"It is farther on," said I; "but observe the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls."

He turned towards me, and looked into my eyes with two filmy orbs that distilled the rheum of intoxication.

"Nitre?" he asked, at length.

"Nitre," I replied. "How long have you had that cough?"

"Ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh! — ugh! ugh! ugh!"

My poor friend found it impossible to reply for many minutes.

"It is nothing," he said, at last.

"Come," I said, with decision, "we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter. We will go back; you will be ill, and I cannot be responsible. Besides, there is Luchesi ——"

"Enough," he said; "the cough is a mere nothing: it will not kill me. I shall not die of a cough."

"True — true," I replied; "and, indeed, I had no intention of alarming you unnecessarily — but you should use all proper caution. A draught of this Medoc will defend us from the damps."

Here I knocked off the neck of a bottle which I drew from a long row of its fellows that lay upon the mold.

"Drink," I said, presenting him the wine.

He raised it to his lips with a leer. He paused and nodded to me familiarly, while his bells jingled.

"I drink," he said, "to the buried that repose around us."

"And I to your long life."

He again took my arm, and we proceeded. "These vaults," he said, "are extensive."

"The Montresors," I replied, "were a great and numerous family."

"I forget your arms."

"A huge human foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel."

"And the motto?"

"*Nemo me impune lacessit.*"[1]

"Good!" he said.

The wine sparkled in his eyes and the bells jingled. My own fancy grew warm with the Medoc. We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling, into the inmost recesses of the catacombs. I paused again, and this time I made bold to seize Fortunato by an arm above the elbow.

"The nitre!" I said; "see, it increases. It hangs like moss upon the vaults. We are below the river's bed. The drops of moisture trickle among the bones. Come, we will go back ere it is too late. Your cough ——"

"It is nothing," he said; "let us go on. But first, another draught of the Medoc." I broke and reached him a flagon of De Grâve. He emptied it at a breath. His eyes flashed with a fierce light. He laughed and threw the bottle upwards with a gesticulation I did not understand.

I looked at him in surprise. He repeated the movement — a grotesque one. "You do not comprehend?" he said.

"Not I," I replied.

"Then you are not of the brotherhood."

"How?"

"You are not of the masons."

"Yes, yes," I said, "yes, yes."

"You? Impossible! A mason?"

"A mason," I replied.

"A sign," he said.

"It is this," I answered, producing a trowel from beneath the folds of my *roquelaure.*

"You jest," he exclaimed, recoiling a few paces. "But let us proceed to the Amontillado."

"Be it so," I said, replacing the tool beneath the cloak, and again offering him my arm. He leaned upon it heavily. We continued our route in search of the Amontillado. We passed through a range of low arches, descended, passed on, and descending again, arrived at a deep crypt, in

[1] No one dare attack me with impunity (the motto of Scotland).

which the foulness of the air caused our flambeaux rather to glow than flame.

At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior recess, in depth about four feet, in width three, in height six or seven. It seemed to have been constructed for no especial use within itself, but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite.

It was in vain that Fortunato, uplifting his dull torch, endeavored to pry into the depths of the recess. Its termination the feeble light did not enable us to see.

"Proceed," I said; "herein is the Amontillado. As for Luchesi ——"

"He is an ignoramus," interrupted my friend, as he stepped unsteadily forward, while I followed immediately at his heels. In an instant he had reached the extremity of the niche, and finding his progress arrested by the rock, stood stupidly bewildered. A moment more and I had fettered him to the granite. In its surface were two iron staples, distant from each other about two feet, horizontally. From one of these depended a short chain, from the other a padlock. Throwing the links about his waist, it was but the work of a few seconds to secure it. He was too much astounded to resist. Withdrawing the key I stepped back from the recess.

"Pass your hand," I said, "over the wall; you cannot help feeling the nitre. Indeed it is *very* damp. Once more let me *implore* you to return. No? Then I must positively leave you. But I must first render you all the little attentions in my power."

"The Amontillado!" ejaculated my friend, not yet recovered from his astonishment.

"True," I replied; "the Amontillado."

As I said these words I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building-stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche.

I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was *not* the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several

minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the masonwork, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within.

A succession of loud and shrill screams, bursting suddenly from the throat of the chained form, seemed to thrust me violently back. For a brief moment I hesitated — I trembled. Unsheathing my rapier, I began to grope with it about the recess; but the thought of an instant reassured me. I placed my hand upon the solid fabric of the catacombs, and felt satisfied. I reapproached the wall. I replied to the yells of him who clamored. I re-echoed — I aided — I surpassed them in volume and in strength. I did this, and the clamorer grew still.

It was now midnight, and my task was drawing to a close. I had completed the eighth, the ninth, and the tenth tier. I had finished a portion of the last and the eleventh; there remained but a single stone to be fitted and plastered in. I struggled with its weight; I placed it partially in its destined position. But now there came from out the niche a low laugh that erected the hairs upon my head. It was succeeded by a sad voice, which I had difficulty in recognizing as that of the noble Fortunato. The voice said —

"Ha! ha! ha! — he! he! he! — a very good joke indeed — an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it at the palazzo — he! he! he! — over our wine — he! he! he!"

"The Amontillado!" I said.

"He! he! he! — he! he! he! — yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone."

"Yes," I said, "let us be gone."

"*For the love of God, Montresor!*"

"Yes," I said, "for the love of God!"

But to these words I hearkened in vain for a reply. I grew impatient. I called aloud: "Fortunato!"

No answer. I called again: "Fortunato!"

No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick — on account of the dampness of the catacombs. I hastened to make an end of my labor. I forced the last stone into its position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. *In pace requiescat!*

PHILOMEL COTTAGE

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"GOODBYE, my darling." Alix Martin stood leaning over the small rustic gate, no unpleasant problems disturbing her mind, as she watched the retreating figure of her husband, walking down the road in the direction of the village.

Presently he turned a bend and was lost to sight, but Alix still stayed in the same position, absent-mindedly smoothing a lock of the rich brown hair which had blown across her face, her eyes far away and dreamy.

Alix Martin was not beautiful, nor even, strictly speaking, pretty. But her face, the face of a woman no longer in her first youth, was irradiated and softened until her former colleagues of the old office days would hardly have recognized her. Miss Alix King had been a trim business-like young woman, efficient, slightly brusque in manner, obviously capable and matter-of-fact. She had made the least, not the most, of her beautiful brown hair. Her mouth, not ungenerous in its lines, had always been severely compressed. Her clothes had been neat and suitable without a hint of coquetry.

Alix had graduated in a hard school. For fifteen years, from the age of eighteen until she was thirty-three, she had kept herself (and for seven years of the time, an invalid mother) by her work as a shorthand typist. It was the struggle for existence which had hardened the soft lines of her girlish face.

True, there had been romance — of a kind. Dick Windyford, a fellow clerk. Very much of a woman at heart, Alix had always known without seeming to know that he cared. Outwardly they had been friends, nothing more. Out of his slender salary, Dick had been hard put to it to provide for the schooling of a younger brother. For the moment, he could not think of marriage. Nevertheless, when Alix envisaged the future, it was with the half-acknowledged certainty that she would one day be Dick's wife. They cared for one another, so she would have put it, but they were both sensible people. Plenty of time, no need to do anything rash. So the years had gone on.

And then suddenly deliverance from daily toil had come to the girl in the most unexpected manner. A distant cousin had died leaving her money to Alix. A few thousand pounds, enough to bring in a couple of hundred a year. To Alix, it was freedom, life, independence. Now she and Dick need wait no longer.

But Dick reacted unexpectedly. He had never directly spoken of his love to Alix, now he seemed less inclined to do so than ever. He avoided her, became morose and gloomy. Alix was quick to realize the truth. She

had become a woman of means. Delicacy and pride stood in the way of Dick's asking her to be his wife.

She liked him none the worse for it and was indeed deliberating as to whether she herself might not take the first step when for the second time the unexpected descended upon her.

She met Gerald Martin at a friend's house. He fell violently in love with her and within a week they were engaged. Alix, who had always considered herself "not the falling-in-love kind," was swept clean off her feet.

Unwittingly she had found the way to arouse her former lover. Dick Windyford had come to her stammering with rage and anger.

"The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

"I know that I love him."

"How can you know — in a week?"

"It doesn't take everyone eleven years to find out that they're in love with a girl," cried Alix angrily.

His face went white.

"I've cared for you ever since I met you. I thought that you cared also."

Alix was truthful. "I thought so too," she admitted. "But that was because I didn't know what love was."

Then Dick had burst out again. Prayers, entreaties, even threats. Threats against the man who had supplanted him. It was amazing to Alix to see the volcano that existed beneath the reserved exterior of the man she had thought she knew so well. Also, it frightened her a little. . . . Dick, of course, couldn't possibly mean the things he was saying, the threats of vengeance against Gerald Martin. He was angry, that was all. . . .

Her thoughts had gone back to that interview now, on this sunny morning, as she leaned on the gate of the cottage. She had been married a month, and she was idyllically happy. Yet a tinge of anxiety invaded her perfect happiness, and the cause of that anxiety was Dick Windyford.

Three times since her marriage she had dreamed the same dream. The environment differed, but the main facts were always the same. She saw her husband lying dead and Dick Windyford standing over him, and she knew clearly and distinctly that his was the hand which had dealt the fatal blow.

But horrible though that was, there was something more horrible still — horrible, that was, on awakening, for in the dream it seemed perfectly natural and inevitable. *She, Alix Martin, was glad that her husband was dead* — she stretched out grateful hands to the murderer, sometimes she thanked him. The dream always ended the same way, with herself clasped in Dick Windyford's arms.

She had said nothing of this dream to her husband, but secretly it had perturbed her more than she liked to admit. Was it a warning — a warning against Dick Windyford?

Alix was roused from her thoughts by the sharp ringing of the telephone

bell from within the house. She entered the cottage, and picked up the receiver. Suddenly she swayed, and put out a hand to keep herself from falling.

"Who did you say was speaking?"

"Why, Alix, what's the matter with your voice? I wouldn't have known it. It's Dick."

"Oh!" said Alix. "Oh! Where — where are you?"

"At the *Traveller's Arms* — that's the right name, isn't it? Or don't you even know of the existence of your village pub? I'm on my holiday — doing a bit of fishing here. Any objection to my looking you two good people up this evening after dinner?"

"No," said Alix sharply. "You mustn't come."

There was a pause, and Dick's voice, with a subtle alteration in it, spoke again.

"I beg your pardon," he said formally. "Of course I won't bother you ——"

Alix broke in hastily. Of course he must think her behavior too extraordinary. It was extraordinary. Her nerves must be all to pieces. It wasn't Dick's fault that she had these dreams.

"I only meant that we were — engaged tonight," she explained, trying to make her voice sound as natural as possible. "Won't you — won't you come to dinner tomorrow night?"

But Dick evidently noticed the lack of cordiality in her tone.

"Thanks very much," he said, in the same formal voice. "But I may be moving on any time. Depends upon whether a pal of mine turns up or not. Goodbye, Alix." He paused, and then added hastily, in a different tone, "Best of luck to you, my dear."

Alix hung up the receiver with a feeling of relief.

"He mustn't come here," she repeated to herself. "He mustn't come here. Oh! what a fool I am! To imagine myself into a state like this. All the same, I'm glad he's not coming."

She caught up a rustic rush hat from a table, and passed out into the garden again, pausing to look up at the name carved over the porch, Philomel Cottage.

"Isn't it a very fanciful name?" she had said to Gerald before they were married. He had laughed.

"You little Cockney," he had said, affectionately. "I don't believe you have ever heard a nightingale. I'm glad you haven't. Nightingales should sing only for lovers. We'll hear them together on a summer's evening outside our own home."

It was Gerald who had found Philomel Cottage. He had come to Alix bursting with excitement. He had found the very spot for them — unique — a gem — the chance of a lifetime. And when Alix had seen it, she too was captivated. It was true that the situation was rather lonely — they were two miles from the nearest village — but the cottage itself was so exquisite with its old-world appearance, and its solid comfort of bathrooms, hot-water system, electric light and telephone, that she fell a victim to its charm immediately.

And then a hitch occurred. The owner, a rich man who had made it his whim, declined to rent it. He would only sell.

Gerald Martin, though possessed of a good income, was unable to touch his capital. He could raise at most a thousand pounds. The owner was asking three. But Alix, who had set her heart on the place, came to the rescue. Her own capital was easily realized, being in bearer bonds. She would contribute half of it to the purchase of the home. So Philomel Cottage became their very own, and never for a minute had Alix regretted the choice. It was true that servants did not appreciate the rural solitude — indeed, at the moment they had none at all — but Alix, who had been starved of domestic life, thoroughly enjoyed cooking dainty little meals and looking after the house.

The garden which was magnificently stocked with flowers was attended to by an old man from the village who came twice a week, and Gerald, who was keen on gardening, spent most of his time there.

As she rounded the corner of the house, Alix was surprised to see the old gardener in question busy over the flower beds. She was surprised because his days for work were Mondays and Fridays, and today was Wednesday.

"Why, George, what are you doing here?" she asked.

The old man straightened up with a chuckle, touching the brim of an aged cap.

"I thought as how you'd be surprised, Ma'am. But 'tis this way. There be a Fête over to Squire's on Friday, and I sez to myself, I sez, neith Mr. Martin nor yet his good lady won't take it amiss if I comes for once on a Wednesday instead of a Friday."

"That's quite all right," said Alix, "I hope you'll enjoy yourself at the Fête."

"I reckon to," said George simply. "It's a fine thing to be able to eat your fill and know all the time as it's not you as is paying for it. Squire allus has a proper sit-down tea for 'is tenants. Then I thought too, Ma'am, as I might as well see you before you goes away so as to learn your wishes for the borders. You'll have no idea when you'll be back, Ma'am, I suppose?"

"But I'm not going away."

George stared at her. "Bain't you going to Lunnon tomorrow?"

"No. What put such an idea into your head?"

George jerked his head over his shoulder.

"Met Maister down to village yesterday. He told me you was both going away to Lunnon tomorrow, and it was uncertain when you'd be back."

"Nonsense," said Alix, laughing. "You must have misunderstood him."

All the same, she wondered exactly what it could have been that Gerald had said to lead the old man into such a curious mistake. Going to London? She never wanted to go to London again.

"I hate London," she said suddenly and harshly.

"Ah!" said George placidly. "I must have been mistook somehow, and yet he said it plain enough it seemed to me. I'm glad you're stopping on here — I don't hold with all this gallivanting about, and I don't think nothing of Lunnon. I've never needed to go there. Too many moty cars — that's the trouble nowadays. Once people have got a moty car, blessed if they can stay still anywheres. Mr. Ames, wot used to have this house — nice peaceful sort of gentleman he was until he bought one of them things. Hadn't 'ad it a month before he put up this cottage for sale. A tidy lot he'd spent on it, too, with taps in all the bedrooms, and the electric light and all. 'You'll never see your money back,' I sez to him. But 'George,' he sez to me, 'I'll get every penny of two thousand pounds for this house.' And sure enough, he did."

"He got three thousand," said Alix, smiling.

"Two thousand," repeated George. "The sum he was asking was talked of at the time. And a very high figure it was thought to be. You'll not tell me that Mr. Ames had the face to stand up to you, and say three thousand brazen like in a loud voice."

"He didn't say it to me," said Alix. "He said it to my husband."

George stooped again to his flower bed.

"The price was two thousand," he said obstinately.

Alix did not trouble to argue with him. Moving to one of the farther beds, she began to pick an armful of flowers.

As she moved with her fragrant posy towards the house, Alix noticed a small dark-green object, peeping from between some leaves in one of the beds. She stooped and picked it up, recognizing it for her husband's pocket diary. It must have fallen from his pocket when he was weeding.

She opened it, scanning the entries with some amusement. Almost from the beginning of their married life, she had realized that the impulsive and emotional Gerald had the uncharacteristic virtues of neatness and method. He was extremely fussy about meals being punctual, and always planned his day ahead with the accuracy of a time-table. This morning, for instance, he had announced that he should start for the village after breakfast — at 10:15. And at 10:15 to the minute he had left the house.

Looking through the diary, she was amused to notice the entry on the date of May 14th: *Marry Alix, St. Peter's, 2:30.*

"The big silly," murmured Alix to herself, turning the pages.

Suddenly she stopped.

"Wednesday, June 18th — why, that's today."

In the space for that day was written in Gerald's neat precise hand: *9 p.m.* Nothing else. What had Gerald planned to do at 9 p.m.? Alix wondered. She smiled to herself as she

realized that had this been a story, like those she had so often read, the diary would doubtless have furnished her with some sensational revelation. It would have had in it for certain the name of another woman. She fluttered the back pages idly. There were dates, appointments, cryptic references to business deals, but only one woman's name — her own.

Yet as she slipped the book into her pocket and went on with her flowers to the house, she was aware of a vague uneasiness. Those words of Dick Windyford's recurred to her, almost as though he had been at her elbow repeating them: "The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

It was true. What did she know about him? After all, Gerald was forty. In forty years there must have been women in his life. . . .

Alix shook herself impatiently. She must not give way to these thoughts. She had a far more instant preoccupation to deal with. Should she, or should she not, tell her husband that Dick Windyford had rung her up?

There was the possibility to be considered that Gerald might have already run across him in the village. But in that case he would be sure to mention it to her immediately upon his return and matters would be taken out of her hands. Otherwise — what? Alix was aware of a distinct desire to say nothing about it. Gerald had always shown himself kindly disposed towards the other. "Poor devil," he had said once, "I believe he's just as keen on you as I am. Hard luck on him to be shelved."

If she told him, he was sure to suggest asking Dick Windyford to Philomel Cottage. Then she would have to explain that Dick had proposed it himself, and that she had made an excuse to prevent his coming. And when he asked her why she had done so, what could she say? Tell him her dream? But he would only laugh — or worse, see that she attached an importance to it which he did not. Then he would think — oh! he might think anything!

In the end, rather shamefacedly, Alix decided to say nothing.

When she heard Gerald returning from the village shortly before lunch, she hurried into the kitchen and pretended to be busy with the cooking so as to hide her confusion.

It was evident at once that Gerald had seen nothing of Dick Windyford. Alix felt at once relieved and embarrassed. She was definitely committed now to a policy of concealment. For the rest of the day she was nervous and absent-minded, starting at every sound, but her husband seemed to notice nothing. He himself seemed to have his thoughts far away, and once or twice she had to speak a second time before he answered some trivial remark of hers.

It was not until after their simple evening meal, when they were sitting in the oak-beamed living room, that Alix remembered the pocket diary, and seized upon it gladly to distract

her thoughts from their doubt and perplexity.

"Here's something you've been watering the flowers with," she said, and threw it into his lap.

"Dropped it in the border, did I?"

"Yes, I know all your secrets now."

"Not guilty," said Gerald, shaking his head.

"What about your assignation at nine o'clock tonight?"

"Oh! that —" he seemed taken aback for a moment, then he smiled as though something afforded him particular amusement. "It's an assignation with a particularly nice girl, Alix. She's got brown hair and blue eyes and she's particularly like you."

"I don't understand," said Alix, with mock severity. "You're evading the point."

"No, I'm not. As a matter of fact, that's a reminder that I'm going to develop some negatives tonight, and I want you to help me."

Gerald Martin was an enthusiastic photographer. He had a somewhat old-fashioned camera, but with an excellent lens, and he developed his own plates in a small cellar which he had had fitted up as a dark room. He was never tired of posing Alix in different positions.

"And it must be done at nine o'clock precisely," said Alix teasingly.

Gerald looked a little vexed. "My dear girl," he said with a shade of testiness in his manner. "One should always plan a thing for a definite time. Then one gets through one's work properly."

Alix sat for a minute or two in silence watching her husband as he lay in his chair smoking, his dark head flung back and the clearcut lines of his clean-shaven face showing up against the sombre background. And suddenly, from some unknown source, a wave of panic surged over her, so that she cried out before she could stop herself. "Oh! Gerald, I wish I knew more about you."

Her husband turned an astonished face upon her.

"But, my dear Alix, you do know all about me. I've told you of my boyhood in Northumberland, of my life in South Africa, and these last ten years in Canada which have brought me success."

"Oh! business!"

Gerald laughed suddenly.

"I know what you mean — love affairs. You women are all the same. Nothing interests you but the personal element."

Alix felt her throat go dry, as she muttered indistinctly: "Well, but there must have been — love affairs. I mean — if I only knew ——"

There was silence again for a minute or two. Gerald Martin was frowning, a look of indecision on his face. When he spoke, it was gravely, without a trace of his former bantering manner.

"Do you think it wise, Alix, this — Bluebeard's chamber business? There have been women in my life, yes. I don't deny it. You wouldn't believe me if I did deny it. But I can swear to you truthfully that not one of

them really meant anything to me."

There was a ring of sincerity in his voice which comforted her.

"Satisfied, Alix?" he asked, with a smile. Then he looked at her with a shade of curiosity.

"What has turned your mind onto these unpleasant subjects tonight of all nights? You never mentioned them before."

Alix got up and began to walk about restlessly.

"Oh! I don't know," she said. "I've been nervy all day."

"That's odd," said Gerald, in a low voice. "That's very odd."

"Why is it odd?"

"Oh! my dear girl, don't flash out at me so. I only said it was odd because as a rule you're so sweet and serene."

Alix forced a smile.

"Everything's conspired to annoy me today," she confessed. "Even old George had got some ridiculous idea into his head that we were going away to London. He said you had told him so."

"Where did you see him?" asked Gerald sharply.

"He came to work today instead of Friday."

"The old fool," said Gerald angrily.

Alix stared in surprise. Her husband's face was convulsed with rage. She had never seen him so angry. Seeing her astonishment, Gerald made an effort to regain control of himself.

"Well, he *is* a stupid old fool," he protested.

"What can you have said to make him think that?"

"I? I never said anything. At least — oh! yes, I remember, I made some weak joke about being 'off to London in the morning' and I suppose he took it seriously. You undeceived him, of course?"

He waited anxiously for her reply.

