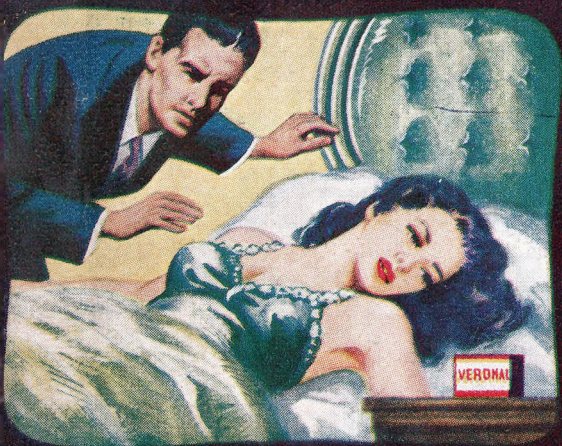


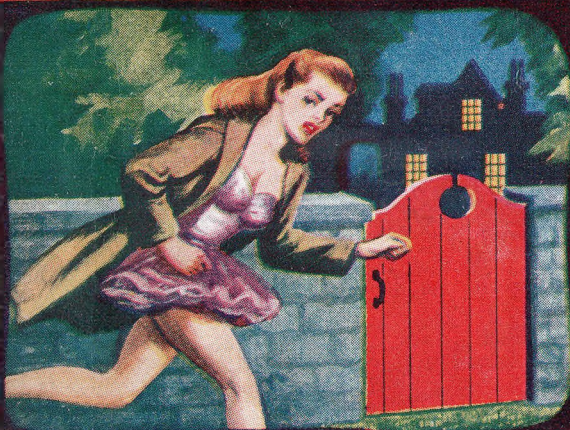
TRIPLE

THREE NOVELS • EXPERTLY ABRIDGED

DETECTIVE



The **DEAD**
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 by Jonathan Latimer



THE
Red
GATE
 by Richard Burke



Murder
One
 by Eleazar Lipsky

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DETECTIVE

Vol. 5, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Spring 1950

THE DEAD DON'T CARE

Murder introduces hard-boiled investigator Bill Crane to a dancer, a deb, a boxer, a gun-toting butler and a strip-tease queen when a grim series of threatening letters brings him to Florida to guard the life of Penn Essex!

JONATHAN LATIMER 11

MURDER ONE

Alice Williston was as good as in the chair unless Esau Frost could come up with a miracle from her lurid and tragic past—but though most people would fight for life, Alice preferred execution to any admission of guilt!

ELEAZAR LIPSKY 56

THE RED GATE

Ever watch detectives gathering evidence that may hang you? That was the predicament facing Sadie Manchester when her wealthy spouse died, and all indications pointed to her as the one and only logical person to suspect!

RICHARD RURKE 110

THE READERS' JURY

A department where mystery readers, authors and the editor get together

The Editor 6

CASE OF THE FEEBLE RATTLESNAKES

An astonishing true story of vicious murder that looked like an accident

Stacy Kent 50

YOU MADE ME DIE

"Come alone, doc . . . and I promise you that I will throw down my gun!"

Morris Cooper 105

"PERE DU CRIME"

The amazing true account of a one-family crime wave that stalked France

Simpson M. Ritter 109

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A Panel of Mystery Fans, Authors and the Editor

IF you've done much reading you have no doubt entertained the thought of one day doing some writing yourself. Very likely most of you wouldn't admit it short of a spotlight and rubber hose session, but after a bit of intensive sleuthing (the hose was used sparingly) we've discovered it's true.

And a surprising number of readers have even gone so far as to actually do a bit of writing on the sly. We say "on the sly" because in most cases it was only with a great deal of reluctance that our suspects finally admitted that there were a few scrawled manuscripts in the bottom drawer under the frayed shirts or the maybe-I'll-wear-it-again-sometime lingerie. Some of the more brazen even admitted to having tried these efforts of theirs with a hardbitten editor or two before deciding the bottom drawer was after all the place for them.

Evolution of a Mystery Writer

So what are we getting at? We're getting at a very fine mystery novel called "A Screen for Murder," by E. C. R. Lorac, which will occupy the Number Two spot in the lineup of the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. But more specifically, we are getting at the reason E. C. R. Lorac ever came to hammering out whodunits in the first place.

"Instead of going to a university I went to an art school," says the author, an English woman now living in the north of Britain in a stone house built in the 1860's. "All the time I drew pictures I told myself stories. Unfortunately I was so high-minded I didn't write my stories down. Instead I turned out frightful essays and articles—politics, aesthetics, Literature with a large

L. Nobody wanted them, of course. At last one great and good editor scrawled a message across my manuscript: 'Apparently you can write; why not write something that will sell?' It percolated at last. So I wrote a detective novel. It sold. I'm still writing them, still selling them."

Simple, what? Go back and take a look there deep in the bottom drawer. Politics? Literature with a capital L? Put it back. Cover it over good with the frayed shirts. Sit down and write a detective novel. Meanwhile, read "A Screen for Death" in the forthcoming TRIPLE DETECTIVE. Maybe you're another E. C. R. Lorac.

An Inspector McKee Novel

Leading off your next issue will be an absorbing Inspector McKee story, "The Diamond Feather," by Helen Reilly. Though this will mark McKee's first appearance in TRIPLE DETECTIVE, many of you are doubtless familiar with the inspector's brilliant sleuthing, perhaps in such well-known *Popular Library* books as "Murder in Shinbone Alley," "McKee of Centre Street," or "Mr. Smith's Hat."

A detective of the first water is McKee. A homespun, believable wizard with a heart of a size to equal his unusual powers of deduction. But don't take our word for it. Take a look instead at the case of "The Diamond Feather" coming up in our next issue.

When Godfrey Thorne contracted pneumonia and died suddenly in the rooms of Roger Cram, he left Cram a beautifully constructed imitation of the family heirloom, the diamond feather.

(Continued on page 8)

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THE READERS' JURY

(Continued from page 6)

In fact, so perfect had been the reproduction that Godfrey himself had not known it was an imitation of the real diamond feather until he'd tried to pawn it and had learned that the gems studing it were fakes.

A few months later, upon invitation of Mrs. Thorne, Cram visits the Thorne home. He takes with him the imitation diamond feather which he intends to return to them. Before he can do so, however, murder intervenes. And later, when again he thinks of the diamond feather and goes to fetch it from his bag, it is gone—obviously stolen from his room.

The Photo Clue

The murder victim is the lovely, French-speaking wife of Harold Thorne, Godfrey's younger brother. Because she was found stabbed behind the locked doors and windows of her room, one hand clutching the ivory hilt of the knife buried in her breast, it was at first thought that she'd taken her own life.

Inspector McKee, accompanying the physician who was called in, quickly dispels this diagnosis with a photograph, however.

"Funny thing—photography," McKee observes, as he shows Roger Cram an overdeveloped print of the picture he'd taken of the dead woman. "Makes red and brown darker than they appear to the eye—sometimes reproduces a mark the human eye can't see at all. Now, then. Every pressure on the skin results in the breaking, or at least the inflaming, of the small veins, whereupon a slight redness is produced.

"So," continues the inspector, "the marks that have come out dark on that print indicates the places where Mrs. Thorne was injured by the pressure of someone's hands. Not only that—a hand was held over her hand, a hand that drove the knife down into her breast with hers beneath it. Sonia Thorne was murdered!"

Which is just an introduction to the
 (Continued on page 158)

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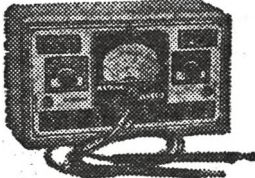
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AND THEN JEFF SPRUNG THE TRAP...



WHAT GOES?

NEVER MIND THE QUESTIONS. CAST OFF AND LET'S GET OUT OF HERE!

TIED UP TO A LONELY DOCK IN A SMALL SOUTHERN BAY, JEFF BELL, "TROPICAL TRAMP" IS SPENDING A QUIET EVENING ABOARD HIS BATTERED LAUNCH, WHEN...



TWO HOURS LATER

WHY DID YOU PICK ON MY TUB?

SOMEBODY MESSED UP MY ENGINE. HEAD FOR THAT LIGHT



HURRY UP, YOU!

THESE THINGS ARE HEAVY

ONE MORE BOX, PETE



HEAVE TO!

SO! IT WAS A PLANT! DUMP THOSE PLATES!

HOLD IT! I'M TAKING OVER NOW!



LATER

TRAP WORKED. COUNTERFEITERS LED ME TO CACHE. BOTH CAPTURED, ALONG WITH PLATES. BELL

I'LL BE GLAD TO SHED THIS BEACHCOMBER RIG. CAN I CLEAN UP HERE?

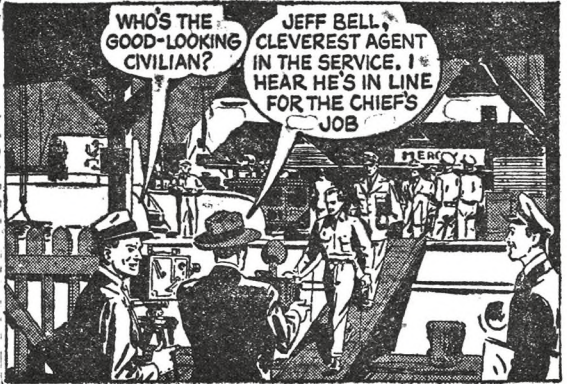


HERE'S MY RAZOR AND SOME SHORE CLOTHES



WONDERFUL BLADE YOU'VE GOT HERE!! I CAN'T RECALL A SMOOTHER, EASIER SHAVE!

THIN GILLETTES GO OVER BIG ON THIS SHIR. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN



WHO'S THE GOOD-LOOKING CIVILIAN?

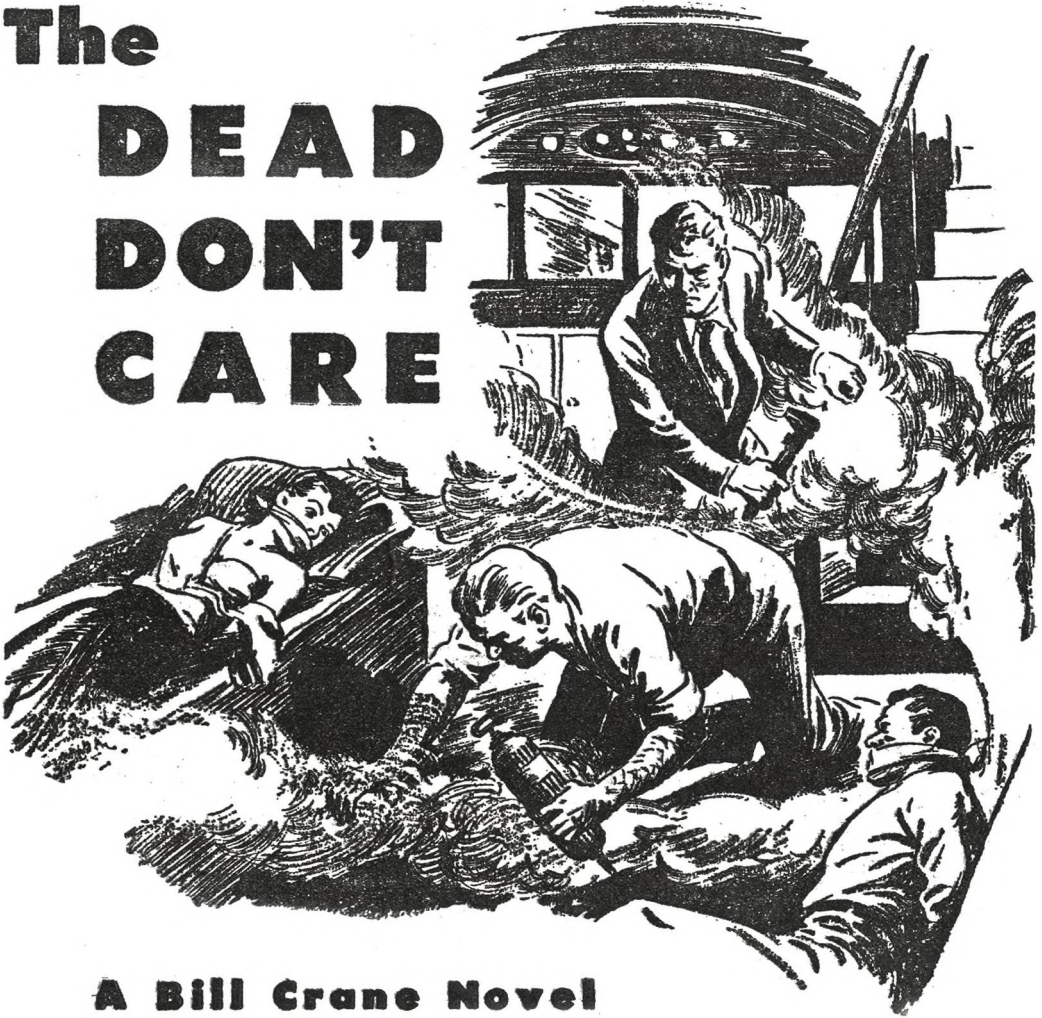
JEFF BELL, CLEVEREST AGENT IN THE SERVICE. I HEAR HE'S IN LINE FOR THE CHIEF'S JOB

FOR QUICK, CLEAN, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES... AND MORE OF 'EM PER BLADE ... USE THIN GILLETTES. THESE BLADES ARE BY FAR THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING IN ALL THE LOW-PRICED FIELD. PRECISION MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY, THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOUR FACE AGAINST NICKS AND IRRITATION. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE ECONOMICAL 10-BLADE PACKAGE

NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

When threatening letters bring a hard-boiled investigator to Florida to protect rich Penn Essex, the mysterious "Eye" sees all—knows all

The DEAD DON'T CARE



A Bill Crane Novel

by JONATHAN LATIMER

I

THOMAS O'MALLEY ran gray eyes over the white marble front of the house, gave a half whistle of admiration. William Crane, his companion, shut off the Buick convertible's engine. He was looking at the brass knocker on the great ebony door.

"Are you supposed to pound that thing?" he demanded.

"Why not?" O'Malley asked. "We got invitations."

"All right." Crane slid off the seat. He mounted the three crescent-shaped steps, was about to raise the knocker

Murder Introduces Bill Crane to a Dancer, a Deb, a

when a door opened, disclosing a dour man with unfriendly lips. He was the butler.

"Mr. O'Malley?" he asked. "And Mr. Crane?"

"Mr. Crane," Crane said. "And Mr. O'Malley."

The man came out on the first crescent-shaped step. "Mr. Essex is expecting you. Shall I bring in your luggage?"

Crane gave him the convertible's keys. "In the rumble."

He started to follow the butler, but O'Malley nudged him. "Take a gander at the window above the door."

Casually Crane's eyes roved over the grounds, the house—to the window above the door. A man was seated in the recess, his face shadowed by a hat. He was peering down at them. Crane's eyes returned to the convertible, where the butler now had the rumble seat open. As he reached for the large pig-skin suitcase his drill jacket slid up his back, disclosing a small blue pistol.

Crane's and O'Malley's eyes met for a second. Then the butler led the way inside and upstairs.

One hand on the knob of the door to Crane's bedroom, the butler said, "I shall try to locate Mr. Essex, sir."

He left, and O'Malley was seated on the arm of an easy chair. Crane moved over to the French window, flung it open. Out on the balcony, he lighted a cigarette and contentedly filled his lungs with smoke. The food would be good, and the beds. He was very tired after the long drive from Charleston and he thought with pleasure of the double bed. He always slept well with the noise of the sea in his ears. It was pleasant, too, to be sent from rain-swept New York into the languorous perfection of Key Largo, fifty miles south of Miami.

O'Malley said, "I could do with a bottle of beer."

"Ring up Old Lynx Eyes and tell him to fetch you one," Crane suggested.

"Good idea," said O'Malley.

L EFT alone, Crane wondered what had happened to the young Essexes. It couldn't have been very serious or he'd have read about it in the newspapers. They were always in the newspapers. The boy, Penn, twenty-five years old, had a penchant for fast automobiles,

chorus girls and breach-of-promise suits. The girl, Camelia, twenty-three, had recently been taken from a Grace liner as she was about to elope with a gentleman styling himself Count Paul di Gregario. The removal had been accomplished by attorneys for the Union Trust Company, trustee of the Essex fortune, which had discovered that di Gregario was no count. He was also, it developed, already married.

Crane hoped that O'Malley would order two bottles of beer. He decided to make certain and, as he started back into the room, caught sight of the figure of a man on another balcony over the left wing of the house, at right angles to his balcony. There was the same down pulled hat that had characterized the man in the front window but Crane did not think this was the same man. This man seemed smaller, though equally unpleasant.

There was a knock on the door, and a hollow-cheeked young man in a white linen suit came into the room.

"I'm Penn Essex," he said and carefully closed and bolted the door. "I'm certainly glad to see you."

Crane introduced O'Malley and himself, then asked, "What's the trouble? Colonel Black didn't have time to tell us."

Essex sat in one of the two easy chairs.

"It's notes," he said.

"Notes?"

"Here." Essex uncoiled from his chair, thrust three sheets of paper in Crane's hand. "Read them."

Crane examined the first note. It was crudely printed in red ink on a diagonally torn sheet of white paper. It read:

Essex—You come clean or else. Follow instructions when they come. Don't try to escape because I am watching every move you make.
The Eye

"Well, well, well," said Crane and turned to the second note.

Essex—Hire more guards if you like. They will do you no good. Your instructions are to get fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000) in unmarked bills. Keep them handy.
The Eye

This sheet of paper had also been torn diagonally from a larger piece. Crane picked up the first piece and placed the

Boxer, a Gun-Toting Butler and a Strip-Tease Queen!

two together. They matched. The ink on both, too, was red.

The third sheet was torn like the others. It read:

Essex—The time nears when you must pay your debt. You have a choice. Fifty thousand in small unmarked bills—or your life! Instructions follow. Don't try to escape.

The Eye



BILL CRANE

"When did you get the first note?" Crane asked.

Essex sat with elbows on knees. "The first note came just a month ago, on the twenty-seventh of February. It was the oddest thing. I had some rooms at the Waldorf in New York and I woke up in the morning with something scratching my chin. It was the note, pinned to the pillow."

"Any idea how it got there?" Crane asked. "Anybody staying with you?"

"Nobody but Brown, my man."

Crane asked, "You don't think he could have put the note on your pillow?"

"He could have, all right, but I don't think he did. Especially in view of the others."

"Yes, you better tell us about the others."

"Well, the next note—the one about the fifty thousand dollars—came the day after I got down here. That was ten

days ago. I found it in my wallet. I put five hundred dollars in the wallet and drove up to Miami for a fling at the Blue Castle; that's Roland Tortoni's place. The note wasn't there when I put the five hundred in the wallet, but when I opened it to buy some chips for a roulette game it fell out. And another queer thing was that two of the five one-hundred-dollar bills had disappeared."

O'Malley's gray-blue eyes rested on Crane's brown eyes. "A dip?"

"Might be," Crane explained to Essex: "Mr. O'Malley suggests someone might have picked your pocket, removed the two hundred dollars, inserted the note and then replaced the wallet."

"That's barely possible," agreed Essex, "but it seems to me a very risky way for The Eye to get the note to me."

IN THIS Crane was inclined to agree, but made no comment.

Crane asked, "Where was Brown that evening?"

"Somewhere between New York and Miami, driving the Bugatti down. That's why I've eliminated him."

"And the third note?"

"It came four days ago, in the morning. That one really scared me. It was in my hand when I woke up. I suppose somebody came in through the window—the door to the bedroom was locked—and put it there." He detected an expression of doubt on Crane's face, added, "This would be no time to lie, anyway, with possibly my life at stake."

"Or fifty thousand dollars."

"Much more likely my life. I haven't an idea where I'd get fifty thousand dollars. Dad left everything tied up in a trust for me and Camelia. We get an allowance, but mine goes a lot faster than it comes."

Crane was looking at the third note. "The time nears when you must pay your debt." He glanced at Essex. "Do you owe somebody?"

"Only a few small debts—clothes and hotel bills and liquor bills. I don't suppose any of them run over a couple of thousand."

"Have you any enemies?"

"I suppose there're lots of people who don't like me, but I'm sure none of them is gunning for me," Essex said. "I think somebody's trying to scare me into pay-

ing him fifty thousand dollars. Probably some racketeer. If he knew me he'd know I couldn't get my hands on any such sum."

"I don't know that 'somebody' would have much chance to stick notes in your hand while you're asleep," said Crane. He took a long drink of the beer. "Is that the whole story?"

Essex nodded.

"No more notes?" Crane asked. "No attacks made on you?"

Essex shook his head. Crane continued:

"Well, what do you want us to do?"

"Oh, I suppose the usual thing." Essex relaxed. "It wasn't so much my idea bringing you down here as it was old Hastings'." He caught the inquiry in Crane's eyes. "He's president of Union Trust and was worried about my safety."

"We're not bodyguards," said Crane, "we're detectives."

"I don't expect you to guard me; I've provided for that. You're to see about The Eye—collar him if you can."

"What are we supposed to be? Friends of yours?" Crane asked.

"Yes. Only Camelia and the trust company representative know you are detectives."

"Is he that fellow who sent us a wire telling us to be here yesterday or we'd be fired?"

"Yes. Major Eastcomb. He's still furious over your telegram in answer."

"I only said 'Baloney,'" Crane protested.

"Well, you *are* a day late." Essex rose. "I'll tell everybody I met you both in New York and invited you down here. Anyway, Camelia's giving a sort of house party. Is that all right?"

Crane let the last of the beer slide down his throat. "I accept the invitation with pleasure."

O'MALLEY and Crane had just finished an early swim, the next morning, and had reached the strand of damp, firmly packed sand at the water's edge, when a flamingo ran around the left-hand corner of the house and came toward them. Behind the bird was a blonde in a tight white Lastex bathing suit. Her legs were slim and brown and her hair was the shade of pine shavings.

"Head him off," the girl called, running.

Crane obligingly ran toward the patio, but the flamingo suddenly cut loose with a burst of speed, passed him by a good three feet and vanished around the other side of the house.

"Oh, too bad," cried the girl, coming to a halt. She turned to face a tall young man in blue wool trunks who had just rounded the first corner. "No use, Tony," she told him. "Abelard went through for a touchdown." She turned back to Crane: "Thanks for the gallant effort," she said.

"I'm just as glad I was too late," said Crane. "I've never tackled a flamingo."

"Nobody ever has. We've been trying for years." She smiled and added: "I'm Camelia Essex. You're Penn's friends, aren't you?"

"I'm William Crane," said Crane, "and this is Thomas O'Malley."

"And this is Tony Lamphier."

The young man's expression was glassy. "H'lo," he said. Abruptly he started for the ocean.

"He's a little drunkee," Miss Essex explained.

"So early in the morning?" asked Crane in astonishment.

"Oh, no. We're just rounding out the evening."

"You must have had some evening," Crane said.

"Oh, yes. We went to Tortoni's." Her eyes turned from Tony Lamphier, struggling with the breakers, to Crane and O'Malley. "You're the detectives, aren't you?" Her face was serious. "You can help Penn, can't you? I'm really frightened."

"Sure," said O'Malley. "Don't worry at all."

She put her hand on Crane's arm. "This may be the only chance I'll have to speak to you alone." Her words were hurried. "Penn's lost a lot of money gambling—twenty-five thousand dollars. Tortoni holds his I O Us and has been trying to collect. He's dangerous."

Tony Lamphier was shouting from a point fifty yards out at sea. "Cam! Oh, *Caam!*"

"Coming, dear." She tightened her fingers on Crane's arm. "Penn doesn't know I know about it, but I thought you ought to be told. He doesn't intend to pay the debt, says Tortoni's wheel is crooked."

"How did you find this out?"



The doorman hit Crane, sending him spinning [Chap. III]

"I overheard Tortoni threatening Penn in New York." She ran toward the surf. "Here I come, Tony." Breast deep in water, she faced the shore for an instant. "See you this afternoon."

Crane shouted, "It's a date."

They went up to their rooms. The connecting bathroom was a large one, and Crane shaved while O'Malley took a shower.

"We better go out tonight and see if this Tortoni's wheel is really crooked," he said.

"What will we use for money?"

Crane doused warm water on his face. "We got dough." Marching into his room, he returned with a pigskin wallet. "The colonel gave us a grand for expenses. Look!" His right hand drew out the contents of the wallet. "Well, I'll be frazzled!"

Amid the hundred-dollar bills was a folded sheet of paper. He opened it, noted the red ink, read aloud:

Flatfeet—

You got till 12 noon today to get out of here. This is no joke. Get out or the 'gators back in the swamps will be fatter. You get the idea.
The Eye

Crane went into his room and compared the new note with those he had received from Essex. The ink was the same shade of red and the angle at which the sheet had been torn was identical.

O'Malley thrust one lean leg then the other into a pair of shorts. "We better scam downstairs and get some breakfast," he said. "He gives us only three hours to go."

II

MIAAMI'S sidewalks dazzlingly reflected sunlight as the convertible swung into a parking lot. "Back after lunch," Crane told the attendant.

They walked over to Flagler Street. A block to the left they found the New York Bar. It was cool inside. They sank into leather chairs on the opposite sides of a black composition table.

"Give me a jit," Crane said to O'Malley. "I'll make that phone call."

When he returned he was smiling. "Doc Williams and Eddie Burns are in town."

O'Malley looked up from a half-finished drink. "So that phony count did get here after all?"

"Yeah, the count's over at the Roney Plaza. Burns is with him on the beach and Doc's coming right over."

Doc Williams found them very gay. He was a dapper man with a waxed mustache and pouches under his eyes. Chorus girls always thought he looked "distinguished."

"Now tell us about the count," Crane said. "How did he get here?"

"On a plane." Williams said he had picked up the count as soon as the Union Trust had given Colonel Black the Essex case. "The Colonel's got an idea di Gregario's back of those notes." Crane nodded and he went on. "Last night he takes the Florida plane at Newark and Eddie and I go along. He goes right to the Roney from the plane, gets a room and meets with a lot of other foreigners. They are plannin' something, but Eddie and I can't get near enough to hear. Now he and Eddie are sunning on the beach."

"You don't think they are just friends of his?"

"They may be friends, but they're up to something. Most of 'em are packing rods."

O'Malley said, "That gives us two guys to investigate—the count and Tortoni."

"I know Tortoni," said Williams. "He used to work in the slave racket."

"A torpedo?"

"Naw. Yellow as a banana."

"Well, we'll be seeing him for ourselves tonight," said Crane. "We're going to give his joint a little whirl."

Crane shoved the convertible over the fifty-one miles to Key Largo in forty-seven minutes.

On the curving stairs they met a servingman. "Mr. Essex has been inquiring about you, sir," he told Crane. "Everyone is having cocktails by the swimming pool."

They climbed the stairs and Crane went to the balcony and looked down at the patio. In the place where breakfast had been served was a long table covered by bottles, glasses, ice, hors d'oeuvres. A servant in white was flourishing a cocktail shaker.

Crane said, "O'Malley! Babes!"

One of the women by the pool didn't count; she was past fifty. There were three others who did count, however. One of these was Camelia Essex. Another woman, English-looking, athletic,

stood talking to Tony Lamphier and another man. Her hair was brown; her legs were long and slender; her hips narrow under a silver-gray swim suit. But the third woman, Dawn Day, held their eyes. She was an egg-yolk blonde and O'Malley described her by saying, "Look out—Mae West!" She was talking with the Major and Penn Essex.

ESSEX, when they entered the patio, saw they were given planters punches and took them around to the others. The woman with Tony Lamphier was Eve Boucher and she was about thirty years old. The man with them was Gregory Boucher. He was over forty and looked cunning and unreliable. Crane wondered how Mrs. Boucher had happened to marry him.

Sybil Langley was the name of the older woman. She was seated by herself and held in her hand what looked to Crane like half a glass of straight whisky.

"She's a second cousin of ours—was a top-flight actress once," Essex said, when they left her. "Dawn, this is Mr. Crane—and Mr. O'Malley." He turned to them. "Dawn Day."

Miss Day was even more appealing at close range. Her eyes, baby blue, passed over Crane's wiry body, lingeringly appraised O'Malley's beautifully muscled shoulders.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. O'Malley," she said, "real pleased. And you, too, Mr. Crane."

Major Eastcomb was scowling. "Have a good time in Miami?" he asked.

Crane said, "I had a good time, but it was awfully hot." He added, "We hurried back."

Essex was interested. "What time did you make?"

"Forty-seven minutes."

"Not bad, but I've made it in an even forty in the Bugatti."

Miss Day said, "You boys and your cars." She smiled at Essex. "You won't mind if Mr. O'Malley gives me a swimming lesson? I just know he's a wonderful swimmer." She rolled her eyes up to Mr. O'Malley. "Don't you think it would be fun?"

O'Malley replied with enthusiasm that he thought it would, and then started for the beach.

Major Eastcomb said, "What did you find in Miami?"

Crane said, "I ran across the trail of a friend of Miss Essex. Count Paul di Gregario."

Anger made the major's face tomato red. "I'll teach that fellow to follow Camelia down here. Where's he staying?"

"At the Roney Plaza."

Essex' eyes were on the sea. "What are you going to do about the note you got?" he asked.

"I told him," said the major. "I warned him to keep away."

"What can I do?" asked Crane. "Except wait. I *am* going around to see Roland Tortoni tonight."

Essex' face was surprised.

"He *has* twenty-five thousand dollars' worth of your I O Us, hasn't he?" Crane asked impatiently.

"Yes, but I'm not going to pay him. He's crooked—his wheels are crooked. He can't collect."

"Hasn't it occurred to you he might be using the notes to make you pay?"

Essex clenched his hands. "He wouldn't dare."

They could hear Miss Day's laughter, high and piercing.

Essex' hand pressed Crane's arm. "I'll see you a little later." He went off in the direction of O'Malley and Miss Day.

The major also left him. Crane went over to the edge of the pool and dived into the lime-colored water.

At the other end of the pool he encountered Camelia Essex and Tony Lamphier. They seemed glad to see him.

"Your friend sort of goes for Penn's girl, doesn't he?" Camelia said.

"She wanted to learn to swim."

"She always wants to learn to swim."

Crane noticed a girl in black Chinese pajamas coming across the patio. She had black hair and a white face, and she walked with short, gliding steps.

"Who's that girl?" he asked.

"What girl? Oh. That's Imago Paraguay. She's a dancer, a friend of Penn. Would you like to meet her?"

"Why not?" Crane said.

MISS ESSEX put her chin over the side of the pool and called, "Imago, this is Mr. Crane."

She had halted by Sybil Langley. "How do you do," she said in a soft flat voice.

Crane swam the length of the pool and climbed over the edge. He went over to the table where the two women were

now sitting. "Let's get acquainted, Miss Paraguay," he said and sat down near her.

* * * * *

Everybody except Miss Langley was very gay after dinner. Crane suggested they go to Roland Tortoni's Blue Castle. Everybody thought this would be fine.

Crane and O'Malley went up to their rooms while the cars were being sent around. Taking five one-hundred-dollar bills from his wallet, Crane gave them to O'Malley. "Let's both watch Tortoni's wheel," he said. "This isn't much dough to work with, but maybe one of us will see something crooked."

They discovered two cars in the driveway. Penn Essex was at the wheel of a black-and-chrome Bugatti sport touring model and Dawn Day sat beside him. He called to Crane, "You and O'Malley take Miss Paraguay in the Lincoln with the Bouchers." He raced the motor sending smoke from the exhaust. "Cam and Tony and the major are coming with me." With a deep-throated roar the car rolled away.

Boucher drove the Lincoln. They went toward Miami at a comfortable fifty-five miles an hour, and came to a halt in front of a large blue stucco house. The Negro's brass buttons gleamed in the light, as he pulled open the doors of the Lincoln.

Their table was beside the dance floor. "Veuve Cliquot," Essex told the headwaiter. "Six bottles . . . to start." O'Malley gazed at him with approval.

Almost as luxuriant as a tropical jungle was the room around the black composition dance floor. Out of the floor, out of blue boxes, grew palms and bamboo trees as delicately leaved as feather dusters. Vines clung to the trunks of the trees, bearing fragile blossoms. Half the room had no roof and overhead there were stars.

Soon a tall, dark man with a mustache came over and began talking to Camelia Essex.

"Paul, I'd like to have you meet these people," she said. "Miss Paraguay, this is Count Paul di Gregario."

The smile fled from the count's face. His skin faded to the color of a peeled banana.

"We ha-ave met before," said Imago Paraguay.

The major was off somewhere with Mrs. Boucher and that left only three of them at the table. The waiter had started to put the champagne bottle back in the bucket, when Lamphier suddenly grasped it by the neck, and rose to his feet. "Gentlemen, I propose a toast."

"To the queen," said Crane.

"Yes, to Camelia Essex."

They drank that toast.

Tony Lamphier said, "Now I want to give a confusion."

O'Malley was surprised. "A confusion?"

"Yes. The confusion of Count Paul di Gregario."

"Good," said Crane.

As they were drinking the orchestra stopped. Crane walked away from the table and through a doorway down the hall. He found Doc Williams and a Negro attendant in the washroom. Major Eastcomb came into the lavatory. His face was flushed from drinking.

Williams departed and the major scowled at Crane. "Who's that?"

"Fellow I used to know in New York."

Crane washed his hands and face and dried them. Through the mirror he saw Count di Gregario come into the room.

Major Eastcomb saw him a second later. He swung around and said, "Ha!" He looked ferocious.

The count halted abruptly.

"So you're around again," said the major. "You scoundrel, I told you to keep away from that girl."

Count di Gregario laughed. "Since when must I obey your orders, Major Eastcomb?"

The major looked like a bull about to charge. "You be out of town tomorrow!"

Di Gregario smiled and turned to leave the room. The major caught his arm, swung him around, hit him a solid blow on the chest. Di Gregario came back at him. "You pig!" he cried. He got a hand on the major's face, shoved. The major stepped backward, his head striking the mirror and cracking it vertically. A piece of soap skidded across the tile floor.

Hands fluttering, the count followed. The major rolled off the washbowl, jerked an army automatic from under his coat, thrust it at di Gregario.

The colored boy slithered under the row of washbasins.

Cat-quick, di Gregario snatched the pistol, struck the major across the

bridge of his nose with the butt. Blood stained the major's white dress shirt. His knees folded under him; his head hit the washbowl. There was a silvery bong, like the strike of a distant clock.

Di Gregario stood over him. "Pig!" he said. "Murderer!" He wiped the automatic with a towel, thrust it in his pocket. He turned to Crane. "I do not think your *amigo* will bother me again. *Adios, Senor!*"

"Adios."

Cold towels quickly cleared the major's head, helped stanch the flow of blood. There were red bruises on his forehead and cheeks, and his left eye was going to be black, but Crane did not think his nose was broken.

Somehow the major got to his feet. "You're a fine coward!" he told Crane. "You stand there and let that man beat me up. You get out of the house by tomorrow morning"—he shouldered past Crane—"or I'll have you thrown out." The door slammed behind him.

The colored boy turned to Crane. "You work for him, boss?"

"I guess not," said Crane.

III

WILLIAM CRANE went back to the table, but there was no one there.

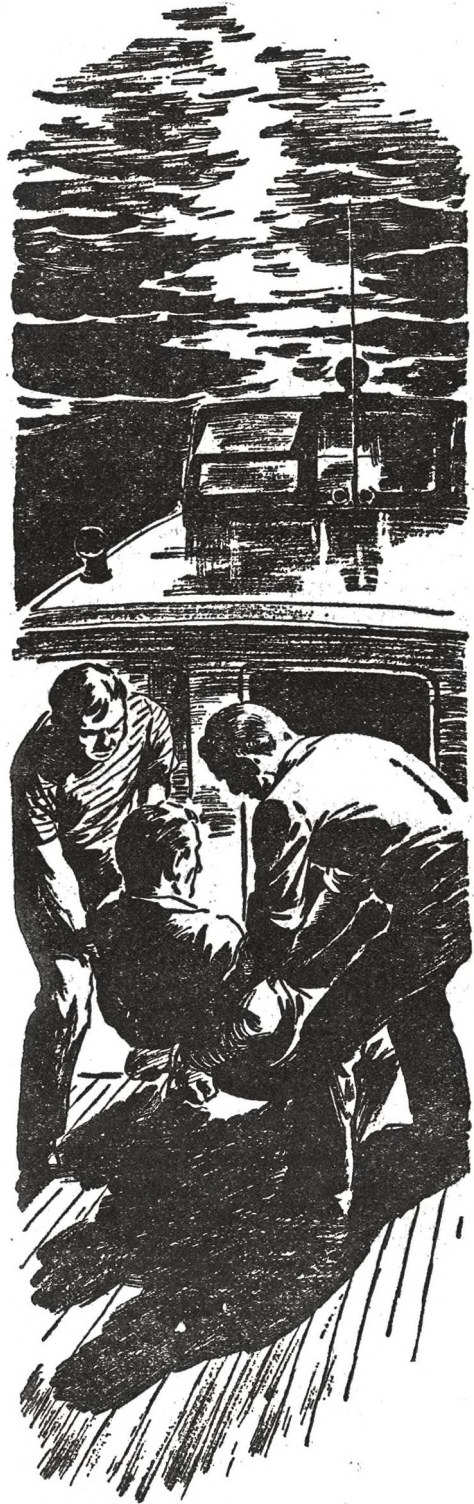
He finished his glass of champagne and called the headwaiter. "My crowd must be upstairs. Take me to Mr. Tortoni."

The headwaiter beckoned and two assistants moved toward Crane. "Take him to Mr. Tortoni," said the headwaiter.

They pushed their way through the crowd and mounted two flights of stairs. They went down a long corridor and past an open door through which Crane saw men and women clustered about a roulette wheel. Among the men was O'Malley.

Behind the desk in Tortoni's office was a thick-joweled man in a cream suit of silk pongee. Back of him, half in shadow, a woman smoked a cigarette through a jade holder. It was Imago Paraguay. Imago spoke. Smoke floated from her red mouth as she talked. "This is Mr. Tortoni, Mr. Cra-ane. Mr. Cra-ane is with the Essex party."

Tortoni's scowl faded. "Pleased t'meet ya, Mr. Crane."



The two men tossed Crane down the cabin steps (Chap. X)

Imago Paraguay explained: "I shall be responsible for Mr. Cra-ane. And now, Mr. Tortoni, if you will just cash my check, we will bother you no longer."

Tortoni produced a metal box. "It was for five—"

"One thousand do-lars, Mr. Tortoni."

He counted out ten one-hundred-dollar bills. "Tha-ank you," she said. "Shall we gamble Mr. Cra-ane?"

They reached the roulette room. Crane saw most of the Essex party at the end of the roulette table. The major had a piece of court plaster on the bridge of his nose. Tony Lamphier, standing behind Camelia Essex, waved at them. The others were intent on the wheel.

Imago Paraguay, to Crane's surprise, bought a thousand dollars' worth of counters. He gave the man five hundred. As he put the counters in his pocket, someone drew him aside. It was O'Malley.

"Doc and Eddie have lost track of the count."

"He and the three Cuban torpedoes with him must have gone out through a back door. Tom's been watching out in front all the time."

Crane thought for a minute. "Well, we're supposed to be fired, but there's no use quitting until we make sure. Tell Doc and Tom to go back to the count's hotel. Maybe they can pick him up."

"Who fired us?"

"The major."

"W'ere out in the cold now."

"It's not so cold," said O'Malley. "I've knocked down a couple of C-notes on the wheel."

"You think it's straight?"

"I'm two Cs ahead, ain't I?"

"Make your bets, please," the croupier said.

Crane leaned between Imago and a large woman glittering with diamonds and put a hundred on red. Imago now had only four hundred dollars' worth of counters.

The ball halted on red and odd. The croupier pushed chips at Crane. He let them stay on red. Imago also put two hundred on red, saying, "We will go down together."

Red came again, and again. A hard-faced man in a tuxedo took up a position behind the croupier. Crane let thirty-two hundred ride on red.

The hard-faced man pushed two hundred dollars' worth of the counters back. "Three thousand limit," he said.

"Oh, I see," Crane said. "Penny ante, hey?"

There was silence as the ivory pea bumbled about the wheel.

The rattle of the ball ceased.

"Red and odd."

Crane accepted the pile of counters. "We can't bet them," he said to Imago Paraguay. "What will we do with them?"

"This way," she said, and let the three thousand remain on red. The other three thousand she put on odd.

CRANE took the remaining two hundred dollars and put them on thirty-three. "Swing it," he said to the croupier.

It seemed to Crane the wheel spun for hours. He felt Imago Paraguay's hand on his wrist.

"Thirty-three, red and uneven," whispered the croupier.

The hard-faced man said, "The wheel is closed for the night."

"A toast to the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo," someone exclaimed.

Their counters came to nineteen thousand six hundred dollars. Crane gave Imago nine thousand seven hundred dollars and put the rest in his wallet.

"I think we can afford a glass of champagne," he said.

The entire party went down to their table and drank the champagne Crane bought.

Then Essex got the bill and paid it.

There was a delay at the check room, as O'Malley had no check for his hat. Thus when the detectives, the Bouchers, and Imago Paraguay finally emerged from the Blue Castle, the Bugatti was in front of the door.

"Where's the major?" he asked.

Crane was noticing that the doorman was a white man now, not a Negro, when two men with handkerchiefs tied over the lower portions of their faces came around the back of the Bugatti. They both carried automatic pistols.

One of them said, "This is a stick-up. Put 'em up."

Miss Day started to scream and the other man snarled, "Can it, sister." He shoved his pistol at O'Malley.

The first man took hold of Camelia Essex' arm, jerked her toward him, saying, "Come along, baby." For an instant he was in the path of light from the door and Crane saw the lobe of his ear was missing.

Tony Lamphier moved to help Camelia and the first man slugged him with the barrel of his pistol. He crumpled against the Bugatti, Essex moved forward and the man hit him too.

Crane tried to reach the man covering O'Malley, but the doorman hit him on the cheekbone, sent him spinning into Boucher. When he got his balance Camelia, the man with the lobeless ear and the doorman had disappeared. The second masked man was backing around the Bugatti. "Move, you dudes, move," he jeered. He swung his pistol in front of him, like a man using a garden hose.

There was the beep of a horn. "Okay," said the man. He scuttled behind the Bugatti and an instant later a black sedan roared down the drive. Miss Day screamed. Crazy the sedan twisted into the street. In the back seat two men fought with Camelia Essex—in the front, beside the driver, the doorman was ripping off his uniform.

Essex scrambled into the Bugatti, pressed the starter. "Come on," he yelled.

Far down the street, they could see the tail light on the sedan. It was steady for several seconds, then it curved to the right. "He's taking the County Causeway," Crane shouted.

Essex nodded. On the causeway the Bugatti leaped like a greyhound, but the sedan was still far ahead.

O'Malley yelled over the nose of the wind and motor, "A turn!"

Essex, braking, said, "I see it," and in an instant they were on Biscayne Boulevard, heading for town.

"They got her?" Lamphier asked. He had been dragged into the back seat by Crane.

"Yeah," said Crane.

OPPPOSITE Bay Front Park, they gained a little on the sedan, and O'Malley leaned out of the tonneau. Three times his revolver deafened their ears. The sedan swung to the right.

"That ought to bring out the cops," O'Malley shouted to Crane.

It did, but too late. They had turned right, past part of the business section of Miami, when a squad car joined in

the chase. Its siren was ululant, but it soon dropped far behind.

"We'll catch 'em ourselves," shouted O'Malley. "We're on a straight road."

"How are we going to handle them?" asked Tony Lamphier. "They had guns, hadn't they?"

The Bugatti was now traveling very fast.

Essex, jackknifed over the wheel, spoke to O'Malley, who repeated to Crane: "There's a revolver in the pocket on the left-hand door."

Crane found it. The Bugatti's lights picked up the black bulk of the sedan. They were steadily gaining.

"You better get on the floor," Crane told Lamphier. "The fireworks are about due."

"I'm not scared," Lamphier replied and then asked, "Isn't there danger of hitting Camelia?"

"They'll keep her down."

With a breathtaking swerve that sent Crane flying against Lamphier the Bugatti angled toward the ditch on the left of the cement, then, as crazily as before, it yawed to the right. Crane ducked, held his breath for the crash, but instead the Bugatti straightened out, and slackened speed. Cautiously Crane raised his head. O'Malley was leaning across the seat, his hands on the wheel, but Essex was not in sight.

"Great Joseph!" Crane yelled. "Did he fall out?"

"Naw," said O'Malley. "He's on the floor. Where's the hand brake?"

The Bugatti was coming to a stop. Crane opened the door and stepped out on the cement. O'Malley lifted Essex from the floor. "Cold as a haddock," he observed.

"We better get him to a doctor," said Crane. "He may be dying."

"But Camelia?" Tony Lamphier's voice was anguished. "Those men—what will they do to her? We have to go on."

"What can we do now?" Crane looked down the road. "They're out of sight. Besides, the police will block all roads."

"I think our guy's coming to," said O'Malley.

While a soft, fragrant breeze fingered their faces they watched Essex, listened to his labored breathing.

At last he sat up, looked blankly around.

"Cam—Cam! What happened?"

"You passed out," said O'Malley.

"While I was driving? How did you stop the car?"

"I don't know myself," said O'Malley. "You slumped over and there I was at the wheel."

"And the sedan?"

"It kept on," said O'Malley.

* * * * *

Sunshine warmed Crane's face through the French windows. O'Malley shook Crane awake. "Come on, dope," he said. "It's almost ten."

Crane sat up.

"The cops are here, and they'll be wanting to see you."

Crane sat up.

"They found the sedan at a place called Matecumbe," said O'Malley. "There was blood on the back seat. They took her on a boat. The sedan was right by the water."

Crane massaged his sore jaw. "That's very interesting." Crane swung his feet over the side of the bed. "How's Essex?"

"He's all right, I guess. Oh yeah, he got another note. Found it pinned to his pillow when he woke up. He gave it to the cops, but I made a copy of it. Here."

Crane took the piece of paper. It read:

Essex—If you want your sister back alive get ready to pay the fifty thousand in small bills. I will let you know when and how.

The Eye

Crane gave the note back to O'Malley. "That's not as pretty as the one I got," he said, taking a folded piece of paper from under the pillow. "Would you care to see it?"

Flatfoot—The alligators in the swamp are hungry for your flesh and they shall have it. I rarely warn twice. Did you enjoy your winnings, ha, ha, ha!

The Eye

"What are you going to do?" O'Malley asked. "I mean about the girl."

"I think we ought to talk to Tortoni and to the count. I'd like to find out if either one knows a gent with no lobe to his ear."

Crane went in the bathroom and put on his swimming trunks.

When he came out O'Malley was staring at the ceiling. "What's the matter?" he asked him.

"Those places—what are they for?"

Crane looked at the steel grilles in the four corners of the room. "Ventilation," he said. "Well, now for a swim."

CRANE went down to the beach. When he had finished his swim, O'Malley and Essex were talking on the shore, by his bathrobe. Essex spoke about the two notes. "The fellow must have an accomplice in the house," he said.

"The cops are going through our rooms," said O'Malley.

Crane was alarmed. "They'll get the nine thou—"

"I got it," said O'Malley.

"That's just about as bad." He put on his robe. "Is it all right if we have breakfast?" he asked Essex.

"Why not?"

"The major fired us last night."

"I've talked with him," said Essex. "You're working for the estate, not for him. He didn't hire you and he can't dismiss you." He walked beside Crane toward the patio. "Who do you think's got her?"

"It may be dangerous to find out— for her." Crane sat at the breakfast table, told the servingman, "Coffee, toast and tomato juice." He faced Essex. "You can bet The Eye isn't holding her in person. If he's caught, his men may let her go or . . ."

He drew his finger across his throat.

Two men approached the table. One of them had a badly set broken nose.

"You're Crane, ain't you?" asked the man with the crooked nose. "I'm Captain Enright, out of the bureau in Miami. This is Slocum, of the sheriff's office."