"Of course, but he's the sort of old man who if once he gets an idea in his head — well, it isn't so easy to get it out again."

Then she told him of the gardener's insistence on the sum asked for the cottage.

Gerald was silent for a minute or two, then he said slowly: "Ames was willing to take two thousand in cash and the remaining thousand on mortgage. That's the origin of that mistake, I fancy."

"Very likely," agreed Alix.

Then she looked up at the clock, and pointed to it with a mischievous finger.

"We ought to be getting down to it, Gerald. Five minutes behind schedule."

A very peculiar smile came over Gerald Martin's face.

"I've changed my mind," he said quietly. "I shall not do any photography tonight."

A woman's mind is a curious thing. When she went to bed that Wednesday night, Alix's mind was contented and at rest. Her momentarily assailed happiness reasserted itself, triumphant as of yore.

But by the evening of the following day she realized that some subtle

forces were at work undermining it. Dick Windyford had not rung up again, nevertheless she felt what she supposed to be his influence at work. Again and again those words of his recurred to her: *The man's a perfect stranger. You know nothing about him.* And with them came the memory of her husband's face, photographed clearly on her brain as he said: "Do you think it wise, Alix, this — Bluebeard's chamber business?" Why had he said that? What had he meant by those words?

There had been warning in them — a hint of menace. It was as though he had said in effect — "You had better not pry into my life, Alix. You may get a nasty shock if you do." True, a few minutes later, he had sworn to her that there had been no woman in his life that mattered — but Alix tried in vain to recapture her sense of his sincerity. Was he not bound to swear that?

By Friday morning, Alix had convinced herself that there had been a woman in Gerald's life — a Bluebeard's chamber that he had sedulously sought to conceal from her. Her jealousy was now rampant.

Was it a woman he had been going to meet that night, at 9 p.m.? Was his story of photographs to develop a lie invented upon the spur of the moment? With a queer sense of shock Alix realized that ever since she had found that pocket diary she had been in torment. And there had been nothing in it. That was the irony of the whole thing.

Three days ago she would have sworn that she knew her husband through and through. Now it seemed to her that he was a stranger of whom she knew nothing. She remembered his unreasonable anger against old George, so at variance with his usual good-tempered manner. A small thing, perhaps, but it showed her that she did not really know the man who was her husband.

There were several little things required on Friday from the village to carry them over the weekend. In the afternoon Alix suggested that she should go for them while Gerald remained in the garden, but somewhat to her surprise he opposed this plan vehemently, and insisted on going himself while she remained at home. Alix was forced to give way to him, but his insistence surprised and alarmed her. Why was he so anxious to prevent her going to the village?

Suddenly an explanation suggested itself to her which made the whole thing clear. Was it not possible that, while saying nothing to her, Gerald had indeed come across Dick Windyford? Her own jealousy, entirely dormant at the time of their marriage, had only developed afterwards. Might it not be the same with Gerald? Might he not be anxious to prevent her seeing Dick Windyford again? This explanation was so consistent with the facts, and so comforting to Alix's perturbed mind, that she embraced it eagerly.

Yet when tea time had come and past, she was restless and ill at ease.

She was struggling with a temptation that had assailed her ever since Gerald's departure. Finally, pacifying her conscience with the assurance that the room did need a thorough tidying, she went upstairs to her husband's dressing room. She took a duster with her to keep up the pretense of housewifery.

In vain she told herself that anything compromising would have been destroyed ages ago. Against that she argued that men do sometimes keep the most damning piece of evidence through an exaggerated sentimentality.

In the end Alix succumbed. Her cheeks burning with the shame of her action, she hunted breathlessly through packets of letters and documents, turned out the drawers, even went through the pockets of her husband's clothes. Only two drawers eluded her — the lower drawer of the chest of drawers, and the small right-hand drawer of the writing desk were both locked. But Alix was by now lost to all shame. In one of those drawers she was convinced that she would find evidence of this imaginary woman of the past who obsessed her.

She remembered that Gerald had left his keys lying carelessly on the sideboard downstairs. She fetched them and tried them one by one. The third key fitted the writing-table drawer. Alix pulled it open eagerly. There was a check book, and a wallet well stuffed with notes, and at the back of the drawer a packet of letters tied up with a piece of tape.

Her breath coming unevenly, Alix untied the tape. Then a deep burning blush overspread her face, and she dropped the letters back into the drawer, closing and relocking it. For the letters were her own, written to Gerald Martin before she married him.

She turned now to the chest of drawers, more with a wish to feel that she had left nothing undone than from any expectation of finding what she sought. She was shamed and almost convinced of the madness of her obsession.

To her annoyance none of the keys on Gerald's bunch fitted the drawer in question. Not to be defeated, Alix went into the other rooms and brought back a selection of keys with her. To her satisfaction, the key of the spare-room wardrobe also fitted the chest of drawers. She unlocked the drawer and pulled it open. But there was nothing in it but a roll of newspaper clippings already dirty and discolored with age.

Alix breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless she glanced at the clippings, curious to know what subject had interested Gerald so much that he had taken the trouble to keep the dusty roll. They were nearly all American papers, dated some seven years ago, and dealing with the trial of the notorious swindler and bigamist, Charles LeMaitre. LeMaitre had been suspected of doing away with his women victims. A skeleton had been found beneath the floor of one of the houses he had rented, and most of the women

he had "married" had never been heard of again.

He had defended himself from the charge with consummate skill, aided by some of the best legal talent in the United States. He was found Not Guilty on the capital charge, though sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on the other charges preferred against him.

Alix remembered the excitement caused by the case at the time, and also the sensation aroused by the escape of LeMaitre some three years later. He had never been recaptured. The personality of the man and his extraordinary power over women had been discussed at great length in the English papers at the time, together with an account of his excitability in court, his passionate protestations, and his occasional sudden physical collapses, due to the fact that he had a weak heart, though the ignorant accredited it to his dramatic powers.

There was a picture of him in one of the clippings Alix held, and she studied it with some interest — a long-bearded scholarly-looking gentleman. Who was it the face reminded her of? Suddenly, with a shock, she realized that it was Gerald himself! The eye and brow bore a strong resemblance to him. Perhaps he had kept the cutting for that reason. Her eyes went on to the paragraph beside the picture. Certain dates, it seemed, had been entered in the accused's pocket notebook, and it was contended that these were dates when he had done away with his victims. Then a woman gave evidence and identified the prisoner positively by the fact that he had a mole on his left wrist, just below the palm of the left hand.

Alix dropped the papers from a nerveless hand, and swayed as she stood. *On his left wrist, just below the palm, Gerald had a small scar. . . .*

The room whirled round her. . . . Afterwards it struck her as strange that she should have leaped at once to such absolute certainty. Gerald Martin was Charles LeMaitre! She knew it and accepted it in a flash. Disjointed fragments whirled through her brain, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fitting into place.

The money paid for the house — her money — her money only. The bearer bonds she had entrusted to his keeping. Even her dream appeared in its true significance. Deep down in her, her subconscious self had always feared Gerald Martin and wished to escape from him. And it was to Dick Windyford this self of hers had looked for help. That, too, was why she was able to accept the truth so easily, without doubt or hesitation. She was to have been another of LeMaitre's victims. Very soon, perhaps.

A half-cry escaped her as she remembered something. Wednesday, 9 p.m. The cellar, with the flagstones that were so easily raised. Once before, he had buried one of his victims in a cellar. It had all been planned for Wednesday night. But to write it down beforehand in that methodical manner — insanity! No, it was logical. Gerald always made a memorandum

of his engagements — murder was, to him, a business proposition like any other.

But what had saved her? What could possibly have saved her? Had he relented at the last minute? No — in a flash the answer came to her. Old George. She understood now her husband's uncontrollable anger. Doubtless he had paved the way by telling everyone he met that they were going to London the next day. Then George had come to work unexpectedly, had mentioned London to her, and she had contradicted the story. Too risky to do away with her that night, with old George repeating that conversation. But what an escape! If she had not happened to mention the trivial matter — Alix shuddered.

But there was no time to be lost. She must get away at once — before he came back. For nothing on earth would she spend another night under the same roof with him. She hurriedly replaced the roll of clippings in the drawer, shut it and locked it.

And then she stayed motionless as though frozen to stone. She had heard the creak of the gate into the road. Her husband had returned.

For a moment Alix stayed as though petrified, then she crept on tiptoe to the window, looking out from behind the shelter of the curtain.

Yes, it was her husband. He was smiling to himself and humming a little tune. In his hand he held an object which almost made the terrified girl's heart stop beating. It was a brand-new spade.

Alix leaped to a knowledge born of instinct. *It was to be tonight. . . .*

But there was still a chance. Gerald, still humming his little tune, went round to the back of the house.

"He's going to put it in the cellar," thought Alix.

Without hesitating a moment, she ran down the stairs and out of the cottage. But just as she emerged from the door, her husband came round the other side of the house.

"Hullo," he said. "Where are you running off to in such a hurry?"

Alix strove desperately to appear calm. Her chance was gone for the moment, but if she was careful not to arouse his suspicions, it would come again later. Even now, perhaps. . . .

"I was going to walk to the end of the lane and back," she said, in a voice that sounded weak and uncertain to her own ears.

"Right," said Gerald, "I'll come with you."

"No — please, Gerald. I'm — nervy, headachy — I'd rather go alone."

He looked at her attentively. She fancied a momentary suspicion gleamed in his eye.

"What's the matter with you, Alix? You're pale — trembling."

"Nothing," she forced herself to be brusque — smiling. "I've got a headache, that's all. A walk will do me good."

"Well, it's no good your saying you don't want me," declared Gerald with his easy laugh. "I'm coming whether you want me or not."

She dared not protest further. If he suspected that she *knew* ——

With an effort she managed to regain something of her normal manner. Yet she had an uneasy feeling that he looked at her sideways every now and then, as though not quite satisfied.

When they returned to the house, he insisted on her lying down, and brought some eau de cologne to bathe her temples. Not for a minute would he leave her alone. He went with her into the kitchen and helped her to bring in the simple cold dishes she had already prepared. Supper was a meal that choked her, yet she forced herself to eat, and even to appear gay and natural. She knew now that she was fighting for her life. She was alone with this man, miles from help, absolutely at his mercy. Her only chance was to lull his suspicions so that he would leave her alone for a few moments — long enough for her to get to the telephone in the hall and summon assistance. That was her only hope now. If she took to flight, he would overtake her long before she could reach assistance.

A momentary hope flashed over her as she remembered how he had abandoned his plan before. Suppose she told him that Dick Windyford was coming up to see them that evening? The words trembled on her lips — then she rejected them hastily. This man would not be balked a second time. There was a determination, an elation underneath his calm bearing that sickened her. She would only precipitate the crime. He would murder her there and then, and calmly ring up Dick Windyford with a tale of having been suddenly called away. Oh! if only Dick Windyford were coming to the house this evening. If only Dick ——

A sudden idea flashed into her mind. She looked sharply sideways at her husband as though she feared that he might read her mind. With the forming of a plan her courage was reinforced. She became so completely natural in manner that she marveled at herself.

She made the coffee and took it out to the porch where they often sat on fine evenings.

"By the way," said Gerald suddenly. "We'll do those photographs later."

Alix felt a shiver run through her, but she replied nonchalantly: "Can't you manage alone? I'm rather tired tonight."

"It won't take long." He smiled to himself. "And I can promise you you won't be tired afterwards."

The words seemed to amuse him. Alix shuddered. Now or never was the time to carry out her plan. She rose to her feet.

"I'm just going to telephone to the butcher," she announced nonchalantly. "Don't you bother to move."

"To the butcher? At this time of night?"

"His shop's shut, of course, silly. But he's at home now. And tomorrow's Saturday, and I want him to bring me some veal cutlets early,

before someone else grabs them from him."

She passed quickly into the house, closing the door behind her. She heard Gerald say, "Don't shut the door," and was quick with her light reply. "It keeps the moths out. I hate moths. Are you afraid I'm going to make love to the butcher, silly?"

Once inside she snatched down the telephone receiver and gave the number of the *Traveller's Arms*. She was put through at once.

"Mr. Windyford? Is he still there? May I speak to him?"

Then her heart gave a sickening thump. The door was pushed open and her husband came into the hall.

"Do go away, Gerald," she said pettishly. "I hate anyone listening when I'm telephoning."

He merely laughed and threw himself into a chair.

"Sure it is really the butcher you're telephoning?" he quizzed.

Alix was in despair. Her plan had failed. In a minute Dick Windyford would come to the phone. Should she risk all and cry out an appeal for help? Would he grasp what she meant before Gerald wrenched her away from the phone? Or would he merely treat it as a practical joke?

And then as she nervously pressed and released the little key in the receiver she was holding, which permits the voice to be heard or not heard at the other end, another plan flashed into her head.

"It will be difficult," she thought. "It means keeping my head, and thinking of the right words, and not faltering for a moment, but I believe I could do it. I *must* do it."

And at that minute she heard Dick Windyford's voice at the other end of the phone.

Alix drew a deep breath. Then she depressed the key firmly and spoke.

"Mrs. Martin speaking — from Philomel Cottage. *Please come* (she released the key.) tomorrow morning with six nice veal cutlets (she pressed the key again). *It's very important* (she released the key). Thank you so much, Mr. Hexworthy, you don't mind my ringing you up so late, I hope, but those veal cutlets are really a matter of (she pressed the key again) *life or death* . . . (she released it). Very well — tomorrow morning — (she pressed it) *as soon as possible*. . ."

She replaced the receiver on the hook and turned to face her husband, breathing hard.

"So that's how you talk to your butcher, is it?" said Gerald.

"It's the feminine touch," said Alix lightly.

She was simmering with excitement. He had suspected nothing. Surely Dick, even if he didn't understand, would come.

She passed into the sitting room and switched on the electric light. Gerald followed her.

"You seem very full of spirits now," he said, watching her curiously.

"Yes," said Alix. "My headache's gone."

She sat down in her usual seat and smiled at her husband, as he sank into

his own chair opposite her. She was saved. It was only twenty-five minutes past eight. Long before nine o'clock Dick would have arrived.

"I didn't think much of that coffee you gave me," complained Gerald. "It tasted very bitter."

"It's a new kind I was trying. We won't have it again if you don't like it."

Alix took up a piece of needlework and began to stitch. She felt complete confidence in her own ability to keep up the part of the devoted wife. Gerald read a few pages of his book. Then he glanced up at the clock and tossed the book away.

"Half-past eight. Time to go down to the cellar and start work."

The work slipped from Alix's fingers.

"Oh! not yet. Let us wait until nine o'clock."

"No, my girl, half-past eight. That's the time I fixed. You'll be able to get to bed all the earlier."

"But I'd rather wait until nine."

"Half-past eight," said Gerald obstinately. "You know when I fix a time, I always stick to it. Come along, Alix. I'm not going to wait a minute longer."

Alix looked up at him, and in spite of herself she felt a wave of terror slide over her. The mask had been lifted; Gerald's hands were twitching; his eyes were shining with excitement; he was continually passing his tongue over his dry lips. He no longer cared to conceal his excitement.

Alix thought: "It's true — *he can't wait* — he's like a madman."

He strode over to her, and jerked her onto her feet with a hand on her shoulder.

"Come on, my girl — or I'll carry you there."

His tone was gay, but there was an undisguised ferocity behind it that appalled her. With a supreme effort she jerked herself free and clung cowering against the wall. She was powerless. She couldn't get away — she couldn't do anything — and he was coming towards her.

"Now, Alix —"

"No — no!"

She screamed, her hands held out impotently to ward him off.

"Gerald — stop — I've got something to tell you, something to confess . . ."

He did stop.

"To confess?" he said curiously.

"Yes, to confess." She went on desperately, seeking to hold his arrested attention. "Something I ought to have told you before."

A look of contempt swept over his face. The spell was broken.

"A former lover, I suppose," he sneered.

"No," said Alix. "Something else. You'd call it, I expect — yes, you'd call it a crime."

And at once she saw that she had struck the right note. Again his attention was arrested, held. Seeing that, her nerve came back to her. She felt mistress of the situation once more.

"You had better sit down again," she said quietly.

She herself crossed the room to her old chair and sat down. She even stooped and picked up her needlework. But behind her calmness she was thinking and inventing feverishly. For the story she invented must hold his interest until help arrived.

"I told you," she said, "that I had been a shorthand typist for fifteen years. That was not entirely true. There were two intervals. The first occurred when I was twenty-two. I came across a man, an elderly man with a little property. He fell in love with me and asked me to marry him. I accepted. We were married." She paused. "I induced him to insure his life in my favor."

She saw a sudden keen interest spring up in her husband's face, and went on with renewed assurance.

"During the war I worked for a time in a Hospital Dispensary. There I had the handling of all kinds of drugs and poisons."

She paused reflectively. He was keenly interested now, not a doubt of it. The murderer is bound to have an interest in murder. She had gambled on that, and succeeded. She stole a glance at the clock. It was twenty-five minutes to nine.

"There is one poison — it is a little white powder. A pinch of it means death. You know something about poisons, perhaps?"

She put the question in some trepidation. If he did, she would have to be careful.

"No," said Gerald. "I know very little about them."

She drew a breath of relief. This made her task easier.

"You have heard of hyoscine, of course. It is a drug that is absolutely untraceable. Any doctor would give a certificate of heart failure. I stole a small quantity of this drug and kept it by me."

She paused, marshaling her forces.

"Go on," said Gerald.

"No. I'm afraid. I can't tell you. Another time."

"Now," he said impatiently. "I want to hear."

"We had been married a month. I was very good to my elderly husband, very kind and devoted. He spoke in praise of me to all the neighbors. Everyone knew what a devoted wife I was. I always made his coffee myself every evening. One evening, when we were alone, I put a pinch of the deadly poison in his cup."

Alix paused, and carefully rethreaded her needle. She, who had never acted in her life, rivaled the greatest actress in the world at this moment. She was actually living the part of a cold-blooded poisoner.

"It was very peaceful. I sat watching him. Once he gasped a little and asked for air. I opened the window. Then he said he could not move from his chair. Presently he died."

She stopped, smiling. It was now a quarter to nine. Surely they would come soon.

"How much," said Gerald, "was the insurance money?"

"About two thousand pounds. I speculated with it, and lost it. I

went back to my office work, but I never meant to remain there long. Then I met another man. I had stuck to my maiden name at the office. He didn't know I had been married before. He was a younger man, rather good-looking, and quite well off. We were married quietly in Sussex. He didn't want to insure his life, but of course he made a will in my favor. He liked me to make his coffee myself, just as my first husband had done."

Alix smiled reflectively, and added simply: "I make very good coffee."

Then she went on. "I had several friends in the village where we were living. They were very sorry for me, with my husband dying suddenly of heart failure one evening after dinner. I didn't quite like the doctor. I don't think he suspected me, but he was certainly very surprised at my husband's sudden death. I don't quite know why I drifted back to the office again. Habit, I suppose. My second husband left about four thousand pounds. I didn't speculate with it, I invested it. Then, you see ——"

But she was interrupted. Gerald Martin, his face suffused with blood, half-choking, was pointing a shaking forefinger at her.

"The coffee — My God! The coffee! I understand now why it was bitter. You devil. You've poisoned me!"

His hands gripped the arms of his chair. He was ready to spring at her.

Alix had retreated from him to the fireplace. Now, terrified, she opened her lips to deny — and then paused. In another minute he would spring upon her. She summoned all her strength. Her eyes held his steadily, compellingly.

"Yes," she said. "I poisoned you. Already the poison is working. At this minute you can't move from your chair — you can't move ——"

If she could keep him there — even a few minutes —

But what was that? Footsteps on the road . . . the creak of the gate . . . then footsteps on the path outside . . .

"You can't move," she said again.

Then she slipped past him and fled headlong from the room to fall half-fainting into Dick Windyford's arms.

"My God! Alix!" he cried.

Then he turned to the man with him, a tall policeman.

"Go and see what's been happening in that room."

He laid Alix carefully down on a couch and bent over her.

"My little girl," he murmured. "What has he been doing to you?"

Her eyelids fluttered and her lips just murmured his name.

Dick was aroused from tumultuous thoughts by the policeman's touching him on the arm.

"There's nothing in that room, sir, but a man sitting in a chair. Looks as though he'd had some kind of bad fright, and —— he's — dead."

They were startled by hearing Alix's voice. She spoke as though in some kind of dream.

"And presently," she said, almost as though she were quoting from something, "he died. . . ."

FOUR A.M.

by MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

IT WAS ON the day the new intern arrived that Anne Elizabeth Ward's problems began, for it was on that day that Anne Elizabeth went on night duty. It seemed unimportant at the time, except that she could never sleep in the daytime, what with the noises in the street, the other nurses moving through the dormitory hall, and the ambulance going out with its siren shrieking.

Also, as her hours were from midnight to eight in the morning, it gave her a good many empty evenings, especially as Miss Winifred Ogden — privately known as Winnie — ran her training school rather like a convent.

But it only seemed unimportant. As a matter of fact, Anne Elizabeth did not care for interns, having divided them between the ones who made passes at her and the others — she had been at this hospital two years — who did not. Nor did she particularly care for duty on the Front, which was where the private patients had their rooms.

Yet it was the new intern, George Swayne, who helped her solve the murder in the house across the street. And it was the restless woman in Room 12 who proved to be mixed up in it. The chief of police, however, gave all the credit to Anne Elizabeth.

"But it was really very simple," she told the chief later. "You see I'd lived in the country every summer for years."

She liked her nursing job in this small town. She especially liked working in the wards — and the wards liked her. Even the women's, which was unusual. She would trot in briskly in the morning and survey the rumpled beds, and the faces all turned to her.

"Well, how's everything? Been good in here last night?"

They would smile at her, these people who came from every walk of life, having only certain things in common: sickness and poverty and dependence on private charity. And she would smile back.

Quite often she was alone, for nurses were scarce. Then the ambulatory cases would try to help her, changing the beds and dumping the piles of linen down the chute, or carrying water and bedpans. But now Winnie had put her on night duty on the Front, and private patients usually slept from midnight to eight A. M. If they did not, they raised a row and got a sleeping pill from their own doctors.

So Anne Elizabeth had two weeks of boredom before she ever even saw George Swayne. She had heard about him, of course — that he was tall and

good-looking. One thing she could not know about, however, was the interview between him and Winnie on the morning after his arrival.

He had breezed into the office to find Miss Ogden sitting in a sort of awful majesty behind her desk.

"Morning, Aunt Winnie," he said, and grinned at her. "Who would have thought years ago, when you saw me in diapers, or without them ——"

"That's enough, George," she said coldly. "In the first place my name is Winifred, not Winnie, and hereafter please remember that I am Miss Ogden to you. Our relationship is a private matter."

"Good heavens, Aunt Winnie!" He gave her a horrified look. "Don't tell me I was not a wanted child. The parents certainly never gave me that impression."

Winnie gave him a long, calculating look. He was exactly what she most dreaded, a good-looking young man who would undoubtedly play hell with her nurses. Not that she put it that way, but at sixty, and after forty years of nursing, she could see trouble when it was six feet tall, had an engaging smile, and wore fresh hospital whites.

"You understand, of course, that the relationship between you and my nurses is purely professional," she said. "I hope you will observe that rule."

He looked surprised. "Mean to say I can't take one out now and then?" he inquired. "No nice dark movies? No walks in the park? I thought all that nonsense went out years ago, along with carbolic sprays in the operating room."

"I was trained in that period," she said stiffly. "It may interest you to know that quite a number of our patients recovered. Also that the nurses managed to survive, without the assistance of the medical staff.

"Another thing," she went on. "This is not a large hospital, but I want no patronizing on that account. And I hope you will attend strictly to your duties here. As you are alone, you will have plenty to do."

He remembered that later, but at the moment he merely saw her looking at the clock on the desk, so he got up. "Thanks for the warnings," he said. "I'll be a good boy. And I guess that's all. Good morning, Miss Ogden."

"Good morning, George."

"*Dr.* Swayne, if you please," he said politely, and went out.

It was still early. He wandered into the empty board room and looked out at Fremont Street, on which the hospital windows opened. It was obviously a slum district, or worse. There was only one exception to the general frowsiness of the row of houses opposite. One of them looked neat and cared for. It had a service alley at the side and, even as he looked, an elderly woman came out with a pail and proceeded to scrub the front steps.

It interested him only mildly, which seemed curious later. . . .

He spent the next two weeks inspecting his modest new terrain and

being a very busy young man. So naturally he never saw Anne Elizabeth and, when he did discover her, neither was at his or her best. He was wearing an old dressing gown over crumpled pajamas, with his bare feet thrust into ancient bedroom slippers. And Anne Elizabeth's bun had slipped, as had her cap, and anyhow she was only a shadow in the dim corridor.

"It's the patient in Room 12, Doctor," Anne Elizabeth said. "She refuses to stay in bed. I'm sorry I had to call you, but I can't do anything with her."

"Refuses to stay in bed? What does she do?"

"Stands by the window, looking out into the street. Not that *that* makes so much difference, but she's so jumpy and queer, I wish you'd take a look at her."

"All right," he said.

The woman in Room 12 was standing by the window in her nightgown. He approached her in his best professional manner. "Just what seems to be the matter?" he said. "Can't you sleep? Or what is it?"

The woman stared at him desperately. She was a handsome creature, in her late thirties, he judged, but she was jerking with nerves.

"I have a right to stand by the window, haven't I?" she demanded. "This stupid nurse acts as if I'm committing a crime."

"The nurse is right," Swayne said. "I'm sure your own doctor wouldn't approve, either." He took her by the arm and turned her away from the window. She allowed herself to be led back to bed, but suddenly, as a truck passed on the street outside, she sat bolt upright.

"What time is it?" she asked unexpectedly. "My clock's stopped."

"Almost four. How long have you been awake?"

She did not answer him. Instead, she clutched the covers convulsively. "Four o'clock!" she said. "My God, I can't just *sit* here and think about ——! I've *got* to get up."

She thrust her legs out of the bed and kicked at Anne Elizabeth when she tried to put them back. "Let me alone," she said violently. "Let me get up. I have to get up, I tell you!"

"What for?" asked Anne Elizabeth.

"That's none of your business," the woman snapped.

"I think I'll have a talk with your doctor," Swayne said. "In the meantime, stay in bed and try to rest, won't you?"

Anne Elizabeth followed him out of the room, and he glanced at her without interest.

"Better get the key out of her closet," he said. "Lock up her clothes before she decides to run out on us altogether. What's the matter with her?"

"I don't know," said Anne Elizabeth. "She's been restless ever since she came in. She's in and out of bed all night. Then she sleeps all morning."

Swayne called the woman's physician after that, but he was not helpful.

"Of course she can't wander about at this hour," he said. "Give her a sedative. There's a standing order for it."

But actually he knew very little about her.

"Doesn't belong in town," he said. "She walked into my office looking like the wrath of God, and said she hadn't slept for weeks. The hotel was full, and she wanted to go to the hospital anyhow. She seemed to know Room 12 was empty, so I sent her in a couple of days ago."

When Anne Elizabeth came back she found Swayne at the window of the convalescent parlor a little beyond her desk, and followed him there.

"She wouldn't take her pill," she said. "She won't stay in bed, either. But I got the key. She can't get her clothes."

He glanced at her. It was still merely a glance. He seemed puzzled. "I wish you'd tell me," he said, "why a woman has to stare out of the window just because it's four o'clock in the morning."

"I wouldn't know. I often feel like that myself."

He eyed her. It was practically the first time he had really seen her. What he saw was a girl who looked exhausted and bored to tears, and who was endeavoring to tidy her cap and the bun of rather nice hair on her neck.

"Don't like night duty, do you?"

"I don't sleep much," she told him. "The street's quiet now, but in the daytime it's dreadful."

"Speaking of the street," he said, "how do you account for that house over there? It doesn't seem to belong."

She joined him at the window. "I know. I often look at it. I'm not supposed to leave the desk, but I slip in here sometimes and look out. It helps me keep awake. And I can see the dawn coming. First, the milkman's horse comes down the street. That's early, of course. About four o'clock, but at least the worst is over."

Dr. Swayne thought rather guiltily of his waiting bed, and impulsively he put a hand on Anne Elizabeth's shoulder. "It sounds like a hell of a job," he said. "Ever think about four A. M.? Cities dead to the world, and life at its lowest? Even the well slow down, and the sick die."

"I know that. I've been here two years."

She left him to glance along the corridor. But Twelve's light was not on, and when she came back he was still at the open window. She stood beside him, breathing in the fresh spring air.

The street was quiet, except for a man staggering into one of the tenements and a milk wagon at the corner. Then, as if he had emerged from nowhere, a figure appeared in the shadows. It kept carefully away from the street light, and to Swayne's surprise it stopped at the house across the street. He could see then that it was a man in a dark suit and evidently wearing rubber-soled shoes, for his movements were quick and silent.

He was no burglar, however, for after glancing about him he took a

key from his pocket and let himself in at the front door.

"Surreptitious, I call it," Swayne said idly.

"Well, he *is* late, at that," Anne Elizabeth observed. "He's usually out only an hour or so."

"What does he do? Walk the dog?"

"There isn't any dog. I suppose he has insomnia. I've seen him several times."

They still stood at the window. Swayne felt an odd reluctance to leave her there. This was no job for a girl, he thought, this night stuff, and for the first time he was aware of his bare ankles and the crumpled legs of his pajamas under the old dressing gown.

"I must look fine," he said, and ran a hand over his heavy hair. "But I hate like the devil to leave you here alone with that woman. I'll look in on her and ——"

He did not have a chance to finish. The silence outside was broken by a sharp explosion, and Swayne, who had been in the Army, knew what it was.

"Gun shot!" he said. "Much of that around here?"

"Now and then," she said. "Someone gets drunk and fires at something or other. It generally doesn't mean anything. But that sounded close."

It had been close. Fremont Street was still empty and quiet, but a moment or so later the door of the house opposite opened, and they saw the figure of a woman emerge. While they watched she stumbled down the steps, only to collapse on the pavement.

Swayne did not hesitate. "Keep an eye on the place," he said. "It looks like trouble. Watch if anyone else comes out." And with that he flung himself out of the parlor and down the long staircase. On a bench in the lower hall Alec, the night porter, was sleeping placidly, but the doctor did not rouse him.

The woman still lay on the pavement. Above her the door stood open, but there was no light in the hall. She had not been shot, however. So far as Dr. Swayne could determine she had merely fainted or perhaps fallen and struck her head. He was puzzled. Nobody had appeared from the house, and the silence seemed almost sinister. As he stooped over her he saw that she was the elderly maid who scrubbed the steps, and that she wore a thin negligee over her nightgown.

He glanced back at the hospital. Anne Elizabeth was still at the window, and he waved a hand at her. Then he picked up the unconscious woman, carried her into the dark hall of the house, and looked around for some place to put her. There was nothing, however, so he laid her gently on the floor.

Except for a thin gleam of light from the end of the hall, the place was completely dark. He felt his way back, aware of a faint sound from there, and found himself in a brightly lighted kitchen, with a plainly dressed, middle-aged woman, who was staring down at something lying on the floor.

What lay there was the body of a man. It did not need the thin stream of blood on the linoleum or the flat

relaxation of the prostrate figure to indicate to Swayne that he was probably dead. He was lying face down, and under one of his hands lay an automatic pistol. Swayne felt the pulseless wrist and stood up. He was almost certain that it was the man who had entered the house not much more than fifteen minutes before.

The woman was still frozen in the same position.

"What happened?" Swayne said.

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes. Who is he?"

She turned a horror-stricken face toward him. "He said his name was Johnson. He had a room here." Then, seeming to regain her composure, she went on. "I don't know anything about him. He'd only been here two weeks or so. How did I know he was going to kill himself?"

Swayne watched her. She was certainly frightened.

"I heard the shot and came down," she explained. "I found him just as he is."

"Are you usually dressed at this hour?"

She looked startled. "My father is sick. I sleep on a sofa in his room."

It looked all right. A plain case of suicide. But one of the axioms of suicide was that people who killed themselves with pistols blew out their brains, and this man had been shot through the heart. Swayne, however, did not mention it.

"There's a woman in the hall," he said. "She fell on the pavement and knocked her head. I put her on the floor. Somebody had better look after her."

"Olga!" she said. "She must have found him first. Her room is on this floor. Is she hurt?"

"No. I'm a doctor from the hospital across the street. I heard the shot and ——"

But she was not listening. She darted out to the hall, leaving him alone with the body, and he made a further examination. There were no powder burns. The bullet had gone through the man's buttoned coat. Swayne looked around the room. The refrigerator door was open, and there was a plate of cheese on the table and a loaf of bread, as though someone had been about to make a sandwich. But there was the gun, lying under his hand, and Swayne eyed it.

It was a queer setup for suicide, he thought, and a queerer one for murder. In any event the police had to be notified, and he went out into the hall again. The light was on now, and Olga was sitting in a chair, with the woman standing beside her.

"Got a telephone?" he inquired. "I'll have to call the police."

He looked at the two women. Olga had not spoken. She still looked dazed. The other woman shook her head. "Not any more," she said. "We used to have a telephone. But not any more."

Swayne ran a hand through his hair. "This dead man," he said. "He just came into the house, didn't he?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Did he go out every night?"

"He slept most of the day. I suppose he went out sometimes. Don't ask me about his habits. I can't tell you anything. I'm going to take Olga to my room."

He watched as she helped Olga up the stairs. Then he went back to the kitchen. The door to the yard was closed, and he opened it and stepped outside. The place was neatly kept, and high fences shut it off from its unwholesome neighbors.

He went back and again stooped over the dead man. This time he noticed something he had not seen before. A half-eaten piece of cheese lay under the table, and he inspected it without touching it. So the suicide had been eating a light meal before departing this life!

He knew that he should call the police, but he was reluctant to leave the house. He felt confident that, if he did, some vital evidence might be tampered with — the refrigerator door closed, the food put away, the cheese on the floor retrieved. He did not fully trust the landlady.

He glanced at the open kitchen door. Suppose the dead man had opened it for air while eating his snack, and someone had been lurking in the service alley beside the house.

He stepped into the yard again, but before he could reach the alley, a man came briskly through it, carrying a wire rack of milk bottles. He stopped abruptly when he saw Swayne. Then he grinned. "Kinda startled me," he said. "Up pretty early, aren't you?"

He stopped to put a couple of bottles on the doorstep. Then he glanced inside and straightened up quickly. "Anything wrong?" he inquired. "Man there sick?"

"Dead," Swayne said laconically. "Maybe suicide. I don't know."

"Gawd!" said the milkman. "Well, they will do it. Anything I can do?"

Swayne hesitated. His odd reluctance to leave the body persisted. In the silence he could hear the slow deliberate steps of a horse outside.

"Well, you might do something," he said. "I'm a doctor from the hospital across the street. If you'd go over there and telephone the police ——"

"Sure will. Or better still, I hear my wagon outside. Old Dobbin knows his route all right. I'm going past the station house when I leave here. I can stop there."

He hurried out, and Swayne heard the horse start off. Alone, he took a package of cigarettes from the pocket of his dressing gown, lighted one, and, sitting down, surveyed the body.

The man was probably in his fifties, his dark hair gray over his ears. From what could be seen of his face he had been good-looking, and certainly the outstretched hands had done no manual labor. The dark suit was good, too. Swayne had a strong desire to go through his pockets, but he repressed it. That would be a police matter. The gun, he thought, was a .38 automatic, but he could see only a part of it.

The police were slow in coming. It had been twenty minutes since the milkman had gone for them, and Dr.

Swayne was reaching a high pitch of indignation when the doorbell finally rang. Even then no uniformed officer met his gaze. Instead, it was Alec from the hospital.

"Sorry, Doctor," he said. "But Miss Ward sent me over. One of her patients has been acting crazy. Ran down the stairs in her nightgown and was almost out of the door when I caught her. Fought like a wildcat."

"When was that?"

"Maybe half an hour ago. I don't know exactly. She's still hysterical, and the nurse thinks you'd better see her."

Swayne was worried. "I can't go immediately," he said. "Tell the nurse to give her a sedative. I have to wait for the police. There's been a shooting here. And listen, Alec. Call the station house and tell them to hurry."

Alec nodded and went back across the street. Swayne saw that there was a light in Room 12, and it worried him. But he was still doggedly determined to stay with the body until the police took over, which they did soon after.

A cruise car drove up, and two men got out. Their deliberation annoyed Swayne as he let them in.

"Took you long enough," he said. They looked at each other.

One said, "I'd put it at three minutes, Jim. How about you?"

"Three minutes!" Swayne said. "I sent a man around there half an hour ago. There's no telephone here that I could use, so when this fellow came in with the milk I got him to go."

"With the milk!" Once more they looked at each other, and Jim spoke. "He didn't make it, chum," he said. "Got conked on the head with one of his own bottles. Dead when we found him."

"Then," Swayne said grimly, "I think you have two murders on your hands. Come back here, and I'll show you one."

But before he led them to the kitchen he glanced up at the hospital. The light in Room 12 was out at last, and he felt relieved.

It was full daylight when he went back to the hospital, but he did not go to his room. He went up to where Anne Elizabeth, looking white and exhausted, sat at her desk going over her charts. "Hear you had some trouble," he said. "Sorry I couldn't help. She quiet now?"

"Yes. She's asleep."

"What got into her? Did she say?"

"Well, she said she'd heard the shot and that she had to leave. I'd locked up her clothes, so she started without them. Of course Win — Miss Ogden heard the noise on the stairs and came out. I guess I'm in trouble, all right."

"You leave Winnie to me," he said firmly. "And for heaven's sake get some sleep today. Look here, you were at the window while I was going down the stairs. Did anyone come out of that house when I went in — out of the house or through the service alley?"

"No one. Nobody at all."

He told her the story then, or as

much as he knew. But she remained positive. No one had left the house when the doctor went in. She had stayed at the window — only now and then glancing out the door to see if any lights were on — until she heard the fuss in the hall below and leaned over the stair rail to see Alec struggling with the woman.

"Looks as though it's an inside job, then," he commented. "But who killed the milkman, and why? Who knew he was getting the police?"

He looked down at her. The bun on her neck was loose again, and she looked as though she didn't care. He reached out and this time put a rather more than brotherly hand on her shoulder. "See here, forget all this, won't you? It's no skin off your nose. And I'll fix Winnie. Don't worry."

He left her there and went along the hall to Room 12. The woman there was asleep, lying sprawled in the coma of drugs and complete exhaustion. He stood for some time looking down at her. Why had she been at the window the night before? What had a shot in the dark meant to her? And why on earth had she tried to escape from the hospital?

For the first time he wondered if she were somehow connected with the house across the street.

He glanced around the room. On the maple bureau lay the silver toilet articles from a fitted traveling bag, and he picked up a brush. He saw that while the chart had given her name as Hamilton, the initials on the brush were E. B. He raised his eyebrows at that. Not smart, he thought. A clever woman would have called herself Brown.

He was still puzzled as he made his way to his room. Around him the hospital was slowly waking. Back along the wards the night nurses were carrying basins for the washing before the early breakfasts, and convalescents were shuffling about to bathrooms.

Across the street two police cars were still parked, and Dr. Swayne was aware that before long he would be wanted by the law. He got a cup of coffee from a diet kitchen, took a bath, shaved, and dressed in fresh whites for the day. While he went through the routine he was mildly envying Anne Elizabeth, who had nothing to do that day but go to bed.

Had he known it, however, Anne Elizabeth was doing nothing of the sort. She was in bed, true enough, but sleep was far from her. She was going over the events of the night, one by one: the shot, the silent house, and then the emergence of the old woman and her collapse.

But there was something nagging in the brain under the nice hair spread out over her pillow. There was something wrong with the picture as she had seen it. Every now and then she thought she had it, but then it faded and there she was, wide awake in her bare little room, with her laundry bag hanging on the closet door, her discarded uniform over a chair, and the daylight noises of the town coming in through the window.

She had finally dozed off when Winnie's assistant barged in and roused her. She was breathless and looked excited. "Awfully sorry, Ward," she said. "You're wanted in the board room. It's the police."

Anne Elizabeth, still half asleep, looked at her dazedly. "Police?"

"That man across the street. They think you may have seen something."

The chief of police was waiting in the board room, the chief and Winnie. The chief looked bluff and fatherly, but Winnie looked most unpleasant.

"My nurses need their sleep," she was saying. "What can Miss Ward have seen? She was supposed to be at her desk."

She gave Anne Elizabeth what can only be called a dirty look, but the chief, who had daughters of his own, saw only a young nurse who looked scared and rather touching.

He told Anne Elizabeth to sit down, and gave her what he hoped was a pleasant smile. "Only want to know what you saw from that parlor window, Miss," he said. "Understand young Swayne asked you to watch. Anybody go in except the man who was killed?"

"No. Nobody went in or came out while I was watching."

"How long did you watch after Swayne went over?"

"I don't really know." She glanced at Winnie, who was obviously fuming. "I was sleepy, and I was standing by the window to get some air when the man went in. The shot came soon after. Only a few minutes."

"The doc was there with you at the window?"

"Yes. I had called him. One of the patients was nervous. And couldn't sleep."

The chief sat back, considering. "Just how long were you there at the window after Swayne left?"

Anne Elizabeth gave a despairing glance at Winnie. "I don't know exactly. Not very long. You see, we had this disturbance with a patient and ——"

"Then you didn't even see the milkman?"

"No. I heard the noise on the stairs and ran out."

He grunted and got up. "Well, thanks, Miss," he said.

He went out, leaving Anne Elizabeth to a Winnie who was divided between fury at George and rage at Anne Elizabeth.

"Never before," she said, "never before has a patient in this hospital been allowed almost to escape. And in a nightgown, at that."

But Anne Elizabeth had recovered some spirit. "I was acting on Dr. Swayne's orders," she said stiffly. "Besides I had locked up her clothes. What more could I do?"

"I shall place the matter before the board," said Winnie majestically. "I cannot have scandal in my training school, and I shall tell them so. In the meantime I am taking you off duty, at least temporarily."

And it was then, for some reason, that Anne Elizabeth knew what was wrong with the picture, knew what

that missing piece of the puzzle was. And the sudden knowledge startled her so that she simply turned her back on an outraged Winnie and walked out of the room.

She found Swayne in the pharmacy, and beckoned to him urgently. He looked pleased as well as relieved when he saw her.

"Thought you were asleep," he said. "I could do with some shut-eye myself. What's up, anyhow?"

"I want you to do something for me," she said. "Can you get out for an hour or so?"

"What for?"

"Well, I think you ought to pay a visit to the morgue," she said.

He was bewildered. "But why?" he demanded. "I saw the fellow myself, and he was dead as a doornail."

She shook her head. "I don't mean that corpse," she said. "I mean the other one — the milkman."

"But why ——" he began.

"Don't ask me now," she begged. "I could be so wrong. I've just got a hunch, that's all. Just say you'll do this for me. Take a look at that milkman. Please!"

She looked so tired and worried that he decided to humor her, being divided between a sudden impulse to kiss her and a strong feeling that she should be put to bed.

"All right," he said, "but I'll make one condition. If you're officially off duty you're going to the movies with me tonight. And to hell with the board and Winnie!"

Anne Elizabeth did not go back to bed after that. She was too excited, and besides it was late. She took a walk instead. The police cars had disappeared from the house across the street, but the usual crowd of women and children and a few men were being kept back by a uniformed officer.

She bought an evening paper on her way home. The headlines, black and sensational, told of a double killing. The story described the discovery of the body of a man shot to death in the kitchen of a house at 2419 Fremont Street. It went on to say that he had given his name to Miss Alice Williamson, who had rented him a room there, as Arthur Johnson. The police discounted the possibility of suicide, although the weapon was found under his hand. The shot had been fired from a distance of several feet, and other evidence pointed to murder. This suspicion was heightened by the brutal killing of an employee of a local milk company who was struck on the head by one of his own bottles while on his way to notify the police. The body was found in an alleyway only a block or so away from the station house.