"This is O'Malley," Crane began.

"We know O'Malley," said Slocum. Black stubble covered his bulldog jaw. "We think you're a heck of a fine pair of amateur detectives. Let 'em snatch a girl out from under your eyes. It's a blot on the whole profession."

"They did all they could, Mr. Slocum," said Essex. "If I hadn't keeled over we would have caught them easily. It's all my fault."

The servingman was pouring the coffee. "Two lumps and no cream," Crane told him. "What do you want to know, Captain?" he asked, ignoring Slocum.

The captain, it seemed, wanted to know exactly what happened at the Blue Castle. He seemed to know everything already, but Crane patiently went over the story. He said nothing, however, of the man with no lobe on his ear.

Slocum said, "In my opinion this Eye is a crank."

"Crank or not," said Captain Enright, "you gotta admit he's got Miss Essex."

O'Malley asked, "How about Tortoni?"

"We talked with him," said Slocum. "He's okay. He wouldn't pull a thing like that in his own place."

"That's what I thought," said O'Malley, "but you never can tell."

"Oh, we'll keep an eye on Tortoni," Captain Enright said.

"How about that count?" asked Crane.

"We're trying to find him," said Slocum. "He's disappeared."

They discussed the notes. They had them all, including the two received by Crane, in front of them on the breakfast table. Captain Enright maintained The Eye had planned to kidnap Miss Essex from the start. He said that was why the notes threatened Essex; to throw him off his guard. O'Malley wanted to know why The Eye hadn't gone ahead, then, and kidnaped the girl without warning anybody.

"In my opinion," Slocum repeated, "this Eye is a crank."

MAJOR EASTCOMB came in and pulled out a chair beside O'Malley. "Mind if I join the conference?" he asked. Two strips of adhesive tape crisscrossed the bridge of his nose, but otherwise he showed no sign of injury.

"Glad to have you, Major," said Captain Enright heartily. "I don't believe you met Slocum, of the sheriff's office. We were just speaking of the ransom."

Essex said, "What do you think, Major?" His eyes were bloodshot. "What are we to do when the directions for paying come?"

"You know I care for Camelia as much as anybody in the world—as much as anybody." The major clenched his fist. "But what guarantee have we that she'll be released after we pay the money?"

Crane turned to Penn. "Mr. Essex," he asked, "is the fifty thousand available for a ransom?"

"I talked with Mr. Hastings on the long-distance phone this morning." Major Eastcomb tilted his head toward Captain Enright. "He's president of the Union Trust. He said the money will be deposited immediately in the First Na-

tional at Miami. I think, however, we ought to delay payment—at least for a while."

Crane pushed the coffee cup out of his way. He was genuinely angry. "Do you want my opinion? First you ought to ask the Department of Justice for help."

Major Eastcomb said dryly, "We have."

"Good. That's something sensible for a change. The second thing is to have the bank get that fifty grand ready." Crane was talking directly to Essex. "Then put an ad in the papers. Say: 'Money is ready. Please select contact man.' Then sign your own name to the ad, and when the directions come, pay the money exactly as they say."

Slocum sneered, "And what if they don't let her go?"

Essex looked bewildered. "I want to do what's right."

"Then you'll pay the money," said Crane.

IV

CRANE and O'Malley found the road to the Gulf of Mexico was rough and crowded with trucks. On the convertible's right was the old track of the Florida East Coast. Debris, blocks of stone, broken furniture, rags littered the flat landscape.

"Williams is looking up Tortoni and the guy with no lobe to his ear," O'Malley said. "We'll see Di Gregario."

They swung the convertible around a forest of bent palm trees and came to the end of the road. There were two fishing boats in a canal on their right. Some people were looking at a black sedan.

"Come to look at the car?" a man asked as they walked up to it. He had a pistol in a holster over his right hip.

O'Malley said, "You mean that's the car they took Miss Essex in?"

"None other." The man opened the rear door of the sedan. "Look at the blood." On the seat there were brownish stains.

"Somebody winged one of them. Look."

Under his finger, in the rear window, was a hole.

"Musta got his head," the man said. "I hope it killed him," said a tanned man with bare feet.

The man with the bare feet was captain of the fishing boat *Sally*. The man with the gun was a deputy sheriff. Both affirmed there was little chance of discovering the kidnapers' boat. The fisherman said it would be simple to hide by any one of a hundred keys between Port Everglades and Key West.

Crane and O'Malley went to the convertible and started back for Key Largo.

It was five minutes before noon when they reached the Essex estate.

"We'll see what's happened," said Crane, "and then beat it for Miami." He slammed the convertible's door. "Better tell them we're going in to do some errands."

They went to the patio. Toward them came Imago Paraguay.

"It is a nice morning, no?" she said. "I am so surprised to hear you are detectives. I think perhaps I will help you. You wish to find Miss Essex?"

"Very much," said Crane.

"Do you think Paul Di Gregario may ha-ave her?"

"It is likely."

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yes."

"Good. If you like I will go with you to see him. I ha-ave an influence with him."

Crane remembered the count's expression when he had encountered the dancer in the Blue Castle. "Maybe you can help us," he said.

"I can," she said. "Shall we go, *Senor* Crane?"

As they were getting into the convertible they met Miss Day. They told her they were going to Miami.

"Take me," she said.

"Where's Essex?" Crane asked.

"He and Tony Lamphier and the major have gone into Miami to see about an airplane," she said. "They think Camelia's being held in a boat. Tony's idea is they can spot it from the air."

"How're they going to know it?" asked O'Malley.

"Search me."

It was a nice ride into Miami.

THEY left Miss Day in the bar of the Roney Plaza sipping pink planters. "Hurry back," she said, smiling at Crane.

O'Malley was in front of the elevators. "On the eighth floor," he said. "I used the old telegram gag."

In the elevator Imago Paraguay stood between them. Her body gave off an odor of sandalwood. They reached the eighth floor, and started down the corridor. A stocky man looking out the window at the end turned toward them. He was Eddie Burns and he had been watching the count.

O'Malley turned left down another corridor, halted at the third door on the right, and knocked.

"Come in," called a voice.

Imago Paraguay paused in the corridor. O'Malley opened the door and Crane went into the room.

In the door to the bathroom stood Di Gregario. Lather covered the left side of his face; in his hand was a safety razor. Before Crane could speak, Di Gregario recognized him. His fist caught Crane's mouth, sent him sprawling. Crane attempted to grapple with him as he came out of the bathroom door, but the Latin shook him off, ran for the bed. O'Malley followed on his heels, hit the back of Di Gregario's head with a revolver, as Di Gregario's hands pawed the linen sheets. Di Gregario's knees folded, slipped down on the floor. O'Malley felt the sheets with his left hand, found an automatic pistol, thrust it in his pocket.

"Tough guy," he said.

From a sitting position on the floor, Di Gregario scowled at them.

"What do you want?" he demanded thickly. "Why do you follow me?" Suddenly Di Gregario looked beyond Crane. Fear drained his color, left him gray. He gasped, "You!"

Crane turned and saw Imago Paraguay leaning against the hall door.

He watched the count with surprise. Why was he so afraid of the dancer?

Imago Paraguay's laughter was brittle. "He thi-inks we are of the Cuban secret police—that we will kill him," she explained. "For the government once I was an agent."

"Listen," Crane said. "We are not going to kill you, Di Gregario. We want to know what's happened to Camelia Essex."

The count stepped backward, visibly surprised. "I did not know anything had happened to her."

"You didn't know she had been kidnaped?"

"No!" He stared at Crane, then at Imago. "This is a trick."

O'Malley said, "Get a newspaper. That'll prove it for him."

Imago Paraguay handed Di Gregario the front page of the morning's Miami Herald. While Di Gregario read the Essex story under O'Malley's watchful eye Crane went into the bathroom and bathed his lip in cold water. He turned to find Imago Paraguay's eyes on him.

"Is what Di Gregario said true?" he demanded. "You are an agent for the Cuban government."

"Once I was. But no longer. Di Gregario's family once own much la-and in Cuba. They lose all in the la-ast revolution. Now, I think, he heads a junta to overthrow the government."

"Ah," said Crane. Imago and he came out of the bathroom. "Mr. O'Malley and I are in the employ of the Essex estate," he said. "We thought you might know something about Camelia."

"What do you want me to tell you?" asked Di Gregario.

"Where are the three men who were with you?"

"Gone—in a boat."

"Where?"

DI GREGARIO shrugged his shoulders. "A fishing trip, perhaps. But I give you my word, senores, the men in the boat have nothing to do with Camelia."

"You don't seem very worried about her—not for a guy who was so hot to elope a month or so ago," Crane said.

"I am so sorry, of course." Di Gregario's eyes were frank. "But it was over between us. She likes another."

"Who?"

"I do not know. She told me last night that one was in her party. It is the truth when I say about Camelia I know nothing."

"But the boat," said Imago. "Where is the boat?"

"I will not tell you." His eyes were defiant. "You are a spy for that devil, Cabista."

"Want me to work on him?" asked O'Malley.

"No," Crane replied. "Let's go."

He held the door for Imago. As he passed he could smell sandalwood sachet. Di Gregario came as far as the bathroom door.

"I'm sorry I struck you," he said to Crane.

"That's all right," said Crane.

Downstairs they rejoined Miss Day and after leaving the roadster in a parking lot walked to the New York Bar, where they were to meet Doc Williams. Doc and a popeyed man with a round face were at a large table in the back of the grill.

Crane presented Williams to the two women.

"And this is Mr. Joseph Nelson," said Williams.

"Please t'meet ya," Mr. Nelson said. "Sit down. I'm in the laundry business."

He was, at the moment, very drunk.

"Tell 'em about Tortoni, Mr. Nelson," said Doc Williams. "Tell 'em what you told me."

"Well—" Mr. Nelson paused to take a drink. "You see, me and my friend, Whitey, we been working for Elite for moran ten years. Well Whitey and me goes into this lunch counter joint for a couple of sandwiches and some java. Well, this Tortoni's sitting on the next stool but one from us. I don't know him from Adam, but Whitey said, 'You remember me, Mr. Tortoni? A couple of years ago I sold you our towel service for the washroom at the Blue Castle.'"

[Turn page]

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"But Tortoni didn't warm up at all. He just said, 'I remember you all right,' and turned his back to me and was just startin' to walk away when he stopped and stared at the door. I turned around to see what he was looking at and there was a guy with a gun in his hand. There was another guy in back but I didn't get a good look at him. Well, this guy shot Tortoni two times in the stomach. Then when he falls on the floor he shoots him through the top of his head, holding his pistol right up close to—"

"He killed him?" O'Malley's mouth hung open. "Killed Tortoni?"

"That's what I bin trying to tell ya," said Mr. Nelson. "So I said to Whitey, 'Let's get out of here.'"

"Did you?" asked Crane.

"I hope to tell you, mister," said Mr. Nelson. "I said goomby to Whitey and went to a place a couple blocks down the street for a drink. I was kinda sick to my stomach. And as I was telling some of the boys about what I seen, this gen'lman, Mr. Williams here, said would I come down here an tell the story to you folks and I did."

"His story ought to be worth another drink," said Williams.

"It's worth a whole bottle," said Crane. "Waiter!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Nelson.

"One thing," said Crane. "We don't have to see Tortoni now. We can have lunch." He looked at the dancer. "That is, if Imago feels like eating."

"I am all right," Imago Paraguay said. But her face looked as though it had been freshly dusted with rice powder.



AFTER basking with O'Malley on the warm sand through much of the next afternoon, Crane went back to the house for a nap.

Soft dusk had seeped into the room when he woke. He would have liked to sleep longer, but he saw it was time for dinner. He swung his bare feet over the side of the bed and sat there for some time. He thought about Camelia Essex. It was a crying shame, but what could you do? If you were too smart the kidnaper would become frightened and kill the girl. It was best to hold back until the ransom had been paid.

At the same time he wished he could

get his hands on the kidnapers.

He combed his hair and dressed, then took a flashlight and went out into the hall. Except for the murmur of the sea there was no noise. Quietly he walked along the carpet past the stairs, hearing briefly the sound of voices below, and entered the left wing of the house. The door at the end of the hall he opened a crack, saw it was dark inside, slid into the room. Tall gray rectangles on three sides of the room were French windows. He closed their heavy drapes and pressed the button on his flashlight.

He felt pretty sure he was in the rooms occupied by Essex. The French windows to the right, he was certain, led to the balcony from which the guard had watched him on the first night. Where was the bedroom? He saw another door and started for it, but a glass-topped desk with a telephone on it caught his eye. He sat down and pulled out one of the three drawers, then examined the letters inside, carelessly jumbled advertisements, bills, invitations. He had a feeling Essex was holding some information from him, some clue to the identity of The Eye. He goggled at a bill from Cye for two dozen voile shirts: \$312. There was another from Charvert; thirty cravats: \$225.

He was amazed at how much it cost to be rich! He closed the drawer and went through the other two. In one he found a left hand golf glove and eight new balls; in the other a fountain pen, envelopes, monogrammed paper and a bottle of ink. He held his flashlight to the ink. It was royal blue.

Crane got up and opened the second door. It was the bathroom. He went on through a small dressing room with drawers built into the wall two thirds the way to the ceiling. The bedroom was quite large and there were French windows along one side. Noting the double bed of carved walnut, and a table bearing a green thermos decanter and two glasses, he crossed to a door on the other side. He opened it and flashed his light into the room thus exposed and breathed through his half-opened lips, "Ah!"

The room belonged to the early fluffy Jean Harlow period. Everything was in white except the black composition floor. The walls were ivory, the ceiling chalk white, the furniture cream with white leather. On the bed, on a lazy comforter, was a white Teddy bear. Long-haired

white rugs, scattered about the composition floor, looked like blobs of whipped cream on a blackberry tart.

This was really all he wanted to know: that Miss Day had access to Essex' bedroom. . . . But he went on into the room. The eyes of the Teddy bear seemed to follow him as he went to a white writing desk, examined the drawers. He found only one letter, addressed to Dawn Day inquiring if she would be interested in a nice spot at the Boulevard Yacht Club in Chicago. Apparently Miss Day would not since the letter was nearly a month ago. Crane wondered if Miss Day had been with Essex then.

Grinning in the dark, he remembered that he was supposed to be at dinner. He went back through Essex' room, carefully closing the connecting door, and entered the small dressing room. His light, going up the high row of built-in drawers, disclosed a cream-colored ceiling. Lines on one corner marked off a square with sides three feet long—evidently a hatch leading to some sort of attic. He crossed the bathroom and was about to enter the big study when a noise made him halt. He drew back just as the lights were switched on.

A thick-set man came into the room and crossed to the glass-topped table. Pulling open the third drawer, he thrust an object in it. When he came back to the door Crane saw that his nose had been broken and badly set. He turned off the light and closed the door.

Crane waited for a full minute before going into the study. The man, he imagined, was Brown, Essex' body-guard. He went to the desk, flashed his light into the drawer. Besides the fountain pen, envelopes and monogrammed paper there were two bottles. He held one to the light. It was a bottle of red ink.

AT dinner Tony Lamphier kept asking Crane questions.

"What are we going to do tomorrow," asked Tony Lamphier.

All through dinner he had persistently brought the conversation around to the kidnaping.

"What can we do?" Crane asked.

"You should say," Major Eastcomb said. "You're supposed to be a detective."

"It seems funny, us eating and drinking," Miss Day said. "And Camelia out somewhere—in trouble."

"It does," Crane agreed. "But that's the way people act."

"The police have been checking up on the servants," said Major Eastcomb. "They think possibly someone inside the house is connected with the kidnap gang. Particularly in view of the notes."

"I think they're right," said Lamphier.

"That's just what I said," exclaimed Miss Day. "Do you remember, Penn? I told you that when you got the first note—at the Waldorf in New York."

Nervously Penn Essex wiped his lips. "That's right," he said. "I told you the day after I received it, didn't I?"

"Why—" Miss Day's blue eyes widened for a second. "Why, yes, I guess you did."

O'Malley glanced at Crane. Both were recalling Essex' denial that anyone was with him in New York at the Waldorf. Of course, possibly Miss Day wasn't with him. But Essex had stressed "day after." Naturally he'd want to protect Miss Day. And, with what he had seen upstairs, Crane thought it very likely Miss Day had been at the Waldorf. O'Malley, although he didn't know about the connecting rooms, came to the same conclusion. They both decided with satisfaction they'd better spend a little time on her.

Imago Paraguay, who had been listening to Miss Langley recount her English triumphs, suddenly turned to Crane. "Do you think I will be involved in the death of Roland Tortoni?" she asked.

"How do you mean?"

"The check. Do you remember the check I cashed?"

"Oh sure. For a thousand dollars." He finished his brandy. "The police may ask you about it, but all you have to tell them is that he cashed it so you could gamble."

"They will not arrest me?"

"Of course not. This isn't Cuba."

"I am glad." Imago Paraguay smiled.

"I was quite frightened when that funny ma-an was telling us of Tortoni's death. Did you not notice?"

"Yes, I noticed," Crane said.

The ladies left the room.

Crane, O'Malley and the major had whisky. The others had more coffee.

Tony Lamphier said, "I'm never going to get drunk again. If we'd all been sober last night they'd never have been able to take Camelia."

"If we'd been sober," said Crane, "we wouldn't have put up as much of a fight as we did."

Boucher examined Crane. "How much of a fight did you put up?"

"I didn't put this on with a paintbrush." Crane showed him the bruise on his jaw. "By the way, why didn't you take part in the struggle Boucher," he added.

Boucher frowned. "I didn't get there in time. You know that."

"I know you weren't there," said Crane.

At that moment Craig, the butler, came into the dining room. He had the *Miami News* in his hand.

"The reporters outside would like to ask you about this," Craig said. He handed the *News* to Essex.

ESSEX examined the paper, said, "Tell them I'll be out in a minute, Craig." He gave the *News* to Crane, pointed a finger at a classified advertisement.

It read:

Money is ready. Please contact.—Essex.

"So you did decide to pay the ransom," Crane said, passing the paper to O'Malley: "It's going to be interesting when The Eye contacts you. I've never yet heard of a foolproof way of receiving a ransom. Are you going to let the police in on it?"

"I suppose so," said Essex.

"Certainly we are," Major Eastcomb cut in.

As they walked toward the patio O'Malley asked Crane: "What's on the program?"

"We got to find Buster Brown." Crane told O'Malley about Essex' and Miss Day's bedrooms and how he had seen Brown with a bottle of red ink. "We have to find out what he was doing with it."

"Questioning him ought to be fun," O'Malley said.

Out in the patio, Crane pulled a metal chair over to Imago Paraguay. "You look worried," Crane said.

"I have other things to worry me," she admitted.

"The check?"

"No. Someone threatens me."

"Who?"

"That I will not tell you now."

"I don't understand," said Crane.

"You cannot. But I will do this with you," she said. "I will give you some very valuable information tonight."

He stood up, "When?"

"At two o'clock, say?"

For an instant her hand pressed his. "You may come to my room." She detached her hand, moved away, leaving a faint odor of sandalwood.

VI

O'MALLEY met Crane upstairs, in the hall outside Brown's room.

Chester Brown was reading on his bed.

"Wach want?" he asked Crane.

"We want to ask a couple of questions."

"You're the dicks, ain't you?"

Crane nodded.

"Well, I got nothing to tell you." He swung his feet to the floor. "I got enough of cops."

"Sit down," said O'Malley.

Brown sank back on the bed, his eye on O'Malley's gun.

"We aren't cops," Crane said. "We're working for Mr. Essex."

Sullenly Brown said, "What d'you want to know?"

Crane sat on the edge of a chair so he could move quickly. "What do you know about The Eye?"

"Tell that Mick to put away his rod," Brown said, "and I'll tell you what I know."

"Put it away, O'Malley."

O'Malley put the .38 in his coat pocket.

"Look," said Crane. "We want some help. We're trying to get Miss Essex back. You're in favor of that, aren't you?"

"She's a nice broad."

"It's swell of you to say so," O'Malley said.

Brown half rose from the bed.

"Sit down," said Crane. "I got a notion to throw you in the can."

"Tell this Mick to lay off," said Brown.

O'Malley asked, "What have you got on him, Bill?"

"He's the only person who could have

stuck the note on Essex' bed in the Waldorf."

"Oh, yeah?" said Brown, and leaned forward. "How about that second note? I was in Richmond when that came."

"You got a pal," said O'Malley.

"Probably that cute little French maid." Crane nodded. "That Celeste."

Brown's scowl was replaced by alarm. "You guys don't really think I been writing those notes?"

"We don't know," said O'Malley.

"Somebody in the house has been passing them out," Crane said.

Brown shook his head. He said he didn't know anybody in the house very well besides Celeste. He'd worked for Essex less than a year and he hadn't paid much attention to the regular servants. Besides, he and Craig didn't get along. He thought Craig was making plenty on the household accounts

"How long has Craig carried a rod?"

"Just since the notes began to come. Essex had us all get guns."

"Who's the guy who watched us arrive?"

"That was me."

"And the other guy—the one on the balcony?"

"Me too."

"Huh, it looked like a different guy! And you've got no idea how the notes have been arriving?" Crane asked Brown.

"I could make a guess."

"Who?"

"Miss Day."

"She had a room at the Waldorf."

"Have you got anything on her?"

"No. Just that she's handy to deliver notes."

"Deliver? You don't think she's writing them?"

"She couldn't frame a kidnaping by herself."

"I guess you're right." Crane settled back in his chair. "If she's in it, she's working for someone."

"What about the red ink?" O'Malley asked.

"Say!" Brown got to his feet. "That reminds me of something. This morning the major asked me for some red ink," he said.

"Did you get him some?" Crane asked.

"There was a bottle in Essex' study."

O'Malley asked, "He tell you what he needed it for?"

Brown shook his head.

"Has he still got the bottle?"

"Naw, I put it back in Essex' desk just before dinner."

"Looks like we got a date with the major," O'Malley said.

Crane nodded.

"Well, thanks a lot Brown," he said rising. "This may come to something."

MOSQUITOES had driven everyone in from the patio. The Bouchers, Miss Langley and the major were playing bridge. Miss Day, who had been listening to the radio, greeted them warmly.

"What did you find out?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"From that fighter."

"How'd you know we were going to talk to Brown?"

"Tom O'Malley asked me where his room was."

"We found out very little from him,"

Crane said. "Except that he thinks you're dishing out the notes. He said you were at the Waldorf when the first note came. Essex told me you weren't."

"Penn didn't want to mix me in this business. Besides, if I was putting those notes around, I wouldn't put myself on the spot, would I?"

"I guess not."

Miss Day said, "I'll tell you who you ought to watch."

"Who?" Crane asked.

"That dame." She jerked a thumb at Imago Paraguay. "What's *she* doing here?"

"What is she doing here?" demanded Crane.

"I'm asking." Miss Day adjusted a shoulder strap. "She's supposed to be Penn's guest, but he's scared of her."

"Everybody is," said Crane.

Carlos walked across the room to Essex. "Telephone, sir," he said, "Will you take it in here?"

Essex looked frightened. "I'll take it in the hall."

"Maybe it's the ransom directions," whispered Miss Day.

O'Malley switched off the radio. The people at the bridge table stopped their game, craned their necks toward the hall.

The major started to get up, then changed his mind. Miss Day and O'Malley followed Crane over to Imago Paraguay, sitting stiffly on the divan.

There was a decanter of whisky, a chromium siphon and a silver bowl of cracked ice beside the divan. Crane poured Scotch.

They were drinking when Essex came back into the room, looking a greenish white.

"Just the police," he told the bridge players. "Wanted to know if I'd heard anything."

He walked over to the divan and Miss Day gave him her glass. "You need it, baby," she said.

"Where's Lamphier?" Crane asked.

"He went upstairs to lie down," Essex said. "He's done up."

"He should be," O'Malley said. "No sleep since night before last."

"I think I'll lie down on the couch in the library," Essex said. "Then I'll be handy if anyone wants me."

"You ought to take a nap," said Miss Day.

"I can't sleep."

"I have some sleeping powders," said Imago Paraguay. "They are excellent. I take two capsules every night."

"Sleeping powders give me a headache," said Essex. "Don't they give you one?"

"Never," said Imago Paraguay.

They were adding up the score at the bridge table. Crane started toward it. He didn't want the major to get away. Imago asked him, "You ha-ave forgotten our date?"

"Of course not," said Crane.

He caught the major in the hall. "I'd like to speak with you," he said.

"What about?"

"It's a private matter."

The major scowled at him. "Come to my room, then." Without waiting for Crane he turned and went up the stairs.

AT quarter to two O'Malley came into their suite. He was surprised to see Crane. "Thought you'd gone to bed," he said, stripping off his shirt. "I'm going swimming with Miss Day."

"In this thunderstorm?"

"Aw, the thunder's thirty miles off."

Crane got off the bed, looked out the French windows. "I'd go too, only I've got a date with Imago."

O'Malley brought his trunks out of the bathroom. "You better be careful she don't stick you with a dagger."

"It isn't that kind of a date. At least I don't think so."

O'Malley pulled on his trunks. "What did you find out from the major?"

"Nothing. Exactly nothing."

"What was he usin' the red ink for?"

"To balance the estate's books. He showed them to me."

"Is he clear?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Maybe we'll get something on him later," said O'Malley hopefully.

There was a distant growl of thunder. The French window swung shut. Crane said, "You better get going or there will be a storm. And don't let Essex catch you."

O'Malley grinned. "He's dead to the world. Sleepin' under blankets on the couch in the library."

Alone again, Crane glanced at his watch. It was nearly two. He sat on the bed and pulled on his shoes. He tied his black bow tie and put on his coat.

Then he found Imago's door and knocked softly.

Imago Paraguay was wearing a sheer robe-de-nuit.

Crane spoke in a low voice. "You were going to tell me something?"

"No. I ha-ave changed my mind."

"Then nobody is threatening you?"

"Nobody."

He started to turn away. "Then I guess I better leave."

"Wait."

She pulled him toward her, grasped his shoulders, kissed him again and again on the lips. Then violently she released him. "You perhaps think I am strange?"

"I don't know."

"No?" She tore open his silk shirt. "No?" She slid the soft warm palm of her hand across his bare chest.

* * * * *

When he woke he was in bed and he did not know where until he touched the woman beside him. She did not move.

He sat up, his nostrils clogged with the odor of sandalwood. Imago Paraguay. Again he touched her tentatively, but she didn't respond. He wasn't surprised, recalling the sleeping capsule she had taken, and he wondered how deeply asleep she was. Could a person who had taken a sleeping capsule be easily aroused?

Well, there was one way of finding out. He bent over and kissed her shoul-

der. "Hi, babe," he said. She didn't move and he adjusted the light so that the lemon beam crossed her face. Her ebony eyes were wide open, her white skin usually pale ivory, was the color of claret. Startled, he touched her bare shoulder, then shook it violently. It didn't go any good. She was dead.

His first thought was of flight. He started for his clothes, then halted as the unnatural flush of Imago's skin surrured his memory. He went back to the bed, put his nose to her lips. There was a faint bitter odor, like almonds. Cyanide of potassium!

His surprise made him forget his own danger. Beside her, on a small table, was a thermos bottle, a glass half filled with water and a small box of white cardboard. He smelled the thermos, then the glass. Both were odorless. He opened the box and took out three of the dozen or so capsules inside. He opened these and smelled the gray powder with which they were filled. It was odorless. The label on the box read *Veronal*. He frowned and looked at the dead woman.

SUICIDE? Would she kill herself to get him in a jam? He didn't think so. He went to the door and found it was bolted on the inside. He looked out the French windows. From the balcony to the patio was an impossible jump. It was a hell of a time to commit suicide, he thought, but how could anyone have gotten into the room to poison her?

He fingered the box marked *Veronal*. There were two small scars on the box, almost as if someone had started to cut it with a pair of scissors. He wondered if someone had slipped a cyanide capsule in with the veronal. That would be a way of murdering her, but not a very good one if the murderer was in a hurry. She might not come to the cyanide until the last two or three capsules. No, suicide seemed the answer.

There was a gentle knocking at the door.

The low voice of Miss Langley said: "Imago, let me in."

There was a long pause.

"All right," said Miss Langley. "You'll be sorry."

Crane could hear the departing swish of her nightgown.

He found he was still grasping the box of veronal. He wiped it off with the

sheet on the bed and, holding it with the cloth, put it back on the table.

Then he went over to the chair and put on his silk shorts, his silk socks and patent-leather pumps, his shirt. Where the devil were his trousers? He remembered putting them across the top of the chair. They were no longer there. He looked on the floor, under the bed, behind the table, everywhere, but they were gone. Someone had stolen them. That meant someone had been in the room. Imago had been murdered!

VII

ROUGHLY O'Malley shook him, said, "Wake up, Bill. Things have happened." He shook him again.

"You hear me?" he asked. "Imago Paraguay is dead."

"I hear you." Crane closed his eyes, buried his face in the pillow of his own bed. "I know what happened."

"You knew it already!" O'Malley exclaimed. "How'd you find out?"

"She was dead last night."

"You didn't knock her off?"

Crane opened one eye. "Do they say she was knocked off?"

"No. The cops think she took poison."

"Who found her?"

"Miss Langley—early this morning."

"Ha!" said Crane.

"Did she tell you anything?" O'Malley asked.

"No. She changed her mind."

O'Malley lighted a cigarette. "It took you a whopping long time to learn nothing from her." He added: "You weren't in bed when I came in."

"How do you know I wasn't in bed?"

"You weren't in this bed."

"True."

"Were you there when she killed herself?" O'Malley asked.

"I don't know."

While Crane was taking a bath, O'Malley described the discovery of the body. Miss Langley's screams had brought everybody to the room, he said, and the major had called the police. So far the theory was suicide, but no note had been found.

"They didn't find a pair of pants in the room, did they?" Crane asked.

"No. Why?"

"I just wondered. This is the weirdest case."

O'Malley had another piece of news. Eddie Burns had called to say that Di Gregario had given them the slip during the night, but they had learned he was in Key West. Williams was now flying there on the Pan American plane to pick him up.

"Then I'll have to go to Key West too," was Crane's comment.

"You think Di Gregario and Imago are connected in some way?"

"It's possible. Maybe they put on all that cat-and-dog stuff for our benefit."

"I get the idea." O'Malley was leaning against the bathroom door. "She put the finger on Camelia Essex for Di Gregario, then killed herself in remorse."

"She was killed."

The bathroom door swung back and O'Malley nearly lost his balance. "How do you figure that?" O'Malley asked.

But Crane only put his finger to his lips.

"When do we start?" O'Malley said.

"You aren't going. I got a job for you in Miami."

He told O'Malley that he wanted to know if Imago's check for one thousand dollars had been found either in Tortoni's bank or among his effects. "See if you can find out how well they knew each other," he added.

"Okay," said O'Malley.

After an hour's ride over turquoise water, Key West appeared very large. The Sikorsky chartered to search for Camelia met the water in an easy glide. Two men in blue overalls eased the ship to the dock.

The pilot grinned at Crane. "Not a bad trip," he said.

"It was fine," Crane said.

Tony Lamphier stood up. "You're sure you don't mind my coming along?" he asked.

"No. I'm glad to have you."

"When will you be going back?" the pilot asked.

"Not until after lunch."

They jumped to the wooden dock and climbed a flight of stairs to the pier. Crane caught sight of Williams halfway down the dock. He walked up to Williams.

"Hi, Doc!" he said.

Doc told them the count was on a boat.

"Which boat?" Crane asked.

"That tub with the green paint on it."

THE boat was fat and grimy and there were uncoiled ropes on the deck. SYLVIA was printed in black letters on the bow. Forward two men lounged with cigarettes.

Followed by the others, Crane jumped to the deck. One of the men came toward them.

"Who do you want?"

"Di Gregario," said Crane.

The man was a Cuban. "There is no one of that name here."

The other Cuban was coming toward them. "What's the matter, Frank?"

The first Cuban said something in Spanish.

"No. No one here by that name," said the second Cuban. "Now please go."

The other Cuban started to move away. Williams stepped in front of him. Under his coat he held a revolver. "Stay here, you!" he said.

"Keep 'em here, Doc," said Crane. "We'll go below."

They found Di Gregario in the main cabin with a distinguished looking elderly man with white hair and a gray beard. They were looking at a map.

Startled, Di Gregario pushed back his chair. "You!"

"What is this?" the elderly man asked.

"I came to ask Di Gregario where he spent last night," said Crane.

"Who are you?"

"He is an American detective," said Di Gregario. "He believes I have kidnap Camelia Essex."

"So." The elderly man frowned. "That is not good."

"He is also a friend of Imago Paraguay," said Di Gregario.

The elderly man nodded. "Di Gregario was in Key West last night," he said. "He had a room adjoining mine at the Colonia Hotel."

"Is that so?" Crane asked Di Gregario.

"Yes."

"And you didn't murder Imago Paraguay?"

Tony Lamphier gave a startled gasp. "Imago Paraguay murdered?" Di Gregario straightened in his chair, then relaxed. "You are joking me."

"No."

Di Gregario's white teeth gleamed. "Then I am glad."

The elderly man said, "She was an enemy to the Cuban people."

"What rooms did you have at the hotel?" Crane asked.

"We have them yet," Di Gregario tossed a key on the table. Crane picked it up. It was for Room 410. "That is mine," said Di Gregario.

"You were there all night?"

"We went to bed soon after one o'clock," said the elderly man.

"I guess that lets you out." Crane took his clenched hand from his coat pocket. "At least as far as Miss Paraguay's concerned."

"You still believe I kidnap Camelia?" Di Gregario asked.

"This boat would be a good place to hide her. In fact, I'd like to look it over."

"I give you my word she is not aboard," said the elderly man quickly. "Is that not sufficient?"

"No," said Crane.

Di Gregario spoke in Spanish. The elderly man replied. Then Di Gregario said, "We are going to trust you. In this boat we have weapons. We are planning to deliver them to a certain country. If the officials of the country learn of this it will become very difficult to do so."

"We don't care about gun-running," Crane said. "All we're interested in is Camelia."

Di Gregario said, "If we allow you to search the boat, you will say nothing?"

"Not unless we find Camelia."

"You will not find her."

"Then we can look?"

The elderly man said, "Yes."

AFTER talking to the clerk at the Colonia Hotel, they walked toward a place called Sloppy Joe's. On the way they discussed Di Gregario's alibi.

"He's out," Crane said.

"I'm afraid so," Tony Lamphier agreed. "Both the girl clerk and the night bellboy were positive he was there."

They turned a corner and found Sloppy Joe's. "Three bacardis," said Crane to a gaunt, red-faced man back of the bar.

Three natives were talking over beer at one end of the bar. One of them was saying the tarpon had gone out to spawn. "That's why there ain't none in the channel," he said.

"What's on the program?" asked Williams.

"You'll have to stay down." Crane tasted his drink. "Make sure the count does sail tomorrow."

"That's okay by me," Williams said. "What'll I do if he does leave?"

"Give me a ring," Crane said. He watched the colored man fill the glasses again. "Just keep them filled," he told him.

The man who said the tarpon had gone out to spawn said, "I know I'm right. Captain Luther was out with a party the day before yestiddy. He seen hundreds of 'em rollin'—right in the Stream."

"It's too early for spawnin'," said the second man.

The third man had a round face and spectacles. "Captain Luther could-a seen anythin'," he said. "He was carryin' a load. I know he was loaded, because he tried to tell me he seen a man killin' fish from a boat with a machine-gun."

"He told me that too," the first man was forced to admit.

"Maybe he seen Ernest," said the second man.

"He said the man would hook a sail-fish," the man with the spectacles said. "Then, when the sail'd jump, he'd shoot at it."

"Captain Luther said that?" said the second man.

"It must have been Ernest."

The man behind the bar said, "No, it wasn't. Ernest would never shoot at a sail."

Tony Lamphier said, "I wonder if they've heard anything at the house."

Crane was listening to the three men. "Earnest only uses the tommy-gun on sharks," said the man behind the bar. "And besides, Captain Luther knows Ernest's boat."

"Reckon you're right, Captain Joe," said the second man.

"I know very well I'm right," said Captain Joe. "Besides, Ernest don't keep his gun in this country."

"All I know," said the second man, "is that it's too early for spawning."

"Then what're they doin' out in the Stream?" the first man wanted to know.

Crane was listening intently to the three men.

"I feel terrible about Camelia," said Tony Lamphier. "Let's start back."

"In a minute," Crane held his glass out to the colored man.

"What about lunch?" Williams asked.

Crane raised the full glass to his mouth. "Never mind lunch."

MISS DAY came to the door as Crane steered the convertible through the clutter of police cars in the driveway. "Where is Essex?" he asked.

"He and the cops are working up a plan."

"A plan?"

"To catch The Eye when he collects the ransom."

"Why don't they wait until they know how The Eye's going to try to collect it?"

"But they do know. Penn got a ransom note."

"The devil he did! What did the note say?"

She drew a piece of paper from her pocket. "Here's a copy. Penn had me make one. He thought maybe the cops would take the real note away."

Crane unfolded the paper and scanned the message.

Essex—Directions: Wrap the fifty thousand in oilskin. Put in a box. Take box at 10 a.m. tomorrow to cement bridge 12.3 miles south of Homestead on Key Largo road. Leave box on canal bank under exact center of bridge. Drive away.

Camelia will die if you fail. No one must ride with you. No one must follow you. No one must be near bridge.

Camelia is well but unhappy. She says please save her. . . . She says remember Froggy.

The Eye

Crane gave the paper to Miss Day. "Who is Froggy?"

"You got me."

"How'd the note come?"

"Penn found it in with some mail on the breakfast table."

"What are they going to do about it?" Crane asked.

"They're figuring out a way they can hide a party of men around the bridge, but Penn's been fighting them. He thinks it would risk Camelia's life." She looked at him curiously. "What are you going to do?"

"Get us a drink," Crane said. . . .

Crane told O'Malley about di Gregario and the ransom. "What luck did you have?" he asked.

"Plenty." O'Malley poured beer into his glass. "In the first place there is no check, and never was any."

"How do you figure that?"

"Imago was Tortoni's girl friend. I got the dope from a guy I used to know

who works up at Palm Beach. He'd heard from a guy working in Tortoni's joint that Imago was his doll. They been going together for a year."

Crane frowned. "That doesn't seem to make things easier."

"It looks as though Imago and Tortoni had something to do with the snatching after all."

"It doesn't have to. Maybe the same guys who killed Tortoni killed her."

"If she was killed," O'Malley said.

"What's next on the program?"

"I don't know."

"Miss Day tells me the cops are figuring out how to nab The Eye after he gets the ransom money."

O'Malley said, "Let's take a gander at the bridge where Essex has to leave the dough. It's not far."

They drove to Homestead and at the intersection of the town's two streets set the roadster's speedometer at zero. Then they turned back to Key Largo. It was late afternoon when they reached a sickle-shaped bay, which pressed its back against the left side of the road. From a point near the middle of the bay a thirty-foot canal drained water, and over the canal was a cement bridge. Crane glanced at the speedometer. It read 12.2.

They got out of the convertible and walked down a slope and under the bridge's arch. The tide was ebbing and the earth was soft under their feet.

"This must be the spot," Crane said.

"How is The Eye going to pick the money up here?" O'Malley demanded.

"It does seem odd."

"In broad daylight too."

Back of them was the canal. It disappeared two hundred yards away in a jungle of palmettos, sugar cane and tall brush. Ahead was the bay, and farther the Atlantic.

"He must be going to use a boat," Crane said.

"Which way would he go?"

"Out to sea, I'd say," Crane was feeling the cement under-surface of the bridge. "They could trap him if he went up the canal."

"He'd have to have a fast boat to get away by sea."

"Maybe he has a plane."

"He could land her, jump ashore, grab the money and scam, all in a minute."

"What are you feeling around for?" O'Malley asked.

"Oh." Crane wiped his hands on a handkerchief. "I wanted to see if the cement was solid. I thought maybe The Eye had a hiding place in the bridge."

"That's not a bad idea," O'Malley said.

"Not good, either. Of course, he could sneak out and get the dough, but how would he ever get out of his hiding place within the bridge?"

"Wait until night maybe."

"There'd be cops around."

"He could wait a couple of days."

Crane sighed. "He'd starve to death. He might have another way out, though."

"It sounds phony," said O'Malley.

Crane led the way out from under the bridge. "It is phony. It's either a boat or a plane."

"Or a submarine," said O'Malley.

VIII

SWIMMING in the pool at dusk, O'Malley and Crane watched a serving-man put bacardi, lime juice, sugar and ice on the table by the pool.

"We got a friend in the house," O'Malley observed.

"I told Craig to send the makings out," Crane said, "when I got through my little chat with him."

"Did he admit getting a cut on the groceries?"

"Yeah. He even offered me a slice. Showed me his savings deposit book. He's been putting away nearly a grand a year for the last twenty years." He poured the mixture of lime juice and rum over the cracked ice.

O'Malley accepted the filled glass. "I'm going to be a butler."

"Me, too," said Crane. "But I think he's clear of the snatching."

They were drinking their second when Essex and three men came out of the house. "Here they are," Essex said.

One of the men was Captain Enright of the Miami police. The others were County Attorney Osborn and Mr. Wilson, representing the Department of Justice.

"You're the private detectives?" asked Wilson. "Why haven't you offered to help check the servants?"

"We're working on our own lines."

District Attorney Osborn asked, "How do you think the ransom will be collected?"

"O'Malley and I decided the man would have to use a boat or a plane."

Osborn nodded. "Those seem the only possibilities." He sat down. "It's curious he would want the money to be delivered in broad daylight—at ten o'clock in the morning."

"It fits with an airplane," Crane said.

Wilson asked, "What course of action would you recommend, Mr. Crane?" His face was small and pointed.

Crane shrugged. "I don't know. It would be pretty dangerous to catch the person picking up the ransom—at least for Miss Essex."

"We don't plan to apprehend this man, to act until Miss Essex has been released." Osborn sounded as though he were beginning a political speech.

"The idea is to follow him," said Wilson.

He told them of the police plan, and Crane, listening, admitted it was a clever one. It was based on the use of an airplane and two-way radio communication between it and the ground. A very fast plane would be hovering high over Miami around ten o'clock, Wilson said, and its radio would be in contact with a portable police set on the Homestead water tower.

Watchers on the tower, Wilson went on, would inform the plane the moment the ransom was vicked up. It could then, still flying at a very great height, race toward the bridge and pick up the kidnaper's plane or boat. "It will take only six minutes for it to get here," he concluded.

"What if he uses a car?" O'Malley asked.

"There'll be radio-equipped cars all along the road," Osborn said.

"And if the man has a small boat, goes up the canal and loses himself in the underbrush?" Crane asked.

"We've allowed for that," Osborn said. "We'll have men hidden up the canal."

"It sounds all right. The only thing is to keep him from spotting you."

"We can do it," Osborn said.

"What'll you do when the guy goes to cover?" O'Malley asked.

Captain Enright said, "Pinch him as soon as Miss Essex is safe."

Wilson was looking at Crane. "Have you any suggestions?"

"I think it's risky for Camelia."

"Mr. Essex is willing to trust us," Wilson said.

"Are you?" Crane asked.

"Yes, I think so." Essex' eyes went from Crane to Wilson. "Mr. Wilson has had more experience."

"It's this way," Wilson said. "If they were going to harm Miss Essex, they would have done it long ago. The only safe victim of a kidnaping is a dead one."

Crane shrugged. If Essex believed this, there was nothing he could do. "Who's Froggy?" he asked.

Essex said, "A Teddy bear Camelia had. I spilled green paint on it and we named it Froggy. It was a secret name."

Crane asked, "Anybody else know about Froggy?"

"Aunt Sybil—Miss Langley."

Crane said, "Ha!"

BUT one item of the series of events was bothering O'Malley.

"Why do the directions say to wrap the money in oilskin?" O'Malley asked.

"I imagine he's afraid the money will get wet under the bridge," Wilson said.

"Have you got a cardboard box?" Crane asked Essex.

"I've just the thing. One that had been filled with prunes."

Crane looked at Wilson. "You've taken the numbers of the bills?"

"Of course."

Crane asked, "Would you mind if O'Malley and I watched with you from the water tower?"

"You can if there's room."

Captain Enright moved uneasily. "We better get going if we want to get things arranged for tomorrow."

Wilson got to his feet. "All right." To Crane he said: "See you tomorrow."

"Fine," said Crane.

* * * * *

A nurse met Crane at the door to the room and said, "You must be careful. She's had a terrible shock."

"I know," he said.

Drawn curtains made the room dim. Miss Langley lay in the double bed. "Who is it?" she whispered.

"William Crane. Could you help me?"

She looked like a corpse. White powder was thick on her face, on her neck. "How?" she asked. "How?"

"I believe Imago was murdered."

"You are right," she whispered.

"How do you know?"

Her thin lips trembled. "I know."

"But how?"

Her eyelids fluttered, closed, and when they opened again the eyes were staring at the ceiling. "How does one know anything?"

"Oh," he said.

"I see death everywhere," she whispered. "Death . . . everywhere."

"But who killed Imago?"

Her eyes were like a sleepwalker's. "I am afraid . . . afraid. I see death—Imago—Camelia."

"Yes, Miss Langley, but you do remember Froggy?"

"Froggy—Froggy?—No." Her body shook. "I see death. Who will be next?" Her voice was louder, tremulous. "Who?"

The nurse touched his arm. "You are exciting her. Please go."

* * * * *

Essex came out to the swimming pool, collapsed in a chair. "If only Camelia were safe." His voice was weary.

"It should be over tomorrow," Crane said.

"How do you mean?" Essex looked up.

"I mean that you'll pay the money and Camelia will be freed."

"Oh!" The servingman came up to the table. "What is it, Pedro?"

"A telephone call for Mr. Crane or Mr. O'Malley."

Crane said, "You get it, Tom."

For a moment after O'Malley left they sat in silence.

Finally, Crane asked, "How did Imago Paraguay happen to be in this house, Mr. Essex?"

"A friend of mine, Charley Beauchamp, knew her in Paris." Essex poured himself a whisky. "He gave her a letter to me. When I found she was going to be in Miami in March, I invited her to stay out here."

"Did you know she was a close friend of Tortoni?"

"I didn't even know they knew each other."

"Do you think Tortoni had her come here to watch you?"

"No. Why should he?"

"The debt."

"He'd given up all idea of trying to collect that."

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive. Look." Essex drew three pieces of paper from his wallet.

"Tortoni gave me back my I O Us over two weeks ago."

CRANE examined the papers. One of the I O Us was for six thousand dollars. The others were for nine thousand each. They were all signed *Penn Essex*.

"Why didn't you tell Major Eastcomb you had them?"

"I didn't think it was any of his business."

Lights had been turned on around the swimming pool and Crane saw coming toward them an elderly man in blue overalls. He was carrying a woman's bag, made of dark blue beads.

"What is it, Fritz?" Essex asked.

The man held out the bag. "This I find in the rosebushes."

Essex got up and took the bag. "It looks like one of Imago's." He emptied the contents on the table. There was a red lacquer cigarette case, a metal lipstick, and a lace handkerchief. "Nothing to tell whose it is, though."

"Give it to me," Crane said. "I'll tell."

A heavy odor of sandalwood clung to the bag. "It is Imago's," Crane said.

Essex turned toward the man.

"Where did you find it, Fritz?"

"Here by the patio, Mr. Essex."

Crane said, "Could you show us where?"

"Yah. I show you."

They were just starting to leave the table when O'Malley came out of the house. "Where're you going?" he asked.

"Just over here." Crane waited for him. "Who was it?"

"Doc Williams. He said the police have picked up di Gregario. Doc says he'll wait and see what they do with him."

They went across the patio. The man pointed out a clump of rose bushes. Crane looked up at the white wall of the house. "That's my room up there, isn't it, O'Malley?"

"Yeah."

Essex asked, "Do you think someone threw it down?"

Crane was examining the bushes. "It's a funny place to drop a purse," he said.

Essex asked, "But why would anyone want Imago's bag?"

Crane started toward the house. "She must have had the nine thousand she won at Tortoni's in it."