The Williamson family claimed to know nothing about Johnson save that he was a quiet tenant. Apparently unable to sleep, he had taken an early morning walk. And was shot from the yard through the open kitchen door. The police, who suspected that the name Johnson was an alias, were still investigating.

Anne Elizabeth re-read the article.

Then she folded the newspaper, took a nickel from her purse and went to a corner drugstore and called the chief.

He seemed rather puzzled at first. "Who?" he asked. "Who is this?"

"It's Anne Elizabeth Ward, from the hospital," she said. "I talked to you today. Don't you remember?"

"Oh!" he said, his voice taking on a paternal note. "Sure I do. I don't forget a pretty girl as easy as that. Got another killing up your sleeve?"

But humor did not appeal to her at the moment. "I just thought of something," she said breathlessly. "The patient in Room 12 — she might be able to tell you something."

"Why? What's she got to do with it?"

"I think she was watching him. She used to stand by her window quite a bit at night. We had trouble keeping her in bed."

The chief chuckled. "Quite the little sleuth, aren't you?" he said.

"Well, she tried to get out of the hospital right after the shot was fired."

"The dickens she did!" said the chief, and hung up in a hurry.

Anne Elizabeth was not surprised, when she reached the hospital again, to find him there before her. He had evidently been to Room 12, and now he was in the telephone booth in the lower hall, shouting orders and scowling ferociously.

He was still scowling when he came out. "I want to talk to you," he said slowly. "What's the idea, holding out on me? Do you know who that woman in Room 12 is?"

"Why, yes," said Anne Elizabeth. "Her name is Hamilton and ——"

"Her name is Baird," said the chief bluntly, "and she's the wife of the man who got himself murdered across the street. I just got part of the story out of her."

Anne Elizabeth simply stared.

"The murdered man was Herbert Baird," the chief went on. "Remember him? . . . No, you'd have been on roller skates at that time. Well, Baird was suspected of looting his own bank, ten years ago. He got off, but his cashier, a guy named Richards, took the rap. I remember the case."

He paused and lit a cigarette.

"Month ago, Richards escaped, an embittered and dangerous guy. According to Baird's wife, he'd threatened to kill him, and Baird was scared to death. He left home and holed up across the street. Refused to let his wife stay with him — didn't want her to share the danger. But she knew where he was, and she took a room here so she could keep an eye on him and be near him."

The chief exhaled a lungful of smoke. "Sounds screwy, I know, but that's how dames are. She was half crazy with fear and worry. Had good reason to be, the way things turned out. Well, when she heard the shot, naturally she tried to get to him."

He gave Anne Elizabeth a hard look. "What I can't understand is — how did Richards get away with it? Assuming he tracked Baird to his

hide-out and ambushed him, how did he get away? If he put the gun in Baird's hand, he must have been there, in the kitchen. Dr. Swayne got there in a minute. And you say nobody came out. Where did he go? How did he get out and slug the milkman?"

He crushed out his cigarette angrily. Then, evidently feeling that he'd talked too much, he started to leave, but something in her face made him turn back. "Blast it all," he said, "you've still got something in that little head of yours, haven't you? Let's have it. No more fooling."

"Oh, it wasn't much," she said. "I was just wondering what became of the milkman's horse."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, I suppose. He'd just follow his route as usual, and then go back to his stable. They're creatures of habit, horses."

There was suspicion written all over him, but she refused to say any more.

"I'd like to see Dr. Swayne first," she said. "It's just an idea, anyhow."

The chief let her go reluctantly, and it was an hour later when she was called to Winnie's office. She put on some lipstick and combed her hair, which was her way of preparing for battle. But she looked quiet enough when she went in, although the chief was apoplectically pacing the floor.

"Just what *is* all this?" he bellowed. "Where is Swayne? And why the hell are we waiting for him?"

Fortunately Swayne came in at that moment, and Anne Elizabeth gave him a quick glance. "Was I right?"

"Right as rain," he said, and went over to stand more or less protectively beside her. "Nice piece of work," he said admiringly.

"All right, all right!" said the chief furiously. "When you two get through solving this case you might let me know. I'd be interested."

Anne Elizabeth smiled a little. "It's all a matter of knowing about horses."

"Horses!" shouted the chief. "What the devil have horses got to do with two murders?"

"Well, to begin with, the milk wagon was turned the wrong way," she explained carefully. "When I first saw it — before the shooting — it was just standing at the corner, facing up the street. But always before that it came down. I knew something was wrong with the picture — and that was it."

"And what," said the chief, remembering his blood pressure and controlling himself, "does that mean? Unless you are saying the horse went in and did the shooting."

"Of course not. But after I remembered that the milk wagon was facing the wrong way, I asked Dr. Swayne to go to the morgue."

The chief clutched his forehead. "The morgue?" he roared. "What the devil has the morgue got to do with it? Swayne had already seen the corpse."

"Not this one," she said gently. "I mean the real milkman. Dr. Swayne says the man he saw in the morgue is not the one who offered to go to the

police for him. I guessed the real milkman was not driving the wagon."

The chief took out a large bandana handkerchief and mopped his face with it. "All right," he said. "Go on. Tell me how Richards got into the place and out again. I suppose you know that too!"

She gave him an apologetic look. "Well," she said, "he probably watched so he'd know Mr. Baird's habits — that he took a walk before dawn and got himself something to eat when he came back. But this isn't a good neighborhood. The police keep a pretty careful eye on it. It mightn't be easy to get into that house. But he'd seen the man delivering the milk, and that gave him the idea. Nobody notices a milkman anyhow."

The chief stared at her. "Are you saying he killed a man just to take his place?"

"Maybe he didn't mean to, but a milk bottle's pretty heavy. Anyhow I think he had already knocked the milkman out and taken his place before either Dr. Swayne or I went to the window."

"That's a lot of guessing," said the chief drily.

"I don't think so." She was still gently stubborn. "He didn't go in while we were there, or come out, either. He probably just drove the milk wagon up the street, took the bottles in case he was seen, and went in to wait in the service alley. If anyone saw him it was all right, wasn't it? Only the horse knew it was wrong."

"Blast the horse!" the chief exploded. "Are you telling me that after shooting Baird the man had the nerve to go back there? To talk to Swayne and leave the milk?"

"He never left," Anne Elizabeth said. "Maybe he didn't want to be seen leaving the scene of the crime immediately after the shot was fired. Or maybe he heard Dr. Swayne coming and panicked. Anyway, after planting the gun in Baird's hand in the faint hope of making it look like suicide, he faded back into the alley, figuring he'd make his getaway when the coast was clear."

Swayne stirred. He had been watching Anne Elizabeth with the fascination of a man who hears an extremely personable young woman suddenly sounding off like a detective in a story.

"How do you know all this?" he demanded. "Sounds to me as if you have a criminal mind."

"But it's all so simple," she told him. "When you went out into the yard he *had* to appear. Suppose you'd looked down the alley and seen him? What was he to do?"

"I notice he got away, just the same," Swayne said, almost sulkily.

"Why not? You did that, of course. You sent him on an errand. The horse helped, of course."

The chief groaned. "See here," he protested. "I'm allergic to horses. Any kind of horses. They give me sinus trouble. How in God's name did this one help Richards to get away?"

"Oh, he had a good reason to leave by that time. Dr. Swayne gave it to him. It just happened the horse was

there, at the house. You see, it knew it was headed the wrong way. It thought about it for quite a while. Then it just turned around and came back, and stood in front of the alley, facing in the direction that it ordinarily did." And she added, "I don't suppose he expected it. And I imagine he'd have killed Dr. Swayne if his bluff hadn't worked. But it did work. I was gone from the window by that time, so all he had to do was to get into the wagon and drive away."

The chief drew a long breath. "Sure," he said dourly. "He got away, all right. Maybe he had a car somewhere. But he's got a long start on us. Even if he divided with Baird he's probably got enough money cached away to keep him somewhere for the rest of his life." He got up heavily. "Well, thanks, little lady," he said. "It isn't your fault we've lost him."

Anne Elizabeth got up too. She really looked very nice in her street clothes, and in high heels instead of the flat hospital ones. "I was just wondering," she said. "Did you find the horse and wagon?"

"We did. Is this more about horses? Because outside of a race track I don't care for them."

"Well, it's like this," said Anne Elizabeth. "You see if Richards left the wagon" — she omitted the horse. It seemed to be a fighting word — "if he left the wagon anywhere on its regular route it would eventually end up in the stable. But if it was in a strange part of town it would probably just stay there."

A look of supreme surprise lightened the chief's heavy face. "So that's it!" he said. "Well, that horse didn't go home, my girl. We found him near the railroad station, wagon and all. And that's the first honest-to-God clue we've had as to how Richards left town. If he took a train we've got a much better chance of tracing him."

He glanced at Winnie, stiff and speechless behind her desk, and gave her a beaming smile. "Bright young woman you've got here," he told her. "Any time she wants a job at headquarters I'll take her."

There was a brief silence after the chief had gone.

Swayne had not changed his position, but he smiled at the frozen figure behind the desk. "I understand you've taken Miss Ward off night duty temporarily," he said. "So if it's all right with you, Aunt Winnie, I'm taking her to the movies. A nice dark one."

Miss Winifred Ogden was obviously fighting a battle with herself, or rather a battle between her two selves, the one which remembered George in diapers, and the other, which had been encased in armor for lo, these many years, and regarded babies as creatures who only added diapers to the laundry costs. It was the early one which finally won.

"Very well, George," she said. "Perhaps I have been a trifle too strict. After all, times have changed."

If she winced a trifle when George put an unbrotherly arm around Anne Elizabeth nobody else noticed. Or cared.

THE AFFAIR OF THE TWISTED SCARF

by REX STOUT

MY PROBLEMS hit a new high that day. What I really felt like doing was to go out for a walk, but I wasn't quite desperate enough for that. So I merely beat it down to the office, shutting the door from the hall behind me, and went and sat at my desk with my feet up, leaned back and closed my eyes, and took a couple of deep breaths.

I had made two mistakes. When Bill McNab, garden editor of the *Gazette*, had suggested to Nero Wolfe that the members of the Manhattan Flower Club be invited to drop in some afternoon to look at the orchids, I should have fought it.

And when the date had been set and the invitations sent, and Wolfe had arranged that Fritz and Saul should do the receiving at the front door and I should stay up in the plant-rooms with him and Theodore, mingling with the guests, if I had had an ounce of brains I would have put my foot down. But I hadn't, and as a result I had been up there a good hour and a half, grinning around and acting pleased and happy. . . . "No, sir, that's not a brasso, it's a laelia." . . . "Quite all right, madam — your sleeve happened to hook it. It'll bloom again next year."

It wouldn't have been so bad if there had been something for the eyes. It was understood that the Manhattan Flower Club was choosy about whom it took in, but obviously its standards were totally different from mine. The men were just men; okay as men go. But the women! It was a darned good thing they had picked on flowers to love, because flowers don't have to love back.

There had, in fact, been one — just one. I had got a glimpse of her at the other end of the crowded aisle as I went through the door into the cool-room. From ten paces off she looked absolutely promising, and when I had maneuvered close enough to make her an offer to answer questions if she had any, there was simply no doubt about it — no doubt at all.

The first quick, slanting glance she gave me said plainly that she could tell the difference between a flower and a man, but she just smiled and shook her head, and moved on with her companions, an older female and two males. Later, I had made another try and got another brush-off, and still later, too long later, feeling that the grin might freeze on me for good if I didn't take a recess, I went AWOL by worming my way to the far end of the warm-room and sidling on out.

All the way down the three flights of stairs new guests were coming up, though it was then four o'clock. Nero Wolfe's old brownstone house on West 35th Street had seen no such

throng as that within my memory, which is long and good. One flight down, I stopped off at my bedroom for a pack of cigarettes; and another flight down, I detoured to make sure the door of Wolfe's bedroom was locked.

In the main hall downstairs I halted a moment to watch Fritz Brenner, busy at the door with both departures and arrivals, and to see Saul Panzer emerge from the front room, which was being used as a cloakroom, with someone's hat and topcoat. Then, as aforesaid, I entered the office, shutting the door from the hall behind me, went and sat at my desk with my feet up, leaned back and closed my eyes, and took some deep breaths.

I had been there maybe eight or ten minutes, and was getting relaxed and a little less bitter, when the door opened and she came in. Her companions were not along. By the time she had closed the door and turned to me I had got to my feet, with a friendly leer, and had begun, "I was just sitting here thinking —"

The look on her face stopped me. There was nothing wrong with it basically, but something had got it out of kilter. She headed for me, got halfway, jerked to a stop, sank into one of the yellow chairs, and squeaked, "Could I have a drink?"

"Sure thing," I said. I went to the cupboard and got a hooker of old whiskey. Her hand was shaking as she took the glass, but she didn't spill any, and she got it down in two swallows.

"Did I need that!"

"More?"

She shook her head. Her bright brown eyes were moist, from the whiskey, as she gave me a full, straight look with her head tilted up.

"You're Archie Goodwin," she stated.

I nodded. "And you're the Queen of Egypt?"

"I'm a baboon," she declared. "I don't know how they ever taught me to talk." She looked around for something to put the glass on, and I moved a step and reached for it. "Look at my hand shake," she complained.

She kept her hand out, looking at it, so I took it in mine and gave it some friendly but gentle pressure. "You do seem a little upset," I conceded.

She jerked the hand away. "I want to see Nero Wolfe. I want to see him right away, before I change my mind." She was gazing up at me, with the moist brown eyes. "I'm in a fix now, all right! I've made up my mind. I'm going to get Nero Wolfe to get me out of this somehow."

I told her it couldn't be done until the party was over.

She looked around. "Are people coming in here?"

I told her no.

"May I have another drink, please?"

I told her she should give the first one time to settle, and instead of arguing she arose and helped herself. I sat down and frowned at her. Her line sounded fairly screwy for a member of the Manhattan Flower Club, or even for a daughter of one. She

came back to her chair, sat, and met my eyes. Looking at her straight like that could have been a nice way to pass the time if there had been any chance for a meeting of minds.

"I could tell you," she said.

"Many people have," I said modestly.

"I'm going to."

"Good. Shoot."

"Okay. I'm a crook."

"It doesn't show," I objected. "What do you do — cheat at Canasta?"

"I didn't say I'm a cheat." She cleared her throat for the hoarseness. "I said I'm a crook. Remind me some day to tell you the story of my life — how my husband got killed in the war and I broke through the gate. Don't I sound interesting?"

"You sure do. What's your line — orchid-stealing?"

"No. I wouldn't be small and I wouldn't be dirty — That's what I used to think, but once you start it's not so easy. You meet people and you get involved. Two years ago four of us took over a hundred grand from a certain rich woman with a rich husband. I can tell you about that one, even names, because she couldn't move, anyhow."

I nodded. "Blackmailers' customers seldom can. What —?"

"I'm not a blackmailer!"

"Excuse me. Mr. Wolfe often says I jump to conclusions."

"You did that time." She was still indignant. "A blackmailer's not a crook; he's a snake! Not that it really matters. What's wrong with being a crook is the other crooks — they make it dirty whether you like it or not. It makes a coward of you, too — that's the worst. I had a friend once — as close as a crook ever comes to having a friend — and a man killed her, strangled her. If I had told what I knew about it they could have caught him, but I was afraid to go to the cops, so he's still loose. And she was my friend! That's getting down toward the bottom. Isn't it?"

"Fairly low," I agreed, eying her. "Of course, I don't know you any too well. I don't know how you react to two stiff drinks. Maybe your hobby is stringing private detectives."

She simply ignored it. "I realized long ago," she went on, as if it were a one-way conversation, "that I had made a mistake. About a year ago I decided to break loose. A good way to do it would have been to talk to someone the way I'm talking to you now, but I didn't have sense enough to see that."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"So I kept putting it off. We got a good one in December and I went to Florida for a vacation, but down there I met a man with a lead, and we followed it up here just a week ago. That's what I'm working on now. That's what brought me here today. This man —" She stopped abruptly.

"Well?" I invited her.

She looked dead serious, not more serious, but a different kind. "I'm not putting anything on him," she declared. "I don't owe him anything,

and I don't like him. But this is strictly about me and no one else — only, I had to explain why I'm here. I wish to heaven I'd never come!"

There was no question about that coming from her heart, unless she had done a lot of rehearsing in front of a mirror.

"It got you this talk with me," I reminded her.

She was looking straight through me and beyond. "If only I hadn't come! If only I hadn't seen him!"

She leaned toward me for emphasis. "I'm either too smart or not smart enough; that's my trouble. I should have looked away from him, turned away quick, when I realized I knew who he was, before he turned and saw it in my eyes. But I was so shocked I couldn't help it! I stood there staring at him, thinking I wouldn't have recognized him if he hadn't had a hat on, and then he looked at me and saw what was happening. But it was too late.

"I know how to manage my face with nearly anybody, anywhere, but that was too much for me. It showed so plain that Mrs. Orwin asked me what was the matter with me, and I had to try to pull myself together. Then, seeing Nero Wolfe gave me the idea of telling him; only of course I couldn't right there with the crowd. Then I saw you going out, and as soon as I could break away I came down to find you."

She tried smiling at me, but it didn't work so good. "Now I feel somewhat better," she said hopefully.

I nodded. "That's good whiskey. Is it a secret who you recognized?"

"No. I'm going to tell Nero Wolfe."

"You decided to tell me." I flipped a hand. "Suit yourself. Whoever you tell, what good will that do?"

"Why — then he can't do anything to me."

"Why not?"

"Because he wouldn't dare. Nero Wolfe will tell him that I've told about him, so that if anything happened to me he would know it was him, and he'd know who he is — I mean, Nero Wolfe would know — and so would you."

"We would if we had his name and address." I was studying her. "He must be quite a specimen, to scare you that bad. And speaking of names, what's yours?"

She made a little noise that could have been meant for a laugh. "Do you like Marjorie?"

"Not bad. What are you using now?"

She hesitated, frowning.

"For Pete's sake," I protested, "you're not in a vacuum, and I'm a detective. They took the names down at the door."

"Cynthia Brown," she said.

"That's Mrs. Orwin you came with?"

"Yes."

"She's the current customer? The lead you picked up in Florida?"

"Yes. But that's —" She gestured. "That's finished. I'm through."

"I know. There's just one thing you

haven't told me, though. Who was it you recognized?"

She turned her head for a glance at the door and then turned it still farther to look behind her.

"Can anyone hear us?" she asked.

"Nope. That other door goes to the front room — today, the cloakroom. Anyhow, this room's soundproofed."

She glanced at the hall door again, returned to me, and lowered her voice: "This has to be done the way I say."

"Sure; why not?"

"I wasn't being honest with you."

"I wouldn't expect it from a crook. Start over."

"I mean . . ." She used the teeth on the lip again. "I mean I'm not just scared about myself. I'm scared, all right, but I don't just want Nero Wolfe for what I said. I want him to get him for murder, but he has to keep me out of it. I don't want to have anything to do with any cops — not now I don't, especially. If he won't do it that way — Do you think he will?"

I was feeling a faint tingle at the base of my spine. I only get that on special occasions, but this was unquestionably something special. I gave her a hard look and didn't let the tingle get into my voice: "He might, for you, if you pay him. What kind of evidence have you got? Any?"

"I saw him."

"You mean today?"

"I mean I saw him then." She had her hands clasped tight. "I told you — I had a friend. I stopped in at her apartment that afternoon. I was just leaving — Doris was inside, in the bathroom — and as I got near the entrance door I heard a key turning in the lock, from the outside. I stopped, and the door came open and a man came in. When he saw me he just stood and stared. I had never met Doris's bank account, and I knew she didn't want me to. And since he had a key I supposed of course it was him, making an unexpected call; so I mumbled something about Doris being in the bathroom and went past him, through the door and on out."

She paused. Her clasped hands loosened and then tightened again.

"I'm burning my bridges," she said, "but I can deny all this if I have to. I went and kept a cocktail date, and then phoned Doris's number to ask if our dinner date was still on, considering the visit of the bank account. There was no answer, so I went back to her apartment and rang the bell, and there was no answer to that, either. It was a self-service-elevator place, no doorman or hallman, so there was no one to ask anything.

"Her maid found her body the next morning. The papers said she had been killed the day before. That man killed her. There wasn't a word about him — no one had seen him enter or leave. And I didn't open my mouth! I was a rotten coward!"

"And today, all of a sudden, there he is, looking at orchids?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure he knows you recognized him?"

"Yes. He looked straight at me, and his eyes —"

She was stopped by the house phone buzzing. Stepping to my desk, I picked it up and asked it, "Well?"

Nero Wolfe's voice, peevish, came: "Archie!"

"Yes, sir."

"What the devil are you doing? Come back up here!"

"Pretty soon. I'm talking with a prospective client —"

"This is no time for clients! Come at once!"

The connection went. He had slammed it down. I hung up and went back to the prospective client: "Mr. Wolfe wants me upstairs. Do you want to wait here?"

"Yes."

"If Mrs. Orwin asks about you?"

"I didn't feel well and went home."

"Okay. It shouldn't be long — the invitations said two thirty to five. If you want a drink, help yourself. . . . What name does this murderer use when he goes to look at orchids?"

She looked blank.

I got impatient: "What's his name? This bird you recognized."

"I don't know."

"Describe him."

She thought it over a little, gazing at me, and then shook her head. "Not now. I want to see what Nero Wolfe says first."

She must have seen something in my eyes, or thought she did, for suddenly she came up out of her chair and moved to me and put a hand on my arm. "That's all I mean," she said earnestly. "It's not you — I know you're all right. I might as well tell you — you'd never want any part of me anyhow — this is the first time in years, I don't know how long, that I've talked to a man straight — you know, just human. I —" She stopped for a word, and a little color showed in her cheeks. "I've enjoyed it very much."

"Good. Me, too. Call me Archie. I've got to go, but describe him."

But she hadn't enjoyed it that much. "Not until Nero Wolfe says he'll do it," she said firmly.