"That's right!" Essex' voice had new

vitality. "The police didn't find it."

"They're not mentioning it if they did," Crane said. "Well, I think I'll take a nap before dinner."

Essex said, "I wish I could sleep."

Up in his room Crane yawned, sighed comfortably, let his head sink into the pillow, closed his eyes. He wondered if Imago's purse had been planted under his window. It looked as though it were an effort to implicate him in her death. A sudden thought occurred to him. He slid off the bed, seized his coat; then sighed with relief. His nine thousand, at least, was safe. He took the money out of the coat and put it in his trousers. What he didn't understand was how anybody could have gotten into Imago's room to steal the money. He got back on the bed and closed his eyes. It was a strange case.

He was awakened by someone knocking at his door.

It was Pedro, the servingman. He had a metal coat hanger from which hung blue paper. On the paper was printed: Riteway Cleaners, Miami. "This is for you, Mr. Crane," Pedro said.

"What is it?"

Pedro lifted the blue paper.

"I guess they are mine," said Crane. "Thanks."

They were the dress trousers which had disappeared in Imago's room.

This was the craziest case!

THE time was 9:40 A.M.

The Bugatti's engine, throttled down, went chug-chug . . . chug-chug-chug.

Major Eastcomb opened the black valise. "Here." Green bills, tied with rubber bands, were slick in the sunlight. He helped Essex wrap the money in yellow oilskin, put the package in the brown cardboard box. "Fifty thousand dollars."

Wilson, the government agent, was excited. "You've got twenty minutes."

Essex put the box beside him on the front seat. "I'll drive slowly."

Miss Day was standing between Crane and O'Malley. She said: "Take care of yourself, Penny."

"I'll be all right," Essex replied, but he looked frightened.

Major Eastcomb took the valise into the house. Wilson asked, "You'll come to the watchtower as soon as you've left the money?"

Essex nodded.

Crane touched O'Malley's arm. "Take the roadster and pick him up after he leaves the money."

Miss Day asked in alarm "You don't think they'd try to kidnap him, do you?"

"You never can tell," O'Malley said.

"The Eye won't try anything before he leaves the money." Crane smiled at Miss Day. "If anything does happen it will happen after he has left the bridge."

The major came out of the house and went up to the car. He patted Essex' shoulder. "Cheerio," he said.

Essex put the Bugatti in gear. Wilson said, "Good luck." The Bugatti sneaked away, sunlight making a nimbus on the black engine hood.

9:56 A.M.

On the observation balcony of the water tower, Wilson looked at his watch. "Three more minutes," he said.

Toward the Atlantic, Crane could see freighters plodding along the edge of the Gulf Stream, the closer ones completely visible and those farther less and less visible until of one he could see only smoke and the tips of masts. Back of him was the smoke of Miami.

"Two more minutes," said Wilson.

With Wilson on the balcony were Osborne, the county attorney, a dark fat man from the sheriff's office, and the radio operator. All were near the portable set the man was using, all watched the bridge through binoculars. Crane moved up to the set.

"Getting close to the deadline, Mark," the radio operator was saying into the mouthpiece.

Crane tried to see the airplane hovering over Miami but he couldn't find it. There was a small bank of clouds toward Miami and he thought the plane was probably above them.

"One more minute," said Wilson.

"I see him," said Osborn.

Crane lifted his binoculars to his eyes. They were a fancy pair and it was necessary to adjust each eye separately. When he finally did get them focused Essex had reached the bridge. Parked in the center of the road, the Bugatti looked like a beetle.

"Stand by, Mark," the radio operator said.

Essex climbed out of the car and walked to the canal bank. Crane could see the brown cardboard box under his

right arm. He went down the bank sideways, using the edges of his shoes to check his descent, and disappeared under the bridge.

"Right on the dot," said Wilson.

Essex reappeared and scrambled up the bank. He walked briskly to the Bugatti, got in, started toward the water tower. Crane figured he would make the eight miles in about ten minutes.

"Are you standing by, Mark?" asked the radio operator. "Okay," he said.

Wilson said, "Everybody keep their eyes peeled."

All of them leaned over the rail, binoculars to eyes. 10:13 A.M. . . .

O'MALLEY at his heels, Essex stepped off the steel ladder to the balcony. "Anything happen?" he asked. He pulled a white handkerchief from his coat pocket, wiped his face.

"No sign as yet," said Wilson.

Crane lowered his binoculars. "Want to take a look?" he said to Essex.

"Thanks."

"Anything funny on the way over?"

Crane asked O'Malley.

"Not a thing."

The radio operator asked, "Still standing by, Mark?" Apparently Mark was, because the radio man didn't say anything further.

"It's hot as hell up here," said Crane. It was now 10:30 A.M.

"Stand by, Mark," said the radio operator.

"He's certainly taking his time collecting the money," said O'Malley.

County Attorney Osborn said, "He's probably waiting to make sure no police cars are hiding by the bridge."

"We can wait as long as he can," said Wilson. 11:30 A.M.

"I wish they had a bar up here," said Crane. 11:56 A.M.

Sweat made the sheriff's man's shirt cling to his chest. He lowered his binoculars. "Do you suppose he could have swum up the canal?" He rubbed his eyes with the back of his right hand. "I'm mighty near blind."

"We can see both sides of the canal," said Wilson.

The strong midday heat made them all perspire.

"I'd like to swim up that canal," said O'Malley.

The radio operator said, "Standing by, Mark? . . . Okay." 12:20 P.M.

"I wonder if he's wise to our plans?" asked the sheriff's man.

Wilson said, "We have to stick it out." 12:31 P.M.

The radio operator took off his ear-phones.

"Mark says he'll have to come down for gas."

Osborn lowered his glasses. "What's the matter? Can't a plane stay up more than three hours?"

"Yes, Mr. Osborn. But Mark says he won't have enough gas to follow another plane unless he refuels."

"Well, Wilson?"

"I suppose he'll have to land."

Crane said, "While he's down suppose we go by the bridge and see if everything's all right."

"And alarm the kidnaper?"

"Baloney! He's either alarmed right now, or he's waiting until dark."

"All right." The heat had paled Wilson's face. "Block, you stay with the radio man." He started for the ladder.

The radio man said, "It's okay to come down, Mark."

Block was evidently the sheriff's man. He didn't like being left behind. The others followed Wilson down the ladder.

They took the convertible rather than the police car. Essex sat in back, between Osborn and Wilson. O'Malley drove and Crane sat beside him. "This is the hottest place in the world next to Death Valley," said Crane.

"I wish this were over with," said Essex.

They swung out onto the road leading to the bridge. Essex looked ill. He almost seemed, Crane thought, to have abandoned hope of having Camelia returned.

The bridge was ahead of them.

"Which side?" asked O'Malley.

"Cross it," said Wilson.

O'Malley pulled the convertible to a smooth stop just past the bridge. Wilson opened his door and stepped out onto the pavement. "You can come with me, Crane."

The tide was barely coming in, but the water in the canal was blue and clear. They went down the slope together, being careful to keep their weight on their heels. Near the bottom Wilson started to slip, but Crane steadied him.

"Thanks," Wilson said.

They peered under the bridge.

"It's gone!" Wilson exclaimed.

"Gone!"

"Box and all," said Crane.

IX

EVERYBODY agreed it certainly was a mystery. Captain Enright, who had been hiding five miles up the road with a squad of his Miami detectives, came the closest to summing it all up when he said: "It don't seem possible."

Nearly fifty detectives, deputies and other law-enforcement officers stood around on the bridge while Osborn and Wilson questioned Essex. It was now one o'clock.

"But you saw everything I did," Essex said. "I simply put the box on that flat place under the bridge and came out."

"And you're sure it couldn't have slipped off into the water?" asked Osborn.

"I'm certain. The only thing that could have moved it was wind and there wasn't any."

[Turn page]

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"And there was nobody waiting under there?"

"I should say not."

Two of the detectives came up from under the bridge and reported to Captain Enright that there was no hiding place within the cement structure. "It's solid as rock," one said.

Crane and O'Malley were examining the canal bank for the seventh time. The tide was almost completely full now.

"It looks as if he did use a submarine," O'Malley said.

"Maybe he's got a cloak that makes him invisible." Crane moved along the bank, farther from the bridge. "If there were any footprints these cops have tramped over them all."

"Elephants and cops are a lot alike." O'Malley bent over a small recess in the bank. "Hello! What's this?"

There was almost a bay where the bank had crumbled away. From the back edge of the bay O'Malley picked something up.

"Looks like a piece of brown paper," said Crane.

"It's cardboard."

"So." Crane took it from O'Malley. "There's printing on it."

On the soggy piece of cardboard, about the size of a business envelope, was printed:

LIFO

"What does that mean?" asked O'Malley.

"How do I know?" Crane pressed the water out of the cardboard, put it in his pocket. "I'm a stranger here."

They moved back toward the bridge. Osborn was staring at Essex, saying:

"You're sure you didn't throw the box into the canal instead of putting it on the bank?"

Essex, very pale, said, "You don't suspect that I'd jeopardize my sister's life by not following instructions, do you?"

Captain Enright said, "You could've had some other instructions from the kidnaper. Secret ones. He could've told you to throw it in the water."

Crane said to O'Malley: "Not so dumb."

"Don't you see?" Captain Enright turned to Wilson. "The tide's been going in. The box could've floated to somebody hiding in those bushes inland."

Everybody looked at the green clump of palms, palmetto, sugar cane and

scrub pine a quarter of a mile inland. The canal disappeared in the center of this oasis on the gray-green tundra of the Everglades, its water cloaked by marsh grass and hanging trees.

"Let's take a look," said Wilson.

"But it's no use," said Essex. "I didn't throw the box in the water."

"Let's look anyway," said Wilson.

Crane touched O'Malley's arm. "I got an idea. While I go with those guys, you find out a couple of things for me. Find out if cyanide of potassium is used for anything in the Essex house. Find out what the gardener, Fritz, uses to trim the trees with."

"I know one answer now. They use cyanide to clean the silver." He glanced at Crane. "What's your idea?"

"I'm getting tired of this case." Crane mopped his face. "I think I'll wrap up."

"You really got something?"

"I got an idea. Where'd you hear about the cyanide?"

"I heard the cops asking Craig."

"Then anybody could have got hold of some?"

"Yeah." O'Malley's face was alert. "You think Essex did float the box along the canal?"

"No. I've just got an idea."

"All right, wise guy. Keep it a secret."

OSBORN, Wilson, Essex and Captain Enright were a hundred yards inland. They were walking slowly along the canal bank, keeping their eyes on the water, on the edge of the bank.

"I'd better go with them," said Crane. "You find the gardener."

He caught up with the group around Essex. They were nearing the clump of trees. Beside the pine the thick growth of sugar cane was luxuriant. A crane, flying heavily, came out of the marsh grass.

Essex pointed at the marsh.

"A floating box wouldn't get past here," he said.

Wilson was a little ahead of them. "Someone must have lived here once," he said. "I see banana trees."

"I see a shack," said Osborn.

The banana trees were an emerald green and they leaned against the side of a frame shanty, their trunks arched. The shanty's door stood open. The windows had been blown out and one side of the roof had collapsed.

"Deserted," said Wilson.

They went around the shack toward the canal. "Look," said Osborn.

He was pointing at a place twenty yards up the canal. There, on a rectangular sandy beach, just in the water, was a diver's suit. A hose led from the helmet to a self-contained air outfit, the straps of which, meant to be fastened over the diver's shoulders, trailed in the water.

"So that's how he got under the bridge," said Osborn.

Wilson's thin lips were compressed. "Clever," he said.

"Very clever," said Crane.

BACK at the house, guests, servants and police were all assembled in the living room.

"I got everybody here," Crane said, "because I want a lot of witnesses to know what I'm going to do. In fact, I'm going to accuse Essex of kidnaping his sister. And I further accuse him of being The Eye."

"You can't mean that," said Tony Lamphier.

"What proof have you of this?" demanded Osborn.

"I have quite a bit of proof. But first I want to give you my reasons for picking on Essex."

"To begin with there are the notes. They were always being found on Essex' pillow or in his pocket or some place like that. Who could put them there easier than himself?"

"All right," said Osborn. "Go ahead."

"He needed money," said Crane. "Tortoni was after him for nearly twenty-five thousand dollars. He couldn't get it from the trust company."

Essex spoke for the first time. "That's foolish, Crane. I had the I O Us. I didn't need the money to pay Tortoni."

"You have them now, but you didn't have them a couple of weeks ago. No, you and Tortoni figured you could kidnap Camelia and make fifty grand. I suppose you were going to split it between you. Then Tortoni would call the debt square."

"This is very pretty," said Wilson. "But have you any facts?"

"Wait." Crane was still talking to Essex. "You thought you could write notes to yourself, signed The Eye, and establish the fact that someone, probably a maniac, was threatening the Essex

family. Thus the kidnaping would be blamed on The Eye. Then Tortoni's men kidnaped Camelia. You put up a phony fight and one of the men socked you."

"But he did his best to catch them in the Bugatti," Tony Lamphier said. "Don't you remember?"

"I remember that he conveniently collapsed just as we were about to overhaul Tortoni's men. Well, when Tortoni was killed, it left Essex alone in the plot, but he decided to carry it through. The fifty grand would come in handy. So he wrote the note giving the directions for the delivery of the money. Then he went out under our eyes, and made the gesture of paying over the money to The Eye. He returned to wait with us for the release of Camelia, but I don't think that will ever happen."

"Why not?" asked Tony Lamphier.

"I think she's dead."

THERE was a ring of conviction in those words which impressed the other men.

Major Eastcomb said, "But The Eye mentioned Froggy, a toy only Camelia would know about."

"Essex writing the note, would know about Froggy."

"But who is the accomplice?" Osborn wanted to know. "Who collected the money?"

"Nobody."

"But the diver's suit?"

"It was a plant. Essex put it there last night."

Miss Day screamed. With an overhead sweep, O'Malley flung a bacardi bottle, hit Essex a glancing blow on the top of the head. He fell, spinning, to the floor, lay there under everyone's astonished eyes. An automatic pistol slipped from his outstretched right hand.

Crane walked over to Essex, jerked off his lined coat. He unfastened a brown canvas inner belt around Essex' hips, emptied the contents of the pockets on the red tiles in front of Wilson.

The bills were so clean they looked counterfeit.

"There's your proof," said Crane. "He hid the money on the way to the bridge. Under the bridge he tore up the cardboard box, tossed the pieces in the canal."

"How'd you figure it?"

"Easy." Crane fumbled in his pocket,

found the water soaked piece of cardboard. He gave it to Wilson. "This spilled it."

Wilson read the printing. "'... lifo.' What does that mean?"

"He had a prune box. Where do prunes come from?"

"California."

"Sure. And 'lifo' is part of California. California prunes. I found this piece, or rather O'Malley did, right near the bridge."

Wilson's face was puzzled. "I still don't see what finding a piece of the box by the bridge proves."

"The tide. It runs six hours one way, then six the other. It was running inland when we reached the bridge around one o'clock, but it had almost stopped. That meant it was running pretty fast inland when Essex was under the bridge at ten o'clock. If there had been a diver he would have grabbed the box and hurried back to the bushes with it. He wouldn't have waited under the bridge to open the box."

"No, I guess not," Wilson said.

"Well, if there had been a diver it would have been impossible for O'Malley to find a piece of the box near the bridge. The tide was going inland, so any pieces he threw in the water by the bushes would have gone toward the Everglades."

"I get it," Wilson nodded his head. "The piece by the bridge indicated the box had been torn up by the bridge."

"That's what gave me the idea about Essex," Crane said.

Osborn had been counting the bills. "This can't be the ransom money," he said. "There's only nineteen thousand dollars here."

Crane said, "Have someone look in the Bugatti."

Osborn and the detective went out and presently returned. Meanwhile Essex sat up pressing his head with both hands.

"Here's the rest of the money," Osborn said. "Forty thousand dollars, and the oilskin wrapper too."

"That's nine thousand extra," said Wilson.

Crane said, "This is the first time in history a cop ever got back more money than was lost."

"I guess we can arrest him," said Osborn. "We'll charge him with kidnaping."

"You better make it murder," said Crane.

Essex struggled to his feet. "She's not dead. She can't be dead. Tortoni told his men they weren't to harm her. She's safe. I'm sure of that."

"Where is she then?" asked Wilson.

"I don't know. Tortoni had charge of the hiding place."

Osborn said, "Then you do admit conniving with Tortoni in the kidnaping of your sister?"

"Yes. Tortoni forced me to help him."

Wilson asked, "If your sister is alive, how will we get her back? Will they return her without word from Tortoni?"

Essex' voice cracked with anguish. "That's what I don't know. I thought if they heard the ransom was paid they'd let her go. That's why I collected the ransom."

Osborn was wrapping the money in the oilskin.

"We'll take him down to the Detective Bureau. Maybe somebody can make him talk there."

Major Eastcomb cut in. "Don't worry, Penn, I'll get a lawyer. We'll have you out on bail."

"We'll make the bail high," said Osborn. "Kidnaping comes high."

"Make the charge murder," said Crane. "You can't bail out a murderer."

Osborn shook his head. "I'm afraid we can't. At least not until we have reason to suppose Miss Essex is dead."

"Well, skip that!" said Crane. "Charge him with the murder of Imago Paraguay."

SUNLIGHT, coming through the open French window in Imago Paraguay's room, cast a white rectangle on the floor.

Wilson and Osborn stood in the middle of the room, while back of them were Tony Lamphier, Miss Day, Major Eastcomb and the Bouchers. Essex, handcuffed to the Miami detective, had been left downstairs.

O'Malley's voice came through the steel ventilator nearest to the bed. "This the one?"

"Yeah," said Crane.

O'Malley's fingers hooked themselves around a portion of the steel grille, lifted it out of its place.

Wilson said, "You can't tell me anybody got through that."

"They didn't." Crane said. "I'll show

you. Where's Celeste?"

"Here, monsieur." Celeste had evidently been standing in the hall.

"Did you not put Miss Paragrays's sleeping tablets on the table by the bed each night, Celeste?"

"It was at her orders, monsieur."

"Thank you." Crane's eyes went to Wilson and Osborn. "Essex came in here after dinner and replaced her sleeping capsules with similar capsules filled with cyanide. Then at bedtime Imago took her usual capsules with water just before she turned off the light. The gelatinous material of which the outside of the capsules is made took some time to dissolve in her stomach—perhaps ten minutes—but when it did, bang!" Crane snapped his fingers.

"Why didn't she scream out?" asked Tony Lamphier.

"My guess is that she was already asleep."

"Very fine," said Osborn. "But how do you account for the fact that the box found on the table was filled with harmless sleeping capsules?"

"That's what I'm going to show you." Crane put a package of cigarettes on the table beside the bed. "This is a box filled with cyanide capsules. Do your stuff, O'Malley."

A pruning pole which O'Malley had obtained from the gardener appeared through the hole in the ceiling, stretched to the table. Slowly the clawlike blades closed over the package of cigarettes, gently pulled it up through the hole in the ceiling.

Osborn gaped. "Clever. Then all Essex had to do was to put the regular sleeping capsules in the box and lower it to the table."

Mrs. Boucher said, "I suppose that's how Penn got the notes on your bed, Mr. Crane?"

Crane nodded.

"I get the idea." Wilson's shoulders twitched. "But why does it have to be Essex up there? Why couldn't it be anybody in the house?"

"He was asleep in the library," Major Eastcomb pointed out.

"So he said. But did anybody see him there?" Crane paused, then continued: "Still another thing gave him away. He told me, when I first came, that Tortoni had his I O Us, but wasn't trying to collect them. Then Essex showed me the I O Us, and said Tortoni had given

them to him two weeks ago. That meant he had lied, one way or the other."

"Those the I O Us we found on him?" asked Osborn.

"Yeah. Twenty-four thousand worth. He got 'em from Imago."

"How do you figure that?"

CRANE shrugged. "They weren't found among Tortoni's effects. Imago was Tortoni's mistress and she had been put in the house to see Essex didn't try any funny business. She'd be likely to have them. And I think he got them after she had taken the poison. She probably had her purse on the table beside her bed. All Essex had to do, after he had put back the harmless tablets, was to grab the purse with that pole of his." Thinking of the trousers Essex had also taken made Crane grin.

Wilson said, "It works out very well, but it's all supposition."

"Not all. The purse was found in the patio, under my window. I think maybe Essex planned to incriminate me in some way. In this purse along with the I O Us, had been the nine thousand dollars Imago had won at the Blue Castle. She and I were both paid in thousand-dollar bills."

"Oh!" Wilson's thin face was pleased. "The extra nine thousand dollars we found on Essex. If we could only prove it was her money."

"Get out the thousand-dollar bills you found on Essex," Crane said.

Osborn undid the oilskin packet, sorted out the thousand-dollar bills. "There's nine of them, all right."

"Smell them," Crane said.

Osborn held the bills to his nose. "Sandalwood!"

"Imago's sandalwood!" Miss Day exclaimed. . . .

IN dismay Lamphier asked, "You're not going to give up on Camelia?"

"No," said Crane. He cocked one eye at O'Malley. "What have you been doing, my man?"

"Talking to Essex. Asking him about his sister. He thinks she's on a boat."

"We know that already," Crane said.

"I'm just telling you what he said, wise guy." O'Malley's manner was aggrieved. "He said he was sure of that because Tortoni had him go to a sporting goods shop and get some stuff for the men."

"Rods and reels," Crane said. He walked to the door. "Come on," he said. "I'll show you."

X

LAZILY they cruised across a crème-de-menthe ocean under a sky so brilliantly blue it hurt their eyes. Captain Luther Binto stood by the wheel, kept his boat pointed toward Dry Tortugas.

"Do you think you can find it?" Crane asked him.

"I kin if anybody kin."

"You'll know the boat, won't you?"

"I said I seen 'em. I seen 'em shootin' sailfish with a tommy-gun."

Lamphier asked, "What are we going to do if we spot them?"

"Just spot them," Crane replied.

"O'Malley and the other boys are getting a boat with a machine-gun."

"Won't seeing us alarm them?"

"They'll think we're a fishing party. After dark we can turn around and sneak back to Key West."

"And pick up O'Malley?"

"Yeah."

Navy-blue water glided by the boat. Time glided by too.

In the west, almost ahead of them, the sun became hot coal. Captain Luther grunted, turned the boat slightly to the starboard.

"See something?" asked Crane.

"A vessel."

"Where?"

"You'll see," said Captain Luther.

Presently, so close it surprised them, they saw a black-and-mahogany cruiser. It was motionless in the water and two men were fishing from the stern. KATE—MIAMI was painted on the stern.

"That's her," said Captain Luther.

They passed within forty feet of her. One of the men was fat and dark; the other was a blond with a face like granite. Crane waved a hand, but neither replied.

The pair watched them as the gap between the boats widened. Suddenly the fat man stood up, ducked into the cabin, reappeared an instant later with another man. This man cast a quick glance at Crane and Lamphier, spoke angrily to the two men, darted back into the cabin.

"Can you get a little more speed out of her?" Crane asked the captain. "I'm

afraid we've been recognized."

"She'll burn out a valve if I give her any more."

"You better burn out a valve."

The *Kate* was getting under way. She swung in a quick circle, started after them. There were four men on her deck now. The *Kate* came up fast.

Captain Luther shut off the engine, let the boat drift. "They got the legs," he said. He reached up on a shelf back of the wheel, took down a three-foot piece of pipe. The *Kate* slid up beside them. The plump man pointed at Crane.

"That's him, ain't it, Frankie?" he said.

Frankie had no lobe on his left ear. "Bring 'em on board," he snarled.

The boats rubbed sides. The plump man started to leave the *Kate*. Frankie had a sub-machine gun in his hands. Captain Luther moved toward the plump man, lifted the piece of pipe, said, "No, you don't." But the plump man suddenly had a pistol in his hand and he fired it once. Captain Luther fell forward, rolled over on his back. The pipe, released, clanged to the deck.

"Come on." The plump man jerked the pistol at Crane and Lamphier. "Get in the other boat."

They got in the other boat. There was anger in Frankie's voice. "Watch 'em, Dopey." He looked over at the plump man. "Anybody else on board?"

"Naw," said the plump man.

At the *Kate's* wheel was the blond man with the granite face. "Toad," he said, "why'd you shoot the old dope?"

"You seen him try t'hit me, did'ya?"

"Yeah, but what'll we do with him?"

"Is he dead?" Frankie asked.

"Naw."

Frankie said, "Bring him on board, then. We may wanta talk with him. An' sink the boat."

As though he had an ague, Dopey's gun hand trembled. "How?" the plump man asked.

"Bust out the bottom," said the man at the wheel. He got an ax, jumped into the boat beside the plump man. "Tie the old pooper in a bunk, Toad. I'll sink the boat."

"A-a-w, horse-feathers!"

Crane stepped toward Dopey, wrested the pistol from his hand. He turned to cover the man with the missing ear lobe, saw something descending on his head, and tried to duck. . . .

BEING tossed down the steps to the cabin floor brought him to. His hands and feet were bound with cord. A voice said, "you two move and we'll plug ya," and Tony Lamphier dropped heavily beside him, half across his feet. It was dark in the cabin.

A woman's voice frightened, whispered, "Who is it?"

Tony Lamphier got to a sitting position. "Camelia?"

"Oh!" Her voice was glad. "Oh, Tony!"

"I knew you'd come."

"Are you all right, darling? Where are you?"

"On the bed." There was a pause and then she said, "Come up, Tony."

"I can't. I'm tied."

"They've tied me too," she said.

"Who's with you?"

Crane moved his position so that his head was near the cabin entrance. He could hear voices outside. It was almost dark now.

"Crane."

"How did you find us?"

"Crane heard about men shooting sailfish with machine-guns."

"Yes. They do it every day."

Someone came down the cabin stairs, stepped on Crane, almost fell. He kicked Crane heavily in the stomach, then shoved him further into the cabin. "Keep outa the way," he growled. By hand he started first one engine, then the other. He turned a flashlight on Captain Luther.

"Gran'pappy's still out cold," he called up the stairs, then turned the flashlight on Camelia Essex. "Holdin' up, toots?" he asked.

She didn't reply.

* * * * *

About ten o'clock the *Kate* put in at Little Hog Key. At least that was what Crane heard the man with the granite face call it. His name was George and he piloted the boat, holding himself aloof from the whispered conversation of the others. They were trying to determine what should be done with Crane and Lamphier. All were drinking rum out of a jug.

They were quite close to shore. Crane could hear the rustle of branches being pushed aside, the lapping of water on land. His ears still roared from the noise of the engines and his skin burned

from their heat. The engines ran hot and once George had come down and tinkered with them. After a time he had wiped his hands on a piece of oil waste, thrown it in a corner of the cabin, and gone up the stairs.

"It's either timin' or the water pump," he reported to Frankie.

For ten minutes the *Kate* lay at rest. Cool air came in the portholes, fanned away some of the engine heat. Finally, two men appeared at the head of the cabin stairs. The voice of Frankie said, "Bring Wise Guy out here."

The men grasped Crane under his armpits, dragged him up on deck.

"Frisk him," said Frankie to the plump man named Toad.

The man's hands were soft and clammy. He ran them over Crane's body, found the wallet in his pinned inside coat pocket. He opened the wallet.

"Nine grand! exclaimed Toad.

"Wise Guy had nine grand?" Frankie's voice went up the scale. "Give it here." He put the bills in an inside pocket.

"Where'd you get the nine grand?"

"Expense money," said Crane.

"How'd you find us, wise guy?" asked Frankie.

"Some fisherman reported you as looking funny," Crane lied.

"I tole ya," said Toad. "I tole ya it wasn't safe to stick here."

"Shaaat aap!" said Frankie.

"Why dinja have more people with ya?"

"They're coming in the morning," Crane said. "They've got all kinds of boats."

THE toughs stared at each other uncertainly.

"I think we oughta scram out of here," said George. "It'll be tough."

"We gotta lie right here," said Frankie.

Dopey said, "If we ain't here the boss can't give us the office."

"Tortoni's never going to reach you," said Crane. "He's dead. He was shot for trying to muscle into the slot-machine racket."

At first they did not believe him. They hardly believed him, even when he went into details.

"You lie," Frankie said.

"No."

Frankie hit him on the cheekbone and then had to pick him off the deck. "You

lie," he repeated, and hit him again.

"I think he's giving it to us straight," said George.

Frankie asked, "How'd you find out about Tortoni if they knocked him off?"

Crane told them about Essex' part in the plot.

"That's the angle Tortoni was talkin' about," said George. "Remember he said there'd be no rap in the case?"

"Yeah, I remember," said Frankie.

"What'll we do?" asked Dopey.

"Le's talk," said Frankie.

He took Crane by the waist and threw him down the cabin stairs. Landing on his right shoulder, Crane rolled past the engines. The ropes cut his ankles, his wrists. He lay absolutely quiet in the dark. His stomach pained him terribly.

Tony Lamphier whispered, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Crane said.

XI

GENTLE and cool, a faint breeze moved through the hot cabin and Crane fell into a fitful sleep.

What wakened him also woke Camelia and Tony. It was the sound of a boat being rowed. The oarlocks grated and the oars made a sucking noise in the water. Crane could hear men's voices. He decided the kidnapers must have landed on the key and were now returning to the boat.

He heard a noise in the lower bunk to the left, saw Captain Luther Binton's head roll over to one side. He was conscious. Crane moved along the floor in his direction.

The rowboat came alongside. George called, "Everything all right, Dopey?"

"Sure," said Dopey.

There was a noise of oars being shipped.

Frankie said, "Good ole Dopey." He was very drunk.

The deck creaked under feet. Dopey asked, "Wha'd you decide?"

"We figured it out." Frankie's voice was thick. "We croak 'em and scam for Miami."

"The girl too?" asked Dopey.

"Sure, we gotta croak her," said George. "She knows too much."

Crane reached the captain's bunk, whispered in his ear. "Are you all right, Captain Luther?"

The captain's voice was barely audible. "No. What happened to my boat?"

"They sank it."

The captain's hands were free, though ropes still bound one wrist. He cursed softly. Crane for the first time felt hopeful.

Outside Frankie's voice said, "We take the nine grand and divvy it up. That's only a grand less'n Tortoni was t'give us."

"And we're in the clear," said George.

"When do we croak 'em?" asked Dopey.

"Right away," said Frankie.

"We gotta go out in the Stream," said George. "The bodies'll never come up out there."

"Sharks," Toad explained.

"Le's get goin'," said Frankie. "Whas keepin' us?"

George came down in the cabin to start the engines. His breath smelled of Jamaica rum. He kicked Crane in the small of the back and turned his flashlight on Camelia. "How ya doin', toots?" He turned to the engines.

One of the engines wouldn't start. Presently Frankie came down. "Whas tha matta?"

"I dunno." George spun the cast-iron wheel viciously. "But I'll make her go. See if I don't."

Between drinks they finally got it going. The cabin reeked of rum and spilled gasoline. It was almost daybreak and Crane could see the men's dirty faces. They were both sweating. George threw a piece of oil rag in the corner of the cabin and said, "Let's scam." Crane could see a pile of oil rags in the corner. The men went up the cabin ladder.

"They're going to kill us?" asked Camelia.

For the first time Crane was able to see her. Her blond hair was tangled; her hands were tied with linen strips; her white chiffon evening gown was soiled and one side had been ripped open.

"Don't give up hope," said Crane, soothingly.

"Can you untie your feet, Captain Luther?"

The captain tried to sit up, but he was unable.

The *Kate* was heading out to sea and the engines, racing, were getting hot. On deck Frankie approached George at

the wheel, a jug in his hand.

"Why do we bump the broad?" he asked.

George took the jug from him, had a long drink. He smacked his lips. "I been wonderin' myself."

"We could keep her around for awhile, anyway."

"I might even smuggle her into Miami. I know a place."

"No, you dim-wits!" George's voice was decisive. "That's takin' a chance. We gotta bump her."

"But first—" Frankie said.

"After me," George said.

"No ya don't!" Frankie said.

Up the angling stairs Crane could see a portion of the rail, a rectangle of French-blue sky.

"We'll draw lots," George said.

Toad moved into Crane's field of vision. His small eyes peeped between creases of flesh the color of lard. "Why bother with her?" he asked in his shrill voice. "Why not croak her, now? We're almost in the Gulf Stream."

Dopey joined the conversation. "Let's start bumpin' 'em. What d'you want with the broad, anyway?"

"Ha, ha, ha." Frankie slapped his thigh. "He wants to know what we want wit' her. Tha's good. Ha, ha, ha."

Dopey said, "This one's too young."

"I like 'em young," George said.

"Why, she ain't eighteen," Dopey said.

"That don't make no difference," Frankie said.

George had a coin. "Heads or tails," he said. "Call it."

"Tails," Frankie said.

The coin fell on the deck. Dopey bent over it. "Tails."

Frankie came down the cabin stairs. Tony Lamphier, on the floor in front of Camelia's bunk, tried to kick him with his bound feet.

Frankie stunned him with a kick to the head.

The *Kate* was running into a moderate swell and the engines struggled on the up grades, raced on the down slopes. The exhaust pipe was a bright red.

Frankie said, "Hi, babe! How about a drink?"

Camelia didn't answer.

Frankie called to the men on deck. "Toots is givin' me the high hat."

"Le's get going," said Toad.

Crane could see the heads of all three men at the top of the cabin stairs.

Frankie bent over Camelia, began to untie the rope around her ankles.

"Please don't," she said. "Please!" Her voice broke in terror.

Frankie unwound the last turn of rope. "There y'are, sweetheart."

Camelia kicked him in the face.

"Get tough, hey?" He struggled with her. Tony Lamphier tried to squirm in their direction.

"Want me to hold her?" George called.

"Naw," Frankie said. "I like a dame with spirit."

On the floor Tony Lamphier writhed impotently.

Crane wished he was untied, had a gun.

Toad's high voice, from the deck, suddenly shouted:

"Holy smoke! A boat."

"It's heading right for us."

FRANKIE hurried up on deck. The boat was a large one, Crane gathered from the men's remarks. They quickly decided it was faster than the *Kate* and therefore dangerous to run away from. They debated what to do.

"Are you all right, Cam?" asked Tony Lamphier, now directly below the bunk.

"Tony," she said. "Keep him away."

Dopey came down into the cabin and tied cloth gags on Camelia, Lamphier and Crane. He ignored Captain Luther.

"Just in case," he said.

On deck the other three men watched the boat approach. "He's going to hail us," said George.

"Dopey, you and Toad start fishin'," commanded Frankie. "Keep your hats over your eyes." He came to the cabin entrance, took a Panama hat from a nail, put it on. "George, you talk to 'em."

The gag in Crane's mouth tasted of oil. He lay on his back, put his feet on Captain Luther's bunk. The captain got the idea, fumbled with the ropes around Crane's ankles, and untied them. Crane hooked his arm over the bunk and stood up. He found his legs would hold him. Captain Luther started to untie the cord around his wrists.

The other boat had approached within hailing distance of the *Kate*.

"We're looking for Captain Luther Binton's boat, the *Spray*," called a voice. "Seen any sign of her?"

"No," said George. "We been down to Tortugas all night."

The captain pulled the last turn of

rope off Crane's wrists, then tried to yell for help. Crane fell on the floor, rolled in a corner, holding his hands behind him as if they were still bound. Dopey came down into the cabin, hit Captain Luther over the head with a pistol butt, then he went out on deck again.

"If you see the *Spray*," the man on the other boat called out, "tell Captain Luther we're around, will you?"

"Sure," said George.

The stutter of the other boat's idling exhaust changed to a steady roar. George gave the *Kate's* engine gas.

Crane got to his feet, pulled off his gag, looked out the porthole. His heart sank. The other boat was pulling away fast, was beyond reach of a shout.

Frankie was saying to George, "We better scam out to sea."

"That's what I'm doin'," said George.

Crane scooped up a handful of oily waste from the pile in the corner of the cabin. He dropped it on the glowing exhaust pipe. It burst into flame. He picked it up again, regardless of the blaze, and tossed it into the pile of waste. Orange light filled the cabin, billows of black smoke rose from the pile. He found a large monkey wrench and hid himself beside the cabin stairs. Camelia and Tony watched him with alarmed eyes. The heavy smoke began to pour through the portholes.

DOPEY came to the cabin entrance. His voice yelped in terror:

"Fire! Fire!"

George leaped to his side, jerked him off the cabin stairs, sent him sprawling to the deck. He peered down at the smoky interior of the cabin.

Dopey got to his feet, yelled, "Fire! Help!" Frankie knocked him down.

George shut off the engines and Frankie asked him, "Where's the extinguisher?"

"In the cabin."

The bunk nearest to the pile of flaming waste had caught fire and the wood crackled loudly.

George said, "Take the wheel. I'll get the extinguisher."

Stooping over slightly, he came down the cabin stair. Crane waited until he reached the cabin deck, then hit him on the head with the wrench. George's skull cracked like a dropped cantaloupe. He pitched forward onto the port engine.

SMOKE swirled about the interior of the cabin. It was terribly hot. The entire bunk was now on fire. It was hard to breathe.

Frankie shouted down the stairs, "How're you comin', George?" While behind him Dopey screamed, "Help! Help!"

The smoke hurt Crane's lungs, choked his throat. The fire roared.

A voice from the sea shouted, "Stand by, *Kate*. We'll help you."

"Keep clear!" Toad's voice was shrill. "Stay away!" He fired his pistol over the starboard rail.

The other boat had a tommy-gun. Over the roar of the flames it made the noise of long strips of canvas being torn. Frankie yelled out a curse and got the *Kate's* tommy-gun from the shelf above the wheel. He was pointing it over the starboard rail when he suddenly began to cough. The gun slipped from his hands, glanced from the rail, clattered on the deck. He doubled over and pressed both arms against his stomach. He coughed again and blood gushed from his mouth. He fell against the rail. . . .

Crane went back into the cabin and picked up Camelia Essex and carried her up the stairs. She was unconscious. He laid her on the deck. He went back and got Captain Luther.

Dopey was lying curled up against the stern of the boat and Crane was unable to tell whether or not he was dead. Toad had been shot in the right arm and he was trying to hold his automatic in his mouth and put a clip in with his left hand. Blood had turned his right sleeve maroon.

Crane went back to the cabin. Smoke choked his lungs. Tony Lamphier was unconscious too. Crane tried to lift him, but he was too heavy. He dragged him to the stairs, tried to push him up them, but he couldn't get him off the cabin floor.

He tried again to lift Lamphier.

Someone said, "I got him, Bill."

It was O'Malley. Crane let him have Lamphier and followed them up the cabin stairs. A man with an extinguisher pushed by him, began to spray the cabin. The sunlight, the blue ocean hurt Crane's eyes. He felt very tired. The deck rose toward him. . . .

He felt sick when he regained consciousness. Captain Enright and a

strange man with gray hair were working over Camelia Essex. Tony Lamphier was seated on the deck. Dopey was handcuffed to a fishing chair, and beside him sat Toad, holding his wounded arm. His eyes were closed; his face calm. Frankie's tommy-gun was lying where he had been shot, by the starboard rail in a pool of blood.

O'Malley and Williams carried up George's body from the cabin.

"What'll we do with him?" he asked O'Malley.

"Throw him in the stern."

They threw him in the stern.

Camelia Essex regained consciousness. "Tony," she said. "Tony."

"Here I am."

"What happened?"

Tony Lamphier got off the deck and took her hand. "We're safe, darling."

Camelia Essex began to cry. She kissed him, crying at the same time.

Captain Enright and the gray-haired man were bending over Captain Luther. "He'll live, all right," said the gray-haired man.

Williams picked up the tommy-gun Frankie had tried to use. "A good thing he never let go with this," he said.

Abruptly Crane left the rail, ran toward Williams. "What happened to him?" he shouted. "What happened to Frankie?"

"He fell into the water," O'Malley said.

"Did you pull him out?"

"He was dead," O'Malley said.

"You didn't pull him out?" Crane was frantic. "Where is he?"

O'Malley pointed. The deep blue water of the Gulf Stream, twenty-five feet from the boat, was alive with sharks. Crane slumped down on the deck.

"Why didn't you pull him out?"

"Why should we?" asked O'Malley.

"What was he to you?"

"He just had my nine grand on him—that's all!" Crane gazed mournfully at O'Malley. "You let nine grand go to the sharks."

"That's terrible," said Tony Lamphier.

"Here," said O'Malley, "Here. I got the nine grand. I got it out of the pocket of that coat on the deck. He musta thrown it off before going into action. . . . Frankie's coat. Here."

"Why, you dirty thief!" said Crane. "Picking a dead man's pocket."



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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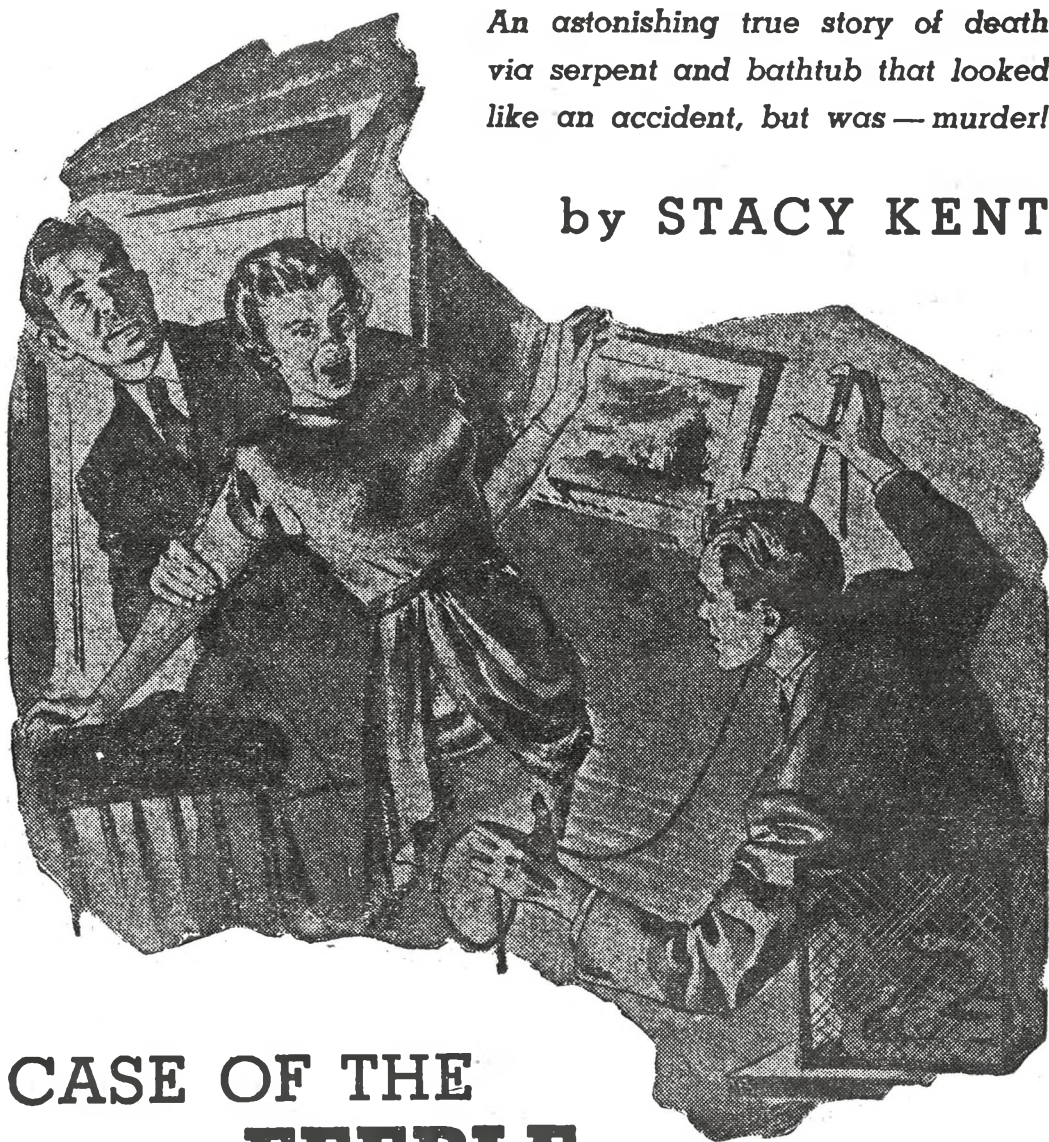
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*An astonishing true story of death
via serpent and bathtub that looked
like an accident, but was — murder!*

by STACY KENT



CASE OF THE **FEEBLE** **RATTLESNAKES**

LOS ANGELES, that famed Mecca of the western world, produces bigger and better murders, as well as movies and revival meetings. One of the biggest, best and by all odds most gruesome of the first-named was staged Sunday and/or Monday, August 4 and 5,

1935, in a rose-bowered bungalow of suburban La Canada, in the foothills of the Sierra Madres.

The victim was little Mary Busch, wife of Robert James, big, good-looking Alabamian, who ran a downtown Los Angeles barber-shop. She was young

and pretty and had worked for him as a manicurist. They were newlyweds.

The murder implements were two—a rattlesnake and a bathtub. But it took many tense months and much brilliant detective work to assemble these and certain other facts about this baffling crime, facts that ultimately were to reach the ears not only of twelve "good men and true" but millions more.

Meanwhile police marked the dossier "accidental death," after a coroner's report to that effect, verified by a routine investigation that disclosed the following:

The thermometer had hovered around 100 that Monday of August 5, 1935, and Robert James, who was red-headed and fair-skinned, was feeling the heat. He shaved his customers indifferently and cut one or two.

Plans Dinner Party

Finally, later in the afternoon, the thought came that it would be nice to have an outdoor dinner-party that evening. So Robert closed his shop, rounded up a couple of Mary's friends, drove them to the bungalow. On the way up into the cool hills they stopped and bought some steaks. It was dusk when they arrived.

Seeing that no lights were lit, Robert stepped from the car, sang out in his musical Southern drawl, "Mary, here's company! Where are you, honey?" He ran inside, calling, "Mary! Mary!"

There was no answer.

"Funny!" he said, switching on the lights in the hall. "This isn't like her."

They went from room to room—but there was no Mary.

"Let's look around outside," Robert said at length. "I'm afraid something has happened."

They got flashlights and started hunting.

"Here—come over here!" called one of Mary's friends.

They rushed to a fish-pond, in a thicket of bamboo. There lay Mary, in lounging pajamas, face down in the water, feet still on the neat little path that bordered the pond.

"Oh, my God!" gasped Robert.

Tenderly he lifted his young wife from the water, gazed into her pallid face.

"She's dead!" he sobbed. "She must

have slipped and fallen in."

If Mary's friends didn't think this was quite what had happened, they didn't say so. Nor did the coroner, though a pronounced swelling of the left leg and hip made him wonder.

"Accidental death," he said, officially at least.

And that's the way it stood.

But the D.A.'s office had different ideas about it. Deputy Eugene D. Williams, who was later to try the case, was given a crew of detectives expert in obtaining evidence that would "stick" in court, told to check up on Robert James.

"Go back to the cradle," the D.A. told Williams. "Get everything he ever did, or failed to do. And don't overlook the insurance angle. Some of them are still dumb enough to work that old racket, though it's practically a sure head in the noose."

So Williams went to work on James's story as if he'd been gathering data for a book-length biography. Here is what he found:

The young man's real name was not James but Lisenba—Major Raymond Lisenba. His parents were Alabama share-croppers. The "Major" was not a military title but merely his first name. Evidently he hadn't liked it, or his last one. So Raymond became Robert, Lisenba became James, and Robert James became a barber.

Works in Birmingham

For a while he worked in Birmingham, for the husband of one of his elder sisters, a master barber of that city, and seems to have been good at his trade. But women were his weakness and one of them, wooed with more ardor than wisdom, caused him to leave his brother-in-law's shop, Birmingham and Alabama, all in a day and with the proverbial toothbrush and a prayer.

In the wandering, journeyman-barber years that followed, women and money were always Robert's problems. He could never get enough of either and squandered both with a lavish hand. But he managed to do all right, with the aid of a little larceny now and then. Nor was he above matrimony, when all else failed. His wives were so numerous and frequent, in fact, that Williams' men soon became convinced that they were

on the trail of a bigamist, if nothing more.