I had to leave it at that, knowing as I did that in three more minutes Wolfe might have a fit. Out in the hall I had the notion of passing the word to Saul and Fritz to give departing guests a good look, but rejected it because (a) they weren't there, both of them presumably being busy in the cloakroom, (b) he might have departed already, and (c) I had by no means swallowed a single word of Cynthia's story, let alone the whole works.

Up in the plant-rooms there were plenty left. When I came into Wolfe's range he darted me a glance of cold fury, and I turned on the grin. Anyway, it was a quarter to five, and if they took the hint on the invitation it wouldn't last much longer.

They didn't take the hint on the dot, but it didn't bother me because my mind was occupied. I was now really interested in them — or at least one of them, if he had actually been there and hadn't gone home.

First, there was a chore to get done. I found the three Cynthia had been with, a female and two males.

"Mrs. Orwin?" I asked politely.

She nodded at me and said, "Yes?" Not quite tall enough, but plenty plump enough, with a round, full face and narrow little eyes that might have been better if they had been wide open. She struck me as a lead worth following.

"I'm Archie Goodwin," I said. "I work here."

I would have gone on if I had known how, but I needed a lead myself.

Luckily one of the males horned in. "My sister?" he inquired anxiously.

So it was a brother-and-sister act. As far as looks went he wasn't a bad brother at all. Older than me maybe, but not much. He was tall and straight, with a strong mouth and and jaw and keen gray eyes. "My sister?" he repeated.

"I guess so. You are —?"

"Colonel Brown. Percy Brown."

"Yeah." I switched back to Mrs. Orwin: "Miss Brown asked me to tell you that she went home. I gave her a little drink and it seemed to help, but she decided to leave. She asked me to apologize for her."

"She's perfectly healthy," the colonel asserted. He sounded a little hurt.

"Is she all right?" Mrs. Orwin asked.

"For her," the other male put in, "you should have made it three drinks. Or just hand her the bottle."

His tone was mean and his face was mean, and anyhow that was no way to talk in front of the help in a strange house, meaning me. He was a bit younger than Brown, but he already looked enough like Mrs. Orwin, especially the eyes, to make it more than a guess that they were mother and son.

That point was settled when she commanded him, "Be quiet, Gene!" She turned to the colonel: "Perhaps you should go and see about her?"

He shook his head, with a fond but manly smile at her. "It's not necessary, Mimi. Really."

"She's all right," I assured them, and pushed off, thinking there were a lot of names in this world that could stand a reshuffle. Calling that overweight, narrow-eyed, pearl-and-mink proprietor Mimi was a paradox.

I moved around among the guests, being gracious. Fully aware that I was not equipped with a Geiger counter that would flash a signal if and when I established contact with a strangler, the fact remained that I had been known to have hunches. It would be something for my scrapbook if I picked the killer of Doris Hatten.

Cynthia Brown hadn't given me the Hatten, only the Doris, but with the context that was enough. At the time it had happened, some five months ago, early in October, the papers had given it a big play, of course. She had been strangled with her own scarf, of white silk with the Declaration of Independence printed on it, in her cozy fifth-floor apartment in the West Seventies, and the scarf had been left around her neck, knotted at the back.

The cops had never got within a mile of charging anyone, and Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide had told me that they had never even found out who was paying the rent.

I kept on the go through the plant-rooms, leaving all switches open for a hunch. Some of them were plainly preposterous, but with everyone else I made an opportunity to exchange some words, full face and close up. That took time, and it was no help to my current and chronic campaign for a raise in wages, since it was the women, not the men, that Wolfe wanted off his neck. I stuck at it, anyhow. It was true that if Cynthia was on the level, we would soon have specifications, but I had had that tingle at the bottom of my spine and I was stubborn.

As I say, it took time, and meanwhile five o'clock came and went and the crowd thinned out. Going on five thirty, the remaining groups seemed to get the idea all at once that time was up and made for the entrance to the stairs.

I was in the moderate-room when it happened, and the first thing I knew I was alone there, except for a guy at the north bench studying a row of dowianas. He didn't interest me, as I had already canvassed him and crossed him off as the wrong type for a strangler; but as I glanced his way he suddenly bent forward to pick up a pot with a flowering plant, and as he did so I felt my back stiffening. The stiffening was a reflex, but I knew what had caused it; the way his fingers closed around the pot, especially the thumbs. No matter how careful you are of other people's property, you don't pick up a five-inch pot as if you were going to squeeze the life out of it.

I made my way around to him. When I got there he was holding the pot so that the flowers were only a few inches from his eyes.

"Nice flower," I said brightly.

He nodded.

He leaned to put the pot back, still choking it. I swiveled my head. The only people in sight, beyond the glass partition between us and the cool-room, were Nero Wolfe and a small group of guests, among whom were the Orwin trio and Bill McNab, the garden editor of the *Gazette*. As I turned my head back to my man he straightened up, pivoted on his heel, and marched off without a word.

I followed him out to the landing and down the three flights of stairs. Along the main hall I was courteous enough not to step on his heel, but a lengthened stride would have reached it. The hall was next to empty. A woman, ready for the street in a caracul coat, was standing there, and Saul Panzer was posted near the front door with nothing to do.

I followed my man on into the front room, now the cloakroom, where Fritz Brenner was helping a guest on with his coat. Of course, the racks were practically bare, and with one glance my man saw his property and went to get it. I stepped forward to help, but he ignored me without even

bothering to shake his head. I was beginning to feel hurt.

When he emerged into the hall I was beside him, and as he moved to the front door I spoke: "Excuse me, but we're checking guests out as well as in. Your name, please?"

"Ridiculous," he said curtly, and reached for the knob, pulled the door open, and crossed the sill.

Saul, knowing I must have had a reason for wanting to check him out, was at my elbow, and we stood watching his back as he descended the seven steps of the stoop.

"Tail?" Saul muttered to me.

I shook my head and was parting my lips to mutter something back, when a sound came from behind us that made us both whirl around — a screech from a woman, not loud but full of feeling. As we whirled, Fritz and the guest he had been serving came out of the front room, and all four of us saw the woman in the caracul coat come running out of the office into the hall. She kept coming, gasping something, and the guest, making a noise like an alarmed male, moved to meet her. I moved faster, needing about eight jumps to the office door and two inside. There I stopped.

Of course, I knew the thing on the floor was Cynthia, but only because I had left her in there in those clothes. With the face blue and contorted, the tongue halfway out and the eyes popping, it could have been almost anybody. I knelt down and slipped my hand inside her dress front, kept it there ten seconds, and felt nothing.

Saul's voice came from behind: "I'm here."

I got up and went to the phone on my desk and started dialing, telling Saul, "No one leaves. We'll keep what we've got. Have the door open for Doc Vollmer." After only two whirs the nurse answered and put Vollmer on, and I snapped it at him: "Doc, Archie Goodwin. Come on the run. Strangled woman. . . . Yeah, strangled."

I pushed the phone back, reached for the house phone, and buzzed the plant-rooms, and after a wait had Wolfe's irritated bark in my ear: "Yes?"

"I'm in the office. You'd better come down. That prospective client I mentioned is here on the floor, strangled. I think she's gone, but I've sent for Vollmer."

"Is this flummery?" he roared.

"No, sir. Come down and look at her and then ask me."

The connection went. He had slammed it down. I got a sheet of thin tissue paper from a drawer, tore off a corner, and placed it carefully over Cynthia's mouth and nostrils. In ten seconds it hadn't stirred.

Voices had been sounding from the hall. Now one of them entered the office. Its owner was the guest who had been in the cloakroom with Fritz when the screech came. He was a chunky, broad-shouldered guy with sharp, domineering dark eyes and arms like a gorilla's. His voice was going strong as he started toward me

from the door, but it stopped when he had come far enough to get a good look at the object on the floor.

"Oh, no!" he said huskily.

"Yes, sir," I agreed.

"How did it happen?"

"Don't know."

"Who is it?"

"Don't know."

He made his eyes come away from it and up until they met mine, and I gave him an A for control. It really was a sight.

"The man at the door won't let us leave," he stated.

"No, sir. You can see why."

"I certainly can." His eyes stayed with me, however. "But we know nothing about it. My name is Carlisle, Homer N. Carlisle. I am the executive vice-president of the North American Foods Company. My wife was merely acting under impulse; she wanted to see the office of Nero Wolfe, and she opened the door and entered. She's sorry she did, and so am I. We have an appointment, and there's no reason why we should be detained."

"I'm sorry, too," I told him, "but for one thing if for nothing else, your wife discovered the body. We're stuck worse than you are, with a corpse here in our office. So I guess — Hello, Doc."

Vollmer, entering and nodding at me on the fly, was panting a little as he set his black case on the floor and knelt beside it. His house was down the street and he had had only two hundred yards to trot, but he was taking on weight. As he opened the case and got out the stethoscope, Homer Carlisle stood and watched with his lips pressed tight, and I did likewise until I heard the sound of Wolfe's elevator.

Crossing to the door and into the hall, I surveyed the terrain. Toward the front, Saul and Fritz were calming down the woman in the caracul coat, now Mrs. Carlisle to me. Nero Wolfe and Mrs. Mimi Orwin were emerging from the elevator. Four guests were coming down the stairs: Gene Orwin, Colonel Percy Brown, Bill McNab, and a middle-aged male with a mop of black hair. I stayed by the office door to block the quartet on the stairs.

As Wolfe headed for me, Mrs. Carlisle darted to him and grabbed his arm: "I only wanted to see your office! I want to go! I'm not —"

As she pulled at him and sputtered, I noted a detail: the caracul coat was unfastened, and the ends of a silk scarf, figured and gaily colored, were flying loose. Since at least half of the female guests had sported scarfs, I mention it only to be honest and admit that I had got touchy on that subject.

Wolfe, who had already been too close to too many women that day to suit him, tried to jerk away, but she hung on. She was the big-boned, flat-chested, athletic type, and it could have been quite a tussle, with him weighing twice as much as her and four times as big around, if Saul hadn't rescued him by coming in between and prying her loose. That didn't stop her tongue, but Wolfe

ignored it and came on toward me: "Has Dr. Vollmer come?"

"Yes, sir."

The executive vice-president emerged from the office, talking: "Mr. Wolfe, my name is Homer N. Carlisle and I insist —"

"Shut up," Wolfe growled. On the sill of the door to the office, he faced the audience. "Flower lovers," he said with bitter scorn. "You told me, Mr. McNab, a distinguished group of sincere and devoted gardeners. Pfui! . . . Saul!"

"Yes, sir."

"Put them all in the dining-room and keep them there. Let no one touch anything around this door, especially the knob. . . Archie, come with me."

He wheeled and entered the office. Following, I used my foot to swing the door neatly shut, leaving no crack but not latching it. When I turned, Vollmer was standing, facing Wolfe's scowl.

"Well?" Wolfe demanded.

"Dead," Vollmer told him. "With asphyxiation from strangling."

"How long ago?"

"I don't know, but not more than an hour or two. Two hours at the outside, probably less."

Wolfe looked at the thing on the floor with no change in his scowl, and back at Doc. "Finger marks?"

"No. A constricting band of something with pressure below the hyoid bone. Not a stiff or narrow band; something soft, like a strip of cloth — say, a scarf."

Wolfe switched to me: "You didn't notify the police?"

"No, sir." I glanced at Vollmer and back. "I need a word."

"I suppose so." He spoke to Doc: "If you will leave us for a moment? The front room?"

Vollmer hesitated, uncomfortable. "As a doctor called to a violent death I'd catch the devil. Of course, I could say —"

"Then go to a corner and cover your ears."

He did so. He went to the farthest corner, the angle made by the partition of the bathroom, pressed his palms to his ears, and stood facing us. I addressed Wolfe with a lowered voice:

"I was here and she came in. She was either scared good or putting on a very fine act. Apparently, it wasn't an act, and I now think I should have alerted Saul and Fritz, but it doesn't matter what I now think. Last October a woman named Doris Hatten was killed, strangled, in her apartment. No one got elected. Remember?"

"Yes."

"She said she was a friend of Doris Hatten's and was at her apartment that day, and saw the man that did the strangling, and that he was here this afternoon. She said he was aware that she had recognized him — that's why she was scared — and she wanted to get you to help by telling him that we were wise and he'd better lay off. No wonder I didn't gulp it down. I realize that you dislike complications

and therefore might want me to scratch this out, but at the end she touched a soft spot by saying that she had enjoyed my company, so I prefer to open up to the cops."

"Then do so. Confound it!"

I went to the phone and started dialing WAtkins 9–8241. Doc Vollmer came out of his corner. Wolfe was pathetic. He moved around behind his desk and lowered himself into his own oversized custom-made number; but there smack in front of him was the object on the floor, so after a moment he made a face, got back onto his feet, grunted like an outraged boar, went across to the other side of the room, to the shelves, and inspected the backbones of books.

But even that pitiful diversion got interrupted. As I finished with my phone call and hung up, sudden sounds of commotion came from the hall. Dashing across, getting fingernails on the edge of the door and pulling it open, I saw trouble. A group was gathered in the open doorway of the dining-room, which was across the hall. Saul Panzer went bounding past me toward the front.

At the front door, Col. Percy Brown was stiff-arming Fritz Brenner with one hand and reaching for the doorknob with the other. Fritz, who is chef and housekeeper, is not supposed to double in acrobatics, but he did fine. Dropping to the floor, he grabbed the colonel's ankles and jerked his feet out from under him.

Then I was there, and Saul, with his gun out; and there, with us, was the guest with the mop of black hair.

"You fool," I told the colonel as he sat up. "If you'd got outdoors Saul would have winged you."

"Guilt," said the black-haired guest emphatically. "The compression got unbearable and he exploded. I'm a psychiatrist."

"Good for you." I took his elbow and turned him. "Go back in and watch all of 'em. With that wall mirror you can include yourself."

"This is illegal," stated Colonel Brown, who had scrambled to his feet.

Saul herded them to the rear.

Fritz got hold of my sleeve: "Archie, I've got to ask Mr. Wolfe about dinner."

"Nuts," I said savagely. "By dinner-time this place will be more crowded than it was this afternoon."

"But he has to eat; you know that."

"Nuts," I said. I patted him on the shoulder. "Excuse my manners, Fritz; I'm upset. I've just strangled a young woman."

"Phoocy," he said scornfully.

"I might as well have," I declared.

The doorbell rang. It was the first consignment of cops.

In my opinion, Inspector Cramer made a mistake. It is true that in a room where a murder has occurred the city scientists may shoot the works. And they do. But, except in rare circumstances, the job shouldn't take all week, and in the case of our office a couple of hours should have been ample. In fact, it was. By eight o'clock the scientists were through. But Cramer, like a sap, gave the order to

seal it up until further notice, in Wolfe's hearing. He knew that Wolfe spent at least three hundred evenings a year in there, and that was why he did it.

It was a mistake. If he hadn't made it, Wolfe might have called his attention to a certain fact as soon as Wolfe saw it himself, and Cramer would have been saved a lot of trouble.

The two of them got the fact at the same time, from me. We were in the dining-room — this was shortly after the scientists had got busy in the office, and the guests, under guard, had been shunted to the front room — and I was relating my conversation with Cynthia Brown. Whatever else my years as Wolfe's assistant may have done for me or to me, they have practically turned me into a tape recorder. I gave them the real thing, word for word. When I finished, Cramer had a slew of questions, but Wolfe not a one. Maybe he had already focused on the fact above referred to, but neither Cramer nor I had.

Cramer called a recess on the questions to take steps. He called men in and gave orders. Colonel Brown was to be photographed and fingerprinted, and headquarters records were to be checked for him and Cynthia. The file on the murder of Doris Hatten was to be brought to him at once. The lab reports were to be rushed. Saul Panzer and Fritz Brenner were to be brought in.

They came. Fritz stood like a soldier at attention, grim and grave. Saul, only five feet seven, with the sharpest eyes and one of the biggest noses I have ever seen, in his unpressed brown suit and his necktie crooked — he stood like Saul, not slouching and not stiff. Of course, Cramer knew both of them.

"You and Fritz were in the hall all afternoon?"

Saul nodded. "The hall and the front room, yes."

"Who did you see enter or leave the office?"

"I saw Archie go in about four o'clock — I was just coming out of the front room with someone's hat and coat. I saw Mrs. Carlisle come out just after she screamed. In between those two I saw no one either enter or leave. We were busy most of the time, either in the hall or the front room."

Cramer grunted. "How about you, Fritz?"

"I saw no one." Fritz spoke louder than usual. "I would like to say something."

"Go ahead."

"I think a great deal of all this disturbance is unnecessary. My duties here are of the household and not professional, but I cannot help hearing what reaches my ears. Many times Mr. Wolfe has found the answer to problems that were too much for you. This happened here in his own house, and I think it should be left entirely to him."

I yooped, "Fritz, I didn't know you had it in you!"

Cramer was goggling at him.

"Wolfe told you to say that, huh?"

"Bah." Wolfe was contemptuous. "It can't be helped, Fritz. Have we plenty of ham and sturgeon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Later, probably. For the guests in the front room, but not the police. . . . Are you through with them, Mr. Cramer?"

"No." Cramer went back to Saul: "How'd you check the guests in?"

"I had a list of the members of the Manhattan Flower Club. They had to show their membership cards. I checked on the list those who came. If they brought a wife or husband, or any other guest, I took the names."

"Then you have a record of everybody?"

"Yes."

"About how many names?"

"Two hundred and nineteen."

"This place wouldn't hold that many."

Saul nodded. "They came and went. There wasn't more than a hundred or so at any one time."

"That's a help." Cramer was getting more and more disgusted, and I didn't blame him. "Goodwin says he was there at the door with you when that woman screamed and came running out of the office, but that you hadn't seen her enter the office. Why not?"

"We had our backs turned. We were watching a man who had just left. Archie had asked him for his name and he had said that was ridiculous. If you want it, his name is Malcolm Vedder."

"How do you know?"

"I had checked him in with the rest."

Cramer stared. "Are you telling me that you could fit that many names to that many faces after seeing them once?"

Saul's shoulders went slightly up and down. "There's more to people than faces. I might go wrong on a few, but not many."

Cramer spoke to a dick standing by the door: "You heard that name, Levy — Malcolm Vedder. Tell Stebbins to check it on that list and send a man to bring him in."

Cramer returned to Saul: "Put it this way: Say I sit you here with that list, and a man or woman is brought in —"

"I could tell you positively whether the person had been here or not, especially if he was wearing the same clothes and hadn't been disguised. On fitting him to his name I might go wrong in a few cases, but I doubt it."

"I don't believe you."

"Mr. Wolfe does," Saul said complacently. "Archie does. I have developed my faculties."

"You sure have. All right; that's all for now. Stick around."

Saul and Fritz went. Wolfe, in his own chair at the end of the dining table, where ordinarily, at this hour, he sat for a quite different purpose, heaved a deep sigh and closed his eyes. I, seated beside Cramer at the side of the table which put us facing the door to the hall, was beginning to appreciate the problem we were up against.

"Goodwin's story," Cramer growled. "I mean her story. What do you think?"

Wolfe's eyes came open a little. "What followed seems to support it. I doubt if she would have arranged for that" — he flipped a hand in the direction of the office across the hall — "just to corroborate a tale. I accept it."

"Yeah. I don't need to remind you that I know you well and I know Goodwin well. So I wonder how much chance there is that in a day or so you'll suddenly remember that she had been here before, or one or more of the others had, and you've got a client, and there was something leading up to this."

"Bosh," Wolfe said dryly. "Even if it were like that — and it isn't — you would be wasting time, since you know us."

A dick came to relay a phone call from a deputy commissioner. Another dick came in to say that Homer Carlisle was raising the roof in the front room. Meanwhile, Wolfe sat with his eyes shut, but I got an idea of his state of mind from the fact that intermittently his forefinger was making little circles on the polished top of the table.

Cramer looked at him. "What do you know," he asked abruptly, "about the killing of that Doris Hatten?"

"Newspaper accounts," Wolfe muttered. "And what Mr. Stebbins has told Mr. Goodwin, casually."

"Casual is right." Cramer got out a cigar, conveyed it to his mouth, and sank his teeth in it. He never lit one. "Those houses with self-service elevators are worse than walk-ups for a checking job. No one ever sees anyone coming or going. Even so, the man who paid the rent for that apartment was lucky. He may have been clever and careful, but also he was lucky never to have anybody see him enough to give a description of him."

"Possibly Miss Hatten paid the rent herself."

"Sure," Cramer conceded, "she paid it all right, but where did she get it from? No, it was that kind of a set-up. She had only been living there two months, and when we found out how well the man who paid for it had kept himself covered, we decided that maybe he had installed her there just for that purpose. That was why we gave it all we had. Another reason was that the papers started hinting that we knew who he was and that he was such a big shot we were sitting on the lid."

Cramer shifted his cigar one tooth over to the left. "That kind of thing used to get me sore, but what the heck; for newspapers that's just routine. Big shot or not, he didn't need us to do any covering for him — he did too good a job himself. Now, if we're to take it the way this Cynthia Brown gave it to Goodwin, it was the man who paid the rent. I would hate to tell you what I think of the fact that Goodwin sat there in your office and was told he was right here on these premises, and all he did was —"

"You're irritated," I said charita-

bly. "Not that he *was* on the premises, that he *had* been. Also, I was taking it with salt. Also, she was saving specifications for Mr. Wolfe. Also —"

"Also, I know you. How many of those two hundred and nineteen people were men?"

"I would say a little over half."

"Then how do *you* like it?"

"I hate it."

Wolfe grunted. "Judging from your attitude, Mr. Cramer, something that has occurred to me has not occurred to you."

"Naturally. You're a genius. What is it?"

"Something that Mr. Goodwin told us. I want to consider it a little."

"We could consider it together."

"Later. Those people in the front room are my guests. Can't you dispose of them?"

"One of your guests," Cramer rasped, "was a beaut, all right." He spoke to the dick by the door: "Bring in that woman — what's her name? Carlisle."