That tip about insurance, too, was beginning to pay off. Robert had collected on his mother's death, seemingly from natural causes. Then on the death of a nephew, in an automobile accident. Then on a wife, in an automobile accident followed by an accident in a bathtub.

The bathtub case had some odd angles. It led the detectives to Colorado and other interesting places.

Robert had met and married, in Los Angeles, a girl name Winona Wallace. Then, having arranged insurance from which he would receive some \$14,000 in the event of her accidental death, he scraped up enough money to pay the first quarterly premiums and take the bride to Colorado on her honeymoon. It proved very bad for her health.

Late one night their car went off the road at Glen Cove, near Pike's Peak. Robert had jumped, but Winona, who was driving, had gone on over the cliff. That at least was the story he hurried back and told the toll-gate superintendent.

"Some jumper!" exclaimed that skeptical official, noting the young man's immaculate clothes. "Take me to the spot."

"I landed on my feet," Robert explained, starting off.

As they reached the scene of the accident and the superintendent cast the beam of his powerful flashlight into the gorge, they saw that a huge boulder had stopped the car in its wild downward plunge. Winona was lying beside the wreckage, in bad shape but still breathing. A police ambulance was summoned and she was taken to a Colorado Springs hospital. There, after a careful examination, the attending surgeon voiced his reluctant opinion that the wound on the back of Winona's head seemed to have been caused by a hammer.

Find Bloody Hammer

He was right. The hammer was found, with blood on it. And blood was found in Robert's car. This was reported to the Colorado Springs police. And the toll-gate superintendent told them what he thought about this big red-headed Southerner's jumping abilities. They went to the scene of the "accident" and took pic-

tures, made diagrams, convinced themselves that murder had been intended.

But instead of dying, Winona recovered. And luckily for Robert but unluckily for her, she could remember nothing of what had happened and asked that no action be taken. So Robert removed his bride from the hospital the moment she was able to travel, took her to a lonely cabin in nearby Manitou, up in the hills, "to recuperate and resume their honeymoon"—with money borrowed from her father.

"Obviously a smooth operator!" Williams muttered, as he delved deeper into the matter. "I can almost see the end of this thing now."

It was a grim end.

Appearing at the Manitou general store one afternoon, Robert ordered some groceries. He was just back from Colorado Springs, he told the clerk, and was tired. Would they send a boy along to help carry the packages?

They would and did—and on entering the cabin, Robert called for Winona, just as he was to call for Mary up at that La Canada bungalow. And Winona was ominously absent. But, on this earlier occasion, there being no fish-pond, they found her in the bathtub. The water was warm and soapy. Winona was nude and dead.

Why the Colorado Springs police failed to arrest Robert James and charge him with her murder is something the Los Angeles D.A.'s office couldn't figure out, and probably still can't. Nor can anyone else. They had evidence a-plenty—first in the attempt at Glen Cove, and then in the success at Manitou. And had still more been wanted, they need but have checked up to find that soon thereafter Robert came into some \$14,000 of insurance money.

Had the Colorado Springs D.A. been able to bring this brutal killer to trial for the murder of Winona Wallace, he would almost certainly have got a conviction, and little Mary Busch would in all probability be alive today. Instead, the police let him go unpunished, to enjoy a wild fling with the fruits of his revolting crime, and then to commit another, even worse.

What a fling it was! Robert bought himself a convertible coupé fit for Sam Goldwyn, clothes and luggage that would have done credit to Adolphe Menjou, plus toiletries and gadgetries that would

have delighted many a lesser Hollywood notable. Then, with a gay heart and a gas-happy foot, he high-tailed back over the mountains to Birmingham, Alabama.

He Is Welcomed Home

It was "Southern Boy Makes Good in Golden West" and they forgave and forgot, handed him the town on a tin platter—as much of it as he could pay for. Among his purchases were some fighting game-cocks. These added to his fame, and temporarily to his fortune, and soon he was the biggest thing in that class of Birmingham society.

While there he became intimate with Lois Doe, an attractive girl of eighteen. The way he described it, Los Angeles sounded wonderful. So they went back together, traveling as man and wife. He sent her to a beauty school and had her learn manicuring.

While waiting for Lois to complete her studies, Robert bought a barber-shop in a good downtown location, hired Mary Busch as a manicurist. He talked her into marriage, with results that are known. But when he went to collect the \$20,000 insurance money she left him, he met with difficulties. One of the companies settled a \$10,000 claim for \$3500. The other, more blunt in its suspicions, refused to pay a cent on a claim of like amount.

While battling it out with the second company, and airily unaware that he was under investigation by the District Attorney's office, Robert James bought a charming little bungalow in southwest Los Angeles—and into this pretty cage went Lois, now a graduate manicurist and very easy on the eyes. It was April of 1936 and Mary had been in her grave nearly eight months. The web of the law was drawing close. Soon someone else would be in a cage, one not so pretty.

Next door to where Lois preened and trilled was a bungalow of similar type but occupied by quite a different class of people, a group of bachelors who looked coarse and uninteresting to the romantic barber and his beautiful manicurist. This was okay with the bachelors, for they were Deputy Williams' men. Though perhaps not good talkers, they were excellent listeners. And it was swell listening they had!

A dictograph, fed by microphones in-

stalled in every room of the "love nest," as they called the Robert-Lois *ménage*, entertained them day and night. But though many choice tidbits came over this dulcet network, among them was not one of an incriminating nature. Lois seemed even dumber than she looked.

Finally, the night of April 19, tiring of their amorous chit-chat, Williams ordered his men to break in and arrest Robert James on a technical charge. Something might come of it. Often a man will talk when he gets in jail. But Robert didn't. No word would he say about Winona Wallace, Mary Busch or anyone else he might have murdered, seduced or bigamized.

Old Stuff Crops Up

Others, however, were not so close-mouthed. Once it was known that Robert James was under arrest, numerous people began remembering things.

One of the first to come forward was the owner of a liquor store. A fellow named Chuck Hope had come into his store one day the previous August, high as a hoot-owl, hollering for gin, and muttering about buying rattlesnakes to bite a woman, and how one had bit her, but not hard enough, and someone had been forced to drown her. D.T.'s, of course. But he'd been thinking perhaps there might be some connection between this gin-head's story and the finding of Mrs. James in the fish-pond. Now that the husband was under arrest for living with some woman in sin or something, perhaps the police might want to ask him about the rattlesnakes.

They did, but first they wanted to ask Chuck Hope about them. Through his wife, they located him at Hermosa Beach, where he was cookie in a dog-wagon. At first he wouldn't talk—but finally he did. It was a horrible story, and so fantastic that had a fiction writer concocted it, the editor would have returned his manuscript with the advice to sober up and try again.

Chuck had dropped into Robert's barber-shop on a day of late May or early June, 1935, asked for a haircut and shave on credit. He'd been drinking and didn't feel so good. He felt worse when he thought he heard Robert say:

"Okay, buddy—and I'll give you a hundred bucks to boot if you'll get me some rattlesnakes. Pal of mine has a

wife that's been bothering him. Wants to let 'em bite her."

That gin! Yep, he'd have to swear off! But no, he'd heard right the first time. For now the barber was repeating, and it was the same thing. He wanted live rattlesnakes, to commit a murder with!

They went out and had a couple of drinks, and pretty soon it didn't seem so awful. Pretty soon Chuck was agreeing. Pretty soon, folding-money in pocket, he was weaving around town, trying to buy rattlers. Succeeding, too.

But the snakes weren't potent enough. The first batch wouldn't even kill a chicken they put in the cage with them. And the second batch were worse. A rabbit they put in at night was frisky as whisky in the morning, but one of the snakes was dead.

Robert was disgusted. "These snakes have got no pep!" he told the abashed Chuck. "Get me some *hot* ones!"

Chuck Hunts Rattlesnakes

So Chuck tried again. This time he located a dealer, one "Snaky Joe" Houtenbrink, who said his were the hottest in captivity. They were the *Crotalus Atrox* variety, Joe said, fresh from the Colorado desert and guaranteed to kill man or beast. Chuck paid him six bucks for a pair of real stingerosos, fat as a man's arm and plenty mean.

Proudly he took his ugly darlings to Robert, who viewed them with a cynical eye.

"They look just like the others," he said.

"Try 'em and see!" said Chuck.

Robert, who had been drinking, was half tempted to stick his hand in the cage, in which event this story would have been finished before now. Thinking better of it, however, he substituted a tough old hen. The rattler let her have it—and with a startled cluck, she expired. The other snake did the same to her sister.

"These will do," Robert said, somewhat shaken.

He put the cage in his garage, gave the rattlers a few days to recuperate, meanwhile feeding them copiously. And if Mary wondered what her husband wanted with a couple of nasty old snakes, at least she made no complaint. For the moles and gophers he caught and fed them reduced the numbers of

these little rodents that were tearing up her lawns.

Perhaps the trouble was that Robert fed his pets too well. Or perhaps they weren't quite the stingerosos "Snaky Joe" had made out. At any rate, when the crucial hour struck, and the rattlers struck, they weren't "hot" enough. So Robert had to drown Mary, as he'd had to drown Winona when pushing her over the cliff hadn't quite worked. And he did it the same way—in a bathtub.

The grimmest part of Chuck's story was not the actual murder but the attempted murder. He had driven out to the bungalow on Sunday morning, August 4, 1935, "just to see how things were coming along," but Robert had forced him to aid in the gruesome work, promising to split the insurance money fifty-fifty. After several drinks he agreed. Entering the kitchen, Hope seized Mrs. James while her husband bound and gagged Mary, laid her on the kitchen table. Then they brought in the rattlers, stuck her left foot in the cage. At least one of them struck her.

Chuck staggered out with the cage, put it in his car, drove down to Joe's place, sold back the snakes at half price. Then he returned to the bungalow, expecting to find Mary dead. But, though her leg was swollen almost double and she was suffering agony, she still lived.

"Those rattlers are just like the others—feeble!" Robert growled. "Looks like I got to finish her off with water."

Girl Wife Lingers On

But Chuck advised waiting. So they went to the garage, had several more drinks. Then they returned to the bungalow, and Mary was still alive, though the swelling had now spread to her hip.

"I better do it now!" Robert muttered.

But again Chuck advised waiting. The poison would soon reach her heart. . . .

It didn't, however, though they drank and waited all day, and half the night.

"I'm goin' in an' drown her now!" Robert mumbled at length, half maudlin.

"Very feeble rattlesnakes!"

"Nothin' feeble about this!" Chuck gurgled, as he swilled the gin.

Robert staggered into the bungalow, eyes beady and bloodshot. He was gone a long while. Chuck dozed and dawn broke over the Sierra Madres. . . .

Finally, around 6 A.M., Robert returned, sober now. "She's finished and I've fixed everything up," he said. "Come in and help me get her out."

Mary was lying in a hallway just beyond the bathroom, Chuck saw she was dressed in lounging pajamas and was dry, except for her hair. Together they carried her to the fish-pond, pushed her face down in it. "Well, that's that!" Robert said. "Guess we're in the clear. Now I got to get to work."

He drove Chuck home, then cruised out Wilshire Boulevard for a while. Then he headed back into town, parked his car at the usual place, opened his shop at the usual time.

That was Chuck Hope's story and he stuck to it. When Williams recited it to Robert, however, he denied it emphatically.

"The drunken fool—he's crazy!"

But when they took him to the scene of the crime, showed him that the detectives had verified the main points, he began to break. After they confronted him with the solution of the Winona Wallace case, he made a partial confession.

Lisenba Goes On Trial

While admitting that he and Chuck had planned to murder Mary and had agreed to divide the insurance, he said the rattlesnake idea was Chuck's and that it was Chuck who had drowned her.

"I couldn't kill Mary," he said as he sobbed convincingly. "She'd been too good to me."

But this didn't check with one of his previous remarks.

"Why all this fuss about a dame like that?" he'd asked Williams, shortly after his arrest. "She's nothing but a slut. I

practically picked her up off the street."

So Major Raymond Lisenba of Alabama, alias Robert James of California, was booked on a murder charge and brought to trial in the Los Angeles Superior Court, before Judge Charles W. Fricke. Deputy D.A. Eugene D. Williams was chief prosecutor, assisted by John Barnes. Defense counsel was "Wild Bill" Clark, aided by Russell Parsons and Samuel Silverman.

A surprise witness was Chuck Hope, who had pleaded guilty to first-degree murder and received a life sentence. But the most damaging witness was a dead woman—Winona Wallace. Evidence of her murder was admissible, and was damning.

"Mr. Clerk, read the verdict," said Judge Fricke at the end of the long trial.

"We, the jury, find the accused guilty of murder in the first degree."

That meant death, mandatory under California law—death by hanging.

But the romantic barber wasn't dead yet, not with a trio of such noted and resourceful defense attorneys. On abstruse technical grounds, they appealed to the Supreme Court of California.

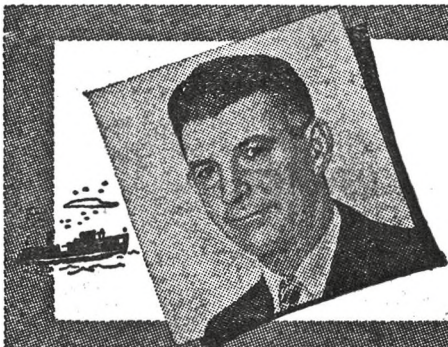
"Judgment affirmed."

They appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States.

"Affirmed."

It was the end of the road at last.

Many wished the old Mosaic law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" had prevailed in California, so that Robert James could have been "bitten by a rattlesnake until dead," a punishment still too good for him. Instead, he was "hanged by the neck until dead"—the last man to die by the rope in the Golden State. After that, they started gassing their murderers.



OYSTERMAN FINDS REAL PEARL!

AMAGANSETT, N. Y.—Capt. Ted Lester has discovered a gem among whiskies. "It's Calvert Reserve," he says, "and the day I first tasted it, I switched to Calvert's smoother taste. It's a real find!"

A Detective Novel

MURDER ONE



by ELEAZAR LIPSKY

Alice Williston was as good as in the chair unless Prosecutor Esau Frost could come up with a miracle from her lurid and tragic past!

I

THE persistent signal buzzer finally got through the glutinous darkness and released her from dreaming. She grew aware of a vile taste and sandy eyes.

The buzzer continued. She knew she would get up. There would be no more sleep that day. The cramps in her arms and in her belly ensured against forgetfulness.

She threw back the covers and walked across the disordered room to the house telephone. The afternoon sun warmed the room despite the draft on her naked body coming through the open window.

Jimmy was lying on the floor, his head on a pineneedle pillow, still asleep. He badly needed a shave. She grimaced and picked up the receiver.

The doorman's voice told her that there had been a call for her from a man. But the caller had hung up and had said he would call again.

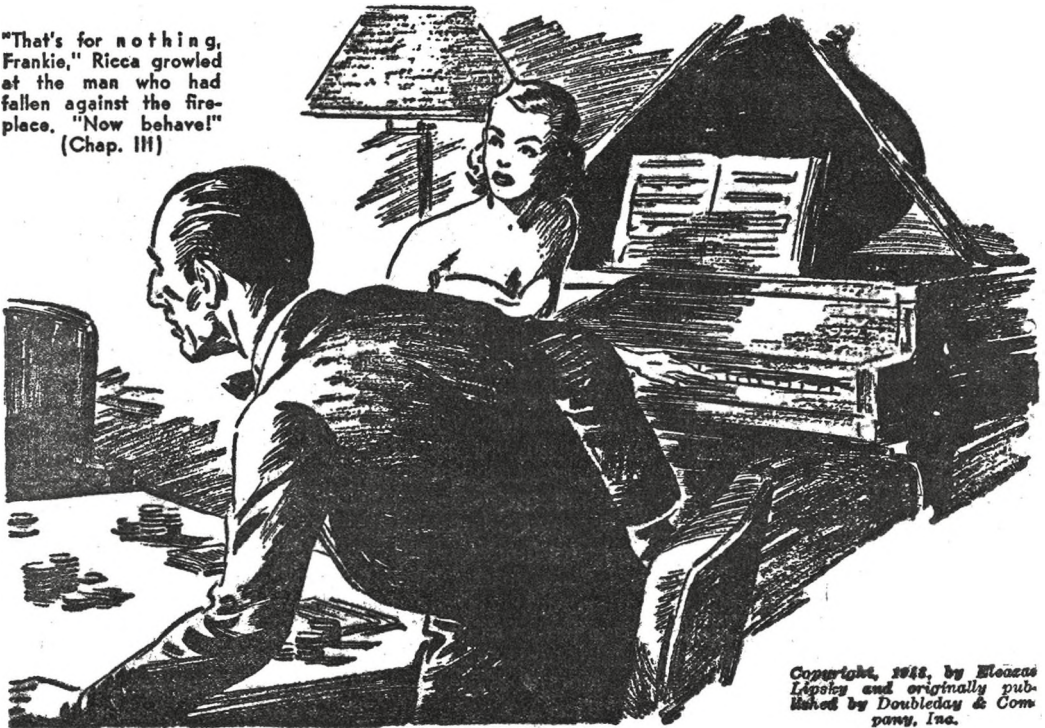
"What time is it?" she asked hoarsely.

"Four-fifteen," the doorman answered jovially. "Month of April. Time to wake up."

"Shut up, you clown," she snapped grumpily.

She hung up and closed herself in the

"That's for nothing, Frankie," Ricca growled at the man who had fallen against the fireplace. "Now behave!" (Chap. III)



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Most People Will Fight for Life—but this Girl

bathroom. After a time she washed her face with cold water, let the faucet flow full force over her wrists, brushed her teeth thoughtfully with a harsh tooth-paste, combed her hair, applied a light carmine lipstick. Still she felt no better.

Coffee might help, she thought. It always did.

She drew back the doors concealing a kitchenette and made her preparations. She emptied the pot, slopped it with a wet rag, refilled the top, and set a second pot to boil.

She turned and nudged Jimmy's bristly cheek with her naked toe.

"I'm making coffee," she said ill-humoredly. "Wake up."

He made no answer. She reached down and shook him. She kneeled and slapped his cheeks. "Wake up," she insisted. She attempted to lift him.

Through the sour haze, she noticed that his arms stiffly resisted as she tugged at him. She slipped her hand inside his shirt.

"What's wrong?" she cried. "Jimmy, answer me!"

She stood and wrung her hands. She filled a glass with cold water and flung it in his face. She wiped him dry with a kitchen towel from the sink. She massaged his wrists.

She stood terrified. "What's wrong, Jimmy?" she cried. "What's wrong?"

It was more than she could stand. She scrambled through her dresser and found a telephone number. She stepped into shoes and the previous evening's dress. Without doing up her hair, she ran into the hallway and took the elevator to the lobby.

She borrowed a nickel from the door-man, Frank, on duty and submitted to a familiar pinch as the price of the favor. She misdialed twice before she got her number.

"Haven't I told you never to call my office?" the man who responded said unpleasantly. "I'll call you when I want you."

"Please! Please!" she begged. "Something's wrong with Jimmy. I'm afraid."

"What is it?" the voice asked cautiously.

"He's asleep on the floor," she said fearfully. "He's stiff and he's cold! I can't wake him up."

After a pause the man said, "That sounds as though he's dead. You'd better call the police."

She clung to the telephone, her knees sagging.

"Not Jimmy!" she cried. "He can't be dead! He can't leave me!"

"Call the police," the man said. "You'll have to get them or the medical examiner."

After a time she said, "Come with me. I'm afraid to go alone."

"No. You go alone," he said. "I can't help."

"I'll come to your office," she said. "I'm afraid."

"Don't come here," the man said quickly.

She hung up and rushed back to her one-room apartment. She grabbed a pair of gloves and pulled a comb through her hair. Her purse was empty. She threw it away. Someone else would pay for her taxicab.

Jimmy was lying quietly, his head on the pillow, as she closed the door of the apartment.

HIS red face swollen with anger as they walked down the steamy corridor, the prison guard blurted out: "We put the current through twice and he wouldn't die! He flopped like a fish, but the heart kept going! It took three shots!" He motioned at the tiered stories above them. "They been nervous like bedbugs since the grapevine got the story! They don't like it!"

"What makes you so sore?" Esau Frost growled. "Morgan didn't ask to be burned. That was our idea."

Detective Vincent Ricca glanced sideways at the grim assistant district attorney. "Okay. Okay," he said to the guard. "We heard that story! Turn the dial!"

The guard led them on. "Tie that!" he snorted as he turned them over to the next guard. "Three times!"

Frost and Ricca turned over their identification passes to the new guard and were admitted to a fair-sized chamber with a half dozen cells on each side of the central passageway. Each of the four occupied cells was brightly lit. The cots were clean and provided with linens. The prisoners came to the fore to regard

Preferred Execution to Any Admission of Guilt!

them as they walked past toward the cell nearest the green-painted steel door at the end.

"Hello, Cesare," Ricca said.

Cesare Buongiorno stood back against the wall as they entered and the cell door was locked behind them. He was quiet

tap drip. He drew up a stool and sat, resting a slack paunch against his thighs.

"You heard what they did to Morgan?" he asked suddenly. His voice was deep and rasping. They nodded. "Tomorrow Sarde goes. Next week Keppler



Albany saw Jimmy on the floor and Alice with a wooden lamp in her hand (Chap. III)

and watchful, a fat aging man with large, domineering features. In his youth he might have been handsome, but now, with his coarse skin and bristling hair streaked with white, his face was porcine and merely brutal.

Frost offered cigarettes around. "Well, Cesare, here I am," he said, tapping his own. "What's on your mind?"

Buongiorno lit the cigarette, drew one breath, and doused it under the water-

there. Then Georgie Battle. Then me."

"I could read that in the papers," Frost said.

Buongiorno wiped his face with his sweating hands. "Then me," he repeated. "That makes it different."

"I don't see how," Frost said.

The prisoner twisted his hands. "It's this way," he rasped. "I'm ready to tell you what you want. Anything. Just ask." He stood and loosened his shirt. "There's

maybe twenty jobs I could break for you. Ask me. Just ask."

"I figured you'd crack," Frost replied slowly. "I told you before you went to trial—there's a breaking point in the best man alive." He stared glumly at the prisoner. "Even in you."

"Ain't you a little late?" Ricca put in.

Buongiorno bit his dry lips. He turned on the detective with hate. "Don't cross me up now, Ricca! I'm talking to the man who counts!" He returned to Frost. "Suppose I give up the men who knocked off Julie Mannheim?"

Frost removed the cigarette. "That could be interesting," he said. "Even after six years. What have you got on them?"

The prisoner's legs were trembling. He sank back to the stool. "I hired the two men myself. Connections from Kansas City. They done other jobs for me. I could hand them up like that." He snapped his fingers.

Frost shook his head firmly. "You passed up your deal, Cesare. You could have taken a plea to Murder Two, and saved your life. But you wanted a trial! Result?" He threw his hands in a short, outward gesture. "Murder One!" He pinched out his cigarette. "You knew what you were doing. We're not trading your hired hands for you."

Buongiorno grasped Frost's hand. "I ain't asking to get sprung," he pleaded in his rasping voice, his body quivering. "I just don't want to go through that door. I just want to live." He slid off the stool to his knees. "Whatever you say, District Attorney. Just save my life!"

Frost snatched back his hand. "I can't help unless you give up someone bigger than you," he said flatly. "You know that!" He signaled for the guard.

Buongiorno lost the fight for control. "How can I do that? There ain't no one bigger!"

"Sorry, Cesare," Frost said harshly. "There's nothing I can do."

When the cell door had closed behind them, Frost turned and asked with finality. "Anything else to offer?"

The prisoner started up from the floor and moaned.

Frost hesitated, then threw in his package of cigarettes and turned away. Buongiorno's moans, mingled with the curses of the other prisoners, pursued him and Ricca as they left the death house.

"Get me out, Vince," Frost muttered to Ricca.

Ricca drove silently from Ossining until well into Washington Heights, where he proposed that they drink. Frost agreed and they found a bar on upper Broadway.

"How do you like that guy?" Frost demanded after a second straight whisky. "He said he'd never crack!"

"Forget that hood, Easy," Ricca replied. "He knew what he was doing."

"Next case!" Frost dismissed the subject.

They continued down Broadway and then Riverside Drive to the Eighties, where Ricca dropped Frost off at his home. It was well toward midnight, but Dorothy heard his footstep and was at the door to greet him.

Like a wise woman, she said nothing as she read his face. The sight of her did him good at once. There was something wholesome and zestful about his handsome wife. He held her close and kissed her brown hair. She was firm and responsive.

He looked in at the children. Timmy, the little one, lay sprawled and peaceful within the crib, clutching a woolly lamb. The older boy, Bobbie, was gently snoring, his mouth in a pout.

Over bacon and scrambled eggs Frost talked about everything but the events at the death house. After coffee, he finally felt relieved, but even so, as they went to bed, he knew he would not sleep.

IN a way the telephone was welcome when it rang at about one o'clock, driving through the tumult of his mind. He threw back the comforter and walked to the cold living room in bare feet. It was the Telegraph Bureau announcing that the Thirty-fourth Precinct had fished a headless torso from the North River. Frost sarcastically replied that he would be glad to roll out when the deceased was ready to give a statement.

As he was settling back to bed the telephone rang again. The Eighteenth had a d.o.a. Homicide had been notified.

"Who's catching squeals?" Frost grumbled.

"Ricca and Corbin," the Telegraph man said, and rang off.

Frost was reassured. He liked the team on a case. He was undecided. If he waited, he might try for sleep before the Homicide detectives would call him.

Unfortunately, he bore a New England conscience. He dutifully called Homicide.

"Yeah. Yeah," Ricca answered. "We caught that squeal, Tommy Corbin and I were going to check it over before waking you."

"What do you say, Vince? Should I roll on this?"

"Well, they've got this woman who reported the death," Ricca said. "She's in a bad way, but she might be in shape for a statement soon."

Frost asked Ricca to notify his stenographer and called Police Headquarters. Motor Transport promised a car in a half hour.

His feet were icy. He returned to the bedroom and began to dress warmly. He pulled on a red knitted sweater and drew it over corduroy trousers and a corduroy jacket. He pulled a mustard-colored scarf from the dresser and his old army overcoat from the closet.

Dorothy muttered at him. She propped herself in bed and brushed the warm sleep from her eyes. He looked longingly at her. "Do you always have to wake up?" he asked. "Why don't you sleep through?"

"Give me a kiss," she commanded.

Her tumbling hair smelled warm and good.

"I'm giving this up," he said after a time. "I can't do my job when you melt me down this way." He smiled in the darkness.

"Keep quiet, fool," she whispered. "You'll wake the kids."

He smoothed the covers, kissed her again, and walked to the cold living room where he waited in the dark. After a half hour a battered sedan played a familiar toot on the horn. Frost turned the lights on and off, then walked down, greeted the driver, and slid into the front seat of the automobile. He hunched himself against the cold as they swung into Riverside Drive and drove south fast and in disregard of traffic signals. At Tenth Avenue a uniformed officer brought them to a halt at gunpoint. They were motioned on when the driver showed a badge and explained their mission.

"Slow down," Frost growled. "Our client can wait."

They turned east in the Forties and halted before an older apartment building set between brownstones. There was the usual curious crowd and a

gratifying amount of police activity. Frost counted three squad cars, the Homicide Squad cars, and the black van of the Technical Research men. He recognized the license plates of a deputy chief inspector.

A serious Ricca and his partner, Tommy Corbin, were waiting at the entrance. They made a good team. Ricca was swarthy and handsome in a dark, long-faced way. His shrewd knowledge of human behavior in the lower classes was always useful. Corbin was taller, blue-eyed, with freckled, slow-moving hands. He had a strong, intuitive grasp of investigative essentials. They were both dressed in impeccable, conservative taste.

Before entering the building, Frost scouted out certain features. A rental sign showed one- and two-room suites, all fully rented, occupying a twelve-story apartment house in the center of the block. There was a doorman, an elevator, and a house telephone with a buzzer system. The stairway, the passenger and the service elevator opened into a dingy hallway.

Ricca and Corbin got him past the uniformed officer on guard in the lobby and into the building. A group of newspapermen in the lobby came forward as he entered. Frost pointed out that he knew less than the press and asked for time to inform himself.

"What's all the action for?" he asked.

Gerald Boxer, a *Tribune* man, said coarsely that a white woman was involved.

Frost showed that he was impressed.

"Get your story from the cops," he suggested. "They can't keep a secret."

As they rode the elevator Ricca remarked, "You'll find the place crawling with bosses, Easy. You'll have to battle your way in."

They found the apartment on the fourth floor crowded with police officers in plain clothes in a warm hubbub of seeming confusion. The entrance led into a small hallway which opened left into a living room. A kitchenette, powder alcove, and bathroom covered the side wall opposite the hallway. Two large windows opened the far wall overlooking the street. The near wall was blank. The furnishings were inexpensive but in good taste. Two or three excellent water colors alternated with cheaper prints. Two day beds filled opposite corners of

the room. A table, chairs, and bookcases completed the room.

FROST set about with difficulty to memorize the apartment for future purposes. A small broken table and a shattered mirror in the hall entrance were conspicuous. Of the score of police officers, some were rummaging through drawers, reading through letters and papers stuffed in a powder table, and making notes as they proceeded.

Ricca respectfully introduced him to Walter Harrington, a deputy chief inspector. He was a handsome, elderly official in a quiet business suit who was about to leave. Harrington acknowledged the introduction with a short nod. "Nothing to keep me here," he grimaced. "Just a *shmear*. A drunken brawl."

"One boss out of the way," Ricca whispered behind Harrington's retreating back.

A short man of middle years, dark and Latin in appearance, was the center of attraction. He lay supine on the floor, feet toward the entrance, head to the kitchenette. Large black-and-blue marks covered the face, notably over the right eye and temple. The vacant face was bristly and coarse. Coat, shirt, and trousers were open to the groin, revealing a plump, hairy body. Two technical men were rolling ink on the fingers.

"What's wrong with our friend?" Frost asked.

The fingerprint men looked up. "He isn't complaining, Mr. D.A.," he smiled. "The medical examiner hasn't got here yet to talk for him."

In the hallway Captain Daniel Mulvaney of the Homicide Squad was pressing a tall, fat man for information. That the man was sweating nervously was easy to understand. Mulvaney was a hook-nosed martinet with a fund of slashing, savage humor and a brutal, hectoring manner which took fortitude to resist.

Captain Judah Benjamin of the Eighteenth Squad was questioning a woman on the day bed near the window. She was wearing a cheap, loose evening dress, no stockings, and broken slippers. She wore no underclothes, and when she leaned forward her body was exposed. The woman kept biting her lips and pulling at her fingers.

Benjamin pressed without mercy. "Tell us again where he was when you

went to sleep," he said in a nagging voice.

She indicated the body with a jerky, abrupt motion. "Jimmy was lying there!" she cried.

"Tell us again why he was there!" Benjamin went on.

"I told you," she trembled. "He went to sleep."

"On the floor?" Benjamin asked incredulously.

"That's right," she said, clipping her words.

Benjamin pulled up a chair and settled down. "All right, tell us again. From the beginning," he ordered.

The woman suddenly began to shriek, "Let me alone!" She clasped her arms across her large breasts and began to rock back and forth. "Make them let me alone! Oh, Mummy! Mummy! Make them go away!"

"Shut up, you bitch!" Benjamin growled. He rolled a cigar in his mouth calmly and seized her bare arm.

The woman became the center of attraction. The police officers looked up from their various duties. Captain Mulvaney put his head into the room from the small hallway where he was interrogating the fat man and grinned. "Hey, Captain, cork that whistle before they call the cops," he boomed.

Frost intervened. "Captain, will this woman be a defendant?" he asked quietly.

Benjamin turned angrily at the young lawyer. "She might be," he said grimly. "You're holding her too tight," Frost said wearily. "That white skin will show bruises if you don't let up."

The point was well taken. Benjamin flung the woman off. "All right, Mr. D.A.," he said. "No bruises. No contusions. No abrasions!" His face turned cold. "And no confession!"

"I won't have rough stuff, Captain." Frost answered with equal feeling. "If we get a confession, it's got to stand up in court. Don't mess up my trial."

The monotonous screams went on. The woman kept rocking back and forth, calling "Mummy" for help. Her face was ghastly white, dotted with faint freckles. Wisps of lanky red hair, dark with sweat, kept falling in her eyes. Her light brows and lashes gave her green eyes a washed-out, almost albino appearance.

"What is this woman's name?" Frost asked.

Benjamin looked at a notebook. "Williston. Alice Williston, she says."

Frost leaned over and took her limp hand. He brought his free hand in a sudden slap across the back of her wrist.

"No more screaming, Alice," he said quietly. "If you scream, I won't listen," he repeated several times firmly. "I can't hear you when you scream."

Finally the screams dissolved into silent weeping.

"That's much better," Frost said encouragingly. "Now when you've finished, I'll let you tell me your story."

Frost looked up at the small circle of detectives who had gathered to watch. "Do you want to put questions now?" he asked Benjamin gravely.

It was a delicate moment. Benjamin was an older man, a good, hard-driving investigator who knew his business. He looked thoughtfully at Frost and the woman and at the cluster of detectives.

"I guess not," he grunted. "You want to run the show. Let's get down to the precinct where we can work."

The detectives winked at each other and resumed their chores.

Mulvaney joined Benjamin and Frost.

Frost nodded at the dead man. "Who did this, Dan?" he asked.

"The woman here," Mulvaney indicated with his chin, and yawned. "She admits they were alone all night." He scratched a bristly chin. "No details. She says he went to sleep and she put the pillow under his head." He snorted. "Garbage is what we got!"

"Who's the fat man you were working over?"

"The lawyer who reported the death," Mulvaney said grimly. "He's not telling what he knows either."

Frost requested black coffee for the woman and asked that all papers be scooped up and brought along for study.

Corbin shook the woman lightly. "Come on, Alice, march!" he ordered with a slow gesture.

SHE picked up a light tan coat and drearily followed him out of the room. She stepped over the body and out through the hallway, tears wetting her cheeks.

Almost all the detectives except the technical men followed. Frost lingered with Ricca.

Ricca grimaced. "You see what the working cop has to contend with," he



Cesare Buongiorno stood back against the wall as Frost and Ricca entered the cell (Chap. I)

said. "We got nothing from her. Just names and telephone numbers." He clucked lasciviously. "Quite a list, what I mean. We just got started when she got the shakes." He unwrapped a small parcel. "We figure this was used." He exhibited a small wooden lamp of light wood, maple-tinted. The shaft was broken from the base.

Frost hefted the two wooden objects. "This is no weapon," he said thoughtfully.

Ricca rewrapped the pieces. "Yeah. Yeah. That's right," he grunted, "but it could account for the bruises. He pointed at the carpet. "Look at these blood-stains." He showed Frost similar stains on the bathroom sink and the kitchenette floor. "And these." He pointed to two quart whisky bottles, one with the neck broken off. They were standing empty, one on the bridge table with five high-ball glasses and one on a bookcase. "The technical men will take these."

"What killed this bugger?" Frost asked thoughtfully. He put the question to the technical men who were concluding their examination.

"Can't say, Mr. D.A.," a young officer with clear eyes answered. "There are no open cuts or penetrating wounds. Look!" The officer exposed the chest and belly down to the groin. "Nothing here." He poked a stubby finger into the swollen bruises about the head. "No holes in these bruises."

"Even a hole wouldn't prove cause of death," Frost said dryly. "He might have died of anything."

"For instance?" Ricca asked.

"Heart disease. Brain hemorrhage. Gas poisoning." Frost ticked off on his fingers. "Anything," he repeated.

"So?" Ricca asked.

"So you never know till the medical examiner tells you." Frost kneeled beside the body. "Turn the lower eyelids down," he requested. "Lend me a magnifying glass and a flashlight." They were passed over. He examined the inner aspect of the eyelids. "At least it doesn't look like strangulation or asphyxiation." He straightened up. "We'll have to wait for the autopsy."

Frost arose and walked about with Ricca, scrutinizing the empty room.

"Would you believe that this woman could have made this home, Vince?" he murmured, half to himself.

A ball of wool led from the window

day bed to a half-done muffler and a pair of knitting needles in the corner. Frost tugged at the muffler and showed its good workmanship to Ricca, then tossed it back to its corner. He crouched and ran a finger along the bookcase. At random, he picked a worn green volume of Elinor Wylie's verse and nodded appreciatively. "Look here, Vince." He showed Ricca the flyleaf: "To Alice-in-Wonderland. From J.H.M." There was a deft caricature of Alice Williston, drawn in the Tenniel style, in a child's smock at the pool of tears, long tresses down her shoulders.

There were other volumes of New England poets, and current books on psychological theories.

"Maybe she's smart," Ricca commented. "Looks like she knows subjects, what I mean." He called Frost's attention to a large oil painting hung in the powder alcove. Frost observed the bust of a good-looking woman. The picture was dated five years earlier. "That's nice," Ricca breathed. "You wouldn't think it's the same one. Our woman looks like a witch."

It was indeed a beautiful face, but marred by a sulky expression about the mouth. The slight roll of fat under the chin of the original did not appear in the picture. The hair was done in a plain, tasteful coiffure with a braid drawn across the head, Russian style. The small nose and firm chin appeared to good advantage in three-quarters aspect. The darkness of the eyes gave depth and intelligence to the entire face. A velvet gown with a bursting bodice and bare shoulders set off its petulance.

Frost studied the picture. "It does look like another woman, Vince," he commented. He turned to the technical men. "Say, Lieutenant, when you shoot this room, will you try to get this picture in?" he asked.

The "lieutenant" smiled. "I only made sergeant, Mr. D. A., but I'll watch for it. Better than that, I'll shoot the picture alone," he promised.

"Is this all?" Frost asked Ricca.

"The apartment is clean, Easy," Ricca answered.

As they left, the technical sergeant was setting up his camera. Frost turned at the hallway to fix the room clearly in his mind. The last thing he observed was the large painting in the alcove which was to be photographed.

II

AT the Eighteenth Precinct, Frost and Ricca found the usual morning overflow of crime from the theatrical area. Several drunks in formal dress, men and women, were arguing with the desk officer for bail. A girl in a red cotton dress was shivering on the bench opposite, guarded by a bored plain-clothes officer.

The desk officer nodded them to the right stairway and one flight up, where they followed a sign to the Eighteenth Detectives' squad rooms. To the left was a series of small offices for the detectives; to the right, a locker room with cots. The corridor ended in the grimy inner and outer offices of the commanding officer.

They found Alice Williston in the outer office seated near the window. She was in oblivious misery, weeping silently. Various other witnesses were seated on benches, docilely waiting to be called. Mulvaney's fat lawyer was seeking to convey aloofness from the scene.

In the inner office, Mulvaney and Benjamin were seated with Corbin and a precinct detective, Leslie McLeod, a sallow, overgrown man near retirement with a black cowlick across his forehead and a thick, upturned nose.

Frost brightened as he observed coffee in cartons and bread-and-butter sandwiches. He slid behind the desk, poured himself a mug, and suggested that they get on.

Benjamin shouted through the open door to the lounging detectives in the squad room, "Make me reports, you men! In two days you'll remember nothing!"

Mulvaney put away a mug of coffee and wiped his mouth. "Let's pro-and-con this procedure, Easy," he said, his fierce blue eyes twinkling. He turned his burly chest and head as though his neck were rigid. "Captain Benjamin feels you're wasting time. He'd like more direct action here."

Benjamin caught the ironic overtone. In the strong yellow light his thoughtful, mild face stood in clear outline. His features were rounded and regular, placid brown eyes, a curved, firm nose, and a strong mouth and chin.

"You can't get proper results without proper methods, Mr. Frost," Benjamin said quietly. "I'd have a statement from that woman now if you hadn't broke in."

He placed his large, clean hands flat on the desk. "You know, Mr. Frost, police experience counts for something. I object to your interference."

"I object to strong-arming this woman!" Frost returned. "I can't control the police! But once I get here"—he tapped the desk with a stiff finger—"I insist on legal methods!"

Benjamin studied Frost with sudden interest. "There's a man lying dead," he said mildly. "This woman has the answers we need. Should we ask her, did she kill him, just like that?"

"Of course not!" Frost was annoyed. "I'll put on the squeeze myself soon enough! With something better than a fist!" He looked around at stolid faces. "Look here, what's the use of battering from the outside? Why not let nature take its course? Let her tear herself to pieces! She's weltering in anxiety! All we need is to suggest force, not to use it! Her imagination will do the rest!"

"The fourth degree, hey?" Mulvaney was amused.

Frost nodded seriously, then turned again to Benjamin. "Captain, you're new here. You may not know how we feel about homicides." He poured out sugar from a folded paper. "What good is her confession if you use force? The judge wouldn't take it in evidence, and—you might as well know—I wouldn't offer it!" He swirled the coffee slowly in the mug. "In this county the district attorney is a lawyer!"

"I'll go along with that!" Mulvaney formed a scaly fist and regarded it thoughtfully. "In the old days this set of fives was my friend! What a lie detector it made! One belt, and it broke cases, Easy." He shrugged his powerful shoulders. "But with this administration, what's the percentage? Lay a finger on a prisoner, and they want your scalp!" He settled back cynically. "I wouldn't touch this woman! I wouldn't stick my neck out! If they don't want cases busted, that's up to them."

"Let's use our brains. There's always a legal way to break a witness. This woman can't possibly hold out," Frost said doggedly.

"Why worry?" Mulvaney smiled broadly. "He didn't commit suicide, and the woman says she was there alone."

"Are we sure there was no third person?" Frost asked.

Benjamin stood and adjusted his

clothes neatly. "I'm headed for home," he said sourly. "I ain't been out of these clothes for two days."

Mulvaney joined Benjamin. "What a shmear!" he grunted as they left.

MCLEOD was able to summarize a call back from the Trenton police. "The deceased is James Madena, 181 Tyler Street, Trenton, aged forty-six, married, two daughters. Dead on arrival," he droned from his notes. "The prisoner is Alice Williston, living at the premises in question, not married, age over thirty. Occupation, entertainer." He snapped his notebook shut. He related that the dead man was occasionally a drummer with a small band in a cheap Seventh Avenue restaurant. He concluded, "He didn't work there for a year."

"Okay. Okay." Frost was impatient. "What do the neighbors say? Sum it up."

"Not in," Ricca said briefly. "One is in Florida. The other we couldn't find."

"Have you got a doorman?"

Ricca nodded. "Has he been questioned?" Frost demanded.

Ricca shook his head.

"For God's sake, haven't the police done anything?" Frost was vexed. He rose and shouted through the open door into the squad room, "Send that doorman in! Let's start getting some truth here!" The witnesses looked up with various expressions of fear and interest. "All right! Let's roll!"

Luis Hernandez came in with a sufficient shove to give him a taste of authority. He was dressed in shiny trousers, a collarless shirt, and a makeshift uniform overcoat and doorman's cap. His dark amber eyes slid about the room under fat, motionless lids.

He sat where indicated, his thumbs hooked in his belt, defiantly staring at the blond district attorney. He reluctantly admitted that he was forty-two, married, had seven children, and that he lived in the cellar of the apartment house in question. He burst into a torrent of choppy, Caribbean dialect.

"Talk English!" Frost ordered. "I can't follow you."

The man put out two dark fists in appeal. "Please. Let me go. I know nothing. I am only the super."

He was on duty from seven o'clock the previous evening until seven in the morning, when Frank, the day man, took over. After ten at night the front

door was locked. It was impossible for anyone to come or go without his knowledge. Miss Williston was a good, quiet lady. No one came or went to her floor.

McLeod shoved his shoulder roughly. "Come on. Out with it," he demanded. "You're lying."

Hernandez twisted to view the detective. "Please. No one came. I saw nothing."

Frost took over the interrogation with alternate threats and promises. After a half hour the doorman burst out, "Please! I must go! My wife. She dying in hospital. I must fix kids and go by morning." He handed over a paper to the skeptical lawyer. "Cancer. She at Welfare Island."

Frost threw back the hospital admission paper. "Tell me what I want and you can go," he said.

Hernandez shook his head desperately. "No one come. No one go. How can I talk when I got nothing to say?"

"You're making me keep you here," Frost said cruelly. "Why should I help your wife if you won't let me?" He exchanged winks with Ricca. "Luis, you're going to sit here until she dies." He nodded to McLeod. "Take Luis outside until he decides to be a man!"

McLeod pushed the stricken doorman back to the squad room.

"Bring in that lawyer," Frost called out.

Ricca marched the lawyer into the captain's office and motioned him into a seat. McLeod remained in the outer office typing a report laboriously.

Frost loosened his army coat and spread the yellow form flat on the desk, staring at the witness to increase his measure of anxiety. Ricca and Corbin drew up chairs behind the witness.

Frost methodically noted on his yellow form that the witness was Henry Pollock, forty-three, married, a lawyer, Broad Street office, Central Park West residence. He was big and smooth and silky, with a woman's mouth, red and ripe. There was something nasty and sycophantic about him. He was too neat, too richly dressed.

He hastened to volunteer that he knew nothing about the case. He had received a call from Alice Williston late in the day. From her description, he judged that the man was dead. Since she was afraid to report to the police alone, he had volunteered as a friend, not as an

attorney, to go with her to the station. He knew nothing of the circumstances.

When he had had enough, Frost brought the witness up short. "I'm not pleased with you," he said brutally. "You're a liar, you're in the middle, and you're sinking deeper by the minute."

Pollock licked his red lips. "What do you mean?" he whispered. "I'm telling what I know."

"Did you imagine this woman would cover you?" Frost asked, incredulous. "She spilled on the way here. You were in the apartment, she says, when the dead man got those lumps."

The lawyer drew out a linen handkerchief and dried the forks of his fat fingers. "She couldn't have told you that," he said weakly. "It isn't true."

Frost leaned forward on the desk. "She accuses you." He turned to Ricca. "Tell this man the rest of her story."

"Why, she told me personally you slugged him with this lamp," Ricca contributed blandly, showing the exhibit.

Pollock searched their stony faces. "You're bluffing."

Frost slapped the desk flat with his palm. "The doorman just backed her up. Do you want to confront him?"

POLLOCK wiped his forehead. "I mustn't be mixed up with this horrible woman," he whispered. "Jimmy was alive when I saw him last." He swallowed a bitter taste. "But I can't prove it without involving a client."

Frost flung himself back in his seat. "You amaze me, counselor! You're in no position to be ethical! You've got to think of yourself! You don't want to wind up as a defendant!"

The lawyer shuddered and sighed in surrender. He began reluctantly, but gathered speed as he went on.

It was true, he admitted, that he had been to Alice's apartment the night before. He had known and liked her for several years. In spite of present looks, she was intelligent and cultivated and a good companion.

The previous day, following a profitable business closing, he and his client decided to celebrate at Alice's place. Shortly after seven they found Alice in a housecoat, fortunately in a good mood. She told them they were welcome to drinks if someone would buy a quart. The client looked her over and laid down a ten-dollar bill for the liquor. He gave

a glance of approval and Alice blushed with pleasure. It was ridiculous, because the client looked like nothing at all, an older man, squat and coarse, with baggy eyes and a wrinkled face. But that was Alice!

They sat around chatting for half an hour. Alice served her last round of highballs while she held forth on the subject of show business. Pollock took up the ten-dollar bill and left, passing Jimmy Madena on the way in. As usual, Jimmy was drunk and clung for a moment at the elevator. Pollock ordered the corner liquor store to send up a quart of rye. He could prove that he arrived home at eight-thirty because it was his wedding anniversary and his wife had invited guests.

The next he knew, Alice telephoned in the afternoon with the news of Jimmy's death.

"I told her to keep away from my office, but she insisted," he said bitterly. "I stopped her outside and brought her directly to the police."

Frost thought with closed eyes. "Did she tell you about a fight?"

"I wouldn't let her say a word," Pollock protested. "Why should I stick my neck out?"

Frost drummed on the desk top. "I want the name of that client."

Pollock half arose in an appealing gesture. "I can't give him away."

Ricca pulled him back.

"You're disgusting!" Frost's lips were white. "We expect that talk from criminals, not lawyers!" He addressed Ricca and Corbin. "Why waste time? Take this shyster downstairs and book him for homicide!" He shook his head. "There never was a client! Good-by!"

"Wait a minute!" Pollock appealed. "You've got to keep this in confidence! You've got to protect me!"

Frost turned back. "I want that name!"

Pollock shuddered and drew a deep breath.

"It was Frank Albany," he said finally.

Frost sat and exchanged glances with Ricca and Corbin. They nodded appreciatively. Pollock's eyes darted from man to man, searching for something he could not find.

Frost looked sharply at the lawyer. "Did Frankie do it?"

"I don't know what happened in that

hole after I left," Pollock said desperately.

Frost rubbed his long jaw. "Tell you what," he said, with the air of conferring a vast benefit. "If you're on the level, I'll cover you. If not, don't be surprised if your client learns how you put him in the middle."

Pollock rose and then sank back into his chair. "What a fool I've been!" he half whispered as realization dawned.

"Get rid of this man," Frost ordered curtly. "I'll pull him back if I need him."

Pollock attempted to say something, but the words would not come. He barely made the distance to the squad room. Frost swung back in his chair. Ricca and Corbin grinned in appreciation.

"So there was a third man," Frost said dryly. "It pays to be thorough!" He laughed. "That fat skunk was soft."

"Yeah. Yeah. You handled that first class," Ricca said soberly.

"And we didn't lay a hand on him!" Frost was pleased with himself. "Now we've got a witness to work against this woman. Between them, they'll come through." A cloud of doubt crossed his face, and he added meaningfully, "I'd like to hit Frank Albany before the grapevine tips him off."

An idea came. He picked up the direct line to Police Headquarters and, after some difficulty, got through a call to Abe Maugham, a deputy chief inspector, at his home. The old man was thoroughly annoyed.

"I hope it's important, Mr. Frost," the weather-beaten veteran grumbled. "At my age, I'm entitled to sleep."

Frost explained the circumstances.

"Albany?" The telephone was silent. "I might help. I'll call back."

Frost apologized profusely and hung up, smiling. Then he assembled the detectives for his main interrogation.

on an open, flat plain with blue-black storm clouds pursuing her, suddenly, down a terrifying set of stairs, then came the inevitable shoutings and the piercing screams.

Finally, slowly, she became aware of the neat, dark-haired detective who was shaking her, and the visions fled. The detective was polite enough and gentle, but there was no mistaking his firmness. She allowed him to direct her to the small inner office. Behind the desk, sipping at a white mug of coffee, was the yellow-haired, youngish man she remembered from the apartment.

She obeyed the detective's nudge and sat in a wooden chair across the desk from the young man. Her throat hurt and her heart was in agony. She recognized the danger before her, but her thoughts were confused.

"Feel better, Alice?" Frost asked gravely.

She shivered. "I'm all right," she said nervously.

"Would you like coffee?"

"You're kind." She shook her head. "Nothing, please!"

She spoke with an educated accent. She fought for control, biting her underlip, scraping away the greasy-tasting lipstick.

"Can I have a drink?" she asked abruptly. She had fought against asking, but she could endure the need no longer. "I could use a drink," she repeated.

"No!" The young man's answer was decisive. He turned to the detective. "Give her a cigarette."

The detective drew out a pack and, after she had failed, lit the first for her. It gave no comfort.

"Alice, my name is Esau Frost," the young man began in an even, peremptory voice. "I'm an assistant district attorney for this county. All I want are the facts regarding the death of this man, Madena. Don't make it necessary for me to leave you to the police for questioning. Do you want to tell the truth?"

She nodded and blinked.

Frost swept on. "Before I go further, I want you to know that the questions I am putting and the answers you may make are being taken down by a stenographer in shorthand and may be used against you in any future proceeding. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. "I understand."

ALICE WILLISTON was barely conscious of the heavy-walking curious men about her. The recent events crowded in on her and she permitted herself to wander back in her mind to the comforting past. She was small and lying in a vast, dark bed, clutching something warm and woolly. Downstairs she knew that "they" were at it again, first the deep man's voice, then the woman's. She was alone

"Do you understand that it is your privilege not to answer questions?"

She clasped her hands together until the knuckles went white.

"I'm confused. I don't know," she said weakly. She put out imploring hands. "You're a lawyer. Tell me what's best to do!"

"Just tell the truth," Frost said, annoyed. "You'll feel better."

"Will it help me?" She blinked. "You tell me I don't have to answer. What's your advice?"

She looked to him for some human feeling. Her throat was tight. She could not speak.

A scowl gathered on his face. "Let's get on!" he ordered and swept into a series of simple questions. She told him she was single, over thirty, and an entertainer. She could not remember where she worked last.

"Tell me about yourself," he asked. "Where do you come from?"

"New England," she blinked.

"Do you have a family? What's your father's name? Where do they live?"

The question touched off something within her. "I won't answer that question!" she blazed, suddenly defiant. "Keep out of my personal life!"

Frost stared her back to her seat. "I'll refuse to go on unless you behave, Alice," he said calmly.

She subsided and begged a fresh cigarette.

"I've got no one!" She blinked and smiled bitterly. "My father left us years ago. I don't know or care where he is. My mother left me—I mean she died when I was a girl. There was a woman who took care of me. She died and left me too." Her nose swelled red, and the tears came suddenly. "Now Jimmy left me, there is no one else." She wiped her eyes.

"You may need help," Frost said shrewdly. "Whom shall we notify?"

"That won't work," she answered tightly. "Keep away from that subject."

He shrugged and went on. The line of personal questions, she observed, was only to start her off. She bit a fingernail as Frost began on the previous night.

With a few sharp questions, she was forced to concede that her story did not account for the broken wooden lamp, the bloodstains, nor the marks which were found on Jimmy's head.

The district attorney's face grew ugly

with anger, and she rushed to admit that there had been a fight. Jimmy had been nasty, and she had struck him almost without intention with the little wooden lamp. The blow might have caused the bruises, but Jimmy had been all right afterwards. He had washed up and talked with her for some time before he passed out on the floor.

"Did any other person come or go during the evening?" Frost asked finally.

She shook her head.

"Is it your statement that you alone are responsible for whatever happened in your apartment?" Frost asked quietly.

The cigarette frazzled on her lips. Ricca put aside his notes and handed over his own. She breathed in deep and nodded.

"If we find that Jimmy died from a blow to his head," Frost went on, his eyes to the pencil scrawl, "doesn't it follow that you killed him?"

Her hand went to her throat. "Oh no!" she cried. "I couldn't have done that! Jimmy was all right! I took care of him! I couldn't have hurt Jimmy! He was fun!"

She suddenly began to shake violently. "No!" she whimpered. "No more! Make it stop! Make it stop!"

WHEN she recovered, Frost was seated before her on the desk, waiting quietly. "Well, Alice, you haven't told me all," he said patiently. "I know there were two men in your apartment. Will you give me their names?" His voice was hoarse.

She shook her head stubbornly.

"Never mind, I know that too!" He changed the subject. "Tell us the truth now, Alice. What are those telephone numbers? How do you really make a living?"

She was empty of feeling. "I don't know how I live," she said dully. "I'm on the ragged edge."

"And that Jimmy?" the thick-nosed detective with the cowlick put in. "He was a cut of the same cheap tripe! How about that?"

The hot tears burst through. "Don't say such things about Jimmy!" she sobbed in a strangled voice. "He was good fun! He left me! But he was all right! He wasn't those things you say!"

"Oh hell! This is useless!" Frost exclaimed. She heard him tell the stenographer to suspend as she stumbled

blindly toward the outer room. "Have her made comfortable," Frost ordered. "We'll get the details when she's calmer." Then, wonderingly, he added, "That's a new way to put it—that Jimmy left her!"

"What do you make of her?" Frost asked the detectives when Ricca had returned. They finished their notes and relaxed for the moment, yawning and shivering.

"I say let her story stand!" McLeod said violently. "It's a complete case. Why change it?" He thrust his thick, upturned nose forward. "I'm for sleep."

The others ignored the outburst. "She runs to type," Frost mused. "These women are drifters. They're ready to attach to anyone they can. This one has a good mind, but she's childlike."

"Too bad she threw that fit," Ricca said. "You had her going. She was scared, and she held back two names."

Frost nodded. "Something's blocking her answers now. Maybe shock. Maybe something we don't know yet."

They chatted, and presently the telephone rang. It was Abe Maugham. "Albany is running a crooked game at the Lambertson," he reported. "He's up there now, taking over Dan Underleigh."

"You kidding?" Frost asked. "Why don't you break it up?"

The old man chuckled. "He works with a couple mechanics. So what have you got? It looks like a friendly game and you can't prove the larceny. There's always a girl to keep the mark from squealing." He paused. "Albany is no killer. Why not pull him in?"

"We want to get the jump." Frost hung up.

After he outlined a plan of action, Hernandez was brought in for a final try.

"What about it, Luis?" Frost demanded. "Do you stay here forever?"

"Okay." Hernandez' deep breath indicated a decision. "At half-past seven that fat man, Mr. Pollock, came with another. Mr. Pollock leave at eight. The other go at eleven-thirty from Miss Williston floor. Nobody else come or go all night."

"You know Pollock?"

"He come many times."

"Would you know the other man?"

Hernandez nodded. "He was old, short man with wrinkle face and eyes like so." He illustrated graphically with curved

forefingers to show baggy eyes.

The detectives nodded to each other. The description fitted. "You can go," Frost said abruptly.

Hernandez seized and shook each detective by the hand. "No hard feelings!" he stated, giving each a decisive nod. He reached over and clasped Frost's hand and shook it. "*Gracias!*" he said firmly. He pointed a forefinger. "If anything happen to my family from this, I kill him!" He indicated Ricca. He strode to the door and left.

They laughed and Frost rubbed his eyes. "It's a good thing he broke." He sighed with relief. "Another five minutes and I'd have let him go." He added, "Vince, you get Alice, and let's roll!"

Ricca drove them north along Eighth Avenue and then east on Fifty-ninth Street. He stopped on the park side of Central Park South opposite the Lambertson Hotel. Frost got out with Ricca and McLeod, leaving Alice in the automobile with Corbin and Brebner, the stenographer.

"We have this one stop and then you'll be made comfortable, Alice," Frost said. "You go before a judge in a few hours. Do what this officer tells you, and you'll be all right."

As the door swung open, McLeod went in first and pinned an astounded man against the wall, smothering a protest with his huge hand. Ricca followed, his right hand ready to draw his gun.

Frost then entered.

Two large rooms led off a mirrored foyer, one of which displayed an arch, indicating further rooms beyond. Frost caught a glimpse of a silken bedroom with twin beds and dressing tables decorated in the style of a home. He passed through to a large square chamber in which three men were seated around a card table. A blond woman was seated at the piano, her face twisted in surprise.

"Police!" Ricca announced. "Let the pot stand." One of the players reached for his money and got his knuckles rapped. "Okay! Stand away from the table!" He hauled the man out of his seat. "You too, miss!" The woman cheerfully remained seated.

A short, squat man in rumpled evening dress arose angrily. "What's the idea?" he demanded. He had a large,

long nose, a seamed, wrinkled forehead, and clever, baggy eyes. "You can't touch me, you chiselers!" He caught a glimpse of the house detective through the doorway. "Hey, you! Spick! How come you let them through?" he shouted angrily. "I'll see you later." He seized Ricca's arm. "All right, get out!" he ordered.

Ricca grasped the squat man by the lapels of his coat, bunched the clothing together, and shoved him violently away. The man reeled across the room and ended against a fireplace, his head striking the stonework. Ricca followed him up and roughed his face with a knuckled fist. "That's for nothing, Frankie," he growled. "Now, behave!"

McLeod brought in the man taken at the door, a moonfaced elderly man with curly black hair. He was lined up against the wall with the three men taken from the game.

Frost made a pretense of observing the lay of the cards and monies on the table. "No doubt about it," he said in a loud voice. "This game's been banked!"

Albany shook a loose dewlap. "You're crazy!" he said. "That's poker! How can it be banked?"

"Poker can be banked!" Frost retorted wearily. "Don't ask me how!" He scrutinized the squat man contemptuously. "Frank Albany! We got you by the short hairs, mister! Who's the mark? This couldn't be Dan Underleigh, the gambler's friend?"

Frost was referring to the man on the end, grotesquely tall and fat, his jowls drooping over a wing collar. Underleigh's pale blue eyes stared in alarm at the assistant district attorney.

"Oh, my God, officer, I wish you hadn't come in," he complained. He spoke with a marked British accent. "I was doing quite well. You've spoiled the game."

"They're looking to put the arm on you," Albany snarled. "Pay 'em and throw 'em out."

"Not this time, Frankie!" Frost smiled grimly. "This game is crooked. If Underleigh will make the complaint, we'll charge you with larceny."

Albany smiled superciliously. "Dan won't squeal! Not in a thousand years."

"Now who's this?" Frost referred to the blonde at the piano.

The woman stood swaying. She was almost as tall as Dan Underleigh, with abundant golden tresses hanging in disorder down her back.

"Taffy," she giggled. "Taffy Swenson." She attempted to stand and sat flat, her legs straight out, giggling. "Taffy. Taffy Swenson."

Underleigh and the moonfaced man helped her into a white leather armchair.

"You can be sure she was getting a cut, Underleigh," Frost commented grimly. "You're the prize mark in town."

Underleigh stared. The affair was beyond him.

Frost ordered Albany into the adjacent bedroom and followed with Ricca, leaving McLeod to search the living room and guard the others.

In the bedroom Albany leaned against a bureau. "What's the damage?" he asked confidentially. "Let's have the bill."

"Sit down," Frost suggested. "This case sticks. There's no bill."

"You're wasting your time." Albany smiled craftily. "You can't prove anything but a friendly game."

"You're forgetting Jimmy Madena," Frost said.

Albany looked puzzled. "What's Madena got to do with this?"

"He's ready to hand you up," Ricca said.

Albany showed the first symptoms of alarm. "What is this, a frame? I got nothing to do with Madena!"

"If you didn't hold out on him," Frost argued reasonably, "how come you had to work him over last night? Why else would he finger this game?"

"So that's it!" the gambler wondered. "Madena! How come he knew about this game?"

Frost shrugged. "All I know is, here we are." He spread his hands out. "He's sore at that beating you gave. He says you gave him the knee for nothing, just for wanting his cut."

"He's no good," Albany thought fast. "You wouldn't want him as a witness."

"But the woman backs him up," Frost argued, seemingly uncertain.

Albany smiled contemptuously. "Naturally!" he retorted. "You got to consider the background! What do you expect?"

"You're coming!" Frost propped a pillow against a bedpost. "You don't know a thing! You never saw the woman before! You followed Jimmy there and gave him a treatment!" He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"That what she says?" Albany asked

sharply. Frost nodded. "Go on!" Albany made a derisive gesture. "I know 'em more than four years! They're both no good!"

"I'll listen!" Frost said blandly. "What about them?"

"Well . . ." Albany warily mulled things over. He came to a decision. "You know," he said slyly, "I once figured she was a lady. I never figured she'd wind up this way."

He shrugged to indicate the queerness of life.

IV

FRANKIE ALBANY told a clever story. He spoke with derision but with no apparent serious ill will against Jimmy Madena or Alice Williston. Five years earlier, he said, he had accumulated some capital which he invested in the ice-cream and charlotte-russe business. The trade was going legitimate, he emphasized, and it made a good opportunity for a cousin who was manufacturing freezing units. He found that his old lawyer, Davie Purvis, was not suited for the new business, and he got Pollock from a friend in the liquor trade where problems were similar.

One hot May afternoon, at Pollock's office, he remarked that he had spent too much time at the making of money. He had provided for his wife, put his son through college and his daughter through a convent, and at no time had he enjoyed life or met people he cared for. He suggested that Pollock introduce him to his theatrical friends.

Pollock reluctantly agreed, and they drove to a cheap hotel in the lower Forties off Sixth Avenue.

The party was in progress on the tenth floor. A blast of music, raucous and unpleasant, came through the transom as they entered. The suite had been formed simply by unlocking three or four interconnected doors. The first room was packed with men and women clustered around the food trays and the liquor table.

Pollock disappeared to look for their hostess. Albany looked about. The people did not impress him. They looked like Broadway touts and hangers-on. The women were cheap and the men no better. Evidently there was an exhibit of some kind going on. The walls were hung with numerous pictures and, although

Albany was not a judge, he had insight. He liked what he saw.

He had little chance to study the paintings before Pollock returned with Alice Williston. She had a long drink in her hand.

"Isn't this wonderful?" she demanded. Her face was flushed. "He said it couldn't be done. But here it is! Everybody likes it. It's simply an enormous success." She looked at Albany with sudden, urgent anxiety. "How do you feel about it?" she demanded with intensity.

Albany was taken aback. "I think those pictures are good," he said truthfully. "I don't know much about these things. But the man who painted this stuff . . . he's trying to tell something. . . ." His gesture indicated that he lacked words. "He's trying hard . . ."

She pouted. "You don't understand," she said impatiently. "Not the pictures. I mean all this—the exhibit." She swallowed a drink. "This is what I did."

Albany was amused. "It's wonderful. If you did it, you're wonderful too," he kidded.

She sighed with satisfaction. "This is a nice man," she announced to Pollock. "They said it couldn't be done, you know."

Pollock suggested, "Why not show Frankie around, Alice? He's rich and he might buy."

"Are you rich?" Alice demanded, interested.

"I do all right," Albany answered shortly, "before income taxes."

Alice laughed with great, ringing peals of amusement. She stopped suddenly and seized his arm, squeezing it to her bosom. He was disconcerted at the familiarity from one with such refined speech. She struck him as good-looking, with long red hair rolled in a bun like his mother's in her wedding picture.

She pulled him along through the steaming crowd. They stopped before a picture in the third room, a canvas of planes and angles in somber colors.

"This is an abstraction. One of his best things," she said intensely in her rich voice. "You may buy this. You should. It will be priceless someday."

Albany stood away from the canvas. "There's an idea of a city," he muttered. "The guy didn't like what he painted." He shook his head. "Neither

do I. There's no place for that in my home."

She swayed closer. A couple struggling past pushed her to him until he felt her body heat.

"Don't disappoint me," she said urgently. "It's most important! Please!" There was a note of desperation in her rich voice. "It's only one thousand. You could have it for five hundred."

"That's not business," he said. "I got no use for this stuff. Show me a religious picture. Something I can give the wife. You know, angels and saints."

"He doesn't do that sort of thing," she said scornfully. "If you aren't here to buy, you can leave."

She turned her back and walked purposefully back to the first room in the suite.

Albany found Pollock and drew him away from an animated conversation with a girl in a light knitted sweater and beret.

"What does she think she's doing?" he asked. "She can't force a sale that way. I buy what I want."

Pollock conferred a superior, educated smile on his client. "What do you know about paintings?" he asked. "Besides, she's not hard to look at. Something extra goes with the sale." He winked.

"Not at those prices," Albany retorted.

HE felt depressed. He worked his way back to the liquor table and picked up two double scotch highballs. The meaningless gaiety added to his despondency. He sat on the double bed in the second room from the entrance between two couples, each amorously entwined. He decided to finish his drinks and leave. No one was interested in him and none of the women were free.

His eye caught a glimpse of color through an open closet door. He arose and swung it open. The bright light from the setting sun streamed through the window and illuminated a straight picture, nothing interpretative but a portrait of a woman. It was an arresting likeness of Alice Williston! The expression was different, however, as though the artist had caught her in a better phase of her life. The desperation and anxiety which had struck Albany were missing. Instead there was a sulky pride, a petulant challenge at the viewer. He picked up the canvas to examine it in the

light. The bare slender shoulders, the deep bosom, and the narrow waist were boldly executed. Albany felt his mouth watering.

His arm was suddenly clutched and he was swung strongly around. "How dare you!" Alice Williston blazed. "Put that back! It's not for view."

He pulled the picture away. "Easy does it," he said mildly. "This is more like I might buy."

"Not you nor a thousand like you," she cried. "Put that back!"

He allowed her to wrest the picture away and thrust it in the closet. She turned the key and concealed it in her bodice.

"You'll buy what's on the wall or nothing," she said angrily. "No one here understands values!"

She turned and walked into a slender, bearded man with tired gray eyes and stained fingers. The bearded man put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arm's length.

"Why not do as your refined friend says?" he said bitterly. "You haven't managed so well that you're beyond advice. Why not save something from the debacle?"

She was startled for a moment, then she rallied. "It's you! Why couldn't you wait till the notices? You never do as I say!" She went on argumentatively. "You know very well you know nothing about selling. You'll only spoil the affair if you stay around." She smiled wheedlingly. "Go back to the studio."

The bearded man thrust her aside violently. She stumbled against the door-jamb and cut her lip. The blood surprised her. She drew a handkerchief and stanching the flow. Meanwhile the bearded man began methodically to remove the pictures from the wall.

"You're doing this to humiliate me, to prove I'm not capable of helping." She raised her voice. "You don't want this to succeed."

Without halting his efforts, the bearded man said over his shoulder, "This is the limit, Alice. I've warned you. There won't be any notices, good or bad." He removed a picture and stacked it in a corner. "You try too hard, you foolish woman. These scum have no interest in my stuff. They're here for free lunch."

"Don't remove another picture," she warned. "I want everything to stay on the walls."

The bearded man paid no attention. He removed and stacked another picture. Quite suddenly Alice began to emit piercing screams. The bearded man smiled grimly and continued with his work. The guests were startled. Heads began peering through the doorways of the other rooms.

A little, bristly waiter pushed his way in from the liquor table.

"What's the trouble, Alice?" he asked.

She shook her hands and pointed to the bearded man. "Make him stop, Jimmy," she moaned. "Make him stop!"

The little waiter walked up. "All right," he said expertly. "I'll take you where you can sleep it off."

"Keep out of this, Jimmy," the bearded man warned. "This is no affair of yours."

There were further angry words, and finally, after a heated, grunting scuffle, the bearded man was frog-marched out by the smaller.

Alice followed to the door and stood hesitatingly. She turned and smiled apologetically to the amused crowd. A fluttering gesture indicated that she was not responsible for the gaucherie.

"He's a genius," she said to the world at large. "What would happen if I didn't take care of him?" She gave a sigh and plunged vehemently into the role of hostess to the world of art.

Albany stayed for another drink. The dispute with the artist took the zest out of his excursion into the new world. Pollock was deep in conversation with the girl in the sweater and beret. Albany left to join his wife and kill an evening at the Music Hall. He did not see Alice Williston again, for years.

"The last I heard," Albany concluded, "she couldn't meet the bill and the hotel had her locked up. Pollock told me somebody paid the tab and she got off."

"What about last night?" Frost prodded.

Albany grinned and resumed. He and Pollock were again out for a good time, and the lawyer suggested the redhead. When they arrived, he was taken aback by the change in her appearance. She was heavier and her arms and waist had grown thick. Her eyes were vague and she seemed incapable of focusing sharply on the conversation. When he mentioned where they had last met, she changed the subject abruptly.

Albany was not disposed to argue with

fate. He had money enough to buy younger, more attractive women, but Alice interested him. She came from the upper world, he recognized, and knowing and talking to her filled him with satisfaction.

At about eight Pollock left and the waiter whom Albany remembered from the hotel episode entered, drunk but giggling. It was Jimmy Madena. Albany was surprised that Alice Williston had anything in common with him. He settled down to outwait the little man, but after the liquor store delivered a quart of rye it was obvious that Jimmy would not leave till the whisky was gone.

Albany turned the conversation to show business and kept his irritation in control. Alice talked of organizing a band around Jimmy and getting an engagement in an important hotel through its manager.

At eleven Jimmy's good nature changed. He sullenly broke the bottle neck against the kitchenette tap and poured a straight whisky. He lifted the glass.

"Is it all right to drink, *Mister Albany*?" He sprawled on the day bed and spilled the drink down his shirt. "Can I live and breathe, *Mister Albany*?"

"Sure," Albany said. "The air's free."

"The air's free!" Jimmy pondered this deeply, then roused up. "Alice is a fine girl," he said solemnly. "The best." He wiped his mouth. "Trouble is . . ." He stopped moodily. "I don't know what the trouble is!" He came back to his nasty manner. "I know what you're thinking, *Mister Albany*! But you're wrong! I got my own place! Alice don't own me, see?"

SUDDENLY he was ill and went to the bathroom. Alice was distressed. She began to prepare coffee. When Jimmy came out he was pale.

"See, *Mister Albany*, I'm going to my place," he said thickly. "Watch how I do it!"

"Don't go, Jimmy," Alice urged. "I'm making coffee."

Jimmy frowned in concentration. "Why don't she grow up, *Mister Albany*?" he swayed. "She's a big girl. She don't need me. She just don't want me to go away. She don't want nobody to go away!"

"I'm making coffee," Alice repeated. "Don't go! I'm making coffee."

Jimmy called her a name and walked to the front door. She followed with the coffeepot in her hand, asking him to stay. He called her another name. Albany heard Alice say, "You can't call me that," and then a crashing sound. He walked to the hallway and saw Jimmy on the floor and Alice with a wooden lamp in her hand. A little table was overturned and a glass vase broken.

Albany did what any man might do. He picked Jimmy up and slapped him soundly. He then joined Alice in the living room.

Jimmy came out of the hallway docilely enough, bleeding at the mouth. Alice told him he ought to be ashamed to have acted as he had before a visitor. Jimmy disappeared into the bathroom while Alice made the coffee. When he came out, she again detained him and he reached for her throat.

Albany had had enough. He put down his highball with care and walked over. He stepped in and struck a left to the mouth and a right cross to the eye. Jimmy went down to the floor, and out.

"It's a shame you two nice people can't get along better," Albany observed.

"You let Jimmy alone," Alice cried. "I can handle this myself."

Albany left and arrived home by twelve o'clock, as he could prove by the clerk and the elevator boys.

"I don't know," Frost yawned. "It sounds good. But I don't know." He looked at Ricca. "What do you think, Vince?"

Ricca gazed stolidly at Albany. "He might be telling the truth."

Frost settled back comfortably in his deep leather chair. "Would you repeat what you told us in Madena's presence?"

"Why not?" Albany grunted. "I got nothing to hide."

"Bring the woman here first," Frost ordered Ricca.

Alice came into the room and stood passively at the door, escorted by Corbin and Ricca. Frost ordered her to sit quiet and listen. He turned to Albany. "Tell us again when you claim you saw Madena."

The gambler looked warily at Alice, trying to fathom the situation with his clever eyes. "Last night at this lady's apartment," he said sturdily. "I was there only a few hours and I left."

"Did you quarrel with Madena about gambling matters?" Frost persisted.

"Never did," Albany answered. "I just straightened him out when he talked dirty to this lady."

"Then you struck him?"

"Is that what he says?" Albany asked suddenly.

Alice laughed without mirth.

"Quiet, Alice," Frost warned. "Not a word."

"They've been kidding you, Mr. Albany!" Her laughter turned to sobs. "Jimmy left me. He is dead."

Albany's face was ugly. "You been cunning!" he snarled. "You ain't interested in that game inside! I been on a sleigh ride!"

"Dry up," Frost advised calmly. "You claim you gave me the truth. What's the difference how I got it? Do you want to change your story?"

Albany spat at Frost's feet. "You get nothing from me."

"Hold him outside," Frost ordered. "Get rid of those others and tell Brebner to come in."

RICCA shoved the enraged Albany into the living room. When Brebner arrived, Frost dictated some brief connecting matter and then put a series of questions to Alice, covering Albany's statement.

Point by point, she miserably admitted that his version was correct in all details.

Frost drew the detectives aside and pointed out that between the two all the facts were accounted for. The case was complete. He ordered the arrest of Albany for assault and the detention of Alice as a material witness. "We don't have to charge them with homicide till the autopsy comes in."

As they took the elevator down, Frost asked Alice curiously, "Why didn't you tell me about Albany and Pollock?"

She replied in a low voice. "They both have families."

Frost reached home in time to see his older boy, Bobbie, awaken and begin preparations for school. He kissed the boy, undressed, and went to bed. Dorothy came in from the kitchen, smoothed the covers about him, kissed him.

"Was it an interesting case?" she asked him as she always did.

He turned over.

"Just a *shmear*, honey," he mumbled. "Nothing to get excited about."

He fell asleep.

V

FROST slept three hours and awoke with a start. He threw back the bed-clothes and showered for fifteen minutes. He shaved, cut himself, and cursed his dull razor blades. He barely noticed Dorothy's good breakfast of bacon and eggs, country style, served in the kitchen. He ate hastily, reading the sensational news treatment of his case.

A telephone call to his office told him that the medical examiner urgently wanted him. He brushed off little Timmy, gulped his coffee, and hastened out.

A religious burial society was rescuing a lucky corpse from dissection as he was admitted to the City Morgue at Bellevue Hospital. Perhaps a half dozen pathologists in the stinking dissecting room were cutting into the rigid bodies. Frost found Dr. Saul Mendelsohn at work on a staring, blond female body. The medical examiner had reflexed the scalp, from which long tresses were dangling, and had cut a lid into the skull with a power saw. He looked up from smelling the brain, acknowledged a greeting, replaced a cigar, and motioned Frost toward his office. He was a dark man, neat and precise, with twenty years of experience behind him. He spoke with a faint stammer.

The doctor's finding startled the young lawyer. He read his notes methodically but in a stammering monotone. The deceased had been a white male person of middle years, one hundred and thirty-two pounds, five foot two inches, well nourished. An operational scar was visible for removal of the appendix. An arthritic process had begun at the base of the spine, and a sclerotic condition in the coronary area. His brain was aromatic and analyzed to four-plus alcohol, showing extreme intoxication at death.

The doctor found black-and-blue marks about the face and a two-inch abrasion on the front head. However, the subject had died of an extensive laceration of the mesentery with bleeding into the abdominal cavity.

Were they talking about the same case?

There could be no doubt. The doctor showed a water color made by himself of the deceased with the bruises painted in. Frost hunched over. It was a vivid representation.

The injury was remarkable and ac-

counted for the doctor's urgent message. He showed Frost a small pamphlet written by himself and turned to a water-color plate. "You can see here. The mesentery is a membrane which lies in the rear of the abdominal cavity. Since it is protected by the vital organs and the belly wall, it is difficult to cause such an injury. If the belly muscles are tightened, as they invariably are when the blow is expected, the front main organs receive the force and may be bruised and torn and we usually find black-and-blue marks. In this case the belly muscles must have been completely relaxed to allow the force to be transmitted to the rear. The blow, or blows, were powerful, I should say."

Frost stared at the water-color picture of the dead man. "What a damned fool I've been!" He was suddenly pale. "I've messed up a Murder One!" He looked at the doctor. "We found no bruises on the belly! I thought I accounted for all the injuries. How could I figure on this?"

"It is rare," the doctor stammered. "Caused by extreme violence. Like an automobile accident."

The courts were discharging when Frost reached the Criminal Courts Building. In the Homicide Bureau he put through a call to Ricca and Corbin and laid the facts before them. "Albany is out of our hands," he said bitterly, "but we still have that woman, thank God! We've got to squeeze until her ribs crack. She made a monkey of us!"

Alice could not be questioned, Ricca told him. She had fainted twice in their hands on the way to the Women's House of Detention. The doctor had put her to sleep for the day.

Frost spent the dragging day dictating reports, directing his fretful detectives by the telephone, referring newspapermen to the front office for hand-outs, and stalling inquiries by his curious fellow assistants.

At three o'clock he quieted the blubbery of a pudgy girdle manufacturer from New Rochelle. As a country-club director and a family man with good social standing, he feared that he might be connected with Alice in the scandal. He had rushed down just as soon as he heard the news. He went on and on.

Frost made an experimental thrust. "How would you come into this?" he demanded harshly. "Were you there when the man was killed?"

"Oh God, no!" the old man moaned. "I'm just afraid she might bring me in for spite! I've got a wife and children! I couldn't stand it! I'll kill myself!"

"Be quiet! You're not in this case! She hasn't mentioned anyone!"

The old man raised his hands and looked upwards. "Oh God!" he prayed thankfully. "I hope I never mix myself up with a woman like this again!"

Frost swung back and forth in his swivel chair. "This woman will need counsel," he observed finally. "It's not my affair, but I'd like to know—do you intend to help her?"

The old man clutched at his heart. "Oh no! I couldn't take the chance!" he gasped faintly.

Frost rose and opened the door to show his visitor out. "You're clear!" he growled contemptuously. "You can go!"

Frost was bone-weary, but there was no letup. At three-thirty another of Alice Williston's acquaintances, Thyra Camp, asked to see him. Frost let her settle comfortably and ramble on just long enough to size her up. He saw a poised, educated woman with a flat, lynx face, smartly clothed in caracul. She gave a good impersonation of distressed friendship.

UNFORTUNATELY, she had little to tell. She and her husband, Elias, had met Alice some five years before in one of the small summer colonies near Gloucester. Elias ran a school for student painters. They had met Alice through one of Elias's fellow painters. Alice had a fair understanding of art, though she was only a native. That winter she kept running into Alice at various parties. Alice was not exactly popular, but she became a fixture. She showed up at all gatherings, she drank well past the mellow point, and the men regarded her as good fun.

Frost raised his eyebrows.

Mrs. Camp gave him an intimate half-smile. We're civilized, it implied, and we should view these things like rational persons.

So far her story meant nothing, Frost said. What was she driving at?

She groped for the right words. She wished to make her position clear—she liked Alice! The girl was a decent sort, you know, well-bred. In spite of everything, to find her in this plight was a shock. . . .

Frost encouraged her to go on.

If Alice got into difficulties, it was because of some desperate streak within her. Every flirtation took her off balance. It always began with wild elation. The man was always at first brilliant and wonderful. Yet invariably, within days, before the affair could really take, Alice would be bitterly disillusioned. They never met her impossible specifications.

Frost was skeptical. From what he knew, to put it charitably, Alice was not leading an orderly life.

Mrs. Camp had come, she said, in the hope that Alice would not be prejudiced. If she had run into difficulties with men, it had no bearing on the case, she was sure.

Frost agreed that the discussion was beside the point. Alice was not yet under arrest. The investigation was continuing. Facts might help, not opinions as to her character. Had Mrs. Camp known the dead man? When had she last seen Alice? Could she throw light on the killing?

His visitor shook her sleek head. She had not seen Alice for months. Jimmy Madena was a surprise to her.

Was Alice ever in the art business?

Mrs. Camp's lynx face broke in a smile. Was he referring to her attempt to run an exhibit in a hotel some years back? That was typical! The girl had been seeking to help the painter with whom she was living, the one who had introduced her to Elias. The venture was a fiasco, like most of her ideas.

Frost rose to end the interview. "If you really wish to help," he said gravely, "you might get some money together for a lawyer."

The gleaming smile froze. "I don't know," Mrs. Camp said hesitantly. "Elias isn't friendly to Alice. I'll do my best."

Frost showed her out, unsmiling, in a cloud of jasmine perfume. It was the old story. Anyone would help, if it cost nothing.

At four-thirty he had a visitor more to the point. Corliss Flanagan, a lawyer, plumped into Frost's best solid chair and wiped a fat, sweating face with a checked handkerchief. He wanted an outline of the case.

"Have you been retained?" Frost asked shrewdly.

Flanagan looked knowing. "I'll file an appearance soon enough." He stuck his

tongue in his cheek. "I see by the papers she claims to belong to the union I represent. At least, this dead man did. That's enough of a handle. After that, we'll see if there's a fee." He loosened his tie. "What about seeing the woman?"

Frost snorted impatiently. "She's a material witness!" he said curtly. "No one sees her without a pass or a court order." He added: "Which you won't get, Corliss!"

Flanagan favored him with an Irish grin. "I'll lay you odds, Easy, once she gives her story, she winds up as a defendant." His fat eyes twinkled. "The routine hasn't changed."

He was abruptly gotten rid of.

THE next morning, with a swimming head, Frost disposed of the Part IV sentence calendar. He returned and handed over his files to Larry Panken, the Bureau clerk. Panken whispered that Alice Williston was waiting with detectives and a policewoman in the conference room. Newsmen had been calling constantly, he added.

Frost asked that such calls be referred to the front-office publicity man and that the detectives assemble in his room.

When they arrived, he sat on his desk and outlined procedure. "We're not rested, but we'll work in relays. At all times I want three of us in this room and one outside, taking it easy. If necessary, you can catch some sleep in the conference room."

He stared grimly at the placid men. "This woman is weak and inexperienced. She's had two days of physical, emotional, and moral strain. She's confused and scared. She should be easy." He yawned and rubbed his face. "Get her talking. About anything. I don't care what, just so she starts. Now we know the facts, I want her to break before tonight."

He addressed Ricca soberly. "Vince, you be the good guy. Let McLeod do the bearing down—he'll like that. Get her in, and let's roll."

McLeod growled something obscene, left, and returned promptly with Alice. She walked in uncertainly, and was seated in a straight-backed chair without arms. Frost swung his feet, thumping the desk softly, thoughtfully looking down at Alice.

"Is there anything you want?" he asked.

She was disconcerted. "I need cloth-

ing, and a toothbrush. And some books."

"Make a list and we'll get it. Anything else?"

She licked her lips. "I'd want to go to the funeral. Can I?"

Frost gave her his handkerchief. "Would the family like that?" he asked.

She wiped her eyes. "They wouldn't mind."

"The answer is 'no!'" Frost said coldly.

He continued swinging his foot. Alice was lucky, he pointed out, to be held only as a witness. Had she been arrested for the crime, her chance to retract her lies would be gone. The average prosecutor would prefer to keep the lies on the record, but he was willing to give her a break. The time had come to tell the truth and explain whatever would help her.

"What lies?" she cried. "I told everything. You know that."

McLeod and Corbin took seats behind her and relaxed.

"While you were asleep in that chicken coop, we were working till morning!" Frost retorted. "You lied to me! You claim you slept from midnight till the buzzer rang. We found out—that was sixteen hours later! We also know you were screaming at Jimmy till morning, walking about, talking in a loud voice. At two o'clock a great thumping sound shook the ceiling below and your neighbor's walls." He stared sharply. "Well?"

"Sixteen hours?" She was puzzled. "I don't understand."

Frost showed her several typewritten sheafs and demanded an explanation.

She fingered her neighbors' statements and read one. She was impressed, but then, how could she be sure, she asked cunningly, that there was no trick?

Frost ran his hand through his yellow hair, exasperated. He declared he was through trying to help an ingrate. He led off a long, exhausting process with Corbin and McLeod on a peremptory line, while Ricca passed away the time outside with the policewoman. It was simple to assert moral ascendancy—a loud voice did it. Alice sat like a whipped dog, trembling, darting to please, eager to placate.

He laid a careful foundation. Without referring to the newly discovered vital injuries, he spent the day plowing over old ground with weary repetition of de-

tails. McLeod and Corbin kept goading with demands that Alice reconcile discrepancies in her story, real or pretended. She was docile and seemed to strive for accuracy, but she remained unshaken and her version duplicated Albany's. After midnight, she insisted, she was asleep.

SANDWICHES and coffee were brought in. Long after it was dark, Frost finally staged a scene and dramatically ordered that Alice be removed from his sight.

When they reassembled in the morning, the detectives were fresh. It was evident neither Frost nor Alice had slept.

Frost began again. As the facts stood, he had enough to indict Alice for first-degree murder. He opened the fat red book containing the Penal Law and ordered her to read the penalty for herself.

She read the brief, dreadful passage and closed her eyes, gasping as a qualm of shock went through her.

Perhaps she would not believe what would happen to her. But, she must realize, to the Homicide Bureau her case was part of the office routine. Once the machinery was set in motion, he could no longer help with the same powers he enjoyed during the investigation. Her best and only chance was to make a full statement and allow the truth to work in her favor within the office. He was anxious, he concluded evenly, to save her from the chair.

"Don't talk about the chair!" She shuddered.

"Better talk than sit in it!" he said cruelly.

Ricca intervened. He put his lighted cigarette in her trembling mouth and gave her shoulder a friendly man's shake. Alice was a good kid and trying hard, he asserted. He asked to talk to her his own way.

When they were alone he smoked companionably and chatted about his garden at his home in Queens. He aroused her to expressing an opinion on mulching sandy soil. Gardening was a common interest, they discovered.

He drew up a chair. "Off the record, Alice, we all want to believe you. Nobody's sore because you tried to lie your way out. But you can't make a damn fool out of the district attorney! You got to explain the facts!"

She stared bleakly at the dark, good-looking detective.

He drew his chair close. "Now suppose it was self-defense," he hinted strongly. "It's no crime to protect yourself, what I mean." He hunched over. "You were alone with Jimmy. Suppose he grabbed a knife, or even a bottle. Who could say different? I could talk to Frost for you. He don't care, just so you explain."

"I know about self-defense," she said sullenly. "But I won't lie. You can't make me say I killed Jimmy. I was asleep."

Ricca gave up when finally she accused him of trying to entrap her. Frost cursed his failure heartily and went back with Corbin and McLeod to badger her. Finally direct hammering had to be suspended simply because Alice kept sliding off into daydreams, biting her nails, unable to focus on questions. Frost began a circuitous inquiry into her life. She obliged with little stories of the men in her twilight world, a sleazy hotel bohemia skirting between theatrical fakes and a minor, contemptible underworld. She talked freely, but at no point were they able to dredge up anything helpful.

A queer sociable atmosphere arose as the days passed. Each interview began anew on a friendlier basis, and it became progressively more difficult for the investigators to work up pressure. Inevitably their relationship shifted away from its first harshness.

On one occasion Frost pointed out that financially she should have done better; she knew many men, but she had no friends and she was broke. She was frankly shocked at him. While she had lived unconventionally, she asserted, she never gave herself for money. If it came, it was welcome, but she never asked.

The detectives smiled derisively.

"I sometimes took cab fare," she flared. "If you were to have fun with a person you like, you might take cab fare yourself!"

She was full of inconsistencies. As Ricca put it, Alice "knew subjects." She was well read, she had traveled in Europe, and she had firm opinions on world affairs. She was quick to generalize abstractly, but weak in supporting her views.

The subject of marriage aroused her to extreme cynicism. As a woman, she was sure no married man could be trust-

ed. Marriage degraded women, enslaved them to children.

"You sound like the voice of experience," McLeod mocked.

Alice gave him a burning look. "I am!" she said bitterly, lifting her chin defiantly. "My father left me and my mother to starve when I was a kid. You remind me of him. He was a beast too, with a vicious mind like yours."

She stared, suddenly frozen and appalled at her temerity. Fortunately, Frost intervened before the detective could recover from his astonishment.

IT was Saturday, Frost arrived late. The other assistants were in the meeting room discussing the week's investigations and trials and other office gossip. Frost took a chair near the window and teetered against the wall.

At ten-thirty promptly Jacques Renaud, the bureau chief, called the meeting to order. He was a hawk-faced French-Canadian type, slender and tall with narrow shoulders and a small paunch. He had boundless energy and, despite his severity and insistence on strict office discipline, he was liked and admired by his assistants.

The meeting room was furnished in the general style of the building with two large desks facing each other and solid chairs lined against the walls. Tommy Baer, a high-and-round-headed, youngish lawyer with a monotonous flat voice, opened the venetian blinds and prepared to take the minutes.

Frost sat opposite Renaud and considered the probable views of the other assistants. George Mulligan, seated near the door, could be counted on for a sensible decision. He was a barrel-chested country man with a booming laugh and a rough sense of humor.

Jeff Bailey was another dependable. He was a light-skinned colored man, a Dartmouth graduate with Phi Beta Kappa attainments, but, nevertheless, sweet and reasonable. Bailey had a jovial intellectual quality which drew him into severe theoretical views. But on the human level his instincts were sound.

Ah, Francis Wilks! A cold fish! Slapping one knuckled fist in the palm of another as usual! He was a likely tough nut, a graven-jawed, cold-eyed, case-hardened prosecutor. He was bound to draw the heavy reserves where nerveless pressure was needed.

Franklyn Vroom, as usual, was shuffling through files, set to get off first with his own cases. He was dark and saturnine, consumed with vanity and disappointments. Frost judged that his embittered approach was due to being older than Renaud and to having been passed over so frequently by the district attorney in upgrading appointments.

Frost shrugged. How it would go was anyone's guess.

There were two cases before him. George Mulligan, with his usual booming indignation, presented the first, a drunken throat-cutting of a harmless old Negro building superintendent by a white neighborhood hoodlum. There was no motive beyond savagery, but the proof of premeditation and planning was clear. However, in mitigation, there was considerable drunkenness. Mulligan demanded a vote for Murder One. The rest were ready to go along with Mulligan until Jeff Bailey urged that a plea to Murder Two be taken if offered. Francis Wilks, Tommy Baer, and Franklyn Vroom voted straight Murder One. Frost and finally Mulligan voted with Jeff Bailey. In the even division, Renaud cast a vote to save the man's life.

Franklyn Vroom presented a rape homicide committed by strangulation by the woman's husband in Central Park. The unanimous vote was for straight Murder One.

"Next case!" Renaud said sharply. The meeting was dragging into luncheon.

FROST ceased teetering and pulled his yellow sheet from the file. He dictated the names and addresses of the parties to Tommy Baer and put forward the Madena homicide in detail. The bureau members listened with varying degrees of care, some making notes, as he established with concise logic that no one other than the two prisoners, according to themselves and other witnesses, had been in the apartment about the time of the crime. Accordingly, either or both had committed the first-degree murder uncovered by Dr. Mendelsohn's autopsy, depending on which defendant was to be believed. There were, however, certain problems which disturbed him.

"Go ahead," Renaud urged impatiently.

The problems, Frost pointed out, arose from his failure to determine absolutely

which of the two actually inflicted the fatal injuries. Unless the problem were resolved, there was a technical doubt as to the guilt of each. Each denied guilt. Neither accused the other.

Francis Wilks cut into the expected hubbub. "If you had a confession, Easy, there'd be no problem. What I don't get," he said in his grating voice, "is why you've got no statement in your file right now!"

Frost flushed. "Four of us, me, Ricca, Corbin, and a squad man, worked for two weeks!" he retorted. "Ask them! We tried everything. She just wouldn't give in! The more we squeezed, the tighter her story got!"

Wilks waved contemptuously. "I'd have got the story," he growled. "You've got worms in your belly, Easy!"

"Cut it, Frank," Renaud ordered. He frowned. "Easy, you can prove Williston lies when she says she slept through the night when Madena was killed. It's common sense: she's lying because she dare not tell the truth. Why isn't that your case against her? I don't understand. What's your feeling here?"

"My feeling? Huh! I'm convinced Alice did the killing! But that's only a feeling!" He studied the lawyers' faces slowly. "When, or how, or why—there's no way of telling without answers from her! Which we haven't got!"

He rose unhappily to express himself. "Albany completes the case against her; but also, Alice makes him guilty! Should we be the ones to decide between them? Just on my feeling?" He sank back to his chair. "I'd hate to use Albany against her! Even if he'd testify!"

"What the hell! This is one for the books!" were some of the comments.

Renaud cut into the outburst. "If she's guilty, what's your beef?" he demanded sharply. "We needn't decide: that's what the jury's for! Indict both! Let *them* fight it out in court!"

"Why not, Easy?" Mulligan joined in with his hearty, loud voice. "With her background, it's a snap conviction!" He beamed at Frost. "You could use the publicity!"

"I thought we were lawyers," Frost said.

Renaud sat forward, hands on kidneys, elbows out like wings. "She has a right to a legal trial, not more!" he said sharply. "We also have a right—to make a case by any legal means! That's all

we're doing! Personally, I'd rather get Albany. It'd be better for the Office." He smiled grimly. "She chooses to keep quiet. Well, that's *her* decision. If she wants a conviction, we'll give it to her."

"But, Jacques," Jeff Bailey drawled in his soft voice, "suppose she can't talk. What if there's nothing she can say? After all, she was drinking."

Wilks reminded him that Alice Williston denied that drinking affected her memory.