Mrs. Homer N. Carlisle came in with all her belongings: her caracul coat, her gaily colored scarf, and her husband. Perhaps I should say that her husband brought her. As soon as he was through the door he strode across to the dining table and delivered a harangue.

At the first opening Cramer, controlling himself, said he was sorry and asked them to sit down.

Mrs. Carlisle did. Mr. Carlisle didn't.

"We're nearly two hours late now," he stated. "I know you have your duty to perform, but citizens have a few rights left, thank God. Our presence here is purely adventitious. I warn you that if my name is published in connection with this miserable affair, I'll make trouble. Why should we be detained? What if we had left five or ten minutes earlier, as others did?"

"That's not quite logical," Cramer objected. "No matter when you left, it would have been the same if your wife had acted the same. She discovered the body."

"By accident!"

"May I say something, Homer?" the wife put in.

"It depends on what you say."

"Oh," Cramer said significantly.

"What do you mean, oh?" Carlisle demanded.

"I mean that I sent for your wife, not you, but you came with her, and that tells me why. You wanted to see to it that she wasn't indiscreet."

"What's she got to be indiscreet about?"

"I don't know. Apparently you do. If she hasn't, why don't you sit down and relax?"

"I would, sir," Wolfe advised him. "You came in here angry, and you blundered. An angry man is a jackass."

It was a struggle for the executive vice-president, but he made it.

Cramer went to the wife: "You wanted to say something, Mrs. Carlisle?"

"Only that I'm sorry." Her bony

hands, the fingers twined, were on the table before her. "For the trouble I've caused."

"I wouldn't say you caused it exactly — except for yourself and your husband." Cramer was mild. "The woman was dead, whether you went in there or not. But if only as a matter of form, it was essential for me to see you, since you discovered the body. That's all there is to it as far as I know."

"How could there be anything else?" Carlisle blurted.

Cramer ignored him. "Goodwin, here, saw you standing in the hall not more than two minutes, probably less, prior to the moment you screamed and ran out of the office. How long had you then been downstairs?"

"We had just come down. I was waiting for my husband to get his things."

"Had you been downstairs before that?"

"No — only when we came in."

"What time did you arrive?"

"A little after three, I think."

"Were you and your husband together all the time? Continuously?"

"Of course. Well — you know how it is . . . He would want to look longer at something, and I would —"

"Certainly we were," Carlisle said irritably. "You can see why I made that remark about it depending on what she said. She has a habit of being vague."

"I'm not actually vague," she protested. "It's just that everything is relative. Who would have thought my wish to see Nero Wolfe's office would link me with a crime?"

Carlisle exploded. "Hear that? *Link!*"

"Why did you want to see Wolfe's office?" Cramer inquired.

"Why, to see the globe."

I gawked at her. I had supposed that naturally she would say it was curiosity about the office of a great and famous detective. Apparently, Cramer reacted the same as me.

"The globe?" he demanded.

"Yes, I had read about it, and I wanted to see how it looked. I thought a globe that size, three feet in diameter, would be fantastic in an ordinary room — Oh!"

"Oh, what?"

"I didn't see it!"

Cramer nodded. "You saw something else, instead. By the way, I forgot to ask — Did you know her?"

"You mean — her?"

"We had never known her or seen her or heard of her," the husband declared.

"Had you, Mrs. Carlisle?"

"No."

"Of course. She wasn't a member of this flower club. Are you a member?"

"My husband is."

"We both are," Carlisle stated. "Vague again. It's a joint membership. Isn't this about enough?"

"Plenty," Cramer conceded. "Thank you, both of you. We won't bother you again unless we have to. . . . Levy, pass them out."

When the door had closed behind

them Cramer glared at me and then at Wolfe. "This is sure a sweet one," he said grimly. "Say it's within the range of possibility that Carlisle is it, and the way it stands right now, why not? So we look into him. We check back on him for six months, and try doing it without getting roars out of him — a man like that, in his position. However, it can be done — by three or four men in two or three weeks. Multiply that by what? How many men were here?"

"Around a hundred and twenty," I told him. "But you'll find that at least half of them are disqualified one way or another. As I told you, I took a survey. Say sixty."

"All right, multiply it by sixty. Do you care for it?"

"No," I said.

"Neither do I." Cramer took the cigar from his mouth. "Of course," he said sarcastically, "when she sat in there telling you about him the situation was different. You wanted her to enjoy being with you. You couldn't reach for the phone and tell us you had a self-confessed crook who could put a quick finger on a murderer and let us come and take over. No! You had to save it for a fee for Wolfe!"

"Don't be vulgar," I said severely.

"You had to go upstairs and make a survey! You had to — Well?"

Lieutenant Rowcliff had opened the door and entered. There were some city employees I liked, some I admired, some I had no feeling about, some I could have done without easy — and one whose ears I was going to twist some day. That was Rowcliff. He was tall, strong, handsome, and a pain in the neck.

"We're all through in there, sir," he said importantly. "We've covered everything. Nothing is being taken away, and it is all in order. We were especially careful with the contents of the drawers of Wolfe's desk, and also we —"

"My desk!" Wolfe roared.

"Yes, your desk," Rowcliff said precisely, smirking.

The blood was rushing into Wolfe's face.

"She was killed there," Cramer said gruffly. "Did you get anything at all?"

"I don't think so," Rowcliff admitted. "Of course, the prints have to be sorted, and there'll be lab reports. How do we leave it?"

"Seal it up and we'll see tomorrow. You stay here and keep a photographer. The others can go. Tell Stebbins to send that woman in — Mrs. Irwin."

"Orwin, sir."

"Wait a minute," I objected. "Seal what up? The office?"

"Certainly," Rowcliff sneered.

I said firmly, to Cramer, not to him, "You don't mean it. We work there. We live there. All our stuff is there."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Cramer told Rowcliff, and he wheeled and went.

I was full of both feelings and words, but I knew they had to be held in. This was far and away the worst

Cramer had ever pulled. It was up to Wolfe. I looked at him. He was white with fury, and his mouth was pressed to so tight a line that there were no lips.

"It's routine," Cramer said aggressively.

Wolfe said icily, "That's a lie. It is not routine."

"It's *my* routine — in a case like this. Your office is not just an office. It's the place where more fancy tricks have been played than any other spot in New York. When a woman is murdered there, soon after a talk with Goodwin, for which we have no word but his — I say sealing it is routine."

Wolfe's head came forward an inch, his chin out. "No, Mr. Cramer. I'll tell you what it is. It is the malefic spite of a sullen little soul and a crabbed and envious mind. It is the childish rancor of a primacy too often challenged and offended. It is the feeble wiggle —"

The door came open to let Mrs. Orwin in.

With Mrs. Carlisle, the husband had come along. With Mrs. Orwin, it was the son. His expression and manner were so different I would hardly have known him. Upstairs his tone had been mean and his face had been mean. Now his narrow little eyes were working overtime to look frank and cordial.

He leaned across the table at Cramer, extending a hand: "Inspector Cramer? I've been hearing about you for years! I'm Eugene Orwin." He glanced to his right. "I've already had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Wolfe and Mr. Goodwin — earlier today, before this terrible thing happened. It *is* terrible."

"Yes," Cramer agreed. "Sit down."

"I will in a moment. I do better with words standing up. I would like to make a statement on behalf of my mother and myself, and I hope you'll permit it. I'm a member of the bar. My mother is not feeling well. At the request of your men she went in with me to identify the body of Miss Brown, and it was a bad shock, and we've been detained now more than two hours."

His mother's appearance corroborated him. Sitting with her head propped on a hand and her eyes closed, obviously she didn't care as much about the impression they made on the inspector as her son did.

"A statement would be welcome," Cramer told him, "if it's relevant."

"I thought so," Gene said approvingly. "So many people have an entirely wrong idea of police methods! Of course, you know that Miss Brown came here today as my mother's guest, and therefore it might be supposed that my mother knows her. But actually she doesn't."

"Go ahead."

Gene glanced at the shorthand dick. "If it's taken down I would like to go over it when convenient."

"You may."

"Then here are the facts: In January my mother was in Florida. You meet all kinds in Florida. My mother met a man who called himself Colonel

Percy Brown — a British colonel in the reserve, he said. Later on, he introduced his sister Cynthia to her. My mother saw a great deal of them. My father is dead, and the estate, a rather large one, is in her control. She lent Brown some money, not much — that was just an opener."

Mrs. Orwin's head jerked up. "It was only five thousand dollars and I didn't promise him anything," she said wearily.

"All right, Mother." Gene patted her shoulder. "A week ago she returned to New York and they came along. The first time I met them I thought they were impostors. They weren't very free with family details, but from them and Mother, chiefly Mother, I got enough to inquire about, and sent a cable to London. I got a reply Saturday and another one this morning, and there was more than enough to confirm my suspicion, but not nearly enough to put it up to my mother. When she likes people she can be very stubborn about them.

"I was thinking it over, what step to take next. Meanwhile, I thought it best not to let them be alone with her if I could help it. That's why I came here with them today — my mother is a member of that flower club — I'm no gardener myself —"

He turned a palm up. "That's what brought me here. My mother came to see the orchids, and she invited Brown and his sister to come, simply because she is goodhearted. But actually she knows nothing about them."

He put his hands on the table and leaned on them, forward at Cramer. "I'm going to be quite frank, Inspector. Under the circumstances, I can't see that it would serve any useful purpose to let it be published that that woman came here with my mother. I want to make it perfectly clear that we have no desire to evade our responsibility as citizens. But how would it help to get my mother's name in the headlines?"

"Names in headlines aren't what I'm after," Cramer told him, "but I don't run the newspapers. If they've already got it I can't stop them. I'd like to say I appreciate your frankness. So you only met Miss Brown a week ago?"

Cramer had plenty of questions for both mother and son. It was in the middle of them that Wolfe passed me a slip of paper on which he had scribbled:

"Tell Fritz to bring sandwiches and coffee for you and me. Also for those left in the front room. No one else. Of course, Saul and Theodore."

I left the room, found Fritz in the kitchen, delivered the message, and returned.

Gene stayed cooperative to the end, and Mrs. Orwin tried, though it was an effort. They said they had been together all the time, which I happened to know wasn't so, having seen them separated at least twice during the afternoon, and Cramer did too, since I had told him.

They said a lot of other things, among them that they hadn't left the plant-rooms between their arrival

and their departure with Wolfe; that they had stayed until most of the others were gone because Mrs. Orwin wanted to persuade Wolfe to sell her some plants; that Colonel Brown had wandered off by himself once or twice; that they had been only mildly concerned about Cynthia's absence, because of assurances from Colonel Brown and me; and so on.

Before they left, Gene made another try for a commitment to keep his mother's name out of it, and Cramer promised to do his best.

Fritz had brought trays for Wolfe and me, and we were making headway with them. In the silence that followed the departure of the Orwins, Wolfe could plainly be heard chewing a mouthful of mixed salad.

Cramer sat frowning at us. He turned his head: "Levy! Get that Colonel Brown in."

"Yes, sir. That man you wanted — Vedder — he's here."

"Then I'll take him first."

Up in the plant-rooms Malcolm Vedder had caught my eye by the way he picked up a flowerpot and held it. As he took a chair across the dining table from Cramer and me, I still thought he was worth another good look, but after his answer to Cramer's third question I relaxed and concentrated on my sandwiches. He was an actor and had had parts in three Broadway plays. Of course, that explained it. No actor would pick up a flowerpot just normally, like you or me. He would have to dramatize it some way, and Vedder had happened to choose a way that looked to me like fingers closing around a throat.

Now he was dramatizing this by being wrought-up and indignant.

"Typical!" he told Cramer, his eyes flashing and his voice throaty with feeling. "Typical of police clumsiness! Pulling *me* into this!"

"Yeah," Cramer said sympathetically. "It'll be tough for an actor, having your picture in the paper. You a member of this flower club?"

No, Vedder said, he wasn't. He had come with a friend, a Mrs. Beauchamp, and when she had left to keep an appointment he had remained to look at more orchids. They had arrived about three-thirty, and he had remained in the plant-rooms continuously until leaving.

Cramer went through all the regulation questions, and got all the expected negatives, until he suddenly asked, "Did you know Doris Hatten?"

Vedder frowned. "Who?"

"Doris Hatten. She was also —"

"Ah!" Vedder cried. "She was also strangled! I remember!"

"Right."

Vedder made fists of his hands, rested them on the table, and leaned forward. "You know," he said tensely, "that's the worst of all, strangling — especially a woman."

"Did you know Doris Hatten?"

"Othello," Vedder said in a deep, resonant tone. His eyes lifted to Cramer and his voice lifted, too: "No, I didn't know her; I only read about

her." He shuddered all over, and then, abruptly, he was out of his chair and on his feet. "I only came here to look at orchids!"

He ran his fingers through his hair, turned, and made for the door.

Levy looked at Cramer with his brows raised, and Cramer shook his head.

The next one in was Bill McNab, garden editor of the *Gazette*.

"I can't tell you how much I regret this, Mr. Wolfe," he said miserably.

"Don't try," Wolfe growled.

"What a terrible thing! I wouldn't have dreamed such a thing could happen — the Manhattan Flower Club! Of course, she wasn't a member, but that only makes it worse, in a way." McNab turned to Cramer: "I'm responsible for this."

"You are?"

"Yes. It was my idea. I persuaded Mr. Wolfe to arrange it. He let me word the invitations. And I was congratulating myself on the great success! Then this! What can I do?"

"Sit down a minute," Cramer invited him.

McNab varied the monotony on one detail, at least. He admitted that he had left the plant-rooms three times during the afternoon, once to accompany a departing guest down to the ground floor, and twice to go down alone to check on who had come and who hadn't. Aside from that, he was more of the same. By now it was beginning to seem not only futile, but silly to spend time on seven or eight of them merely because they happened to be the last to go and so were at hand. Also, it was something new to me from a technical standpoint. I had never seen one stack up like that.

Any precinct dick knows that every question you ask of everybody is aimed at one of the three targets: motive, means, and opportunity. In this case there were no questions to ask, because those were already answered. Motive: the guy had followed her downstairs, knowing she had recognized him, had seen her enter Wolfe's office and thought she was doing exactly what she was doing, getting set to tell Wolfe, and had decided to prevent that the quickest and best way he knew. Means: any piece of cloth, even his handkerchief, would do. Opportunity: he was there — all of them on Saul's list were.

So, if you wanted to learn who strangled Cynthia Brown, first you had to find out who had strangled Doris Hatten.

As soon as Bill McNab had been sent on his way, Col. Percy Brown was brought in. Brown was not exactly at ease, but he had himself well in hand. You would never have picked him for a con man, and neither would I. His mouth and jaw were strong and attractive, and as he sat down he leveled his keen gray eyes at Cramer and kept them there. He wasn't interested in Wolfe or me. He said his name was Colonel Percy Brown, and Cramer asked him which army he was a colonel in.

"I think," Brown said in a cool,

even tone, "it will save time if I state my position: I will answer fully and freely all questions that relate to what I saw, heard, or did since I arrived here this afternoon. Answers to any other questions will have to wait until I consult my attorney."

Cramer nodded. "I expected that. The trouble is I'm pretty sure I don't give a hoot what you saw or heard this afternoon. We'll come back to that. I want to put something up to you. As you see, I'm not even wanting to know why you tried to break away before we got here."

"I merely wanted to phone —"

"Forget it. On information received, I think it's like this: The woman who called herself Cynthia Brown, murdered here today, was not your sister. You met her in Florida six or eight weeks ago. She went in with you on an operation of which Mrs. Orwin was the subject, and you introduced her to Mrs. Orwin as your sister. You two came to New York with Mrs. Orwin a week ago, with the operation well under way. As far as I'm concerned, that is only background. Otherwise, I'm not interested in it. My work is homicide.

"For me," Cramer went on, "the point is that for quite a period you have been closely connected with this Miss Brown, associating with her in a confidential operation. You must have had many intimate conversations with her. You were having her with you as your sister, and she wasn't, and she's been murdered. We could give you a merry time on that score alone.

"But I wanted to give you a chance first," Cramer continued. "For two months you've been on intimate terms with Cynthia Brown. She certainly must have mentioned that a friend of hers named Doris Hatten was murdered — strangled last October. Cynthia Brown had information about the murderer which she kept to herself. If she had come out with it she'd be alive now. She must have told you all about it. Now you can tell me. If you do, we can nail him for what he did here today, and it might even make things a little smoother for you. Well?"

Brown had pursed his lips. They straightened out again, and his hand came up for a finger to scratch his cheek.

"I'm sorry I can't help."

"Do you expect me to believe that during all those weeks she never mentioned the murder of her friend Doris Hatten?"

"I'm sorry I can't help." Brown's tone was firm and final.

Cramer said, "Okay. We'll move on to this afternoon. Do you remember a moment when something about Cynthia Brown's appearance — some movement she made or the expression on her face — caused Mrs. Orwin to ask her what was the matter with her?"

A crease was showing on Brown's forehead. "I'm sorry. I don't believe I do," he stated.

"I'm asking you to try. Try hard."

Silence. Brown pursed his lips and the crease in his forehead deepened.

Finally he said, "I may not have been right there at the moment. In those aisles — in a crowd like that — we weren't rubbing elbows continuously."

"You do remember when she excused herself because she wasn't feeling well?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, this moment I'm asking about came shortly before that. She exchanged looks with some man nearby, and it was her reaction to that that made Mrs. Orwin ask her what was the matter. What I'm interested in is that exchange of looks."

"I didn't see it."

Cramer banged his fist on the table so hard the trays danced. "Levy! Take him out and tell Stebbins to send him down and lock him up. Material witness. Put more men on him — he's got a record somewhere. Find it!"

As the door closed behind them, Cramer turned and said, "Gather up, Murphy. We're leaving."

Levy came back in and Cramer addressed him: "We're leaving. Tell Stebbins one man out front will be enough — No, I'll tell him —"

"There's one more, sir. His name is Nicholson Morley. He's a psychiatrist."

"Let him go. This is getting to be a joke."

Cramer looked at Wolfe. Wolfe looked back at him.

"A while ago," Cramer rasped, "you said something had occurred to you."

"Did I?" Wolfe inquired coldly.

Their eyes went on clashing until Cramer broke the connection by turning to go. I restrained an impulse to knock their heads together. They were both being childish. If Wolfe really had something, anything at all, he knew Cramer would gladly trade the seals on the office doors for it, sight unseen. And Cramer knew he could make the deal himself with nothing to lose. But they were both too sore and stubborn to show any horse sense.

Cramer had circled the end of the table on his way out when Levy reentered to report: "That man Morley insists on seeing you. He says it's vital."

Cramer halted, glowering. "What is he, a screwball?"

"I don't know, sir. He may be."

"Oh, bring him in."

This was my first really good look at the middle-aged male with the mop of black hair. His quick-darting eyes were fully as black as his hair.

Cramer nodded impatiently. "You have something to say, Dr. Morley?"

"I have. Something vital."

"Let's hear it."

Morley got better settled in his chair. "First, I assume that no arrest has been made. Is that correct?"

"Yes — if you mean an arrest with a charge of murder."

"Have you a definite object of suspicion, with or without evidence in support?"

"If you mean am I ready to name the murderer, no. Are you?"

"I think I may be."

Cramer's chin went up. "Well? I'm in charge here."

Dr. Morley smiled. "Not quite so fast. The suggestion I have to offer is sound only with certain assumptions." He placed the tip of his right forefinger on the tip of his left little finger. "One: that you have no idea who committed this murder, and apparently you haven't." He moved over a finger. "Two: that this was not a commonplace crime with a commonplace discoverable motive." To the middle finger. "Three: that nothing is known to discredit the hypothesis that this girl was strangled by the man who strangled Doris Hatten . . . May I make those assumptions?"

"You can try. Why do you want to?"

Morley shook his head. "Not that I want to. That if I am permitted to, I have a suggestion. I wish to make it clear that I have great respect for the competence of the police, within proper limits. If the man who murdered Doris Hatten had been vulnerable to police techniques and resources, he would almost certainly have been caught. But he wasn't. You failed. Why?

"Because he was out of bounds for you. Because your exploration of motive is restricted by your preconceptions." Morley's black eyes gleamed. "You're a layman, so I won't use technical terms. The most powerful motives on earth are motives of the personality, which cannot be exposed by any purely objective investigation. If the personality is twisted, distorted, as it is with a psychotic, then the motives are twisted, too. As a psychiatrist I was deeply interested in the published reports of the murder of Doris Hatten — especially the detail that she was strangled with her own scarf. When your efforts to find the culprit ended in complete failure, I would have been glad to come forward with a suggestion, but I was as helpless as you."

"Get down to it," Cramer muttered.

"Yes." Morley put his elbows on the table and paired all his fingertips. "Now, today. On the basis of the assumptions I began with, it is a tenable theory, worthy to be tested, that this was the same man. If so, it is no longer a question of finding him among thousands or millions; it's a mere hundred or so, and I am willing to contribute my services." The black eyes flashed. "I admit that for a psychiatrist this is a rare opportunity. Nothing could be more dramatic than a psychosis exploding into murder. All you have to do is to have them brought to my office, one at a time —"

"Wait a minute," Cramer put in. "Are you suggesting that we deliver everyone that was here today to your office for you to work on?"

"No, not everyone, only the men. When I have finished I may have nothing that can be used as evidence, but there's an excellent chance that I can tell you who the strangler is —"

"Excuse me," Cramer said. He was on his feet. "Sorry to cut you off, Doc-

tor, but I must get downtown." He was on his way. "I'm afraid your suggestion wouldn't work — I'll let you know —"

He went, and Levy and Murphy with him.

Dr. Morley pivoted his head to watch them go, kept it that way a moment, and then he arose and walked out without a word.

"Twenty minutes to ten," I announced.

Wolfe muttered, "Go look at the office door."

"I just did, as I let Morley out. It's sealed. Malefic spite. But this isn't a bad room to sit in," I said brightly.

"Pfui! I want to ask you something."

"Shoot."