Baer's flat voice rose above the derisive murmur. "Do you believe that garbage, Jeff?" he demanded. "I'm innocent. I was asleep," he mimicked in a girlish, protesting whine.

"There's that chance!" Jeff Bailey said softly. "Maybe she couldn't break!"

"Let's vote," Tommy Baer said, his pencil poised.

Renaud commanded silence. He rose and strode back and forth. "We can't let this lick us. With Albany in the picture, this case is too heavy." He continued striding. "These women defendants are like children sometimes. They can't believe we mean business. They think if they whine and cry long enough, they'll wriggle off the hook. Maybe that's their strength. Well! Not this time! Everybody's got a breaking point! Let's find it!" He folded his arms grimly. "I say we indict for Murder One!"

The lawyers waited for Frost. He rubbed his jaw nervously. "Well, naturally I'll follow the majority vote, Jacques. The indictment should force a plea! It ought to!" he said slowly. "But . . ." He trailed off. He sighed and sat straight. "The facts are clear."

"If they're not, let *her* tell *us*!" Renaud said implacably. "She has a way out. We'll always take a plea."

"Murder One!" Baer voted abruptly.

"Murder One!" Wilks said gratingly.

"I pass." Jeff Bailey was still troubled.

Vroom's gesture went down for Murder One.

"It's understood we'll talk plea?" Mulligan's broad face was questioning. Renaud nodded. "Okay. I'll string along."

Frost stood. "That does it," he said. "I'll put it in the grand jury Wednesday noon."

VI

DISTRICT ATTORNEY Lucius Buckmaster was vexed, but he regretted

the position he was about to take. He was standing at his office window viewing the Chinese children playing eight stories below in the park behind the Criminal Courts Building.

What had happened to Frost? he wondered impatiently. He liked his tall, yellow-haired assistant as much as he was capable of warm feelings toward anyone. Before his hitch in the army Frost had been an asset down in Homicide, dependable, thorough, full of guts! . . . But that day he had returned for his job he had sat unsmiling, reserved, the laughter gone out of him! He would not talk of his war experiences. His eyes were pinched and distant. But at least he had still looked competent and honest. What was wrong?

Buckmaster quickly reviewed Frost's recent record. In his powerful, orderly mind the workings of the Office were classified for instant use. He knew more, he was satisfied, than any of his Bureau chiefs.

Frost had begun well enough, he recalled. No complaints. No delays. Everything in order. But then, since his return, he had been catching only the routine, the homicides resulting from the barroom brawls, the stabbings and clubbings of the big city, all cat-and-dog cases. All, that is, except the Buongiorno case. Could that have had an effect? he mused. But this case now, the first since Buongiorno's with weight—Frost had almost muffed it! According to Renaud, he had gagged at setting the degree of homicide for the grand jury. Even when the foreman had prodded him, he had hesitated! Luckily, Renaud had been present and had requested that the grand jury indict for Murder One!

A medley of calculations swiftly ran through his mind. What was to be done with Frost? Fire him? That was his first impulse, but was it wise? It was better to go slow and think the matter through. He had no patience, of course, with softness or inadequacy on the staff. Frost had a man's job, and if he were not up to it, he was expected to recognize the fact. But, on the other hand, Frost was a trained man, one of his best. There was heavy going ahead for the Office, and Buckmaster needed seasoned men with him. Well, the question was, had Frost lost his guts, or what? Could he still handle the heavy ones? How could one be sure except by continuing to expose

him to the test of the courtroom?

No, Buckmaster concluded, firing Frost was no solution. Not if another way could be found. He turned abruptly from the window to Jacques Renaud, who had been waiting. "Get Frost in," he ordered.

When Frost entered he found Lucius Buckmaster seated behind an ornate mahogany desk, leaning back in a large swivel chair of green leather with studded-brass decorations.

Buckmaster gravely waved Frost into a low leather seat beside Renaud.

"You're putting this office in a difficult position, Easy," Buckmaster began abruptly. His voice was musical and richly modulated, a cultivated instrument of range and persuasion.

It was seldom Frost got this close. Buckmaster was young and conventionally handsome, he thought, a trim, dark man with curly thick hair, a neat mustache, and a high white forehead flaring away from level blue eyes.

"I understand your doubts," Buckmaster continued, spreading his white manicured hands firmly on the desk. "But I must say, your approach to the grand jury this afternoon showed a sudden lack of enthusiasm for the People's case. I'm told you hedged until the foreman pinned you down. Your job, like any assistant's, is to carry out the decisions of this office. Your personal feelings have no bearing on your official position. Am I clear?"

Frost nodded, wordless.

Buckmaster stood and looked down at Frost.

"What's bothering you, Easy?" he demanded. "You act mighty gutless. Didn't the Homicide Bureau vote a procedure?"

Frost nodded.

"Well, what the hell?" Buckmaster brushed his hair back neatly. "You've got savvy! Force them to trial and they'll plead!" He stared at his blond assistant. "And if they don't, what are we supposed to do?"

"It's not that simple," Frost muttered.

Buckmaster touched his thick mustache thoughtfully. "What's going on in Homicide?" he asked Renaud. "This isn't Easy Frost! He used to be a good man."

"He's all right," Renaud said loyally. "Just gun-shy. He'll try this case and win it."

"Just a minute, Jacques." Frost arose. He looked pained. "If you feel I can't do

the People's case justice, why not let another assistant handle the trial?"

"You can do as you see fit," Buckmaster said crisply. "You know I won't interfere if you can't try a case with a good conscience."

Frost turned to go, wordless. Buckmaster restrained him with a friendly hand. "I like your sense of values, Easy, believe me. But if you don't take each case as it comes, you're shifting your dirty work to another assistant. Someone's got to process the close cases. One conscientious objector is a drag on the rest."

"I suppose so," Frost muttered.

"This is a great law-enforcement office." Buckmaster waved a white muscular hand to include the room and the universe. "Our reputation's clean and good. This county likes the way we operate. Renaud will tell you, when we took over we went crazy. The honest cop didn't trust this office. Neither did witnesses." He smiled grimly. Strong lines marked his mouth. "We found new ways of getting facts. The goody-goodies yapped at our heels. They claimed we cut the corners of the lawbooks. I won't say we didn't. We fought fire with fire. We smashed a dozen big rackets. This county is clean because this office is trusted." He was silent for a moment, with the exaltation of an inner vision. "The entire country has watched us. There are no limits to where we can go from here."

He stood looking down at Frost and Renaud, hands on hips, arms akimbo. "Well, Easy, was it worth it? Should we throw that away for a technicality?"

Frost drew a deep, nervous breath. "If she had given a full statement, I wouldn't care if she burns. I've sent better men to the chair." He gathered his courage. "We've got a complete Murder One, yes! But what happened during the night? Why does she insist she was asleep? What if she won't take a plea? The jury will convict! She'll get the chair!"

"That's up to her entirely! She's got her out! That's going far enough!" Buckmaster's mouth was implacable. "We didn't kill Madena. She did!" he said evenly. "Understand this, Easy, the Office comes first. With Albany involved, this indictment won't be killed. The Office goes in fighting. One or the other must plead guilty, even if only to man-

slaughter. I don't care if the jury acquits, so long as we keep the public confidence." He resumed his seat abruptly. "If that isn't more important than your personal feelings, I want your resignation."

There was a long silence. Buckmaster waited.

Finally Frost looked up. "I'll try the case," he said.

"Good!" Buckmaster touched his mustache. "I want you, Jacques, to sit in on the trial," he said decisively. "I'm not happy about Easy's attitude, but I want no speculation as to his absence." He dismissed both.

FROST worked loyally to prepare the People's case. Each witness was examined carefully in his office against previous statements until they reached fretful exhaustion. He went over the autopsy report with Dr. Mendelsohn several times.

There was no way to avoid the newsmen when they waylaid him in court or in the lobby of the Criminal Courts Building. Albany's role puzzled them. They were determined to find a criminal motive for Madena's killing. Frost pleaded front-office orders until even his good friends were resentful.

Alice Williston did badly in the press. Her concealed background prompted the sensational papers to term her "a mystery woman" whose occupation, they said flatly, was the oldest in the world. The association with Albany blew the matter up to unjustified proportions. The prejudice against her was strong.

There was an ugly session with Frank Albany's lawyer, Pat Taormina, an olive-skinned smooth dresser with thick-lensed glasses and a gleaming smile. Frost liked and knew Taormina well, but it took some time to convince him that his client would not be allowed to testify against Alice in return for a promise of immunity.

"No deals!" Frost said flatly. "He's right in the middle, and he's got to testify! Let him convince the jury!"

It was several weeks before Frost managed to run into Corliss Flanagan at Guido's, a small restaurant on Mulberry Street patronized by defense lawyers seeking to refresh contacts with judges and the higher-paid assistant district attorneys. It was a shabby square room with brick walls decorated

with prewar Italian travel posters. Guido, a tall, sensitive, completely hairless man with a rushed, suffering expression, was his own waiter and cashier. Dishes were cooked to order.

Frost was seated at a long table in the rear with a dozen assistants. Sam Gelhorn, the chief of staff, and Scotty Joseph, the ablest trial man in General Sessions, were playing violent gin rummy. The rest were chatting about cases, speculating on Buckmaster's (and their) political fortunes and gossiping generally. As the only man from Homicide, Frost came in for some rallying about his celebrated case. He replied abstractedly, slicing a hard pear for dessert and dipping the segments in honey. A dripping piece was almost in his mouth when Flanagan appeared.

Frost took his fruit and joined Flanagan in the front corner. He sat patiently while the red-faced, cheerful lawyer gave precise directions for a veal cutlet with broccoli and butter sauce and a glass of stiff, rich zabaglioni. Flanagan dipped a napkin in water and wiped the grime from his hands.

Frost came to the point. Why had he failed to show up on the arraignment?

Flanagan wiped his mouth, eyes, nose, and forehead. "What can a poor defense lawyer do?" he asked lightly. "You decided to burn Alice Williston. Who-am I to fight the People's choice?"

"Why not give the woman a run for her money?" Frost muttered.

The ablutions ceased while Flanagan studied Frost. "What money?" He folded his napkin neatly. "She's dry."

Frost put the pear aside. "What about that list of telephone numbers?" he asked after a pause. "They looked good to me."

Flanagan buttered a bread stick. "I found a league of yawning men," he smiled grimly. "I asked the best to kick in with something for the defense. Not ethical. But I did." He grimaced cynically. "They wouldn't touch her with a barge pole."

Frost suddenly found the going hard. "You know, Corliss, I don't like shooting fish in a barrel," he said carefully. "I'd feel better if she were properly defended."

"A Daniel come to judgment!" The red-faced lawyer pointed the bread stick like a ferule. "She didn't tell you what happened after midnight? No more she

didn't tell me!" He snorted. "I checked with the neighbors too. She's holding out on us both." He broke off a brittle end and crunched vigorously. "Don't be squeamish about your job, Easy," he advised. "These women are a dime a dozen. They're floating all over the city. You can't help them and they can't help you. Who knows? Maybe you saved her from jumping from a window."

Frost doggedly molded a bread crumb, his eyes on the tablecloth. "Does she know what Murder One means?" he asked in a low voice. "Would she take a plea?"

"She won't concede she killed the little man," Flanagan said pointedly. "She's scared, but she's a rock on that point."

"She's bound to crack when she hits that courtroom," Frost said without conviction. "Why not stick around? If the regular hacks get appointed for the defense, they might let her go to the jury." He looked squarely at Flanagan. "You'd know what advice to give."

He got a shrewd look. "Forcing pleas with heavy indictments!" Flanagan said ironically. "It brings back my youth when I did the same!"

GUIDO arrived with a tray. "Food at last." Flanagan smiled grossly. He folded a napkin across his knees and poured the butter sauce over the broccoli. Through mouthfuls he said, "My reputation is winning cases for big money!"

Frost threw away the doughy crumb and rose. "I suppose you're right," he muttered. "You've got to consider your overhead."

Flanagan caught his sleeve. His eyes were amused. "Learn to roll with the punches, Easy. I haven't called all those numbers yet."

As he rejoined the other assistants Frost felt uncomfortable under their curious glances.

He got little more comfort from the staff psychiatrist. Shortly before the trial he kept an appointment with Dr. Max Zipser in the eighth-floor examining room. They had worked together on several insanity defenses and were on a friendly and informal footing. Nevertheless the doctor greeted him with the usual professional gravity. He was a heavy-set, elderly man with tufted iron-gray eyebrows and a direct, cutting turn of speech.

The doctor drew up comfortable chairs, and filled a pipe, while Frost dragged out cigarettes. The yellow stains on Frost's fingers were deeper than before, he noticed.

He reassured the doctor—the visit was not personal. He was not ill, just sleeping poorly.

They talked politics and pensions before Frost asked bluntly whether he was making a fool of himself. He outlined the conflicting views of the Bureau. Could Alice be telling the truth so far as she knew it? Or was she deliberately lying?

The doctor pointed out that he could say nothing without data. "I can't say you're not being kidded," he advised briefly. "On these facts, I'd assume nothing." He lit his pipe with a sucking sound. "When a child's caught red-handed in something forbidden, it closes its eyes and denies the obvious! What else can it do?"

Could she have lost her memory?

"Under these circumstances?" the doctor considered. "How does that affect your case? The crime is clear!" The doctor's impatient voice began to show gutturals. "Loss of memory is no legal excuse! If it were every drunken brawler would have a defense!"

In theory, many things were possible, the doctor continued skeptically. Were there head injuries? Was she blind drunk? Had she been ill, or in high fever?

Frost ruled such factors out.

Hysterical loss of memory was known, but of course it was not true absence of recollection. Under proper conditions, recall might be restored. In this case the prisoner had a powerful motive; by faking, she was avoiding other lies even more difficult to sustain. Who could say? No doubt the trial would bring a rush of memory.

"She's already refused to take a plea!" Frost said pointedly.

"Ah? That is strange," the doctor admitted. He rubbed his thick brows briskly. "The refusal to plead . . . Yes, it might relate to her refusal to remember. Her childish pretense might have purpose and reason. But what?"

"She told us. She won't admit killing the man."

"Yes, yes! But why?" the doctor asked impatiently. "She's intelligent! She knows the plea would save her life! It

can't be fear!" As a personal favor, he promised to read the file and follow the matter.

FINALLY Frost moved the case for trial in Part IV of General Sessions toward the end of the April Term. It was a Monday. There was a short pleading calendar and no sentences. At Frost's request, Judge Siegfried Hacker directed that the two defendants in the Albany-Williston case be seated in the courtroom during the taking of pleas. The procedure was unusual, but Frost assured him it was soundly motivated.

Judge Hacker made quick work of the calendar. He was a calm, reserved man with a soft though authoritative voice, an excellent lawyer and the master of the courtroom. He was neat and methodical, with little time wasted on the day's business.

Alice and Frank Albany were brought in by guards and seated together directly behind the defense table. The man sagged badly, he looked ill, and his hair had turned white in streaks. Alice seemed physically more fit than Frost remembered. Her white cheeks had thinned out, and her red hair had a washed sheen in the cold light.

Claude Johnson, a tall, yellow-skinned Pullman chef, came resignedly to the defense table with a guard on each side. After conferring with his counsel, Mrs. Rachel Washington, a beautiful Negro woman with a Virginia accent, Frost recited that the People were satisfied to accept a plea of guilty to first-degree manslaughter to cover the indictment for second-degree murder. The judge then asked the defendant to say distinctly whether he understood that he was admitting the stabbing of Benito Smith with a knife and causing his death.

The defendant nodded dejectedly. "I killed Benny and I'm sorry. No woman was worth it."

After some formal questions by the clerk, the prisoner was remanded to await sentence. Frost accepted four lesser pleas, including one to assault to cover vehicle homicide because of doubt as to the cause of death.

Pat Taormina and Corliss Flanagan came forward as the case on trial was called and answered, "Ready."

Frost crossed over and expressed his appreciation to Flanagan. "Don't get me

wrong, young fellow," the defense lawyer whispered. "I got a fee. Somebody came through. And not from that list of numbers."

Counsel were summoned to the bench.

"Can this case be disposed of, gentlemen?" the judge asked placidly.

"The People's case is open-and-shut." Frost spoke carefully. "We don't need a plea. But you know, Judge, this is Murder One. We'll consider any fair offer."

Flanagan swayed. The whisky smell showed he was ready. "Frost's dying to get a plea, Judge. And, to be frank, I'd be glad to oblige. But this woman says she did not cause the man's death. There's nothing I can do!"

"She's living in a dream," Frost said. "Wait till she hears the witnesses."

Hacker turned to Taormina. The olive-skinned lawyer leaned his elbows on the bench, politely contemptuous. "I offered to let the People use my man as a witness. Now I won't take spitting on the sidewalk." He flashed a derisive smile. "They indicted him only to force him to the stand. I challenge Frost to deny that! Well, that's where he'll be—giving solid testimony! Our testimony will convict the woman and acquit us. I'm not giving one inch!"

Hacker studied the three lawyers, smoothing his silky mustache. "Who's kidding who, I wonder?" he said mildly. "Well, save it for the jury."

The talesmen were assembled from the Central Jury Room. Routine motions to dismiss the entire blue-ribbon panel on constitutional grounds were denied as a matter of course. Jacques Renaud entered and sat with Frost as the clerk called the first talesmen to the jury box.

Frost stood and turned to face the entire courtroom, his back to the high mural of the Goddess of Justice behind the bench. He was acutely aware of Renaud's searching stare, his mind seemed paralyzed, his heart thumped with the usual courtroom fright.

He started too low, cleared his throat, and resumed with vehement strength. He introduced the defendants and various counsel and stated the circumstances briefly to the entire panel. He drew vigor from the accustomed routine and filled the court without effort. He was, after all, a trained advocate in a just cause. He shut from his mind the woman defendant, sitting white and resigned and helpless.

Renaud relaxed.

A glance at the board with the seating list of talesmen's names and occupations showed Frost that he had the usual blue-ribbon panel, solid, dependable businessmen. No need to fear eccentrics or weak sisters. He began with the first talesman. The white-haired, retired real-estate owner knew no reason why he could not give both sides a fair trial. He was sure he would weight the evidence impartially.

Frost asked that he search his mind carefully and state candidly whether he had any feelings against capital punishment.

The smile vanished. "Why, no!" he said firmly. "I believe the law should take its course!"

"Are you sure?" Frost continued to probe. "Would you be too squeamish, or too sensitive, let us say, to return a guilty verdict if justified by the facts?"

"I don't quarrel with the law," the talesman replied. "I've sat in previous cases."

Frost grimly repeated his needling tactics on the rest, and weeded out a union official and a newspaper editor who admitted that they had no stomach for the case.

IN the recess Renaud reproved him for referring to the defendants by their names. "You know what Buckmaster wants—keep the issues abstract!"

When they resumed in the morning, Flanagan pushed his bulk against the jury-box rail and breathed defiance and whisky fumes at the world. He began with the old real-estate owner.

"Mr. Egan, is it?" he asked with a marked inflection, and got a short nod. "Tell me, would you be swayed by the knowledge that a blue-ribbon panel is selected to return men who can be relied on to convict in a murder trial?"

"I would not," the talesman said strongly. "I would weigh the facts completely without prejudice."

"If you can do that, Mr. Egan, you're a truly great and unusual man!" Flanagan said dryly. "May I take it you intend to ignore that this woman's life may hang on your vote?"

"Objection sustained!" Hacker interrupted and swiveled his back to the jury. "Get on with proper questions, Mr. Flanagan!"

"I beg your Honor's pardon!" Flana-

gan's voice was not a whit contrite. "I cannot reconcile myself to these blue-ribbon panels combed clean of jurors likely to acquit! I like at least an even chance where a life is the stake!"

"You've made your point!" The judge turned and stared him to silence. "They get what you're driving at. I'll charge them properly when the time comes."

Flanagan angrily continued, with no luck. The talesmen were solid businessmen. His rages and sallies and little jests glanced off without effect.

At the adjournment he was exhausted. "Am I getting sales resistance?" he murmured to Alice at the defense table. "Real tough nuts!"

"The judge seems kind," she whispered. "I like his face."

"He'll kill you with kindness," Flanagan said curtly.

The following morning Pat Taormina was confident and quickly satisfied. There were eight challenges by Flanagan, further examination back and forth, and by noon the jury was accepted and sworn in.

The afternoon was devoted to brief openings. Frost read the indictment and promised to prove that the defendants had killed James Madena in a manner making it the crime of murder in the first degree. It was true that the motive was either mere savagery or lay concealed with the defendants. But the facts, he promised, would conclusively prove their guilt.

At the defense table Albany pulled at his gray dewlap. Alice gazed down at her desk.

Renaud grunted approval. Frost had made a ringing, clear-cut impression, and the stolid jurors seemed to like his style.

Taormina promptly rose and conceded, smiling broadly, that so far as he knew, murder might have been done. But he promised that the evidence would point solely to the woman. "I guess my client was at fault for entering her establishment. He was looking for trouble. But you're men. You've lived in the world. That fault won't sway you, I'm sure, where murder is the charge." He appealed grossly to a low common understanding. "Think how easy a pretty face can swear away a man's life. Weigh carefully this woman's charges against a family man who has never before been convicted of a crime." He

pointed a dark, quivering finger. "If the man was murdered, as the People say, that woman alone is guilty!"

Alice put a childish finger to her mouth, bewildered at the unexpected venom. Flanagan gripped her arm reassuringly and rose with massive anger.

"Well, gentlemen, you see what it means to be whipsawed!" he blurted.

"My client is to be ground between the upper and the nether millstones. My learned colleague is to do the dirty besmirching job for which the district attorney is too delicate! How can I alone counter this squeeze play? What can I say for this woman stripped naked before your eyes?" He stared at Albany.

"I will not burden my soul and accuse the other defendant! That godlike function is for the infallible district attorney! The guilt necessarily lies between two parties. Since I was not present, I refuse to choose between them. I cannot in all honesty exclude the *chance* that Alice Williston committed the act. I will show, however, that Albany *might* have killed James Madena. And I offer my most solemn assurance that Alice *would not* kill a man who meant so much in her miserable life. I will be satisfied to show a reasonable doubt as to her guilt sufficient to compel her acquittal." He paused, and in the sudden silence his breathing could be heard through the courtroom. "Be happy, gentlemen, that you are not in my position—forced to counter physical evidence with only a knowledge of human probabilities and a conviction of your client's innocence! Be happy you are not in this woman's forlorn seat!"

He walked back to his seat, put a speckled, hairy hand on Alice's shoulder. "Between her and death stands nothing now but the hope you can look into her woman's heart and conclude that the charge is grotesque—whatever the evidence!" He stared deeply at the jurors and resumed his seat.

"Mr. Flanagan!" The bench spoke with weary reproof.

"I know, Judge, I know!" The lawyer shifted his bulk. "I'm too old to learn."

Hacker contemplated Flanagan. He dismissed the jury for the week end and summoned the lawyers, including Jacques Renaud, into his chambers.

"What was that fantastic approach, Corliss?" he demanded. "You might as well throw the case away! Why?"

Flanagan breathed heavily. "I've got nothing to work with, Judge. I'm doing the best I know how. After all, she's a woman. . . ."

"Don't be a child!" Hacker was deeply angry. "You can't play with her life! I want you to work out a plea! Don't let her get to that jury!"

Frost rested wearily against the wall. "Don't wait till it's too late, Corliss," he urged. "I don't want any calls from the death house. Don't give me another Cesare Buongiorno situation."

"You're all wound up, and scared to pitch!" Flanagan eyed the young district attorney shrewdly. "Don't crack before she does!" He turned to the judge with some intensity. "I want that woman to know where she stands! If she continues to refuse to plead, let it be on her shoulders, not mine!"

"She'll plead!" Frost asserted doggedly.

The judge rose to end the interview. "This is the last time I'll intervene," he said coldly. "If you don't plan to turn the tables and accuse Albany, you've got no defense."

VII

ALICE became aware of light and opened her eyes. The streaky barred window showed the cold dawn. She tossed and stretched her legs, but the ache stayed. With an exhausted sigh, she threw away the rough wool blanket.

She swallowed the bad taste in her mouth. What would she not give, she thought, to forget the tension, unendurably prolonged, to end the squeezing pain in her bowels! She longed for an end to her churning thoughts!

"Did you sleep, honey?"

She shook her head slowly.

There was a creaking sound from the cot opposite, a shuffle, then a weight on her own. Her hand was comfortingly stroked by her cellmate, a kind-faced, buxom colored woman.

"You got to fight that case, Alice," Susan Claymore urged anxiously. "This is no way. You won't be able to follow those witnesses. How are you going to defend yourself?"

Alice drew a shuddering sigh. "You're kind and good, Susan. You believe I couldn't have done what they say to Jimmy?"

"Sure thing, Alice," Susan smiled.

"But you do what your lawyer says. He know's what's good for you."

Despite Susan's urging, Alice refused to touch the hot oatmeal served at breakfast and gulped the bitter, lukewarm coffee to clear her mind.

She was taken from the Women's House of Detention south along Sixth Avenue, cut across at Canal Street, and drew into the City Prison connected with the Criminal Courts Building. Her thoughts were deep in the past, remembering a street, enormously wide and steep, with houses set back above stone walls with high hedges or black iron spike fences. In one of those houses she had lived, playing in dark, vast bedrooms and hiding with her dolls in warm, secure closets. Where was that house? She could not remember more than a vague image. Somewhere in the picture was a broad-shouldered man with a rough beard swinging her suddenly toward a ceiling. She had laughed and struggled until let down.

"Are you all right, Alice?" the woman police officer's anxious voice cut in. She started. She had let out an involuntary gasp.

"Quite all right," she apologized with a wan smile.

The confusion of images persisted as the elevator drew them to the ninth floor to cross the bridge to the courtroom detention cell. What had happened? she wondered. There were nights of shouting noises and a woman's piercing screams that went on and on. And a rag doll she had clutched when pulling the covers over against the terror. Then the gray period with so many things still felt but not remembered.

She squeezed her knuckles against her eyes. She was now in the hard and real courtroom. This was no time for daydreams. Her lawyer, that frightening Mr. Flanagan, needed her help. She wanted to please him, to co-operate and get his approval.

The courtroom was familiar and safe. At least nothing could happen for this day.

The trial then began.

The logic of the trial was easy to grasp. The yellow-haired district attorney went at it with fury, cutting his first witnesses to essentials, guiding them to basic facts with economy.

A broad-chested engineer put in evidence the dimensions and a floor plan

of her small apartment.

Another witness offered photographs. As they were passed to the defense table she saw Jimmy's puffed, bruised face harshly lighted. Beyond, dimly out of focus, her room and books and the remainder of things as they once were.

The uniformed officer who had identified Jimmy's body to the medical examiner admitted that the pillow under Jimmy's head, shown in the photograph, had been there when he entered the room, the first to cover the crime.

In the afternoon the medical examiner, Dr. Saul Mendelsohn, took the stand. Flanagan objected that the body had not yet been sufficiently identified. The district attorney promised to bring the widow before closing his case.

"Oh no!" she cried, half rising in her seat. "I don't want Dolores to see me here! Please don't!"

Flanagan's hand on her shoulder restrained her. He looked down thoughtfully. "Objection withdrawn!" he said uncertainly. He sat and scratched his massive head and whispered aside, "Don't make the point important, Alice!"

She strove to follow as the stammering witness responded to Frost's few succinct questions. He told the jurors that he was a doctor of medicine duly licensed to practice in New York State, specializing for twenty years in pathology. He had been an assistant medical examiner for fifteen and had made perhaps twelve thousand autopsies.

He spoke technically and then concluded that the direct cause of death was an extensive laceration of the mesentery with bleeding into the abdominal cavity. "He died of loss of blood by internal bleeding within fifteen minutes," he concluded. "The other injuries were not important."

She gazed with fascinated horror at the neat, precise man who had opened Jimmy's skull, smelled his brain, hefted and fingered Jimmy's lungs, heart, liver, stomach, spleen, and intestines, probed and speculated and finally closed the body with the certitude that Jimmy had been fiercely attacked while supine and unresisting. The judge, the jurors, the lawyers, the spectators, the whole world hung on the slow, carefully weighed, stammered testimony. Through the confusion of her mind, she saw that the doctor knew!

She threw herself forward on the table and wept like a noisy child.

After a time she sipped a glass of cold water and sat back. Flanagan roared to the attack for hour after hour until he ran out of questions, with nothing to show except the admission that Jimmy had been heavily drunk at death. He sat heavily and placed a sweaty paw on her hand. "Well, Alice, you see how it is," he murmured. "You can't toss an expert who knows his stuff."

THERE was an adjournment. In the Women's House of Detention the light changed to darkness and then returned, and it was another day.

In the morning fatigue made her lightheaded. She felt better and went through her toilet with a calm sense of routine. She refused food, but the coffee was bitter and good.

Within the familiar courtroom she watched with detachment the play between the slashing, tight-faced district attorney and his new witness, Detective Ricca. He was, she saw, a good witness, sturdy, direct, and vivid. He wore dark-rimmed glasses and testified in a formal, studious jargon, referring frequently to notes.

Then the lawyers were on him like terriers. Taormina underscored that her statements were identical with his client's, that, according to Alice, the only blows Albany struck were to the head, that Albany had left before midnight without returning. In a way it was a comfort to be corroborated at last. Still, if not Albany, who could have harmed Jimmy?

Ricca removed his glasses and admitted that Albany had said that Jimmy had provoked him by vile language.

With persistent, monumental ingenuity, Flanagan flailed away in vain to drag from Ricca a statement that Alice had been in duress, that her long detention as a material witness without charges showed belief in her innocence, that her arrest was a desperate afterthought. Ricca flatly denied that anyone had threatened her physically. Her statements were voluntary, he maintained stolidly.

Flanagan insisted: except for the statements made by Alice herself, could not a third person have appeared after midnight?

"But she says not, counselor," Ricca replied calmly.

"What she says to her damage, you believe!" Flanagan raged. "What she doesn't, you reject! Is that your theory?"

"The district attorney has theories, not me!" Ricca was cold and hostile. "I'm just testifying!"

Flanagan broke off. "The district attorney has theories!" he parroted audibly as he stalked to the defense table.

As the case stood, nothing yet accounted for the injuries sustained by the dead man in the belly area.

"Call Mrs. Hanni," Frost said quietly.

A brisk, trim little woman with white hair and a rosy face stepped in from the witness room.

Mrs. Hanni told the jurors that she lived next door to the defendant. She made a living as a public stenographer. On the night in question she had stayed late at the office, typing up some urgent work for a lawyer. She arrived home almost precisely at eleven o'clock, just in time for the news broadcast. She prepared for bed and began to read an epic poem in Finnish.

She smiled apologetically as Frost brought her back to the issue at hand. After a little she heard a small crashing sound and then silence. At eleven-thirty she heard a conversation at the door to the defendant's apartment. The defendant was talking to a man. She was sure it was the defendant because of a certain quality in her voice. "Her voice is like the English," she said lamely. "It is hard to say. But I always took pleasure in the sound. Oh yes!" she added. "I heard it many times!"

Then there was the sound of the defendant and a man walking to the elevator, the sound of the elevator, and the sound of the defendant returning to the apartment. The defendant had a quick, light step which was hers alone. There was a silence and, after twelve, she again heard the defendant's voice. She seemed to be shouting, "Get out! Get out of my house!" She did not hear any other voice. At two o'clock there was a loud thumping sound which made the walls shiver—a sound she could not describe or imitate. There was another silence. Then the defendant's voice continued until six in the morning.

At no time after two o'clock did Mrs. Hanni hear any voice other than the defendant's.

"Your witness," Frost said briefly.

Alice was appalled. How could the jurors fail to conclude that she had remained awake during the night, screaming dreadfully at Jimmy, and that she had lied to the police about being asleep after midnight? It was just as Frost had warned! But here was the living witness against her!

Flanagan got a few minutes' indulgence. The court took a recess and she was alone at the defense table with her lawyer. They spoke in whispers.

"It's impossible!" she cried. "I would never have told Jimmy to leave my home, as that woman says!"

"Don't kid me!" The lawyer rubbed his fat jaws and then his tired eyes. "Will the jury believe you and not her?" His voice was now hoarse. "Does she sound like a fool or a liar?"

"No," she admitted nervously. "There's no use pretending."

"Can you suggest anything?"

She bit her fingernail. "I'll take the stand."

"What will that do? Frost will tear you apart. If he doesn't, Taormina will. You haven't anything to say but a denial of the last witness's story." He spoke quietly. After a pause he added, "Your neighbor below is here to back up Mrs. Hanni's testimony."

She examined the fingernail critically. "I won't admit I killed Jimmy."

FLANAGAN pulled her hand away. "Look at me, Alice," he demanded roughly. "Do some thinking, girl! Your time is running out! Give up! You can't win!" His speckled fists were white at the knuckles. "Your own father couldn't give you better advice!"

For some reason his last words stung her.

"I won't plead guilty!" She snatched her hand back.

When the recess was over, Flanagan stood morosely. He suggested that Mrs. Hanni had dozed off during the night, that another person had entered the apartment. The witness cut him off with curt answers. She was certain that she had remained awake till morning. The sound had kept her sleepless.

She was so obviously truthful and reliable that Flanagan did not dare to attack her general credibility. Finally, dismally, he broke off.

The tenant below, a white-thatched,

retired manufacturer named Henry A. Samuels, testified to the same effect. He was supported by his wife and his daughter, a well-upholstered businesswoman from Rhode Island. They had all been kept awake by the sounds from Alice's apartment. They were emphatic about the loud thumping sound at two in the morning, since they had turned up the lights and made hot chocolate to pass the time.

Flanagan's cross-examination was useless. He established merely that the Samuels family had not conferred with Mrs. Hanni before testifying—which was a point for the People.

Luis Hernandez did not help Alice by vouching for her character.

The court adjourned, and then it was the next morning.

Dolores Madena was called as the last, formal witness. Alice followed Jimmy's widow with mute eyes as the little woman in black crossed over to the stand. Her voice was almost inaudible as she took the oath and gave her name and address. She kept her eyes averted as she told briefly that she had identified her husband's body to the medical examiner on a certain day.

Unexpectedly, Flanagan had cross-examination. "Look this way, madam," he invited. Dolores turned toward the defense table. "Look at the defendant, Alice Williston!" She complied.

Alice smiled timidly at her. Dolores nodded gravely in return.

"You did not approve of your husband's staying with the defendant, did you, madam?" Flanagan asked.

Dolores shook her head. "No."

"Was Alice a friend of yours?"

Dolores considered seriously. "We thought so, my girls and I. Until this thing came along."

"Did you receive help from Alice Williston from time to time?" Flanagan asked gently.

Frost objected. The judge waved him back. "Let him ask the question, if he thinks it will help."

The witness answered, "My daughter Rita would get money from Alice. She is seventeen. To help her through business school. I never took money myself."

"How long has your family known Alice Williston?" Flanagan pursued.

Mrs. Madena counted on her fingers. "Maybe more than twelve years. Maybe more than fifteen."

Frost's sharp objections blocked further attempts to draw an opinion on Alice's relations with the dead man.

The widow turned quietly to the bench. "I would like to say, your Honor, I would never have believed harm in Alice toward anyone. Not till I heard this. Still I cannot understand. I pray for Alice every night and day. Do her no hurt, I beg you."

Judge Hacker smoothed the corners of his silken mustache. "This is good of you, madam," he said courteously, "but the Law must proceed." He leaned over. "Strike the last remark from the record."

"That's the People's case!" Frost said in a low voice.

Motions by defense counsel to dismiss were denied. When the court adjourned, Alice sat staring, biting a fingernail. . . .

WITH the two defendants, the trial swept to its end. Albany testified cleverly, a squat, wrinkled fellow with a long nose and shrewd, baggy eyes. Unexpectedly, he showed a digging humor which went well with the jurors. His attitude was: "We're all men! We know it might happen to anybody!"

"Look! I told about hitting him before I knew he was dead, or what killed him!" he argued. "Why shouldn't I have told the whole story? It don't make sense." It was a telling point. He added, "I had nothing against the man! He was just talking dirty to a lady—something I don't tolerate! I figured he needed to learn better, for his own good! So I learned him!" He got a smile from the jurors, and concluded shrewdly, "Understand me, I don't say Alice done anything! All I know, I didn't do it myself!"

When he ended, he had taken himself out of peril.

Alice was finally called to the stand after a whispered argument with Flanagan, and the big courtroom stirred with morbid interest. Frost walked back to the rail and detailed Ricca to summon Dr. Zipser, then returned to his seat with a pounding heart. At his side Renaud whispered, "Don't overplay, Easy. Just follow through." He looked at his assistant curiously. "Did you hear me? What are you thinking about?"

"Jimmy Madena's widow!" Frost muttered. He turned toward Renaud, but his eyes were remote. "Alice must have

known Jimmy since she was a child! How was I to know? I never thought of checking that far back!"

"Why should you? Nobody ever does." Renaud's hawk face was puzzled. "Don't worry. Just concentrate on the jury."

It gave Frost a queer proprietary satisfaction that Alice looked clean and nice on the stand. Her loss of weight had smoothed her neckline and made her fine, regular features seem younger than her years.

Flanagan began dubiously, but after a few preliminaries he gave her her head. "Tell the jury in your own words what happened," he invited, and sat. She told her simple story in a low, cultivated voice. She faltered in describing blows given the dead man, but otherwise her story struck the prosecutors, and doubtless the jurors, as true, so far as it went. Renaud and Frost followed the transcript of her statement page by page. They found no contradictions.

"Damn this bitch!" Frost muttered, half to himself, half to Renaud. "She's got to crack! She can't keep going!" He rose and stood at his favorite position before Juror Number Six and stared at the witness.

"Please proceed, Mr. Frost," Judge Hacker's rolling voice came through the silence.

The court was waiting. Frost began, and was comforted and carried along by a sudden mounting fury. In short order he drove through Flanagan's barrage of defensive objections to destroy Alice's character. She admitted that she could point to no legitimate source of income, that Jimmy received money from her, that she and Jimmy were not married. She refused to say what Frank Albany's purpose might have been in visiting.

"Was Jimmy your lover?" he demanded icily.

"Certainly not!" She twisted. "Jimmy . . . Well, Jimmy was, you know, just around. . . . He was fun. . . ."

"Your relations were not conventional?" he asked ironically.

Her gesture showed that she could not explain. Mercifully, the Court cut the line of questions short.

Alice was adamant on her story of the facts up to midnight, when, she insisted, she had put the pillow under Jimmy's head and gone to sleep. Her version agreed with Albany's and brought out Taormina's gleaming smile.

Unexpectedly, at a question of no importance, she fainted quietly, and a brief recess was ordered.

Out in the corridor Renaud waved back Bureau members, newspapermen, and detectives who gathered around. "I told you not to overplay, Easy!" He was annoyed. "The case is solid! Don't try so hard!"

"My heart's in my work!" Frost retorted sullenly. After a pause he looked up and added, "Cesare Buongiorno went to the chair this morning!"

"I know," Renaud waited.

"Gerald Boxer, the *Tribune* man, told me. It took four men to strap him down. He yelled for me till the current burned him off."

"Well, you weren't there, were you?" Renaud demanded.

Frost nodded toward the courtroom. "Alice hasn't taken a plea yet," he said.

Renaud gnawed at his lip. "Boxer ought to have his tongue cut out!" he said savagely.

A GROUP of idle assistants formed a circle around Renaud and began on small talk. The corridor's air of relaxed cordiality drove Frost back to the courtroom.

When court resumed, Frost rose to put a workmanlike finish to his cross-examination. Alice admitted that none of the witnesses had reason to lie, that no other person yet unnamed had been to the apartment.

"After the first fight in the hallway, what was Jimmy's condition, so far as you could see?" Frost demanded.

"He was all right," she said weakly.

"Did Albany strike Jimmy anywhere but on the face?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Miss Williston, I want you to take all the time you need," he said curtly. "You say you were asleep after midnight." He nodded to the jury box. "Tell the jurors, if you can, how your voice, your footsteps, your screams and the loud thumping sound at two o'clock could have come from your apartment unless you were the cause?"

Her hand went to her throat. Her lips were gray.

"I ask that the Court direct the witness to answer," Frost demanded.

"You must answer, Miss Williston," Judge Hacker said sharply, "in your own interests!"

"I can't say," she whispered.

"Give the jurors your best possible guess!" Frost was remorseless.

"I can't guess," she whispered finally.

Frost went on. "Tell the jurors how James Madena's organs could have been torn and lacerated by anyone but you!" His voice was harshly insistent.

Alice shrank back and bit at her finger. She tried, but no words would come.

"May the record show that the witness had not answered?" Frost cut into the silence.

"Yes," the judge observed quietly, "let it be so noted."

Frost saw only the quivering white face before him. There was a roaring in his ears, like a seashell held close. He strode to the witness stand. "Alice, is there anything whatsoever you wish to tell the jurors?" He put his hand on the rail. "Is there anything you wish to tell me?"

"I wouldn't hurt Jimmy!" she cried.

Frost's shoulders sagged. He walked back to the table. "No further questions," he said dully.

Taormina smiled cockily. "No cross-examination."

Flanagan added in a dead voice, "We rest."

Still smiling, Taormina said, "The defendant, Frank Albany, rests."

Frost said, "The People rest."

There were summations and the trial was closed. The jury were released for the night, with the strict admonition to be on time to receive the judge's charge at the opening of court.

VIII

FROST wearily studied the familiar walls of his office hung with college and law-school diplomas, his certificate of admission to the New York State Bar, the scroll signed by Lucius Buckmaster appointing him to the staff, the photographs of Dorothy and the boys taken near Camp Beaumont in Texas. On his desk was a photograph of the oil painting of Alice.

Dorothy was at his ear on the telephone, going at a great rate. Little Timmy had recovered from his fever. Both boys were asking if he could get home before they were put to bed.

"I don't know!" he exploded, and hung up.

When Flanagan entered, Frost indicated that Ricca and Dr. Zipser stay. Flanagan nodded; he knew them well.

"So, Cesare Buongiorno's out of his misery!" The defense lawyer lowered his bulk in a chair. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks." Frost suddenly flushed.

"You did a clean job today, Easy," Flanagan said gravely. "You're a good trial man."

"Well, you did what you could, Corliss." Frost returned his gaze. "It's not as though she didn't kill Jimmy."

"Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, stripe for stripe, wound for wound!" Flanagan laughed without mirth. "Alice takes Jimmy's life; you take hers!" The wall decorations caught his eye. "Sorry, I meant the *People* take her life! You just did your duty! You had nothing personal against Alice. Why worry? I told you, Alice is a dime a dozen. Or was." He laughed shortly.

Ricca heaved himself from the side table where he had been sitting. "Should I throw this bum out, Easy?" he asked.

"Vince!" Frost reproved. He turned to the defense lawyer. "I don't want her life. I just want a plea."

Flanagan unbuttoned his vest and rubbed his belly. "There's only one chance," he said with slow meaning. "She admits hitting Jimmy with the lamp. I might get her to take assault."

"Can't be done!" Frost said grimly. "She killed a man. We'd look like fools!" He threw away a pencil viciously.

"Assault is all she'll take!"

Frost shook his head. "You heard me! My hands are tied!" He looked up with dead eyes. "Manslaughter is my best offer!"

The bulky defense lawyer drew Ricca and Dr. Zipser into his bitter humor. "I must remember that it's my client who's going to the chair, not me. I really must!" he grimaced. "Easy, when you set this machinery in motion, you skunked yourself! There'll be a verdict in the morning to Murder One! Live with that for a while!"

When the heavy gray door had closed behind the defense lawyer Frost swiveled wearily to Dr. Zipser. "Could she be insane, Doctor? What are chances to get her to an institution?"

"None, I'm afraid!" The doctor's voice was unexpectedly guttural and foreign. "She has an intelligent, logical grasp of her circumstances. No delusions or hal-

lucinations. Nothing to show insanity. She's nervous, but that's natural."

"What's the answer?" Ricca put in. "This ain't acting normal."

"That's true." The doctor's heavy brows furrowed. "I imagine some underlying emotional condition. A case history might help explain."

Frost detained him. "What could one do with a case history?" His voice was sharp.

"That depends." The doctor stood at the door, heavy-set, speculative. "If I knew more, I could tell you more. Under some conditions, one might do a lot."

THEY found Luis Hernandez in his cellar apartment. He was puzzled, but friendly, when Ricca reminded him of their last set-to. It was all past. The old lady, he shrugged impassively, had died of cancer within a week, but he was marrying again soon. A man must live, he implied.

Ricca broke the police seal on the lock and Hernandez admitted them to Alice's apartment. It was as Frost remembered it, dustier, mused, and with an undefinable air of abandonment.

"Landlord's sore at you guys," Hernandez said. "Lots people want rent this place. One funny guy, man with beard, wanted to give ten bucks just to look."

"Okay, Luis, on your way!" Ricca ordered, and the superintendent left.

"So a man with a beard wanted to look!" Frost murmured thoughtfully. "This place has something to tell us."

He rose and walked about the room. In turn, he noted the still present bloodstains and evidences of violence. He kicked the knitted muffler and paged through *Good Housekeeping*. He turned up the worn green volume of poems with the caricature on the flyleaf. He held the book flat between his hands, placed it, binding down, on the bridge table, and withdrew his hands sharply. The book fell open, right and left, on a worn page.

"I should have done this long ago," Frost muttered. "In the whole book there are just four underscored lines. J.H.M. signed his initials and wrote, 'Read this!'" He read aloud:

"I shall stop fighting and escape

Into a little house I'll build.

"But first I'll shrink to fairy size,

With a whisper no one understands . . ."

He closed the book.

Ricca regarded Frost with lackluster eyes, his head cocked aslant. "Do me one favor, Easy!" he said heavily. "Just don't let the captain hear of this!"

Frost gave a weary smile and held up the caricature on the flyleaf to the large oil portrait of Alice in the powder alcove. The resemblance in style was clear. "J.H.M.," he murmured. He looked close at the lower left corner of the portrait and read, "John Henry Mather." He turned to Ricca. "Well, what do you say?"

"Just tell me where we go!" Ricca said. . . .

As they passed the dips and traffic lights of Route 29 going through Elizabeth, Frost snapped off a radio commentator who was predicting the outcome of the Williston-Albany case and sat back. Ricca pushed the shabby touring car at better than the speed limit.

Quite soon they were in the tortuous streets of Trenton. It was midnight when they found their goal, a modest apartment one flight above an all-night restaurant.

Dolores Madena was dressed in a sport coat over a high-necked white nightgown. Her iron-gray hair hung down her thin chest in two neat braids. The unexpected visit threw her in a flurry of suggestions for their comfort. A round-faced girl with black ringlets hung at the doorway, shy and curious.

Dolores closed her dark, brilliant eyes and shook her head stubbornly. She would say nothing. She had no information to give.

UNDER Ricca's expert cajoling, she said finally that she and Jimmy had known Alice as a girl when they worked as servants for a crippled woman who had taken care of Alice after her mother's death. When the woman died, she and Jimmy moved out to Trenton where she found work. Then Jimmy left her to work for Alice. She refused to believe Alice could hurt anyone.

It was all they could get, and finally they took their leave. As though in afterthought, Ricca asked if she had ever heard of Mather—John Henry Mather.

Dolores fingered her braids curiously. "Did you not know?" she asked in her slight accent. "He is her husband."

Ricca made a quick recovery. "Yeah. Yeah. Sure. We want to reach him. Know where he is?"

She considered, and then came to a decision. She removed a cigar box from the sewing table and placed it on the table under the hanging light. From it she took a yellow, brittle newspaper clipping which she handed to Ricca. "This may help. Jimmy brought it once. Later there was some trouble about it. I have saved it."

Frost and Ricca read an advertisement for a first showing of paintings by John Henry Mather, an American painter, at the Agnes Crossthwaite Galleries on East Fifty-seventh Street. The date was four years earlier.

Before they left she handed over a letter she had got from Jimmy a week before his death.

Ricca put through a distance call to Corbin and had his partner set the department in motion. When he and Frost reached the Homicide Squad office on East Twentieth Street, their information directed them to an expensive apartment house in the East Sixties where radios were still blaring. They found Agnes Crossthwaite in bachelor quarters with a sleepy-eyed young auburn beauty, both in flannel robes.

"Don't disturb Mather," Agnes Crossthwaite cautioned. "Damn good painter. Coming out next month at last. Been away long enough." Of Alice she could say only, "Met her once. Bad influence. Can't hold liquor."

It was four when they pulled up at Physicians' Hospital at Eighty-fourth Street overlooking the East River Drive. The establishment was lavish, quiet, and discreet.

The antiseptic clerks stated that no John Henry Mather was a patient and that they neither could nor would search further.

When Frost finally got to a waspish night superintendent of nurses, results were equally barren. He held himself in admirable restraint. "Nurse, I don't think you realize—this man, Mather, has been under surveillance for two months by this police detective." He indicated Ricca with a nod. "His information is positive. I must either see Mather or take steps we may all regret."

"We have no patient by that name," she said coldly.

"Don't make me use my legal powers," he went on patiently. "I don't care what name he's using. If you won't take responsibility, call his doctor. He's a vital

witness in a murder trial. Unless I get results in ten minutes, I'm afraid every nurse and doctor in this building will have grand jury subpoenas by ten in the morning returnable forthwith."

She poked a pencil in a Gibson-girl hairdo, wrinkled her flared nostril, thought, squirmed, excused herself, flounced away, returned, sat, wrote and handed over a slip of paper in a fine temper.

In the elevator Ricca asked guardedly. "Would you really serve all them subpoenas?"

Frost grinned through his exhaustion.

FROST and Ricca stepped in from the corridor to Mather's darkened room. The detective carefully closed the door on its rubber buffer.

"Don't be alarmed," John Henry Mather said in a wheezing, ironical voice. "I'm not really ill."

He was lying outstretched on the hospital bed in a silk robe with a peacock design.

A towel was knotted about his neck like a scarf. A drawing board lay against the wall.

Mather was sneezing into a paper tissue as he spoke.

"I developed this cold yesterday," he gasped. "Caught it from my nurse."

Frost slowly folded his topcoat across the back of the seat. Mather somehow surprised him. He had imagined him as—he knew not what. Certainly not this long, gaunt man with the high white forehead.

"Where's the beard?" Frost said abruptly.

Mather was taken aback. He started a laugh and ended in a series of liquid, rattling coughs. "How did you know?" he managed.

Frost reclined in a comfortable seat, his hands flat on his knees. Ricca stood leaning against the door.

"You decided to let that chin view the world," Frost said, more statement than question.

Mather went into a fit of coughing. "If you're here for the Williston case, Frost," he went on hoarsely, "get to the point, or get out!"

Frost warned Ricca with a glance to remain quiet.

"When you read the news, why didn't you come to my office?"

"Why? I haven't seen Alice for years!

I had nothing to tell you!" Mather gasped, and sneezed. "I did what I could: I sent money to that lawyer to defend her! Fat lot of good it did!"

"So, you were the one!" Frost nodded. He took out a photograph and tossed it onto Mather's chest. "Recognize this?"

Mather held the photograph to the light. As he studied, his face grew impassive and cold.

"It's a photograph of a genuine Mather," he said formally. "In his early period. Before he learned to paint."

"Is it a likeness?" Frost asked. "I mean in spirit, not the features."

"The artist thought so," Mather said in the same formal voice.

Frost raised the photograph horizontally to eye level, and a new picture emerged. The thrusting breasts, the sulky, protruding mouth, the white, broad neck, and the arrogant head diminished out in the leveling effect into something subdued, and frightened, even fearful.

"Try this perspective," Frost said evenly. "Is it still a likeness?"

Mather held the picture vertically, then horizontally. "An artist paints what he sees," he said in a troubled, hoarse voice. "This is a different view . . ."

"But of the same woman," Frost completed. "What did you see when you painted her, Mather? Was she then the woman we have now?"

"To put the last nail in the coffin, Frost? Or to reassure you against that lingering doubt?"

"What doubt?" Frost cried. "She killed a man, and she got a fair, legal trial! Let me tell you, in this world that's mighty rare!"

Frost had risen and was standing over the bedside, but his legs suddenly trembled with fatigue. He sank back and began to write on a hospital envelope. He did not trust himself to speak. Finally he dropped the envelope on Mather's hand.

"This subpoena requires your presence in court at nine-thirty. If you're not on the dot, men will come with a warrant for your arrest—if necessary, with a city ambulance." Frost's face was white. "Talk to her! Maybe then she'll let me save her life!" He gathered up his topcoat. At the door he turned. "Does Alice know you are alive and in love with her?"

Mather held him back with a delicate white hand. "Are you on the level, Frost? How can I be sure?"

Frost returned slowly and Ricca closed the door. "The People's case is in," he said wearily. "Nothing you tell me can be used against Alice now."

"What are you after?" Mather cried.

Frost sloped into an easy chair. "I don't know," he sighed. "I want to know why Alice has refused to take a plea. What was Jimmy to her? What's it all about?"

"Why?"

"I might still persuade her to make a deal."

Mather raised himself out of the covers. "You're the prosecutor! You put her in this spot! Why are you working to defeat yourself?"

"There's more to my job than getting convictions! That's simple! Guilty or not, there must be some better way to deal with this woman. I don't want her to go to the chair!"

"Damn all fools!" Mather cried. "What did you expect when you started? It's too late now! What do you want me to say?"

"You tell me!" Frost retorted. "What about Alice? What's important for me to know?"

Something in Frost's face seemed to satisfy the painter. He came to a decision. "Jimmy was her obsession," he said slowly.

"But why, for God's sake?" Frost demanded.

"You might say, he was old enough to be her father, eh?" Mather reached over and propped the drawing board on his knees. "You're wrong, you know," he said sardonically. "Jimmy was not her lover!"

IX

UNDER Frost's skillful guidance, Mather told his story with a painter's eye for color and detail.

Mather had met Alice, he said, six years earlier. They met by accident in Rome. He had been studying art at the time, broke and wondering how to get home. He was immersed in the transcendent beauty of the grieving stone Virgin when his attention was demanded by a party of tourists, two women and an attendant. They had a question about the sculptor.

The woman who put the question, he explained, was Hilda Corning, who had taken care of Alice after her mother's death. She sat smiling in a wheel chair, wearing a white linen suit. Her broad, good-natured face was finely molded, slightly plump, and smooth about the chin, really paintable, he recalled appreciatively. She spoke French soured with a New England twang.

Alice was standing beside the chair, a tall, pale young woman with a freckled nose, straight red hair drawn in a bun, and dark green eyes. It was Mather's first glimpse, and he liked what he saw—an attractive girl from back home.

The attendant was Jimmy Madena. He was good-humored, aware of his limitations, and given to harmless vulgarisms which amused Mather and pained the women. Hilda treated him like a licensed jester, too far gone for reform, but Alice encouraged him.

They had supper together at a middle-class restaurant off the tourist paths, where Mather thoroughly enjoyed the good food and talk of home. Both women were charming, but Alice stirred him.

When they had finished the satisfying, leisurely meal they were using first names. Hilda learned that he was broke and hired him to guide the party for the rest of their stay in Rome. He soon found that Alice had a need to know more about everything than anyone else. She showed a negative quality which flourished on contradictions and arguments, but at the time he did not realize how deep this went.

About Jimmy: Mather found that he liked the grubby fellow and his animalistic, racy argot. Before having been employed with his wife by Hilda as house servants, Jimmy had passed through a series of shifting, casual jobs on the shady side of the street.

Over beer one night he told Mather that he had been driven to stable work by repeal. After a year's unemployment, his wife, Dolores, landed a job for them as a domestic couple with Hilda. Dolores handled all housework, while he managed the garden and the station wagon. Gloucester had a seamy life, he winked, with enough gambling and lively girls to keep the week ends interesting.

Jimmy could not be drawn into a discussion of the women. Mather learned only that Alice had already been living with Hilda as a child when Jimmy and

Dolores came into the household.

"What does your wife think of Alice?" Mather ventured.

Jimmy eyed him with devilish intelligence. "What the hell do I care?" he asked genially. "She keeps asking, what's between Alice and me? I tell her nothing."

Mather waited and asked casually, "Well, what's the answer?"

Jimmy cocked his head comically and ran his tongue around his mouth lasciviously. "How can you think such things?" he mocked. "Alice is a lady. I'm a bum."

Finally he relented. "I mean nothing to the girl," he said simply. "She slapped me away once. That was enough. The field's clear."

Mather believed him. "You pay for the beer," he said abruptly, and left.

Whether it was being continuously together in a foreign land, or the long hot days, or something else unaccountable, Mather soon found himself in a torment of love and desire for Alice. Her purposeful avoidance of being alone with him seemed to show an awareness of his feelings. However, on the last day in Rome, Hilda retired early for the trip to Naples next day, and he managed to take Alice to a motion picture.

They found an old American film with Italian dubbing. The plot had something to do with a father's sacrifice for his son and ended in tragic, suffering death. Mather could not fathom her response. Her body grew stiff with hostility and her eyes glittered with derision.

"Let's get out," she said angrily. "This is absurd."

MATHER recalled that the Roman night was warm and bright with a new crescent moon. He took Alice in a pitching, shabby trolley through the silvered city to the Coliseum.

They found an empty, hidden bench in the well of darkness. They sat in silence, and after a short time he drew Alice close despite herself and kissed her. She turned strongly and answered. After a time she broke his grasp and thrust him violently away.

Mather exclaimed angrily, "For God's sake! What's wrong?"

"What can I do?" she whispered. "What's to become of me?"

He was startled at the agony in her voice.

He lit a cigarette and put it in her

mouth. He touched her cheek.

"You can tell me."

"I'll never be free! I'm bound forever!" she whispered intensely.

"To Hilda?" Mather was incredulous.

"I've been with her so long! How can I leave her now?"

"I don't know what this is about," Mather said slowly. "And I'm not sure I want to go into it." He took her chin in his hand. "I want you to come with me. I love you!"

She shook her head.

"I'm a pig," she said wretchedly. "I haven't thought of you." A shudder went through her, and she sighed. "I'm ashamed."

Mather was sick at heart. He wanted to argue, to coax and cajole, but there was no point in drawing it out. "This isn't the end," he promised grimly.

At her door in the hotel she looked up with welling eyes and kissed him before turning in. Mather stared at her closed door for a moment, then strode down the hall to Hilda's room where a light still showed.

Hilda was reading in bed. She seemed to have been expecting him.

"We've liked having you," she said, after inviting him to a chair. "You've made these weeks good, especially for Alice."

"I've asked Alice to leave you and come with me," he said abruptly. "She refused."

The smile vanished. "This is personal between you," she said gravely. "There's nothing to discuss with me."

"This isn't easy to say," he began thickly. "She pities you! She hasn't the heart to leave! You can't tie her down forever! Let her go!"

"You don't understand," she said slowly. "Alice is free to leave."

Mather went on brutally. "If you weren't helpless and pitiable, she'd come to me! Send her away!"

Hilda should have been angry, Mather conceded, but she was not. Her fine clear eyes met his firmly. "Really, you don't understand!" she said in a low voice. "I'm fully self-sufficient. I want no human sacrifices. Alice is a coward. She cannot muster courage to leave. There's no pity for me."

"I don't understand," Mather said.

He was silent while Hilda composed her thoughts. "Her mother was a servant in my home. My house was big, and

Alice came with her when I agreed to take in the child to get a housekeeper and a practical nurse."

Mrs. Williston was a good worker, Hilda explained, but she was humiliated by her condition. Alice's father, Hilda was told over and over, was the cause. She was told that the father had been a complete scoundrel. When Alice was seven he had secretly sold his medical practice and disappeared without leaving a cent. Alice's mother never failed to take out her resentment against the father on the child.

Hilda learned how deep her influence had gone after her death in a traffic accident. She called in her lawyer, old Mr. Craigie, to make arrangements for Alice. The old man sat in her living room, puffing his pipe, while Alice watched with a pinched face, the image of fear. She was almost fourteen and a nervous, morbidly shy child. Mr. Craigie said that he could find her father and hand Alice over to his custody.

The child clenched her fists and screamed hysterically at the old man. She sobbed violently and kept calling to her mother to come back.

When Mr. Craigie left, Hilda found Alice hiding in the clothes closet. She threw herself in the older woman's arms and carried on until she was promised that she would not be sent to her father.

She went on with dark meaning, "Can you understand—even now she's afraid!"

Mather walked over to the French windows and looked out over the ancient city. "We never really know one another, do we?" he said grimly. "Forgive me."

After a time Hilda spoke. "Perhaps if you saw more of Alice," she suggested hesitatingly. "I might give you a commission—a ticket home for a portrait of Alice. You could be together that way."

"I've got more urgent business," he answered bitterly. "I've got to get home and make my profession bring me a living. I've got to paint, and I won't begin with a study in fear. The subject lacks appeal."

As he opened the door to leave, he startled Alice in a dressing gown, about to knock. He cut past without a word.

About a year later the American Express caught up with him in Genoa with a letter from Alice and a passage to Boston. As conditions were developing, he was glad to accept this bounty.

HE found Gloucester on a crisp day at the end of a New England spring. Hilda's house was set in a maple thicket on a high point overlooking the Rockport quay. It was an attractive cottage, Cape Cod style.

Dolores, Jimmy's wife, answered his knock. She was a quiet, sallow woman with iron-gray hair and brilliant eyes. There was no smile of welcome, only wary gravity. He was sized up, and judgment was suspended. He learned that Jimmy was in Boston and that Alice expected him for dinner.

He found Alice at the marble quarry, stretched flat, belly down, gazing into the black pool. He tossed in a pebble, and the ripples winked back. She started, and then sighed with allayed fright. Mather had imagined a thousand things to say, bitter, harsh, noble, but they fled. Her swollen eyes and drawn face told their story. He stroked her hair and took her to himself.

It was as well Hilda had died, Alice said. The tumor at her spine had spread, making her p a r a l y s i s progressively worse. For months she had been confined wholly to bed. Three weeks earlier she died of an embolism.

"You sent the passage?" Mather asked.

"It was Hilda's wish, and her money," Alice said.

"That was Hilda's price for your portrait. I accepted the commission. You must sit for me."

She gave him a steady look. "I'll never marry anyone," she said with self-knowledge. "It's impossible for me. I know what marriage does."

"You can name your terms," Mather said finally.

They moved into Hilda's room for the summer. For Dolores's sake, considering her daughters and her religious views, they made a trip to Boston and let her believe they had married. Jimmy seemed not convinced, but he did not voice his doubts.

Life with Alice, he found, would not be easy. The anxieties which gnawed at her colored her entire existence.

Money problems were exasperating. All they had between them was Hilda's legacy to Alice—fifteen hundred dollars. Yet, over his objections, she continued to pay wages to Jimmy and Dolores.

It was absurd. But there was nothing he could say.

Alice objected to his abstractions for reasons she thought practical. Abstractions would not sell, she argued, and he ought to stick to portraiture of his wealthy friends. He resisted. As a result, she refused to let him start her portrait. She surmised correctly that he simply wanted to have done with such work and to get on.

The portrait problem was one example of a strong contrary streak. In July, Mather introduced her to Elias Camp and his wife Thyra. Mather asked Camp to use his influence to get him taken on by the Crossthwaite Gallery. At that time Agnes Crossthwaite was beginning her fight for American painters against the circusing and touting of Europeans by the larger dealers, and Elias was her spearhead. Her sponsorship would mean financial success.

Alice overheard, and promptly objected that the gallery was too small. An inevitable, tiresome dispute arose, which ended only after Elias declared—with a wink to Mather—that she was right.

Still, Mather regretted the summer's end. Their physical relationship was more than satisfying. Especially as the summer ended she clung with engulfing fury. She had no reserves from him.

ONE night he tested a nagging point in his mind. "There's always Jimmy," he joked. "If I go, you've got him."

She was furious.

"Jimmy's my friend!" she said abruptly in a queer, tight voice. "He helped raise me. There isn't anything he wouldn't do for me. Your talk revolts me!"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Jimmy was wonderful. When I was a kid he took me fishing and berrypicking and sailing. He made me laugh. He was fun." Her voice was full and choking.

"Why not?" he observed. "Hilda paid for it."

"Hilda?" Her scorn was something new. "She never liked me. Not really. She kept me to be a companion. It was charity to her."

"You're incredible!" he cried.

"This began as a joke!" He was exasperated. "How do you want it to end?"

It was several days before they made up.

After Labor Day, Dolores got a job in Trenton and left with Jimmy and her

girls. They closed the house, gave the keys to old Craigie, and left for New York. They put up at a small, hot hotel, and then Mather took a tiny studio on East Fifty-ninth Street.

Alice began to run his life. She bought his clothes, ordered his meals, opened his mail, contacted his friends, planned their social events, mapped his career.

He returned one day from a useless tour of the galleries to find Jimmy stretched out on the day bed, reading a comic book. It was obviously not his first visit. To put it short, Jimmy moved in. They gave him their small storeroom until he could get a job.

He hung on for months. When Mather found Alice sneaking him rum and giving him money, he reached a breaking point. He demanded that she send Jimmy away, marry him and have a go at normal married life.

There was the usual violent scene. Alice shouted that men could not be trusted, that marriage was vile.

"Be consistent!" he said sarcastically. "Tie me down! Make sure of me!"

"Not through marriage!" she retorted. "You must *want* to live with me!"

"How do you propose to wrap me up?" He picked up the rum bottle. "Like Jimmy, your lap dog? Fed with this? Taking your money?" He smashed it in the sink. "It won't work with me!"

"All right!" She stared with protruding eyes. "I know what marriage can do! The night my father left, I could hear their voices from my room! My father shouting, then screams! There was marriage, but not love! If we live together, I must know you stay through love! Only through love!"

He had never seen such vehemence, or glaring fear. He fumbled stupidly for something adequate. "Don't ride it to death," he said finally.

In time the Crossthwaite deal came through. Agnes thought his stuff would sell, and, of course, he was American back to Cotton Mather.

When Alice revived her objections, he made it clear that he would walk out and reduced her to abject compliance. But in the morning she asked that he do her portrait for the exhibit. As the best way out, Mather set to work and raced to put everything of Alice into the canvas, the beauty of her body, the sulky pride, the aggressions, and the vast floating anxiety he knew so well. He was determined

to do the portrait and cut loose the moment he could repay her cash outlays.

What Mather did not foresee was betrayal. When the canvas was done, and the gallery had printed the announcements, Mather left for Newton to get more money for the show from his brother. On his return he found a peremptory cancellation of the show sent by Agnes Crossthwaite. Agnes had learned that Alice, with Jimmy's help, had forestalled her and was presenting Mather's works in a cheap hotel off Sixth Avenue.

It may be that, in her perverted way, she meant well. But the stunt was a ghastly fiasco and he was a laughing-stock. Without a word for Alice, he went off on a painting trip in South America.

Mather stopped. His thin, jutting nose and lined face were bleak. He added a few strong lines to the drawing on his board and looked up.

"We know about the hotel deal," Frost said finally. "What happened then?"

"When I got back I heard that Alice was in a tailspin," Mather said somberly. "I also heard she went around spreading the story that I had died."

Ricca cleared his throat. "What about this Jimmy? Did he get in there, what I mean?"

Mather gave a quick, emphatic shake. "Not Jimmy! No, that's out!"

The first signs of dawn were at the window. Frost stretched and yawned with Ricca and put on his topcoat.

Frost asked that he obey the subpoena and attend court on time. "What was that old lawyer's name in Gloucester?" he asked. "The one who could find Alice's father?"

Mather was puzzled. "David Craigie."

Frost looked at his watch. "Come on, Vince, we've got five hours."

X

JUDGE HACKER admired a fine cigar ash he was cultivating. "This conference may be unusual at this stage, but if justice is to be served, you may proceed."

Alice sat at the long table, wordless, searching their unsmiling faces. This was the judge's chamber just outside the courtroom, littered, complete with the bare table and chairs. She felt a hot bubble of rage at her heart.

Frost sat opposite in wrinkled clothing and a soiled collar, haggard, and unshaven. "It's understood," he dictated in a strained, tired voice to the court stenographer, "this is off the record, not binding on any party, not to be used without unanimous consent."

At her side Flanagan shifted massively. "So stipulated," he agreed.

Taormina echoed him. His client was not present.

Alice put her hands under her armpits and held herself close. Why had she been summoned to this inner room? she wondered resentfully. The trial was over!

If only she could be alone! If only she could summon back the sunlit pictures from the very beginning of her life! She strove to isolate herself with her thoughts.

It would not work! She was brought back to this little knobby room, smelling of sharp tobacco smoke and paint and men. . . .

How had she got here? She remembered: only minutes before, the jurors had crossed the courtroom to retire for the verdict. Not one would meet her eye. Frost had risen and requested a conference at the bench. She heard her own lawyer's deep rumble and the other lawyer's sharp inflections. Then the judge had stated that they would all retire to his chamber but not for longer than it would take the jury to return to the box. . . .

But now Esau Frost was talking. He placed a Manila file flat on the table with a sharp slap which shook her.

"There's no point in rehashing the formal evidence," he said curtly. "I said everything possible from that viewpoint in my summation. Alice killed Jimmy Madena! Despite her denials, the fact was obvious from the beginning! The record is airtight! I brought out the facts in court! I have no ideas to the contrary!"

Alice sat blanched and frozen as the words hammered in. Frost looked around the room. Judge Hacker was eying him closely through a cloud of blue cigar smoke. He could read the judge's mind—friendly, but aloof. If he succeeded, the judge would back him up. If anything went wrong, it would be the assistant district attorney, not the judge, who would be under fire.

He went on grimly. "No case could

have been simpler. We began with two possible suspects, Frank Albany and Alice. When Alice testified that Albany did not inflict the fatal injuries, it followed logically that she alone could have killed Jimmy. So far the case was routine."

His voice took a sharper tone. "Listen to me, Alice!" He clapped his hands once to break the hypnotic trance from which she seemed to watch him. She blinked and focused her attention. "Something else pointed to her guilt. I mean her failure to shift the blame to Frank Albany. With Albany's vicious reputation, a small adjustment of her testimony would have raised a reasonable doubt.

"The simple, obvious explanation lay in Alice's make-up as a person. Her character was incongruous with her background. Alice could not escape at Albany's expense for two reasons: she knew she was guilty, *and she was too gentle and kind!*"

Judge Hacker tapped off an inch-long cigar ash. "I don't want to break in, Easy," he said gravely, "but this is not new. You've merely been reinforcing the People's case. Is there anything for us to do?"

"But don't you see, Judge?" Frost said desperately. "Why did I fail to get a confession? She's not tough at all. I should have gotten her to break within hours or minutes! Even now, with her life at stake, she's holding out! She won't plead to manslaughter because it would imply an admission of guilt! Isn't that your reason, Alice?"

Frost shot out the last question. Alice stared, fascinated. Her delicate features were pale and her skin translucent.

"Can any of you understand this?" Frost looked at each man in turn. "She's guilty! She knows she's been proved guilty! But she won't admit the fact and save her life! Yet she's scared and frightened!"

"If she were innocent, we would move mountains to save her! But she's guilty, and we wash our hands! It's up to her now! If she wants clemency, she's got to give us our confession! If not, her blood is on her own head! Those are the rules of the little game we play! But what happens when the defendant plays her own game, not ours? What if she doesn't follow the rules? Do we play to the end?"

"I think I see," the judge said soberly. "Go on."

FROST continued patiently, his voice rasping and harsh with weariness. "What *kind* of guilt does Alice have? Dr. Zipser suggested to me something monstrous, something beyond ordinary remorse, something imposed on a malignant emotional condition living at the expense of the true personality. Like a cancer, so to speak, which might under some provoking stimulus flare up and engulf the victim. With luck, he said, the shell might be cracked and the irritation exposed. That is, if Alice *wants* to be helped."

He said apologetically, "I'm afraid my language is not technical."

"You put it quite well," Dr. Zipser said gravely. "You can't expect medical results, but you may solve the immediate legal problem."

"Well!" Frost nodded acknowledgment and placed his hands flat on the table. "Alice, after Frank Albany left that night," he said directly, "Jimmy awoke at about two and told you he was leaving you to live with his family. You were in a frenzy of fear. You tried to block his way. You resisted when he sought to put you aside. Just how, I don't know—nor does it matter! When the struggle was over, you had caused his death."

"No!" she cried.

"That's the essential truth! The details are not important now!" He removed a letter from the file and slid it down the table. "Dolores Madena gave me this last night. The date Jimmy set to return home was the day he died. Look at the letter."

"It's a trick!" She averted her head. "Not Jimmy's! He'd never have left!"

"I won't argue! You know the handwriting!" Frost went on in his strained voice. "This wasn't ordinary jealousy which provoked you. Jimmy had a unique place in your life. I got the story from John Mather last night."

Alice clasped her hands to her mouth. "John Mather's dead!" she said hoarsely. "He's been dead five years! It's another trick!"

Frost seemed satisfied with what he saw. "I think you know better." He nodded and Ricca left the room, only to return in a few moments with Mather. The painter's eyes were glassy with

fever and he seemed to breathe with an effort. He looked uncertainly at Alice. Her face was transfixed in an indefinable, stark expression.

"You're alive!" she gasped. "And you never let me know! Oh God, oh God! How you must hate me!"

Mather made an ineffectual gesture. The two sharp lines running down to his mouth twisted with the effort of speech. "I . . ." He trailed off.

"This man loves you!" Frost interrupted harshly. "You must know that! Your defense was paid for by him! Flanagan can tell you!"

Flanagan rubbed his sweating face and nodded.

Alice sank back. She was deeply shocked by this sudden appearance, Frost noted. Her eyes darted about the room. She did not see the glass of water Ricca placed before her.

Frost swept on. "This cancer in your life took root when you were a child. The night your father left you and your mother, a structure of terror began building up within you. You were alone and abandoned. You might have outgrown it, but you were your mother's victim. Then she died, and left you with Hilda Corning. Oh yes, I know all about that!" He overruled a gesture. "Then Hilda Corning died. In your queer vocabulary, she, too, 'left' you! You were alone and abandoned!"

Alice's gasping breath was loud in the silence.

"Your chance came when Mather offered to marry you," Frost continued. "But the terror-structure from your childhood possessed you. You sought to engulf him in every way, to digest and assimilate him to yourself so that he might never leave. But this compulsive behavior brought on a climax of disaster. Mather escaped and left you flat. Not because he did not love you, but because he had to live his own life. The effect was more than you could stand. You allowed meaningless men to come and go on their own terms." He made a circular, descending motion. "The cycle kept repeating itself, lower and lower, until it included even creatures like Frank Albany!"

EASY FROST went on, louder, peremptory, and insistent. "I imagine you found those sexual affairs distasteful. But at least it was one way to com-

pel the illusion of love. Well, however it may be, in all this, Jimmy was unique. Certainly he was not interested in you as a woman. He wanted nothing from you but liquor and money and to be let alone. He made you laugh. He was always there. But—and this is the whole point—he was old enough to be your father! When you were still a child in Hilda Corning's home, you had adopted as a substitute father this little man in whom you could have had no other interest. On the fatal night, when he sought to abandon you, the past engulfed you again!"

Alice made an imploring gesture. "No!" she begged. "No!"

Frost drove on with full blows. "Well, Alice, the whole fantastic structure rests on a mistake! The foundation was built on lies—your mother's lies! It was all the other way around! It was your mother who fled and abducted you! Your whole life sickness has no basis in fact!" he urged in his strong authoritative voice. "Lies! Lies!"

She clasped her hands to her ears. "Not true! Not true!" she gasped hoarsely. "It couldn't. . . ."

Frost waited for something which refused to come. "May the record show the appearance of Dr. Henry Bradford," he finally dictated in a tired, low voice.

The elderly man came forward from the corner uncertainly. His eyes were dark green like Alice's, and there was a close resemblance to her well-defined mouth and chin. There was strength and sweetness in him.

"I took the earliest plane from Boston, Alice," he said simply. "Just as soon as I knew."

Alice shrank back. "Go away!" she cried.

"Listen to your father!" Frost said strongly. "You haven't got forever!"

Alice was jolted into silence. Flanagan moved his great bulk to allow Dr. Bradford to take his seat beside Alice. Dr. Bradford reached over for the manila file. He spoke in the same cultivated, precise tones as his daughter.

"I brought these from my office at Mr. Frost's suggestion." He drew a sheaf of papers from the file and removed a heavy rubber band. He placed the papers before Alice like a cardplayer showing his hand. "These are old reports from detective agencies. Canceled checks in payment for searches. Adver-

tisements." He laid them out in a neat row. "Your mother changed her name and concealed herself as a servant. She never gave you a home of your own. I searched a long time. Where were you hidden?"

Alice stared at the spread of papers. Her heart was convulsed within her. The rushing feeling was swirling her on and on and down. . . .

"You must remember me!" her father urged. "You were past seven when you were taken away. You must remember how I carried you on my back. I had a red beard then. You played nurse in my office. I used to sing you to sleep." A wan, cajoling smile formed and vanished.

Again there was a long silence.

At the end, "I remember," she muttered sullenly.

Frost exchanged a quick glance with Dr. Zipser.

"How could you ever believe I left you?" Dr. Bradford's voice was deep with feeling. "You were my little girl. You must have known better!"

She rose and looked away. "And now?" Her voice was choked.

"You're still my daughter."

She turned a contorted, bitter face. "Why didn't you find me sooner?" Her dark green eyes were brimming.

The old man made a simple, hopeless gesture. "Alice!" he said sadly.

"Oh!" Her face was horrible with grief, then the floodgates opened and she abandoned herself completely. Great driving sobs racked her body.

Dr. Zipser indicated that she be allowed to continue, then nodded a signal. Frost shook her wrist and cut through. "Alice!" he said sharply. "The jury is waiting! Will you plead to manslaughter?" He repeated the question several times before she heard and looked up.

AFTER a time they assembled in the courtroom. Judge Hacker smiled ironically as Lucius Buckmaster strode in suddenly and exchanged bows with him. The district attorney's rare appearance raised a stir. He sat at the prosecution table with Frost and Renaud, his chin raised to a noble angle.

On Frost's motion, quietly stated, Frank Albany was discharged from custody. Albany shakily croaked his thanks and fled from the courtroom.

Frost remained professionally impass-

sive though his legs were trembling from the strain. The People were satisfied, he said formally, as to the other defendant, Alice Williston, to accept a plea to manslaughter in the second degree to cover the indictment.

"The Court consents." Judge Hacker swiveled toward Alice. "You understand, Miss Williston, that by such a plea you admit that you unlawfully caused the death of James Madena at the time and place charged?"

All eyes turned to the defense table. Corliss Flanagan, breathing heavily, took Alice's slender arm in his great speckled hand and aided her to rise. She was still sobbing softly, her face stubbornly to the floor.

Finally she raised her face, ravaged with grief, to the bench and nodded. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so sorry." She placed her hands over her face and continued to weep. "Poor Jimmy! Poor Jimmy!" she repeated over and over.

When the newspapermen had left and quiet was restored, Judge Hacker addressed himself to Dr. Bradford. "Some punishment must be imposed here, Doctor," he said sensibly, "but I will try to serve your daughter's best welfare. In taking this plea, I will consider all the facts brought out by the district attorney."

He paused to consider before going

on. "As a physician, I am sure you'll agree that your daughter is not ready for normal life. She has an urgent need for care and treatment. She must know that a secure and loving home is waiting after she leaves the shelter of the institution to which she will be sent—I hope not for long. Above all, she must never again fall prey to emotional isolation. I leave that to you and to Mr. Mather. I feel satisfied you will both continue to meet your responsibilities to her."

Late in the afternoon Frost found Dorothy in the park. Bobbie was climbing the high rocks behind the playground. Timmy was asleep in the carriage.

The sun was hot and strong, and he proposed a walk along the river edge. They stopped to rest on a bench at the yacht basin. He told her what had happened. His eyes were on some point over the New Jersey cliffs.

They sat in silence while the gulls mewed in circles over the dirty green tide. "You must get a haircut," Dorothy said finally.

"Tomorrow," he murmured.

She leaned comfortably against him and sighed. "It's a lovely day!" she exclaimed.

"It is nice," he agreed.

His sudden smile was like the first after a long parting.



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You Made Me Die

By MORRIS COOPER



"Quiet as a flash, Doc, I pushed Eddie over the rail and into the water"

I'll tell you what, doc—you come in here with a shot to kill this burning in my chest, and a couple of cigarettes, and I'll throw down my gun. But come alone, doc. A guy's entitled to privacy at least once in his lifetime, and I don't want a crowd gawking at me with curious eyes, and holding their breaths trying to hear me die.

Thanks, doc. And here's my gun—

careful, it's still got a couple of shells in it. Don't try that grin, doc—it doesn't fool me. I know I've got time to finish one cigarette, maybe two. Then— The shot? Swell, doc, swell. Gives me an empty feeling, sort of, in my chest, but no more pain. And the cigarette tastes swell—can't remember when one ever tasted so good.

There's not much time, and maybe I

"Come Alone, Doc... and I'll Throw Down My Gun!"

ought to tell you what happened. Take it easy? What for, doc? A minute more, maybe, or a minute less—do you really think it'll make any difference? . . .

I met Mary Sue a couple of years ago. Just a pick-up in a back-alley saloon, but she hit me like a ton of bricks. I was at the bar, nursing a beer along, thinking of nothing in particular, when I saw that small hand reach over for my matches. I looked up into a face that an angel would be proud to own, and when that soft smile spread out from her lips, I wouldn't have traded that moment for eternity.

You know those bars. A juke box in back and about six square feet of floor next to it and a sign that says no dancing allowed. Only nobody ever pays any attention to it. We spent the evening there, sitting in a booth drinking beers, and every once in a while going into a huddle that passed for dancing.

The tip of her trick hat came up to my shoulder, and wringing wet I could have picked her up with one paw. I could see the two of us in the bar mirror whenever I faced that way. Mary Sue, looking like a dream, and me, big, awkward, with this busted nose of mine, and a face that even dogs shied away from.

Before the night was over, I asked her to marry me. Asked her to become Mrs. Tony McCoy. I know how it sounds, but that's the way it was. And unless something like that has ever happened to you, nothing I can say will convince you that I wasn't talking out of the wrong end of a bottle.

WE were sitting down and Mary Sue looked at me across the booth-table. She tried to cover my paw with her hand. Her eyes were a sort of greenish blue, and when they looked into mine, I felt that I was really alive.

"We can't, Tony," she said, shaking her blonde head slowly. "I'm already married."

I hadn't seen a ring on her finger, and nothing like that had crossed my mind. Though when I thought about it, I realized that someone as alive as she,

wouldn't have just been sitting around waiting for me. I felt like a little kid whose toy world had been kicked around his ears.

Mary Sue laced her fingers into mine and her red-pointed nails traced patterns over my knuckles. "I don't love him, Tony, but he's always been good to me."

It sounded right, coming from her. A kid who had gotten married before she was old enough to know the score, but who was making the best of a bargain, and not kicking or whining about the breaks.

"A divorce?" I could almost feel the hope in my voice.

"Maybe," she answered. "But let's make sure, first."

I put my free hand on top of hers. "I'm sure right now, baby. As sure as I could be if I had a million years to think about it."

"You're sweet, Tony," she murmured. Mary Sue leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. I felt more decorated than if I'd had all the medals minted since Julius Caesar started to pass them out. She wiped the lipstick smear off my cheek before we left the bar.

Well, things drifted along like that for a few months. Every time I had a chance, I'd meet her, and we'd go walking through the park, or sit in a movie holding hands. I found out her husband—Eddie Suicul—made a living hanging around pool halls and slickering suckers into a game. I wanted to go see him, tell him the way we felt, and ask him point blank to let Mary Sue get a divorce. But she kept putting me off.

Once I even went to the pool hall to talk to him, but I got cold feet. I was afraid maybe Mary Sue wouldn't like it, and I didn't want to take the chance of having her split with me. I sat there for a while, just watching Eddie playing pool with a mathematical precision. He was a wizened little shrimp, with a sharpie hat and peg-legged trousers. The kind of a guy who figured anybody who worked for a living was a sucker. But I could see where he would have a certain fascination for women. I left without talking to him.

Then, one night, I found Mary Sue waiting for me at the other end of the bridge when I got off duty. She was all excited and the first thing she blurted was: "It's Eddie! He's been arrested!"

You ought to remember the case, the way the newspapers splattered it over the front page. Eddie had rammed a gun into the back of a bonded messenger, turned him into a one-way alley, and made him lie face down in a doorway. Then he'd neatly ripped open the wrist-cuffed satchel the messenger was carrying, taken the thirty thousand dollars

and she made a dramatic appeal to Eddie that last day in court. Even the judge had a tear in his eye, but none of it got under Eddie's skin.

So they had Eddie—and Eddie had the money, and the judge gave him ten to twenty to think it over.

I waited till a couple of weeks after the trial when things had cooled off and the reporters were no longer trailing Mary Sue. Then I talked it over with her.

"You can get that divorce now, honey."

She looked at me with that dreamy,

MURDER'S HEX SIGN by JEAN FRANCISWEBB

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in cash that was in it, and calmly walked away.

Eddie probably would have gotten away with it, too, if he hadn't overlooked the fact that the beautiful set of prints he left on the satchel matched with the ones the police had on file.

Mary Sue made a lovely picture on the witness stand, and the sob sisters had a field day splashing her pictures all over the front pages. She was the brave little wife who realized her husband had made a mistake, but whose sense of duty and devotion were too high to abandon him in this crisis.

The insurance company tried to make a deal with Eddie to tell where he had hidden the stolen money, but no soap. They even offered Mary Sue five thousand dollars if she could convince him,

half-sleepy way of hers, and sighed. "Thirty thousand dollars is a lot of money, Tony."

It took me maybe a minute or two to get it. "You're going to wait for Eddie to get out?"

"Uh-uh." Mary Sue shook her head. "Ten years is too long to wait, Tony, even for thirty thousand dollars. I want to enjoy that money while I'm still young."

"Then what are you thinking about?"

"You're a prison guard, Tony. It won't be hard for you to see Eddie every once in a while."

"And I suppose when Eddie finds out I want to marry you, he'll just tell me where the dough is and give us his blessing."

"I've got a plan," Mary Sue said.

"And it's such a lot of money, Tony. You could quit your job and we could go away together." She turned those eyes of hers on me and her lips kissed mine, and I held her tight little body close in my arms.

So I went to work on the plan she had. It took some time, but I managed to get as friendly with Eddie as a guard can with a prisoner. At the same time, I let the rumor start that Eddie was a stoolie. Just before the end, the guy was as nervous as a father with his first set of twins. When I told him that a grand could ease him out of stir before some con stuck a shiv in his back, he went for it like molasses candy.

Eddie told Mary Sue about it on visitor's day and she promised him to get in touch with me—and we were all set.

You know the set-up here. The moat that runs all around the wall and the high tension wires that'll get a con even if he's lucky enough to make it over the wall and across the water filled moat. Which leaves the bridge the only way a con can possibly get out.

So all we had to do was wait until I drew night duty on the bridge. Eddie played sick and was sent to the prison hospital. He was hiding in the yard when I came on at midnight for my tour of duty. I jawed with the off-coming guard for a couple of minutes and Eddie had a chance to slip through the gate, and then I went out after him. He laid flat on the bridge until the gate closed.

You can't blame the other guards too much, doc. We've got a pretty good system, but I guess they never figured on the human element—never counted on one of us selling the system short. And it wasn't hard—the shadows around the gate are pretty deep and dark these nights, and even though I knew Eddie was there, I had to strain my eyes to see him slip out.

Anyway, Mary Sue was waiting for Eddie a little way from where the bridge ended. I watched him eel across the concrete and then he disappeared into the darkness.

The next ten minutes passed like years. So many things could happen to

upset the apple cart. There could be an unexpected hospital check, or one of the tower guards might suddenly decide to sweep the bridge with a searchlight.

I tried to imagine the scene between Mary Sue and Eddie. She'd convinced him on her last visit that she would be the logical one to go after the hidden money, while he made his way to a safe hideout. Eddie had agreed to that, but he wouldn't give the location away until he was over the wall. Things could have been so much simpler if Eddie hadn't been so stubborn.

Just about now Eddie must have told her where the money was, and it was time to go into her last act. A frantic search through her pockets and her purse—the key to the car Eddie was supposed to use was missing. Then Mary Sue would remember—I'd attended to that and she'd forgotten to get the key from me. She hadn't come in a car—and I pictured Eddie standing there, tense, cursing, debating his chances of making it on foot. A last word from Mary Sue and he would be on his way—back to me.

I was expecting him, but I almost let out a yell when I saw Eddie crawl out of the black night. His whisper sounded like it was amplified through a dozen loud speakers. "The key to the car—you forgot to give it to my wife."

I fumbled in my pocket, held out my hand. Eddie half-straightened out to reach and I had my hands under his armpits. Before a surprised scream could break from his throat, I had him over the rail. I guess I fired as soon as he hit the water, and you know I didn't miss. From there on in, it was supposed to be just another of these cases where a con had managed to get over the wall, but had been spotted by the bridge guard before he managed to cross the moat. . . .

THAT'S most of it, doc. How about that other cigarette? Thanks. It's a funny world, isn't it? Who'd ever figure that the insurance company was playing a long shot, and still having Mary Sue's apartment watched.

And Mary Sue? I was betting my life

that she was leveling with me. But she couldn't even wait to give me a gentle brush off. Had to pack her stuff as soon as she got the money and try to take a run-out powder. Can't blame the insurance boy for getting curious when he spotted her trying to cop a midnight sneak. Bet he was surprised when he saw all that long green tucked in with her pretties.

I wonder how she'll look when she gets out? But I won't be around for that, will I, doc?

I was looking out of the guards' recreation room window when I saw the yard captain and some of the boys headed this way. I wasn't fidgety when the warden told me to wait here, after they'd finished questioning me. But I knew I was up to my neck in trouble when I saw that posse. Guess the yard captain figured he needed a little help to corral a murderer. Can't blame him.

That's why I holed up in the recreation room. But that door was never made to stop a lead slug. And doc—not that it

means too much now—but I'm a pretty good shot, and if I'd wanted to, I could have gotten a couple of the boys, anyway.

But tell me what made them so sure, doc? I heard myself that Mary Sue never mentioned my name. The lipstick? I get it, doc—I get it. Mary Sue always was affectionate, and there's only one real way to greet a husband.

Sure, anybody could figure that Eddie never got any lipstick smear on his face before he broke out. And the bridge was the only logical way! That really tied it on me, didn't it?

Like two and two, huh, doc? For Eddie to get that lipstick kiss he had to cross the bridge; to cross the bridge I had to be in on the deal. And to die with that lipstick smear, I had to get him on his way *back* across the bridge. Almost like I signed my name to a confession—with my blood.

Look at the cigarette, doc. It's almost gone. Want to make a bet which of us lasts longer?

"Pere du Crime"

By SIMPSON M. RITTER



A FRENCH crime wave that started during the first decade of the last century and lasted until the 1870s was mainly the product of a single family, the Chretien family.

It all started when Baptiste Chretien, an unfrocked priest, married Julia Dupres, whose father and brothers were professional incendiaries. Their son Jean Chretien, born about 1791, became known as "Pere du Crime" or the Father of Crime.

Jean had three sons, Pierre, Thomas and Jean-Baptiste. All were, like their father, thieves and murderers. Between the four of them they are said to have been responsible for the death of upward of thirty men and women and to have illegally placed their hands on

more than \$500,000 worth of cash and jewelry and other valuables, including church property. One successful raid on a government bank in 1837 is said to have netted them almost \$80,000. Pere Jean and his three sons were eventually all guillotined.

Thomas' two sons, Francois and Martin, followed the paths of their father and grandfather and killed between them not less than fifteen persons. Their loot has been estimated at around \$100,000. They too were finally caught and executed for armed robbery and murder.

Martin's son carried on the tradition, was caught, and died in the penitentiary in Cayenne.

Jean-Baptiste's son Jean-Francois and his wife, Marie Tame, both died in prison. Their seven sons and daughters, Jean-Francois, Benoit, Clain, Marie-Reine, Marie-Rose, Victor and Victorine were all thieves and assassins. All seven died by the guillotine!

The Red Gate

A Mystery Novel

I

SADIE MANCHESTER opened her eyes tentatively, yawned, and rolled her head around on the pillow to look at the tiny clock on the bedside table. It was almost ten. There existed, she decided a definite urge for food. Struggling to a sitting position, she reached for the push button which would presently bring someone with breakfast. The shapely arm fell back across her lap, and she sat hunched

over, waiting for the thud of sensible heels in the hall. In due course, the thud was heard. The bedroom door opened slowly and Miss Walton came in with a large silver tray.

"Mornin', Miz Manch'ster," greeted the housekeeper stiffly.

"Same to you," murmured Sadie. "My good man up yet?"

"Judge Manch'ster has et and gone out—hours ago."



by RICHARD BURKE

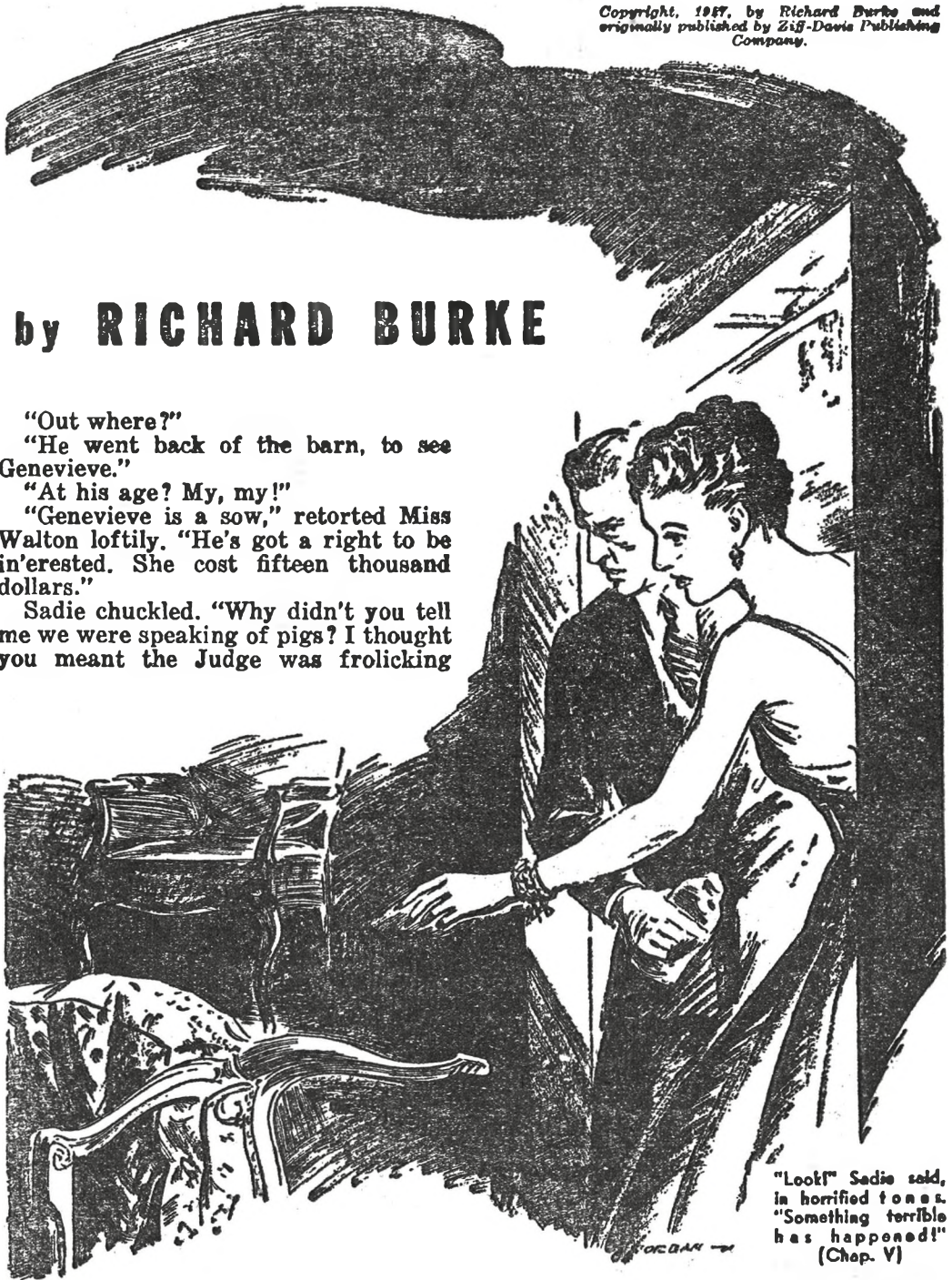
"Out where?"