"I want your opinion of this. Assume that we accept without reservation the story Miss Brown told you. Assume also that the man she had recognized, knowing she had recognized him, followed her downstairs and saw her enter the office; that he surmised she intended to consult me; that he postponed joining her in the office, either because he knew you were in there with her or for some other reason; that he saw you come out and go upstairs; that he took an opportunity to enter the office unobserved, got her off guard, killed her, got out unobserved, and returned upstairs."

"I'll take it that way."

"Very well. Then we have significant indications of his character. Consider it. He has killed her and is back upstairs, knowing that she was in the office talking with you for some time. He would like to know what she said to you. Specifically, he would like to know whether she told you about him, and, if so, how much. Had she or had she not named or described him in his current guise? With that question unanswered, would a man of his character, as indicated, *leave the house?* Or would he prefer the challenge and risk of remaining until the body had been discovered, to see what you would do? And I, too, of course, after you had talked with me, and the police?"

"Yeah." I chewed my lip. There was a long silence. "So that's how your mind's working. I could offer a guess."

"I prefer a calculation to a guess. For that, a basis is needed, and we have it. We know the situation as we have assumed it, and we know something of his character."

"Okay," I conceded, "a calculation. The answer I get, he would stick around until the body was found, and if he did, then he is one of the bunch Cramer has been talking with. So that's what occurred to you, huh?"

"No. By no means. That's a different matter. This is merely a tentative calculation for a starting point. If it is sound, I *know* who the murderer is."

I gave him a look. Sometimes I can tell how much he is putting on and sometimes I can't tell. I decided to buy it.

"That's interesting," I said admiringly. "If you want me to get him

on the phone I'll have to use the one in the kitchen."

"I want to test the calculation."

"So do I."

"But there's a difficulty. The test I have in mind, the only one I can contrive to my satisfaction — only you can make it. And in doing so you would have to expose yourself to great personal risk."

"For Pete's sake!" I gawked at him. "This is a brand-new one. The errands you've sent me on! Since when have you flinched or faltered in the face of danger to me?"

"This danger is extreme."

"Let's hear the test."

"Very well." He turned a hand over. "Is that old typewriter of yours in working order?"

"Fair."

"Bring it down here, and some sheets of blank paper — any kind. I'll need a blank envelope."

"I have some."

"Bring one. Also the telephone book, Manhattan, from my room."

When I returned to the dining-room and was placing the typewriter in position on the table, Wolfe spoke: "No, bring it here. I'll use it myself."

I lifted my brows at him. "A page will take you an hour."

"It won't be a page. Put a sheet of paper in it."

I did so, got the paper squared, lifted the machine, and put it in front of him. He sat and frowned at it for a long minute, and then started pecking. I turned my back on him to make it easier to withhold remarks about his two-finger technique, and passed the time by trying to figure his rate. All at once he pulled the paper out.

"I think that will do," he said.

I took it and read what he had typed:

"She told me enough this afternoon so that I know who to send this to, and more. I have kept it to myself because I haven't decided what is the right thing to do. I would like to have a talk with you first, and if you will phone me tomorrow, Tuesday, between nine o'clock and noon, we can make an appointment; please don't put it off or I will have to decide myself."

I read it over three times. I looked at Wolfe. He had put an envelope in the typewriter and was consulting the phone book. He began pecking, addressing the envelope. I waited until he had finished and rolled the envelope out.

"Just like this?" I asked. "No name or initials signed?"

"No."

"I admit it's nifty," I admitted. "We could forget the calculation and send this to every guy on that list and wait to see who phoned."

"I prefer to send it only to one person — the one indicated by your report of that conversation. That will test the calculation."

"And save postage." I glanced at the paper. "The extreme danger, I suppose, is that I'll get strangled."

"I don't want to minimize the risk of this, Archie."

"Neither do I. I'll have to borrow a

gun from Saul — ours are in the office. . . . May I have that envelope? I'll have to go to Times Square to mail it."

"Yes. Before you do so, copy that note. Keep Saul here in the morning. If and when the phone call comes you will have to use your wits to arrange the appointment advantageously."

"Right. The envelope, please."

He handed it to me.

That Tuesday morning I was kept busy from eight o'clock on by the phone and the doorbell. After nine, Saul was there to help, but not with the phone, because the orders were that I was to answer all calls. They were mostly from newspapers, but there were a couple from Homicide and a few scattered ones. I took them on the extension in the kitchen.

Every time I lifted the thing and told the transmitter, "Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking," my pulse went up a notch, and then had to level off again. I had one argument, with a bozo in the District Attorney's office who had the strange idea that he could order me to report for an interview at eleven thirty sharp, which ended by my agreeing to call later to fix an hour.

A little before eleven I was in the kitchen with Saul, who, at Wolfe's direction, had been briefed to date, when the phone rang.

"Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"Mr. Goodwin?"

"Right."

"You sent me a note."

My hand wanted to grip the phone the way Vedder had gripped the flower-pot, but I wouldn't let it.

"Did I? What about?"

"You suggested that we make an appointment. Are you in a position to discuss it?"

"Sure. I'm alone and no extensions are on. But I don't recognize your voice. Who is this?"

"I have two voices. This is the other one. Have you made a decision yet?"

"No. I was waiting to hear from you."

"That's wise, I think. I'm willing to discuss the matter. Are you free this evening?"

"I can wiggle free."

"With a car to drive?"

"Yeah, I have a car."

"Drive to a lunchroom at the north-east corner of Fifty-first Street and Eleventh Avenue. Get there at eight o'clock. Park your car on Fifty-first Street, but not at the corner. You will be alone, of course. Go in the lunchroom and order something to eat. I won't be there, but you will get a message. You'll be there at eight?"

"Yes. I still don't recognize your voice. I don't think you're the person I sent the note to."

"I am. It's good, isn't it?"

The connection went. I hung up, told Fritz he could answer calls now, and hotfooted it to the stairs and up three flights.

Wolfe was in the cool-room. When I told him about the call he merely nodded.

"That call," he said, "validates our assumptions and verifies our calculation, but that's all. Has anyone come to take those seals off?"

I told him no. "I asked Stebbins about it and he said he'd ask Cramer."

"Don't ask again," he snapped. "We'll go down to my room."

If the strangler had been in Wolfe's house the rest of that day he would have felt honored — or anyway he should. Even during Wolfe's afternoon hours in the plant-rooms, from four to six, his mind was on my appointment, as was proved by the crop of new slants and ideas that poured out of him when he came down to the kitchen. Except for a trip to Leonard Street to answer an hour's worth of questions by an assistant district attorney, my day was devoted to it, too. My most useful errand — though at the time it struck me as a waste of time and money — was one made to Doc Vollmer for a prescription and then to a drugstore, under instructions from Wolfe.

When I got back from the D.A.'s office Saul and I got in the sedan and went for a reconnaissance. We didn't stop at 51st Street and 11th Avenue but drove past it four times. The main idea was to find a place for Saul. He and Wolfe both insisted that he had to be there with eyes and ears open.

We finally settled for a filling station across the street from the lunchroom. Saul was to have a taxi drive in there at eight o'clock, and stay in the passenger's seat while the driver tried to get his carburetor adjusted. There were so many contingencies to be agreed on that if it had been anyone but Saul I wouldn't have expected him to remember more than half. For instance, in case I left the lunchroom and got in my car and drove off, Saul was not to follow unless I cranked my window down.

Trying to provide for contingencies was okay, in a way, but actually it was strictly up to me, since I had to let the other guy make the rules. And with the other guy making the rules no one gets very far, not even Nero Wolfe arranging for contingencies ahead of time.

Saul left before I did, to find a taxi driver that he liked the looks of. When I went to the hall for my hat and raincoat, Wolfe came along.

"I still don't like the idea," he insisted, "of your having that thing in your pocket. I think you should slip it inside your sock."

"I don't." I was putting the raincoat on. "If I get frisked, a sock is as easy to feel as a pocket."

"You're sure that gun is loaded?"

"I never saw you so anxious. Next you'll be telling me to put on my rubbers."

He even opened the door for me.

It wasn't actually raining, merely trying to make up its mind, but after a couple of blocks I reached to switch on the windshield wiper. As I turned uptown on 10th Avenue the dash clock said 7:47; as I turned left on 51st Street it had only got to 7:51. At that time of day in that district there was plenty of space, and I rolled

to the curb and stopped about twenty yards short of the corner, stopped the engine and turned off the lights, and cranked my window down for a good view of the filling station across the street. There was no taxi there. At 7:59 a taxi pulled in and stopped by the pumps, and the driver got out and lifted the hood and started peering. I put my window up, locked the doors, and entered the lunchroom.

There was one hash slinger behind the counter and five customers scattered along on the stools. I picked a stool that left me elbow-room, sat, and ordered ice cream and coffee. The counterman served me and I took my time. At 8:12 the ice cream was gone and my cup empty, and I ordered a refill.

I had about got to the end of that, too, when a male entered, looked along the line, came straight to me, and asked me what my name was. I told him, and he handed me a folded piece of paper and turned to go. He was barely old enough for high school and I made no effort to hold him, thinking that the bird I had a date with was not likely to be an absolute sap. Unfolding the paper, I saw, neatly printed in pencil:

"Go to your car and get a note under the windshield wiper. Sit in the car to read it."

I paid what I owed, walked to my car and got the note as I was told, unlocked the car and got in, turned on the light, and read, in the same print:

"Make no signal of any kind. Follow instructions precisely. Turn right on 11th Ave. and go slowly to 56th St. Turn right on 56th and go to 9th Ave. Turn right on 9th Ave. Right again on 45th. Left on 11th Ave. Left on 38th. Right on 7th Ave. Right on 27th St. Park on 27th between 9th and 10th Aves. Go to No. 814 and tap five times on the door. Give the man who opens the door this note and the other one. He will tell you where to go."

I didn't like it much, but I had to admit it was a handy arrangement for seeing to it that I went to the conference unattached.

It had now decided to rain. Starting the engine, I could see dimly through the misty window that Saul's taxi driver was still monkeying with his carburetor, but of course I had to resist the impulse to crank the window down to wave so-long. Keeping the instructions in my left hand, I rolled to the corner, waited for the light to change, and turned right on 11th Avenue.

Since I had not been forbidden to keep my eyes open I did so, and as I stopped at 52nd for the red light I saw a black or dark-blue sedan pull away from the curb behind me and creep in my direction. I took it for granted that that was my chaperon.

The guy in the sedan was not the strangler, as I soon learned. On 27th Street there was space smack in front of Number 814, and I saw no reason why I shouldn't use it. The sedan went to the curb right behind me. After locking my car I stood on the sidewalk a moment, but my chaperon just

sat tight, so I kept to the instructions, mounted the steps to the stoop of the run-down old brownstone, entered the vestibule, and knocked five times on the door. Through the glass panel the dimly-lit hall looked empty. As I peered in, I heard footsteps behind and turned. It was my chaperon.

"Well, we got here," I said cheerfully.

"You almost lost me at one light," he said. "Give me them notes."

I handed them to him — all the evidence I had. As he unfolded them for a look, I took him in. He was around my age and height, skinny but with muscles, with outstanding ears and a purple mole on his right jaw.

"They look like it," he said, and stuffed the notes in a pocket. From another pocket he produced a key, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. "Follow me."

As we ascended two flights, with him in front, it would have been a cinch for me to reach and take a gun off his hip if there had been one there, but there wasn't. He may have preferred a shoulder holster, like me. The stair steps were bare, worn wood, the walls had needed plaster since at least Pearl Harbor, and the smell was a mixture I wouldn't want to analyze. On the second landing he went down the hall to a door at the rear and signaled me through.

There was another man there, but still it wasn't my date — anyway, I hoped not. It would be an overstatement to say the room was furnished, but I admit there was a table, a bed, and three chairs, one of them upholstered. The man, who was lying on the bed, pushed himself up as we entered, and as he swung around to sit, his feet barely reached the floor. He had shoulders and a torso like a heavyweight wrestler, and legs like an underweight jockey. His puffed eyes blinked in the light from the unshaded bulb as if he had been asleep.

"That him?" he demanded.

Skinny said it was.

The wrestler-jockey, W-J for short, got up and went to the table, picked up a ball of thick cord. "Take off your hat and coat and sit there." He pointed to one of the straight chairs.

"Hold it," Skinny commanded him. "I haven't explained yet." He faced me: "The idea is simple. This man that's coming to see you don't want any trouble. He just wants to talk. So we tie you in that chair and leave you, and he comes and you have a talk, and after he leaves we come back and cut you loose, and out you go. Is that plain enough?"

I grinned at him. "It sure is, brother. It's too plain. What if I won't sit down?"

"Then he don't come and you don't have a talk."

"What if I walk out now?"

"Go ahead. We get paid anyhow. If you want to see this guy there's only one way: We tie you in the chair."

"We get more if we tie him," W-J objected. "Let me persuade him."

"Lay off," Skinny commanded.

"I don't want any trouble, either,"

I stated. "How about this? I sit in the chair and you fix the cord to look right, but so I'm free to move in case of fire. There's a hundred bucks in the wallet in my breast pocket. Before you leave, you help yourselves."

"A lousy C?" W-J sneered. "Shut up and sit down."

"He has his choice," Skinny said reprovingly.

I did, indeed. It was a swell illustration of how much good it does to try to consider contingencies in advance. In all our discussions that day none of us had put the question, what to do if a pair of smooks offered me my pick of being tied in a chair or going home to bed. As far as I could see, standing there looking them over, that was all there was to it, and it was too early to go home to bed.

"Okay," I told them, "but don't overdo it. I know my way around, and I can find you if I care enough."

They unrolled the cord, cutting pieces off, and went to work. W-J tied my left wrist to the rear left leg of the chair, while Skinny did the right. They wanted to do my ankles the same way, to the bottoms of the front legs of the chair, but I claimed I would get cramps sitting like that. It would be just as good to tie my ankles together. They discussed it, and I had my way. Skinny made a final inspection of the knots and then went over me. He took the gun from my shoulder holster and tossed it on the bed, made sure I didn't have another one, and left the room.

W-J picked up the gun, and scowled at it. "These things," he muttered. "They make more trouble." He went to the table and put the gun down on it. Then he crossed to the bed and stretched out on it.

"How long do we have to wait?" I asked.

"Not long. I wasn't to bed last night." He closed his eyes.

He got no nap. His barrel chest couldn't have gone up and down more than a dozen times before the door opened and Skinny came in. With him was a man in a gray pin-stripe suit and a dark-gray homburg, with a gray topcoat over his arm. He had gloves on. W-J got off the bed and onto his toothpick legs. Skinny stood by the open door. The man put his hat and coat on the bed, came and took a look at my fastenings, and told Skinny, "All right; I'll come for you." The two rummies departed, shutting the door. The man stood facing me.

He smiled. "Would you have known me?"

"Not from Adam," I said, both to humor him and because it was true.

I wouldn't want to exaggerate how brave I am. It wasn't that I was too fearless to be impressed by the fact that I was thoroughly tied up and the strangler was standing there smiling at me; I was simply astounded. It was an amazing disguise. The two main changes were the eyebrows and eyelashes; these eyes had bushy brows and long, thick lashes, whereas yesterday's guest hadn't had much of

either one. The real change was from the inside. I had seen no smile on the face of yesterday's guest, but if I had it wouldn't have been like this one. The hair made a difference too, of course, parted on the side and slicked down.

He pulled the other straight chair around and sat. I admired the way he moved. That in itself could have been a dead giveaway, but the movements fitted the get-up to a T.

"So she told you about me?" he said.

It was the voice he had used on the phone. It was actually different, pitched lower, for one thing, but with it, as with the face and movements, the big change was from the inside. The voice was stretched tight, and the palms of his gloved hands were pressed against his kneecaps with the fingers straight out.

I said, "Yes," and added conversationally, "When you saw her go in the office why didn't you follow her in?"

"I had seen you leave, upstairs, and I suspected you were in there."

"Why didn't she scream or fight?"

"I talked to her. I talked a little first." His head gave a quick jerk, as if a fly were bothering him and his hands were too occupied to attend to it. "What did she tell you?"

"About that day at Doris Hatten's apartment — you coming in and her going out. And of course her recognizing you there yesterday."

"She is dead. There is no evidence. You can't prove anything."

I grinned. "Then you're wasting a lot of time and energy and the best disguise I ever saw. Why didn't you just toss my note in the wastebasket? . . . Let me answer. You didn't dare. In getting evidence, knowing exactly what and who to look for makes all the difference. You knew I knew."

"And you haven't told the police?"

"No."

"Nor Nero Wolfe?"

"No."

"Why not?"

I shrugged. "I may not put it very well," I said, "because this is the first time I have ever talked with my hands and feet tied, and I find it cramps my style. But it strikes me as the kind of coincidence that doesn't happen very often. I'm fed up with the detective business, and I'd like to quit. I have something that's worth a good deal to you — say, fifty thousand dollars. It can be arranged so that you get what you pay for. I'll go the limit on that, but it has to be closed quick. If you don't buy, I'm going to have a tough time explaining why I didn't remember sooner what she told me. Twenty-four hours from now is the absolute limit."

"It couldn't be arranged so I would get what I paid for."

"Sure, it could. If you don't want me on your neck the rest of your life, believe me, I don't want you on mine, either."

"I suppose you don't. I suppose I'll have to pay."

There was a sudden noise in his throat as if he had started to choke. He stood up. "You're working your

hand loose," he said huskily, and moved toward me.

It might have been guessed from his voice, thick and husky from the blood rushing to his head, but it was plain as day in his eyes, suddenly fixed and glassy, like a blind man's eyes. Evidently he had come there fully intending to kill me, and had now worked himself up to it.

"Hold it!" I snapped at him.

He halted, muttering, "You're getting your hand loose," and moved again, passing me to get behind.

I jerked my body and the chair violently aside and around, and had him in front of me again.

"No good," I told him. "They only went down one flight. I heard 'em. It's no good, anyway. I've got another note for you — from Nero Wolfe — here in my breast pocket. Help yourself, but stay in front of me."

He was only two steps from me, but it took him four small, slow ones. His gloved hand went inside my coat to the breast pocket, and came out with a folded slip of yellow paper. From the way his eyes looked, I doubted if he would be able to read, but apparently he was. I watched his face as he took it in, in Wolfe's precise handwriting:

"If Mr. Goodwin is not home by midnight the information given him by Cynthia Brown will be communicated to the police, and I shall see that they act immediately. NERO WOLFE."

He looked at me, and slowly his eyes changed. No longer glassy, they began to let light in. Before, he had just been going to kill me. Now, he hated me.

I got voluble: "So it's no good, see? He did it this way because if you had known I had told him, you would have sat tight. He figured that you would think you could handle me, and I admit you tried your best. He wants fifty thousand dollars by tomorrow at six o'clock, no later. You say it can't be arranged so you'll get what you pay for, but we say it can and it's up to you. You say we have no evidence, but we can get it — don't think we can't. As for me, I wouldn't advise you even to pull my hair. It would make him sore at you, and he's not sore now, he just wants fifty thousand bucks."

He had started to tremble, and knew it, and was trying to stop.

"Maybe," I conceded, "you can't get that much that quick. In that case he'll take your I.O.U. — you can write it on the back of that note he sent you. My pen's here in my vest pocket. He'll be reasonable."

"I'm not such a fool," he said harshly.

"Who said you were?" I was sharp and urgent, and thought I had loosened him. "Use your head, that's all. We've either got you cornered or we haven't. If we haven't, what are you doing here? If we have, a little thing like your name signed to an I.O.U. won't make it any worse. He won't press you too hard. Here, get my pen, right here."

I still think I had loosened him. It was in his eyes and the way he stood, sagging a little. If my hands had been free, so I could have got the pen myself, and uncapped it and put it between his fingers, I would have had him. I had him to the point of writing and signing, but not to the point of taking my pen out of my pocket. But, of course, if my hands had been free I wouldn't have been bothering about an I.O.U. and a pen.

So he slipped from under. He shook his head, and his shoulders stiffened. The hate that filled his eyes was in his voice, too: "You said twenty-four hours. That gives me tomorrow. I'll have to decide. Tell Nero Wolfe I'll decide."

He crossed to the door and pulled it open. He went out, closing the door, and I heard his steps descending the stairs; but he hadn't taken his hat and coat, and I nearly cracked my temples trying to use my brain. I hadn't got far when there were steps on the stairs again, coming up, and in they came, all three of them.

My host spoke to Skinny: "What time does your watch say?"

Skinny glanced at his wrist. "Nine thirty-two."

"At half-past ten untie his left hand. Leave him like that and go. It will take him five minutes or more to get his other hand and his feet free. Have you any objection to that?"

"Nah. He's got nothing on us."

The strangler took a roll of bills from his pocket, having a little difficulty on account of his gloves, peeled off two twenties, went to the table with them, and gave them a good rub on both sides with his handkerchief.

He held the bills out to Skinny. "I've paid the agreed amount, as you know. This extra is so you won't get impatient and leave before half-past ten."

"Don't take it!" I called sharply.

Skinny, the bills in his hand, turned. "What's the matter — they got germs?"

"No, but they're peanuts, you sap! He's worth ten grand to you! As is!"

"Nonsense," the strangler said scornfully, and started for the bed to get his hat and coat.

"Gimme my twenty," W-J demanded.

Skinny stood with his head cocked, regarding me. He looked faintly interested but skeptical, and I saw it would take more than words. As the strangler picked up his hat and coat and turned, I jerked my body violently to the left, and over I went, chair and all. I have no idea how I got across the floor to the door. I couldn't simply roll, on account of the chair; I couldn't crawl without hands; and I didn't even try to jump. But I made it, and not slow, and was there down on my right side, the chair against the door and me against the chair, before any of them snapped out of it enough to reach me.

"You think," I yapped at Skinny, "it's just a job? Let him go and you'll find out! Do you want his name? Mrs. Carlisle — *Mrs.* Homer N. Carlisle. Do you want her address?"

The strangler, on his way to me, stopped and froze. He — or I should say, she — stood stiff as a bar of steel, the long-lashed eyes aimed at me.

"Missus?" Skinny demanded incredulously. "Did you say 'Missus'?"

"Yes. She's a woman. I'm tied up, but you've got her. I'm helpless, so you can have her. You might give me a cut of the ten grand." The strangler made a movement. "Watch her!"

W-J, who had started for me and stopped, turned to face her. I had banged my head and it hurt. Skinny stepped up to her, jerked both sides of her double-breasted coat open, released them, and backed up a step.

"It could be a woman," he said.

"We can find that out easy enough." W-J moved. "Dumb as I am, I can tell *that*."

"Go ahead," I urged. "That will check her and me both. Go ahead!"

W-J got to her and put out a hand.

She shrank away and screamed, "Don't touch me!"

"I'll be —" W-J said wonderingly.

"What's this gag," Skinny demanded, "about ten grand?"

"It's a long story," I told him, "but it's there if you want it. If you'll cut me in for a third, it's a cinch. If she gets out of here and gets safe home, we can't touch her. All we have to do is connect her as she is — here now, disguised — with Mrs. Homer N. Carlisle, which is what she'll be when she gets home. If we do that we've got her shirt. As she is here now, she's red-hot. As she is at home, you couldn't even get in."

"So what?" Skinny asked. "I didn't bring my camera."

"I've got something better. Get me loose and I'll show you."

Skinny didn't like that. He eyed me a moment and turned for a look at the others. Mrs. Carlisle was backed against the bed, and W-J stood studying her with his fists on his hips.

Skinny returned to me: "I'll do it. Maybe. What is it?"

I snapped, "At least, put me right side up. These cords are eating my wrists."

He came and got the back of the chair with one hand and my arm with the other, and I clamped my feet to the floor to give us leverage. He was stronger than he looked. Upright on the chair again, I was still blocking the door.

"Get a bottle," I told him, "out of my right-hand coat pocket. . . . No, here; the coat I've got on. I hope it didn't break."

He fished it out. It was intact. He held it to the light to read the label. "What is it?"

"Silver nitrate. It makes a black, indelible mark on most things, including skin. Pull up her pants leg and mark her with it."

"Then what?"

"Let her go. We'll have her. With the three of us able to explain how and when she got marked, she's sunk."

"How come you've got this stuff?"

"I was hoping for a chance to mark her myself."

"How much will it hurt her?"

"Not at all. Put some on me —

anywhere you like, as long as it doesn't show."

He studied the label again. I watched his face, hoping he wouldn't ask if the mark would be permanent, because I didn't know what answer would suit him, and I had to sell him.

"A woman," he muttered. "A woman!"

"Yeah," I said sympathetically. "She sure made a monkey of you."

He swiveled his head and called, "Hey!"

W-J turned.

Skinny commanded him, "Pin her up! Don't hurt her."

W-J reached for her. But, as he did so, all of a sudden she was neither man nor woman, but a cyclone. Her first leap, away from his reaching hand, was sidewise, and by the time he had realized he didn't have her she had got to the table and grabbed the gun. He made for her, and she pulled the trigger, and down he went, tumbling right at her feet. By that time Skinny was almost to her, and she whirled and blazed away again. He kept going, and from the force of the blow on my left shoulder I might have calculated, if I had been in a mood for calculating, that the bullet had not gone through Skinny before it hit me. She pulled the trigger a third time, but by then Skinny had her wrist and was breaking her arm.

"She got me!" W-J was yelling indignantly. "She got me in the leg!"

Skinny had her down on her knees. "Come and cut me loose," I called to him, "and go find a phone."

Except for my wrists and ankles and shoulder and head, I felt fine all over.

"I hope you're satisfied," Inspector Cramer said sourly. "You and Goodwin have got your pictures in the paper again. You got no fee, but a lot of free publicity. I got my nose wiped."

Wolfe grunted comfortably.

The whole squad had been busy with chores: visiting W-J at the hospital; conversing with Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle at the D.A.'s office; starting to round up circumstantial evidence to show that Mr. Carlisle had furnished the necessary for Doris Hatten's rent and Mrs. Carlisle knew it; pestering Skinny; and other items. I had been glad to testify that Skinny, whose name was Herbert Marvel, was one-hundred-proof.

"What I chiefly came for," Cramer went on, "was to let you know that I realize there's nothing I can do. I know Cynthia Brown described her to Goodwin, and probably gave him her name, too, and Goodwin told you. And you wanted to hog it. I suppose you thought you could pry a fee out of somebody. Both of you suppressed evidence." He gestured. "Okay, I can't prove it. But I know it, and I want you to know I know it. And I'm not going to forget it."

"The trouble is," Wolfe murmured, "that if you can't prove you're right, and of course you can't, neither can I prove you're wrong."

"Oh, yes, you can. But you haven't!"

"I would gladly try. How?"

Cramer leaned forward. "Like this: If she hadn't been described to Goodwin, how did you pick her for him to send that blackmail note to?"

Wolfe shrugged. "It was a calculation, as I told you. I concluded that the murderer was among those who remained until the body had been discovered. It was worth testing. If there had been no phone call in response to Mr. Goodwin's note, the calculation would have been discredited and I would —"

"Yeah, but why her?"

"There were only two women who remained. Obviously, it couldn't have been Mrs. Orwin; with her physique she would be hard put to pass as a man. Besides, she is a widow, and it was a sound presumption that Doris Hatten had been killed by a jealous wife, who —"

"But why a woman? Why not a man?"

"Oh, that." Wolfe picked up a glass of beer and drained it with more deliberation than usual. He was having a swell time. "I told you in my dining-room" — he pointed a finger — "that something had occurred to me and I wanted to consider it. Later, I would have been glad to tell you about it if you had not acted so irresponsibly and spitefully in sealing up this office. That made me doubt if you were capable of proceeding properly on any suggestion from me, so I decided to proceed, myself.

"What had occurred to me was simply this, that Miss Brown had told Mr. Goodwin that *she wouldn't have recognized 'him' if he hadn't had a hat on!* She used the masculine pronoun, naturally, throughout that conversation, because it had been a man who had called at Doris Hatten's apartment that October day, and he was fixed in her mind as a man. But it was in my plant-rooms that she had seen him that afternoon — *and no man wore his hat up there!* The men left their hats downstairs. Besides, I was there and saw them. *But nearly all the women had hats on.*"

Wolfe upturned a palm. "So it was a woman."

Cramer eyed him. "I don't believe it," he said flatly.

"You have a record of Mr. Goodwin's report of that conversation."

"I still wouldn't believe it."

"There were other little items." Wolfe wiggled a finger. "For example: The strangler of Doris Hatten had a key to the door. But surely the provider, who had so carefully avoided revealment, would not have marched in at an unexpected hour to risk encountering strangers. And who so likely to have found an opportunity, or contrived one, to secure a duplicate key as the provider's jealous wife?"

"Talk all day. I still don't believe it."

Well, I thought to myself, observing Wolfe's smirk and for once completely approving of it, Cramer the office-sealer has his choice of believing it or not.

As for me, I had no choice.

THE MAN WHO STOOD IN THE WAY

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

THE SENATOR KEPT biting his lip, as if he were beset with problems of insurmountable difficulty. He was a massive man, exuding an air of power. The spacious leather chair in which he sat seemed scarcely adequate for his weight; bulky shoulders and arms bulged over its sides with a suggestion of overflowing.

The Senator's head under his crisp mane of iron-gray hair was massive, too, and his features were large, cragged, and graven with the lines that indicate power.

When he arose presently and crossed the library to get whiskey and cigars for his guest, the immense room seemed to dwindle in an abrupt shrinking of wall and ceiling; and the polished floor threatened each instant to creak under the tread of his heavy feet, though it was far too genteel — as befit a floor in a Dupont Circle home — ever actually to creak. The vacated chair gaped wide, appeared, as the great upholstered cavern it really was, to lose its dignity immediately the Senator dropped into it again.

In marked contrast with the Senator was the man who sat stiffly upright on the edge of one of the room's least comfortable chairs and, ignoring the allure of the imported cigars his host had set at his elbow, employed a gnarled thumb to cram coarse, black tobacco into a yellow-gray corn-cob pipe.

He looked sixty-five, though he may have been ten years younger, and the years had served to parch rather than to mellow him. His unkempt hair, to the extent that it had survived, was a dingy yellow-white which had probably been sandy in its youth; a mustache of the same hue, except where tobacco had stained it a richer shade, straggled over withered lips. His forehead was low, narrow, and of an almost reptilian flatness; his nose was long and pinched and drooping below flat, lusterless eyes of a faded, unrecognizable color; his chin was frankly receding.

In his thick-soled boots he would have stood less than five and a half feet — say, just a trifle above the Senator's shoulder — and the beam of scales set at a hundred and five pounds would have been undisturbed by his presence. He wore a baggy suit of a once-snuff color, and a soft black hat lay on the floor beside his chair.

The pipe loaded, he turned to the table, filled a glass from the bottle, and drained it with neither the shudder nor the appreciative grimace which usually accompanies the drinking of straight whiskey. Then, disregarding the matches on the stand beside him, he felt in the pockets of his vest, brought out a match with

the common brown head so seldom seen nowadays, ignited it sputteringly on the sole of a boot, and lighted his pipe.

His glance never for an instant rested on any of the furnishings of the luxurious room; it ranged from the Senator to the pipe, to the hat on the floor occasionally, and then back to the Senator.

Obviously unused to the elegance in which he now found himself, that little man was not comfortable, not at home; but his attitude was certainly not one of awe — rather he seemed to disapprove of the sybaritic apartment, and, disapproving, to ignore it altogether.

The Senator chewed a cigar, frowned at his feet, and talked. He was counted in political circles a reticent man, one who expressed himself crisply and concisely, with a great economy of words. But his conversation now was at variance with that reputation.

He talked desultorily, letting his sentences lose themselves half-formed, their logical endings being replaced by irrelevancies or not at all. The little man answered now and then with drawled monosyllables in a dry, reedy voice; he was plainly not engrossed by his host's words. It was clear that the Senator had not sent for him to discuss crops and the political situation in Sudlow County.

The Senator wasted three-quarters of an hour in this nervous dalliance. Then he threw his cold cigar into the fireplace and slid his chair forward to within a foot of his guest's. He leaned still closer, the lines between his eyebrows deepening.

"But all this isn't what I wanted to see you for, Inch," he said, his deep voice impressive even in its half-whisper. "I am in trouble. I need help."

Gene Inch nodded his head slightly.

"Can I count on you?" And then, as the meaningless nod came again, "You know I pardoned Tom when I was governor."

It was true enough that the impetus behind that pardoning had been political expediency; but what of it? He had pardoned Tom Inch.

Gene Inch took the pipe from his mouth and said: "Yeah, I know you pardoned Tom. You don't have to remind a Inch of his debts."

"You'll help me, then?"

"Uh-huh. Who do you want killed?"

The Senator quailed.

"Killed?" he repeated in a tone of horror. "Killed?"

Inch bared his stained and broken teeth in an evil grin.

"I hope it ain't no worse than that," he said. "But supposing you tell me what's what."

The Senator laid an unsteady hand on the other's bony knee.

"I'm being blackmailed. It has been going on for years, since shortly after I came to Sudlow County. All the years I was in the State legislature, when I was governor, and now since I have been senator, I have been paying — paying more and more every year. And now — now I've got to stop it.

Inch, I have made a lot of friends since I have been here in Washington, and they are talking of running me for President. But I can't go ahead unless I shake this blackmailer off. I *must* shake him off, or I am stopped! The more prominent I become, the more insolent he is — it strengthens his hand just that much more — and if I should be elected President of this country. . . . I can't even try unless I get rid of him!"

Inch's face hadn't lighted up at mention of either the blackmailer or the Senator's presidential hopes, and his eyes were as void of fire as ever.

"Where'll I find this fellow?" he asked laconically.

"Wait, Gene," the Senator said. "We must be careful. There must be no scandal or my position will be even worse than now. I want you to fix it so he won't bother me, but I don't want anything done that will bring on worse trouble."

Inch let a shade of his contempt for this nicety show in the lift of his lips, and then he said:

"Well, I reckon you better tell me more about it, then."

The Senator's eyes narrowed. He spoke aloud, but more to himself than to his guest:

"I pardoned your boy Tom when he was serving life for killing Dick Haney. . . . All right!

"I came to Sudlow County nearly twenty years ago, remember? Well, I came there after escaping from the California State prison at San Quentin. I got in a fight in Oakland one night and killed a man. I wasn't known in Oakland and I gave a false name when I was arrested. I took my real name again after I escaped — I don't know of anybody else who ever did it from there. I was sentenced to thirty years, but after a year and a half I escaped. About two years after I had settled in Sudlow County a man who had been in San Quentin with me recognized me. Frank McPhail was his name, but he goes by the name of Henry Bush now. I've been paying him every cent I could scrape together ever since."

Inch twisted the end of his long nose reflectively.

"Any chance of facing it down? I mean, can he prove anything?"

"The fingerprints — they are still on file at San Quentin."

"Do you reckon there's anybody in on it besides this Bush?"

The Senator shook his head.

"I am reasonably certain that he hasn't told anyone else" — bitterly — "or I should have heard from them, too."

"Where does this Bush live at? And what does he look like?"

"Wait, Gene!" the Senator pleaded. "You can't walk up and shoot him. He is well-known here in Washington, and he is known to be a friend of mine — he has boasted enough of our intimacy! No matter how careful you are, if you kill him something would leak out, and I'd be worse off than I am now. And, besides, I can't stomach murder!"

Inch tweaked his nose thoughtfully

again and focused his flat eyes on the dirty bowl of his pipe.

"What's the next nearest city to here?" he asked.

"Baltimore is only forty miles away."

"Do you reckon this Bush is known much in Baltimore?"

"I don't think he is. Why?"

Inch thrust the pipe into his pocket and picked up his hat.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

The following evening Gene Inch called upon the Senator again. He stayed but a few minutes, talking to the Senator in the reception hall.

"You tell this Bush you want him to come see you tomorrow in Baltimore; that you'll be waiting for him in Room 411 at the Strand Hotel between ten and eleven at night; that he's to come right up to the room and not ask for you at the desk, because you ain't going to be registered under your own name. Can you make him swallow it?"

"I think so," the Senator said hesitantly, "but he'll be suspicious and come prepared for trouble. What are you going to do, Gene? You aren't going to —"

"You leave me be," Inch said querulously. "I'm going to fix this thing. Do as I tell you. It don't make no difference what he thinks, or how suspicious he is, get him over there and I'll get you out of your troubles."

The Senator's muscular hand shook as he opened the door for his caller; the skinny hand that pulled Inch's black hat down on his head was as steady as a Sudlow County boulder.

A dim light from the corridor entered Room 411 through the transom; through the closed window came a faint glow from the street lights; the two diluted the darkness in the room to an artificial, bluish twilight.

Gene Inch sat on a chair in a corner near the door, facing the door. He wore a suit of coarse, heavy underwear, which bulged in ill-fitting folds here and there over his angular figure.

Clamped between his teeth was the stem of a cold pipe; a battered and scratched revolver of heavy caliber hung from one hand. His bare feet were flat on the carpeted floor in an attitude of patient ease.

A clock somewhere struck ten. Twenty minutes passed. Then the knob of the unlocked door turned, the door opened, and a burly figure stood in the doorway. A black automatic pistol held high against the figure's chest pointed into the room.

The muzzle of Inch's revolver slid forward and nudged the side of the burly man. The latter's muscles jumped suddenly, but his feet did not move. Slowly his right hand opened and the automatic thudded dully on the floor.

Inch stepped back and said: "Come in and close the door behind you."

Then he motioned his captive to a chair and sat on the edge of the bed.

"You're Bush, I reckon."

"Yes, and if you think —"

"Shut your mouth and listen!"

Bush subsided before the menace in the reedy voice of this queer little man in ridiculous clothes who squinted wickedly at him in the dusk over the barrel of the enormous revolver.

"Take off your coat."

Bush obeyed.

"Throw it on the foot of the bed."

Bush hesitated. It might be possible to fling the coat at this old man's head and close with him. But, his eyes now accustomed to the dim light, he saw that the withered finger around the trigger held it back against the grip — the cocked hammer was restrained only by the pressure of the thumb. That pressure removed, the hammer would fall. Gently Bush tossed his coat to the bed. Inch went through the pockets with his left hand, removing everything. Then he threw the coat on the floor.

"Turn out your other pockets."

Bush emptied the pockets of his trousers and waistcoat: a knife, some keys, a few coins, a roll of paper money, a watch, a handkerchief.

"This suit is tailor-made, huh?" Inch said. "Then there had ought to be labels on the pants and vest as well as the coat. Take the knife and rip 'em all out. Give me your hat."

While the puzzled blackmailer — not yet suspecting his captor's intention — removed all the markings from his clothes Inch examined the hat. No initials were in it.

"Put on your coat and hat," he ordered. "Now put all them things back in your pockets except them bills, and your watch. You can drop the labels on the floor. Now stand back against the wall."

Inch picked up the roll of paper money and put it in the pocket of his trousers, which hung over the back of a chair. The watch, the cloth labels, and the things he had taken from Bush's coat he rolled in a handkerchief and put in his ancient valise.

"Say —" Bush began.

"Shut your mouth!" Inch snapped irritably, shaking his revolver at the blackmailer.

Then the old man looked carefully around the room and chuckled with sour satisfaction. He backed to the bed and pulled the covers down with his free hand and got into the bed, the revolver still menacing the other. He pulled the white covers up across his chest, half-sitting, half-lying against the pillows. Then slowly he drew the revolver back toward his body. The muzzle cleared the edge of the covers and slid out of sight.

Bush's mouth hung slack, bewilderment filled his face. As the weapon disappeared beneath the covers he contracted his leg muscles in the first move of a spring. Before he could bend his knees in the second movement the room shook with a heavy explosion. A smoldering hole appeared on the white surface of the topsheet and grew rapidly larger. Bush toppled to the floor with blood seeping from a hole in his left breast. The room reeked with the blended odors of gunpowder and burning cloth.

Inch scrambled out of bed, took a flashlight and a homemade black

mask from a dresser drawer, and dropped them beside the dead man. Then he kicked the automatic pistol, which lay near the door, over near one lifeless hand.

Fifteen minutes later the hotel detective and a policeman were examining the remains of Henry Bush, and listening to Gene Inch's story of retiring early, waking to see a man bending over the chair on which his clothes hung, carefully drawing his revolver from under the pillow, being surprised in that act by the burglar, and having to shoot through the bedcovers.

The detective and the patrolman finished their examination and conferred.

"Nothing to identify him by."

"No; not even a watch or anything we could trace."

"No use trying to trace the gun. Burglars don't get 'em that way."

The policeman turned to Inch.

"Come down to headquarters in the morning — about ten o'clock."

And then, admiringly: "You sure hit him pretty for having to shoot through them bedclothes!"

"The Senator is not in," said the girl in the outer office.

"Now, sister, you tell him Gene Inch wants to see him."

"But he —"

"Run along and tell him, sister."

The Senator came to the door of his private office to receive Inch and to usher him in. The Senator's face was pallid and he seemed to be having trouble with his breathing. The eyes that met Inch's held a strange mixture of hope and fear.

When they were alone in the private office Inch nodded with cool assurance.

"It's all done. Everything is all right."

"And he —"

"I seen by the papers where an unidentified burglar was killed trying to rob a farmer in a Baltimore hotel."

The Senator relaxed into a chair with a sobbing intake of breath.

"Are you positive, Gene, that there can be no slip-up?"

Inch clucked scornfully.

"Ain't nothing can happen."

The Senator got to his feet and stretched out both hands to his savior.

"I can't ever pay you in full for what you have done, Gene, but no matter —"

Inch turned his rounded back upon the other's gratitude and walked to the door. With one hand on the knob he turned, leered malevolently at the Senator, and said:

"I'll expect a check on the first of every month; and I hope you get to be President — it'll mean a lot to me."

For a long space the Senator stood staring dumbly into the little man's flat, lifeless eyes. Then comprehension came to him. His knees sagged and he crumpled into his chair.

"But, Gene —"

"*But* hell!" Inch snarled. "The first of every month!"

—Continued from Back Cover

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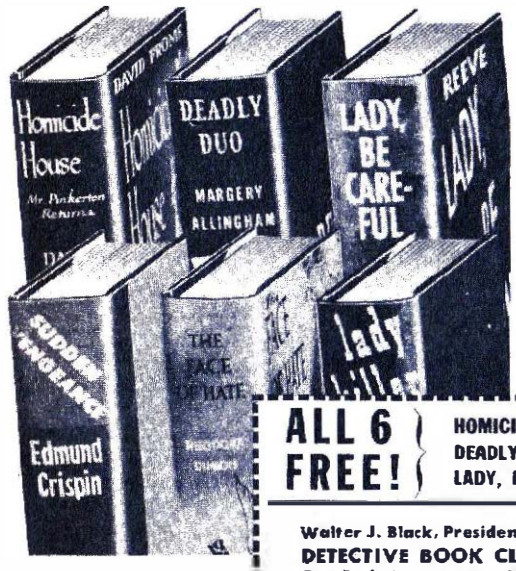

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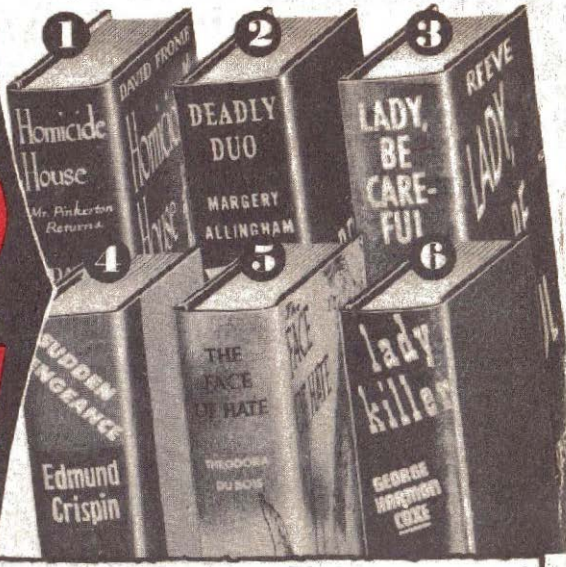

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