"He went back of the barn, to see Genevieve."

"At his age? My, my!"

"Genevieve is a sow," retorted Miss Walton loftily. "He's got a right to be in'ested. She cost fifteen thousand dollars."

Sadie chuckled. "Why didn't you tell me we were speaking of pigs? I thought you meant the Judge was frolicking



"Look!" Sadie said,
in horrified tones.
"Something terrible
has happened!"
(Chap. V)

Ever watch detectives gathering evidence that may hang you? That is Sadie Manchester's predicament when her rich spouse meets death!

with some local lovely."

"Judge Manch'ster ain't a frolicking man," the housekeeper declared, and inhaled sharply. "If you want anything else, I reckon you'll ring," she said primly, and stalked for the door, closing it behind her.

Sadie dawdled along with the breakfast, leaning back in the pillows now and then, looking as sleek and self-centered as a well-kept cat. Eight months had gone by since Judge Manchester had installed his young bride in his great house overlooking Dale Valley. It would take longer than that for her to become satiated with luxury. Childhood in a Williamsburg tenement leaves a mark not easily expunged. To Sadie Moran, the daughter of a soubrette once well known to the Western Wheel, and an impulsive electrician who had deserted his wife and daughter at the daughter's birth, life had been rugged, too frequently grim.

ECONOMIC necessity had put Sadie behind a dime-store counter when she was still too young to get working papers without recourse to fiction. From there, having assiduously cultivated beauty until her natural youthful freshness became hidden under an exotic mask, Sadie had gravitated to the lush fields east of Times Square, to matriculate in the profession of getting without giving. She sold cigarettes in a night club, wearing a costume meant to soften her patrons' sales' resistance: a little black bodice, out of which she seemed about to be squeezed, a mere dark flutter for a skirt, black net stockings, and patent leather slippers with high, slim heels.

"Sooner or later," Mrs. Moran had asserted, "a good-looking girl gets a chance at a man in the chips." It didn't come out sooner, Sadie thought, as she poured a second cup of coffee. She had done a considerable hitch in Fifty-second Street before she got the nod from a suitably wealthy prospect. One who wanted her for keeps, not for just a week end on Olympus.

Sadie went to the altar in a big way—a church job—and came back down the aisle on the arm of Judge Ashley Manchester, past seventy and looking eighty, but Chairman of the Board of Pennsburg Steel. Yet though he was

supposed to take off for the pearly gates within a reasonable time, he seemed blissfully unaware of the idea. The Judge had confidence that one of the nostrums, slyly advertised as being what Ponce de Leon looked for in vain, would actually work. He tried them all, sending for them wherever advertised. Sadie thought he would probably end up in killing himself with the quack stuff, but his deterioration seemed to have gone just so far and then stuck. After eight months of marriage, he appeared no closer to space on the obituary page than at the beginning. Furthermore, Judge Manchester had no idea of allowing his matrimonial investment to deteriorate through dalliance with playmates nearer her age, which was just twenty-five. Sadie quite understood. It wasn't jealousy, but fear of the sneering pity he'd see in other men's eyes if she got caught between bases.

"Anyhow, I asked for it," she murmured. "If you order prunes, you can't holler because the waiter doesn't bring you strawberries."

She moved impatiently, swinging oft-admired legs over the edge of the bed, thrusting smooth, pink feet into fluffy slippers, and then scuffed off to her bath. Some time later, dressed and with nature's minor errors in her beauty corrected, Sadie came out of her suite and headed down the wide corridor toward the staircase. Seeing the door to the Judge's rooms ajar, she stopped to look in. He wasn't in sight and did not answer her hail.

About to move along, she caught sight of a small, unopened package on the table just inside the door. She picked it up and examined it. The printed return address on the label indicated the package had come from Brazil. More of that fountain of youth stuff, she decided, and put it back on the table.

She went on down the hall to the stairway, an imposing affair with marble treads and rosewood balustrades. At the bottom was a reception room with Gothic doorways, a flagstone floor, and suits of armor. Hawk's Head, as the estate was called, was just a cozy little place of thirty-odd rooms, a reasonable copy of a Norman chateau, built in the Twenties by a man named Eblis. A wish for ostentation hadn't put Judge Manchester in it. He'd been stuck with it on



Avery staggered several paces and then pitched forward, flat on the ground (Chap. 14)

a mortgage investment.

As Sadie came downstairs, she saw the maid, Serena, polishing one of the rosewood hawks' heads which formed newel posts.

"Has Judge Manchester come in?" Sadie asked.

The girl bobbed her head toward the study door which was at the end of a short hall leading from the reception room. "He's in there, Mrs. Manchester."

Sadie headed for the study. The heavy oaken door was open and the old man, seated at a small baby grand (the Judge had a neat talent for music), caught her reflection in the polished ebony over the keyboard and twisted around.

"Good morning," he chirped. "You look as fresh as a daisy!"

"I am," she said drawling.

THE Judge swung back to the keyboard and rippled through a passage from Chopin.

"We're having a dinner party Wednesday night," he said presently.

"Who for?"

"The Habricks, Ed Lott and Rinda, Chris Dilberg and his wife. A couple of others." The Judge moistened dry lips. "Frank Avery, I guess."

"Okay." Sadie sent an appraising glance at the gaunt figure at the piano. Something about his profile reminded her of old Mr. Sullivan who had lived next door in Williamsburg. Mr. Sullivan had been ninety-one the last time she saw him.

Take seventy-four from ninety-one, leaves, um— Oh, no! Not *that* long!

"What did you say, dear? Something was—too long?"

"I was thinking about my hair. It needs a do."

The Judge laughed thinly. "Looks all right to me, honey," he said. "We're going into the city tomorrow. You can have it done."

"New York?" A girl can hope.

"Fennsburg. I want to see Mark Habrick, and I've some other business at the bank."

She was mildly disappointed. "Okay. I'll call Jean for an appointment."

"Jean?" queried the Judge sharply.

"The beauty shop. She's the best here."

"Oh, I see. I daresay she is the equal of any in New York," the old man ob-

served. "But your beauty doesn't need beauty shops." He impaled her with a flinty stare. "There's a matter I wish to speak to you about, Sadie," he said.

Sadie recognized tone and look.

"Well, let's have it," she replied resignedly.

"It has come to me that you returned from the city last week in the car of that young newspaper fellow. Please try to avoid giving substance for Fennsburg gossips."

"They don't need any," retorted Sadie. "That bunch of frozen pussers can dig mud where there's been no water since the Flood. All Nick did was give me a lift home."

"Nick!" The Judge cracked it out. "And does he refer to you as Sadie?"

"If he did, am I supposed to shriek and fall down in a faint! After all, Ashley, I've been called Sadie ever since I can remember." She whipped in a quick breath and expelled it. "Why won't you let me have a car of my own?"

"We won't even discuss it. Be good enough to understand that I won't have you running around with raffish newspaper men—"

"I like raffish men. They're interesting. You're raffish."

He ignored her. "Particularly one in the employ of that scurrilous *Register*. Just keep in mind that I expect you to behave as a wife of the most important man in the district should."

"Oh, stop worrying, Ashley," returned Sadie. "I wouldn't cheat on you, unless I was awful sure you wouldn't catch on, and there's no chance of that. Let's skip it—it's too hot to fight."

Grimness flowed into Judge Manchester's cadaverous face.

"Did I hear you correctly?" he demanded. "Did you say that only the certainty of my learning of it prevents you from indulging in a disgraceful affair? When you agreed to become my wife, I clearly indicated that I would tolerate no side excursions."

Sadie's thoughts were traveling two paces to his one. Her rose-petal lips suddenly broke into a smile and her cat-like eyes gleamed up at him disarmingly.

"A hen likes to fool the big rooster," she said, her voice now a pleasing ripple. "I like to make you freezeup. Right now, Ashley, you look just like one of

those faces some fella carved in the side of a mountain!"

JUDGE MANCHESTER'S grimness receded slightly. He wanted so much to think Sadie had merely been amusing herself at his expense, as she declared, that believing her wasn't difficult.

"I suppose all women have a cruel streak," he said. "But watch your step, Sadie. I'll not have people talking about you."

"Oh, I'll watch it, all right!"

She walked across the study toward the door and went out into the gloomy reception hall. Only a faint glow in her eyes betrayed the resentment that burned behind them.

* * * * *

Sadie came out of Jean's looking about the same as when she went in. As a matter of fact, she hadn't had very much done. The beauty shop appointment had been mostly a device to give her an interval for which she wouldn't need to account when she met the Judge at the bank at three. She walked eastward past the old red brick building where the *Register* was housed and crossed the alley alongside it. On the other side of the alley was Bailey's Bom-Bom, a bar and cocktail lounge favored by the newspaper trade.

With furtive glances right and left, Sadie went in. A railing separated the bar from the dining room at the back. Pausing only long enough to make sure her quarry was present, Sadie pushed on through. Nick Willard was at the moment working through his lunch.

"Thought I'd find you here," she greeted. Easing herself into the vacant chair opposite him, she glanced back at the bar. "What's the matter with those dopes? Haven't they ever seen a woman before?"

"No Sadie Manchesters," returned the newsman. "But that's not the reason. Unescorted ladies are supposed to use the restaurant entrance."

"Horse feathers! I wanted to see you, and you didn't call up at Hawk's Head."

"Was I supposed to?" His eyes showed surprise.

"You could have, anyway. I nearly go crazy sitting around in that big house."

Nick glanced warily at the frankly curious faces surrounding them. The

diners were mostly newspapermen, and word would reach every newsroom in town that Nick Willard was sticking his neck out. It was practically certain to reach the ears of old Manchester, who had no use for the *Register* anyhow.

"Look, Sadie," he began. "Phone me later at the office. Tell the switchboard Miss Jones is calling."

Sadie pouted. "I will not! I am not accustomed to getting the bum's rush."

"I know—I know," argued Nick. "But, coming here is just crying for trouble. That albatross you're married to is poison."

Sadie nodded, but her hazel eyes were smoky. "Tell me how come every time I as much as look at some fella, he finds it out. Yesterday he bawled me out for letting you drive me home last week." Sadie stared with wide-eyed indignation. "What I need to know is, how does he get told so quick what I do?"

Nick moved uneasily. "Jubal Faust?"

"Who's he?"

"He's supposed to be Judge Manchester's private eye, the lug who digs the dirt on anything the Judge wants to know. So far's I know, no one has ever identified him. Could be he's just a local legend."

"It wasn't any legend somebody snitched."

"Any number of persons could have phoned him." The reporter shrugged. "You made your bed, Sadie. The old man's hardly to be blamed for putting a guard around it."

"Don't you think I have a right to some fun?"

"I'm not the rules committee," the reporter disclaimed. "I'd say, grab your fun, but first make sure you don't get caught at it."

Sadie shook her head sadly. "Not a chance. Everyone's against me here, and the ones who aren't, are scared. Like you."

"Wrong. I'm just cautious. For instance, I see this tete-a-tete as all risk and no profit."

"Yeah?" Sadie looked at him and laughed. "My hero!"

NICK thought that for safety's sake he'd better move into another more distant valley.

"Hear any talk at home about Fennsburg Steel?" he asked. "There's a strong

rumor around that Judge Manchester might sell out to Eastern Farm Implement. I could use a straight tip on what he's going to do about it."

"Why does anybody care?"

Nick grunted, then said, "It would hit every man, woman and child in Dale Valley, that's why. If Eastern buys, they'll take the business and the patents to Orentown and scrap the plant here. Without Fennsburg Steel, valley property would be worth three cents on the buck—and no takers."

The clear, hazel eyes studied Nick Willard's rugged face. "What good would it do for you to know what the Judge is going to do? He's got all the cards."

"If I knew in time, my paper would rip his hide off in an effort to make him play fair. And there might be other ways of bringing pressure. If you could bamboozle the right dope out of him—"

Sadie's laugh was a fluttering whir. "Ashley wouldn't pay any attention to me if I asked him anything about his business. On that, I'm a pretty little nitwit."

"Pretty little nitwits have delivered quite often, especially when they're not so dumb as might be thought."

"What would it get me?" she asked.

"Haven't you ever in your life done anything because you thought it was the right thing?" he persisted.

"I didn't think this up. You did." She grinned insolently. "If it worked out, Dale Valley would be saved, you'd be a bigger shot on your paper, and Sadie would have a nice, noble feeling—and still be stuck at Hawk's Head. Low woman on the totem pole. Got any better offers?"

Nick decided he could take a chance and crawl out of it later if she demanded too much. "Get me the tip-off and you can write your ticket. I'll do anything you ask. Is that good enough?"

"Good enough. Some day take me to Byfield Inn?"

"It's a bet, Sadie."

She pushed her chair back. "We're having a dinner party tomorrow night. If Ashley does any nipping—and he doesn't usually at home—maybe I can get him to talk." She stood up. "Look, my hero, I've got to beat it."

"Okay." Nick screwed up his forehead. "Look, precious, use the side door

to the alley on your way out. No use giving those mugs at the bar another close gander at you—or the ones in here, either."

"That I will do." She flashed a smile and started moving away. "I'll phone you—first chance."

It was after closing time when Sadie reached the bank. She pressed the bell button at the side of the bronze doors, and then, when someone came to let her in, crossed the tiled floor to a door marked PRESIDENT, pushed it open and looked in. Mark Habrick, president by Judge Manchester's grace, sat behind a desk; Sadie's ancient sat in another chair across from him.

"Well, it's Sadie!" boomed Habrick. "Bright and pretty as a new dollar! How've you been?"

"I've been all right," Sadie drawled. Glancing at Judge Manchester she said, "Ready to go home, dear?"

He made a show of looking at his watch. "Ten after three. I've been waiting."

"I had to wait for a manicure."

"You had an appointment," the Judge pointed out acidly.

"Sure, for hair, not hands. Well, I'm ready to go now."

Judge Manchester got up. "We'll go out through the back. The car is in the alley."

It was a big black Cadillac, but regardless of its power, the Judge never permitted the chauffeur, Cain, to hit it up beyond a breathtaking thirty while he was in the car. Sadie sat in a corner, with space between her and the old man, staring at the back of Cain's head as the car rolled out of the city. She wasn't thinking of the chauffeur, though. A dark and rather handsome young Irishman, he had resisted her efforts to engage in conversation with grim taciturnity.

"I'd better tell you, Ashley," she said quickly. "I saw Nick Willard just before I came to the bank."

"You did?" There was neither censure nor surprise in his tone.

"Yes, I did. I couldn't help it, and I thought it was a good chance to tell him I had no business letting him drive me home last week. I made him take me in Bailey's Bom-Bom so people wouldn't see me talking to him on the street. He's hard to shake off, you know. But I didn't

let him buy me a drink, or anything. Was it all right, Ashley?"

"You aren't asking me to approve, are you?"

"No, naturally," she said sweetly. "Only to understand."

"I see."

Sadie slanted another cautious glance at him from under her screening eye-lashes. His head was in the act of turning slowly toward her. She dropped her eyes instantly.

"As you have been honest with me about it, there's no point in discussing it," he said.

Somehow she didn't like the reserve faintly intimated by his tone.

II

AS seductive in gold lamé as Herodias' wanton child, Sadie stared moodily at her ancient husband's guests scattered around in the drawing room. She stood against the alcove bar, slim fingers around a brandy glass, bored, and resentful because she was bored.

Listlessly turning her head, she contemplated the group of men in the billiard room through the arched opening at the end of the bar. Mark Habrick was leaning on his cue and grimly watching the more skilful Chris Dilberg's magic with the ivory balls. Dilberg was an inventor. Old Dr. Ward, one of those big, shaggy men whose clothes were always a little rumpled, half sat on one of the high chairs ranged against the wall. Frank Avery, lean, muscular and younger than the others, was there too. He was a lawyer who handled some part of Judge Manchester's legal business.

Avery caught Sadie's roving, sulky stare, but she didn't notice. Her attention had returned to the drawing room, to Rinda Lott at the grand piano singing while Judge Manchester played. Avery drifted out of the billiard room and paused at Sadie's elbow.

"What's gnawing at your innards?" he asked. "Like to say?"

"Nothing. Nothing much." Sadie dropped her eyes to the glass she held, now almost empty. She glanced up and nodded jerkly toward the others in the huge room. "Those dopes. I should get all dressed up for them!" She put her glass on the bar. "Brandy," she said. "If



With a quick movement, Sadie flipped the box of powder full into Rinda's face (Chap. IV)

it wasn't for brandy I'd go crazy at a clam bake like this. Did you hear what Alma Habrick said at dinner?"

Avery refilled Sadie's glass. She was drinking it straight.

"What—in particular?"

"She brought up the Hainsley divorce and worked it over until she could crack about young women marrying fellas with money. Sure," she went on defiantly. "Sure, I married Ashley because he's rich. Look at him! Can you think of any other reason?" Avery glanced into the other room at Judge Manchester.

"Rinda could use him," he suggested.

"She only wants what I've got—and she's not going to get it."

"I suppose you mean Hawk's Head?"

"No, brother. The money. So she can buy herself a later model after he goes over the river."

"Wasn't that your idea?"

"No. I just thought the money might come in handy. I don't need to buy a man." She laughed impulsively. "Men I can have for nothing."

"Not good ones," he objected.

She laughed. "Who wants 'em good? Interesting's all they need to be. Are you—interesting?"

"Very." He grinned. "But, I'm not to be had for nothing."

Sadie's eyes wandered around toward the group at the piano. The song had just finished with a pattering polite applause, and Rinda smirking both at the listeners and Judge Manchester, who had swung around on the piano bench.

Rinda Lott (which is what's likely to happen when parents name a girl child, Laurinda) was the daughter of Ed Lott, sales manager for Fennsburg Steel. She was tall, rawboned and rugged, and potassium cyanide to Sadie. Mark Habrick's sister, Alma, some years older than Rinda, was the other member of an act, singularly adept at provoking Sadie into flaring resentment.

"I said, I'm not to be had for nothing," repeated Avery, mildly piqued at Sadie's inattention.

"Yeah. I heard you. I was thinking about Alma Habrick."

"She had ideas, too, about moving in here, before you came along."

"Maybe she still has. Oh, look, Frank! Here comes Ashley! The minute he sees me with another man, he comes buckety-buckety."

Judge Manchester came across the polished floor with determined but unhurried strides.

"Nice music, Judge," Frank Avery greeted.

"Thank you, Frank," acknowledged the Judge. "But Rinda is the one to be congratulated. Not me."

VERY shot a quick glance of amusement at Sadie before the old man's attention returned. "Sadie and I were speaking of her remarkable voice. Weren't we, Sadie?"

He sauntered away casually, without waiting for an answer.

"Remarkable voice," echoed Sadie, sipping another bit of brandy. "It's remarkable, all right."

Judge Manchester glowered. "Aren't you being rather catty?" he demanded.

"Sure I am," Sadie agreed. "And if I want to say Rinda sings terrible, I will."

"Rinda has a splendid voice!" refuted the Judge, annoyed.

"That's what's terrible. It burns me because she has."

Judge Manchester stared for a baffled moment. "I'd appreciate it, Sadie," he said stiffly, "if you'd try being less antagonistic toward people here."

"Blah!" Sadie made an inelegant noise with her petulant lips. "When you brought me home, I did try. What did it get me? Every woman in your set is pulling for you to throw me out. That Rinda Lott! Alma Habrick! Be friendly with them! Huh!" The brandy was beginning to make her reckless. "Look, Ashley, why don't you let me invite some of my New York buddies up for a party. They'd put it on hot."

"I've no doubt of that," said Manchester grimly. "And the whole valley would be talking about it."

"So what? Don't you own the valley? You could sell out to Eastern and we could go away and have fun."

The old man's eyes gleamed with aroused suspicion.

"Where did you learn about Eastern?"

Sadie shrugged. "I heard somebody say Eastern wanted to buy Fennsburg Steel. I don't know who."

Judge Manchester looked back at his guests uncertainly, as if trying to detect Sadie's informant. "If I decided to

dispose of my interest in the steel works, I'd be a pretty unpopular man in the valley," he said. "A great many people would be hurt."

"Would hurting somebody stop you?" she asked cynically.

"You can't be sentimental in business," he replied. "For that matter, I owe nothing to the valley. I made it what it is, and my work hasn't been appreciated."

"You're going to sell out, then?"

Sadie made the mistake of letting quickened interest show in her eyes, and knew it by the answering spark of obstinacy that leaped into his.

"If someone has put you up to prying into my plans, you may report that I shall continue to run my affairs as I see fit." He nodded in affirmation, his thin lips tightening.

"I don't suppose there's anybody that doesn't know that," Sadie said. "And I don't care what you do about other people. I care what you do to me."

"You have nothing to complain of—or wouldn't have, if you changed your attitude toward my friends." He glanced disapprovingly at the glass in her hand. "You have had quite enough brandy, Sadie."

"Not enough to make those dopes look any better. There's not that much brandy in the house." She circled around toward the bar where she saw Dr. Ward helping himself to a drink. But she didn't reach the bar before the Judge intercepted her.

"You agreed to conduct yourself as my wife might reasonably be expected to," he grated. "I insist that you keep away from the bar."

She stared for a seething moment.

"All right. I will."

She stalked out through the Gothic arch into the reception room. A moment later her gold sandals were flying up the strip of carpet on the marble stairs, lamé skirts hoisted to her knees to facilitate the going.

"He wants me to put on an act," she murmured wrathfully. "I will!"

Rinda Lott, without a great deal of urging, consented to sing again. "I just love singing when you play for me, Judge," Rinda cooed.

The old man beamed his gratification. "It's a pleasure," he replied.

"We should do it more often," the girl

went on, looking regretful. "Only, of course, we can't—now that you've married." She sighed and rolled her eyes ceilingward. "We used to have such fun!"

"Singing?" rasped Dr. Ward, who had come up behind them.

RINDA swung around, frowning, "Of course. What did you think?"

Dr. Ward looked her over brazenly, clinically. "Yes," he said, nodding. "Must have been singing." His big, shaggy head swung around to Judge Manchester. "Can you put me up tonight, Ashley?"

"Of course," Judge Manchester looked curious.

"I need sleep," explained the doctor. "Old Mrs. Catterhorn has read about some new disease and thinks she has it. Calling me at all hours of the night."

"What about your other patients, Doctor? Suppose they need you?" asked Rinda.

"Other patients?" demanded Dr. Ward. "They've all died, except Minnie Catterhorn and Judge Manchester. Minnie'll live forever, but not him. That stuff he takes! He'll either break out in a rash of puppy love, or poison himself."

"Your humor is in bad taste, Lucas," complained the older man.

"So's your judgment." Dr. Ward teetered back and forth on his heels, grinning insolently. "You've a crazy idea that you'll hit on some drug that'll put the fire of youth back in your veins. Any fool should know that isn't chemically possible."

"I see no point in discussing the matter now," retorted the Judge coldly.

"Not that I really give a hoot, Ashley—" Dr. Ward broke off, staring at something coming around the piano.

"Cigarettes?" piped Sadie. "Or cigars?"

Judge Manchester whipped around on the piano bench. His jaws fell apart. "Sadie!"

Sadie had changed from the gold lamé! She wore the tight black bodice and the skirt which was a mere circular frieze above opera-length net stockings—working clothes of her night-club past. She held a silver tray she'd requisitioned from her dressing table, piled with all the cigarettes and cigars it would hold.

"I'll take a cigar," said Dr. Ward, first to recover. He reached into the box of coronas Sadie had snatched from Manchester's room, grinning like an amused gargoyle.

"Have you lost your mind?" Judge Manchester yelped. Subdued titling came to his ears. His wrath made him tremble.

"I just thought if I'm going to be treated like a cigarette girl, I might just as well pick up a few nickels being one," retorted Sadie. She shoved the tray toward him. "Cigar?"

The judge snorted inadequately. Sadie started away, heading toward Alma Habrick and Frank Avery. They were sitting together on a love seat, intensely interested in what was going on.

"Cigars? Cigarettes?" she chirped, stopping at the love seat. "I'm all out of chewing gum."

She felt a hard-skinned hand close over her wrist.

"You'll come with me!" snarled Manchester's voice. "Disgraceful performance—I might expect—come on!" He towed Sadie through the archway into the reception hall as far as the foot of the stairway. "After this degrading exhibition, I think you'd better stay in your rooms for the rest of the evening," he said, his voice rasping thin. "I shall have to try to gloss it over some way."

Sadie, standing on the first step, saw Alma Habrick move into a strategic position beyond the archway.

"You and your friends!" snapped the girl, yielding suddenly to pent-up rage. "Who do you think you are, anyway? Little town big shot! Why don't you buy a gold showcase and put me in it, so I can be seen but not touched?"

"Sadie!" Alarm supplanted resentment in the old man's tone.

"Yeah, Sadie! Sadie the dope, who had an idea a bank roll could take the place of a man. That's me. Why don't you kick me out—send me back to New York?"

"You—you're overwrought, Sadie. It's the brandy."

"Like hell! It's you—and Fennsburg, and Dalebridge, and Hawk's Head! Why don't you give me the air? The nice, foul air of Fifty-second Street?" she snorted. "I'll tell you why. You can't stand the idea of what those nitwits in there would say, if you let me go. 'Old man

Manchester's baby-face took his dough and a powder. Good riddance for the ol' fool,' they'd say."

"I wish you'd go to your rooms, Sadie, before you say anything more," pleaded the Judge. "I'll stop in presently."

"No!" she exclaimed. "Your best play is to keep away from me tonight. I know when I've had enough."

She ran up the broad stairway, her heels cracking viciously on the treads, and disappeared on the landing above without turning to look back.

III

IN the corridor separated from the stair well by the railing, Sadie paused in her flight to peer down. She saw Judge Manchester walk back to the drawing room.

"Sadie!"

Whipping around, she was surprised to see Frank Avery coming from the rear hall, presumably having used the back stairs to reach this floor. She stood watching him until he reached her side. "What do you want, Frank?" she demanded.

"I had to tell you how much I admired your courage in pulling this stunt," he said with a grin.

Sadie started toward the door to her rooms.

"I have an idea," the lawyer said. "There's going to be a moon after a while. It would be pretty to watch it rise from the top of the ridge."

"Well, good night, then." Sadie stopped, her hand on her doorknob. "Take a good look at it."

"Come along with me. The ridge would be a marvelous spot to cool off."

Sadie considered. Going with Avery for a moonlight drive would be foolish, but perhaps an improvement over moping alone in the boudoir.

"I'm not dressed," she faltered. "And I'll bet I run smack into Dom Fuller before I get out." Dom was the Judge's secretary.

"Throw a coat around you. I'll go back downstairs and say good night all. Then I'll park the car near the big oak, across the road from the red gate."

Sadie still hadn't made up her mind to risk the adventure and she spent some minutes moving around the suite in in-

decision. Going into the bathroom, she discovered a strange lipstick lying on the rim of the wash basin. The color would suit either Rinda Lott or Alma Habrick, she thought. She dropped the container in a drawer and went to a closet for a coat. Finding that an intruder had been in her rooms rekindled her resentment.

There was a lot of garden to be traversed between the house and the red gate. Locking her bedroom door, Sadie left by a side entrance and then around through a sunken garden, now a croquet court. She remembered to watch out for the hoops. Beyond the court were the terraces and a great deal of shrubbery. It was quite dark, but the light-colored polo coat would betray her, were anyone watching.

Avery was waiting. Sadie climbed in quickly and the car rolled off along the tree-lined Byfield Road. The crest of the ridge was hardly a quarter of a mile distant.

"This is a dumb play," Sadie grumbled. "We both take chances. Ashley will set you down on your tail feathers but hard, Frank, when he hears about it. I shudder in my girlish way when I think of what he'll say to me. I am not in so good to start with."

"He'll not hear. No one saw you leave. The whole party is in the drawing room. Rinda's digging in with him, helping him to save face by singing the whole second act of *Traviata*."

The car reached the top of the grade and Avery pulled it around in a dirt lane, more or less following the crest of the ridge. As the car swung into it, Sadie looked back.

"We're being tailed!" she exclaimed. "There's a car coming up behind us. No lights!"

"Some farmer's jalopy on the way to Byfield. They're careless about lights. You're just nervous."

Avery's car lunged on and was out of sight before the other car reached the crossing. A little farther on, they stopped to listen. After a moment or so, they heard the trailing car and judged that it had passed on toward Byfield.

The road called for cautious driving as it turned and twisted through the trees. A yellow moon began to soften the gloom while the car traveled another mile. Coming abruptly from a thicket

of small trees, the dark mass of the balancing rock called Hawk's Head loomed against the luminous sky. Avery brought the car to a stop on the grass at its base and leaned back, turning his head toward Sadie.

She was looking at the sprawling chateau in which she lived, not far below them on the slope of the ridge. She hadn't realized it would be so near. She should have as she had often looked up at the huge rock. Anyone in the house with a pair of field glasses could have seen the car easily, were the light strong enough.

AVERY opened the door on his side of the car.

"Let's get out and walk around the rock. You haven't been up here before."

"Promise to keep on walking?"

"Sure. Cross my heart."

The way he laughed canceled the promise, but Sadie got out on her side and they climbed the short incline to the base of Hawk's Head. The moon was becoming brighter, fading from yellow to silver.

"There's something you may as well know, Sadie. I'm crazy about you." Avery murmured.

Sadie thought, now it begins. She said, "Why make a play for married women, Frank? The valley is full of the other kind."

"Not my kind," he disputed. "But you are. Get this straight, though, sweet—I'll never be your lover. No cheap intrigue. I want something substantial. I'm not crowding you. Old men don't live forever."

"I knew one old fella who was still annoying the neighborhood at ninety," Sadie countered.

"Thirty days," Avery's strong jaws clicked together decisively. "He'll be dead in thirty days, Sadie."

"He's feeling all right," she resisted.

"I'm not saying he will die naturally. He's got himself into a spot where any move he makes will smash one of two conflicting groups of Fennsburg Steel's heavy stockholders. One group has raised money on everything they own in the valley and put it into Eastern shares, on the assumption that Manchester is selling out. If the deal falls through, they're a bunch of paupers."

"Suppose he does sell out?"

"Then he wrecks the ones who still hold onto their property here. Either way somebody gets hurt. Manchester has promised to announce what he intends to do within a week. Then you'll see what happens. I'm so sure of it, that if he's still alive in thirty days, I'll win you a divorce—for free."

"Which same would also divorce me from the bank roll, darling—g." She laughed, a husky purling. "I wouldn't like tha-at! Neither would you."

"You got some sort of settlement out of him, didn't you?"

"Don't you know? You're his lawyer."

"I don't handle things like that for him. His bank does."

"I get only so long as I'm a good wife," Sadie said and sighed. "Which is another fine reason not to fool around—like this. It could cost me money."

"There's a way you could make money," Avery said. "If you could get advance information of what the old man means to do, we could mop up. Get me this tip-off, and I'll make you rich without waiting for him to die."

Nick Willard had urged her to find out, too. She shook her head. "He never tells me anything about his business," she said. "Or maybe I would."

"He's calling the Board for a meeting next week. After that, it will probably be too late. Sadie, you're a smart woman. You're clever. You can get the information, if you try. Think it over."

"Sure I'll think it over. And also what might happen to me if he finds out about us coming up here tonight. Could be, I'll get kicked out without even car fare back to Broadway."

"Don't forget that I've told you how I feel about you, Sadie." Avery's smooth voice had just the right amount of subdued tautness. "Any time the old boy gets tough, I think I can safely promise to do something about that."

"You think you can buck Ashley. He'll crush you like a worm in his garden. And me." She turned suddenly toward Avery and came close, her slim hands clutching at her sleeves. "You couldn't do a thing, Frank."

"I can—and will. I promise you." His voice sounded strained, as though he were having trouble with his own control.

"Maybe—" she fumbled, "maybe if tonight's going to cost me everything,

I might as well pick up what I'm paying for."

THE lawyer looked down at her rather grimly. This was neither the time nor the place to yield to impulses, he thought. Too fast a response to the pull on the line sometimes tears out the hook. Play it a little. He lowered his chin and kissed the tawny hair lightly. And kept on living.

A blinding flash from the blackness under the projecting rock cracked like the splitting of a board. Stinging particles of grit whipped against Avery's face. He broke away, went several staggering steps and then pitched forward flat upon the sparse grass. But Sadie could see his hands scrubbing over his face and knew he was not dead.

"Frank!" she called.

"If you're covered, don't move! He may shoot again."

"Are you—hurt bad?"

"Blinded."

Sadie wanted very badly to run. Standing still, listening for another shot, was a paralyzing ordeal. Avery cautiously lifted his head. Sadie heard it, too—the rattle of pebbles as someone moved beyond the overhanging rock. Then, in the bright glare of the moon, she saw Avery wriggling toward her—which was odd, if he could not see.

"Gone!" he grated. "Or moved for a better shot. We'd better get out of here, Sadie."

"Your eyes?"

"All right, now," he cut in. "Grit flew in my face from the rock—where the bullet hit. If I hadn't bent to kiss your hair, I'd have been killed."

He took Sadie's hand and pulled her to her feet, then started toward the other end of the huge stone. Sadie stumbled along unresistingly. Coming out into a glade, Avery kept on across it, then stopped to listen. Hearing nothing, he turned into a dimly marked trail curling through scrubby trees back to the road.

"Wait here," he said, pushing her into the shadow of a spruce. "I'll get the car."

It seemed a long time, but presently she saw the sedan coming toward her. Even before the car stopped she scrambled in. The car leaped forward.

"Scared?"

Her soft laugh didn't sound right. "Who do you suppose did it? Was he shooting at you, or—do you think—me?"

"I think the bullet carried my name. I'm the one who was, ah, poaching."

"That car!" Sadie recalled the one she had seen, the one they had supposed went on toward Byfield. "I told you we were being followed."

"Could be."

Sadie considered. "Could of just as well been me they were after," she said, wanting to shiver. "It's all guessing. Anyhow, a woman could have driven that car. It didn't have to be a man, you know. . . ."

Frank Avery brought his gray sedan to a stop opposite the red gate and Sadie got out. Her good night was laconic, floating back to him as she ran across the road. The Manchester chateau wasn't visible from this side of the wall, and she couldn't know until she entered the grounds whether or not the party had broken up. But reaching the stretch of turf between the gardens and the house, Sadie saw the drawing room lights still on. After a pause, she stole across to the terrace to sneak a look inside and see who was present. Some one of them, she thought, might have followed Avery's car to the ridge.

Judge Manchester was still fooling at the keyboard of the piano, with Rinda Lott and her pal, Alma Habrick, standing by. Chris Dilberg and Mark Habrick weren't in sight, but probably were in the billiard room. She didn't see Dr. Ward anywhere, either.

Sadie went around to the side entrance she had used in leaving.

HER luck had held and she reached the boudoir without meeting anyone. She got out of the cigarette-girl costume in a hurry, then slipped into a robe and sat down before the vanity mirror to refresh her make-up. As she did so, she heard the noise of a car turning from the road into the driveway. From the bay windows of her sitting room, just off the boudoir, part of the drive was visible. She jumped up and went in to look. Headlights flashed through the trees and the car came into sight. It was Dom Fuller's black coupe.

She remained at the window after the car had gone on to the garages,

thinking about the secretary. His deference to Judge Manchester amounted to an obsession. Sadie didn't believe Dom Fuller would hesitate a moment to carry out any mission asked of him by the old man. Was he the answer to the identity of the shadowy Jubal Faust? And to that of the sniper on the ridge?

Returning to the bedroom, she got into a negligee. A little later she heard the uproar of departing cars and a few minutes after this the familiar tread of Judge Manchester in the hall on the way to his quarters. He wouldn't come to hers—never did from choice, and always seemed embarrassed by the lush femininity of the boudoir. Sadie got up from the chaise where she had been waiting and went out into the hall. The Judge had not closed his door, and she saw him standing in the middle of the room with his hands pressed against the sides of his head as though it ached.

She came a couple of yards into the room. "Ashley," she called softly.

The old man turned. "I thought you were in bed."

"Oh, no! I—I couldn't sleep without telling you how sorry I am for making a fool of myself."

"You were outrageous, Sadie."

"I know." Sadie dropped her chin and stared penitently at the rug. "But I'm terribly sorry, Ashley."

"Very well. We'll not refer to it again." He hesitated a moment, clearing his throat. A fleeting desperation darkened his eyes. "You . . . are so beautiful, Sadie."

"You're sweet, Ashley. Guess maybe I better run along and put the form to bed now. For you, it's late."

"Quite late," he assented. "And I've a lot of business to attend to tomorrow."

"Why don't you chuck business, Ashley?" she demanded petulantly. "You've got more money than one man needs, now."

The judge shook his head. "It's not money, Sadie. When a man retires, he settles down to bored waiting for his last rites," he answered slowly. "There's something morbid about it."

"Dr. Ward thinks you should stop worrying about business." The physician hadn't said any such thing in Sadie's hearing, but she thought it was what he would have said, if asked. "He's bothered about your fooling with all those

fake medicines, too." She pointed to the small package with the Brazilian stamp on the table. "There's another load of it. It's silly to think pills are going to change you any. People get born, grow up, and get old. Nothing can make it different."

Judge Manchester lowered himself into a big chair and lifted his feet onto a stool. He looked at Sadie with an odd mixture of resentful admiration.

"That sentiment, if it had prevailed, would have kept man the same as he was in the beginning," he retorted, then went on dogmatically, "If nothing was ever to be bettered, there would not have been the amazing discoveries in medicine which we now accept at commonplace. Who knows what secret medical research may unveil next?"

"But what's the good of living a hundred and fifty years?" she demanded. "Just sitting around and watching people do the things you got tired of doing a long time ago."

"With a sound body, it wouldn't be necessary just to sit."

"You don't get it, Ashley. You don't quit doing things because you can't, but on account of you want something different. Wanting's more important than having."

"There're still things I want."

"What? You've had everything already, and now you want to start all over again. I'm twenty-five, already a lot of things I used to be hot for leave me cold. When I can't get excited about anything any more, I'll be old—and all the pills from here to South America won't make me any different."

THE Judge gave her a look of profound astonishment.

"You constantly amaze me, Sadie," Manchester said with a tight smile. "I'd never suspect you of deep thinking."

"A girl on the spot like I am has to start thinking serious. S'pose, while you're using your insides for a test tube, you swallow something really poisonous and it kills you. Can't you see what it would do to me? Don't you know that every woman in Dale Valley would decide right away that it was just another case of a young wife in a hurry for her rich husband's money? Can you see me with a Chinaman's chance of being acquitted by any jury in this backwoods?

They'd thumb me down without leaving the jury box!"

"What a childish, ridiculous worry! There's not the slightest likelihood of such a thing. Now run along to bed."

Trying to frighten the Judge into giving up his nostrums, Sadie had thoroughly frightened herself.

"I won't unless you promise not to take any more of that junk!" she told him.

His mouth crisped, but less grimly than was usual at comment or his actions.

"The court will take the plea under advisement," he said.

He walked with her to the door, standing there until she had gone into the boudoir. Then he turned, caught sight of the small package on the table, and picked it up. He read the inscription in the corner, then unwrapped it, revealing a white glossy cardboard box. Inside was a small brown bottle filled with pills in layers, each layer separated by cotton wads. The Judge carried it over and put it on the bedside table in the alcove, then began leisurely to prepare for bed.

Back in her own rooms, Sadie finished cleaning the make-up from her face and climbed into bed. After ten or eleven o'clock there wasn't anything to do at Hawk's Head except go to bed. She put the light out, and it wasn't very long before her quiet breathing indicated she had gone to sleep.

Sadie's eyes fluttered open and stared bewilderedly into the darkness for a moment. Her ears caught the sound of someone in an agony of distress outside the room. It was moaning, low, horrible, choking groans. She pulled on the bed lamp, and sliding her feet out of bed, groped for slippers. A moment later she was rushing across the hall to the Judge's room, from where the sounds seemed to come. Luckily, he never locked his door. She twisted the knob and went in.

The lights were on in the alcove. She stopped, paralyzed at the sight of his sprawling figure in white pajamas, face down on the bed, retching and twisting in agony, his bare, skinny, hairy ankles beating feebly against the bed coverings.

"Ashley!" she screamed.

She was still screaming when Dom Fuller came racing down the back

stairs, in slippers and robe.

"In there!" she cried hoarsely. "The Judge—he's dying—"

She ran back into the room, Fuller after her.

"What happened?" the secretary demanded as they reached the bed.

"I don't know. I heard him moaning and—"

Miss Walton appeared in the doorway, holding a flowered wrapper closely around her gaunt frame and looking exceedingly curious.

Fuller broke in on Sadie. "There's no time for talking!" he snapped. "Call Dr. Ward."

"He's in the southwest bedroom," said Miss Walton. "I'll fetch him."

She faded out of the doorway. "He's poisoned," growled Dom Fuller. He was doing something to the old man's throat, and whatever it was, it succeeded in bringing up the contents of his stomach. "Get milk—a pitcher of it!"

Sadie hurried down to the kitchen. There was milk in the big refrigerator—lots of it. With shaking hands, she filled a pitcher and hurried back upstairs to the bedchamber. Dr. Ward was there now.

"The silly old fool!" snorted the physician wrathfully, after minutes of hard, silent work. "Serve him right, if he doesn't pull through! Putting any old thing in his stomach. By George, I ought to walk out on him and let him suffer!"

"You mustn't let him die," Sadie remonstrated. "He mustn't die!" Sadie's nails bit into her soft palms.

Dr. Ward shrugged. "He probably won't. If he doesn't pull through, it'll be mostly because he's been around long enough anyhow. The poison would only be a sort of nudge in the proper direction."

Sadie's eyes wandered to the stricken judge. "I think he took some stuff from that bottle," she said. "It had just come in the mail—from Brazil."

The doctor picked up the brown bottle and inspected it disapprovingly. It was quite round and the cork had been removed. He examined the cardboard box it had been packed in, then seeing the wrapper on the floor at the side of the bed, picked that up, too.

"Brazil, hey?" he exclaimed, scowling. "Something's wrong here. I'm going to have this stuff analyzed. If I'm right,

we're going to want to know how it got here." He glanced sharply at Sadie. "From Brazil."

IV

HIS head supported by a pillow, Judge Manchester sat back in a deep chair. It was Monday afternoon, five days later.

"Hello, Lucas," he called to Dr. Ward in the doorway. "Come in."

"Certainly, I'm coming in," returned the doctor, glancing at Sadie, who was camped on a footstool, and then at Mark Habrick and Chris Dilberg, also present. He walked across the room. "See here, Ashley, I got the chemist's report this morning. That pill was practically pure bichloride of mercury. With sugar. Somebody meant to kill you, of course."

"Nonsense," scoffed the old man.

"Hear me out," demanded the doctor. "The bottle of pills didn't come by mail in that wrapping. It had been opened and poison pills substituted for the top layer. The others were harmless. Then the package was rewrapped, a Brazilian stamp glued on it, and the cancellation faked. How did the package get here?"

Sadie's darting glance saw that Mark Habrick and Dilberg were listening with grim tenseness. And she knew, without having seen, that both men had looked at her.

"Look here, Ashley, were you expecting a package from Brazil?" the doctor asked.

Judge Manchester frowned. "I don't recall," he said. "It's possible."

"I suppose you send for so much of that junk you wouldn't remember," nodded the doctor. "By the way, Habrick, the package was addressed to your bank—not here, to Hawk's Head."

"The Judge's mail always comes to the bank," explained Habrick. "His chauffeur comes in to pick it up mornings. Saves a day in delivery. But you say the package didn't come through the mail."

"It could have got here *with* the mail from your bank."

"Are you insinuating that I had anything to do with it?" Habrick growled.

Dr. Ward shook his head. "Nope. The chauffeur who brought the mail is just as good a bet. For all we know, the package might never have been at the bank.

"I don't know anything about it. Say what I know—and that's as far as I go. The police can take over from here."

"I'll have no police," objected the Judge shortly. "I'll handle this." His eyes slued around toward Sadie.

"Do as you like," Dr. Ward said, shrugging his thick shoulders. "But if you take my advice, you'll call in the cops."

"Dalebridge police? Steve Folmer?" croaked the Judge. Folmer was head of a force of four in the village, and Hawk's Head lay in his district. "Fat loafer! I'll not risk my life to his bungling. I've better facilities of my own to take care of this."

"Jubal Faust?" queried Chris Dilberg interestedly.

The doctor glanced at him pityingly. "Mumbo jumbo—to scare the peasantry," he scoffed.

So Dr. Ward didn't believe in Jubal Faust, either. Everyone seemed to have heard of him, but that was all, Sadie reflected.

"Whoever perpetrated this outrage will discover there's more than mumbo jumbo back of that name," the Judge promised, menacingly.

The doctor heaved his shoulders indifferently. "Well, it's your life," he disclaimed. "Personally, I believe police get better results than private snoops."

"I think the police should be called in," interposed Chris Dilberg. "Steve Folmer isn't as big a fool as people think."

"Stuff," exclaimed Judge Manchester irascibly.

"All right—stuff," the doctor conceded.

He pulled out a pad of prescription blanks and penciled a formula. Then he took a long envelope bearing a chemical firm's imprint from his pocket and the folded wrapping of the Brazilian nostrum. From another pocket he brought out the box containing the pill bottle. He laid these on the table where Sadie stood, weighting them down with the Judge's key container. The prescription he handed to Sadie.

"There's the lab report, and the bottle and wrapper. This washes me up on crime investigation." He eyed the old man, grinning. "But don't forget that at your age you don't bounce like a youngster. In case I don't see you again before

your funeral, I'd better say ta-ta. Ta-ta."

SADIE followed him out. "Doctor," she asked on the way downstairs, "did you notice Ashley look at me like he thought I was the one who poisoned him?"

"Did you?" he asked blandly.

"Of course not!"

"Then why worry? The old coot isn't dead."

"Yes, but that's just it. If someone tried to kill him, they'll take another crack at it. And, if his private eye can't pin it on someone else, there's always Sadie."

"Sadie, you're a smart little baggage. Keep your pretty eyes open. In one way, I'm glad Ashley's decided to leave this job to his own help. Two ways, if he gets himself done in for being so all-fired stubborn."

They reached the bottom of the stairs. The doctor fished a cigar from a vest pocket. He bit off the end of it and stuck it in his mouth, then began searching his pockets for matches. A hail from above caused them to look up. Mark Habrick was coming down the stairs.

"Going to Dalebridge, Lucas?" he asked as he joined them. "Like to drop me off?"

Habrick lived a half-mile toward the village on Byfield Road.

"Sure." The doctor continued fumbling in his pockets. "For a light, I will."

Habrick offered a match case. The case was of chromium, with a shield set in one side showing a plow in relief—a souvenir of Fennsburg Steel's fortieth anniversary, presented to the officers and heads of departments.

"You still using one of these gadgets?" queried Dr. Ward, examining it. He opened the case, pulled out a match and struck it. "Don't see 'em so often lately."

"I have two or three of 'em," said the bank president, taking it back. "Well, shall we get along?"

The two men walked toward the entrance doors. Sadie stood a moment, looking after them, then went to see if she could find Dom Fuller, to send him to the village with the prescription. She thought she might find him in the library.

The secretary wasn't there. About to

continue her search elsewhere, she decided to call Nick Willard first. Despite the Judge's interdiction against the news of the attempted poisoning being made public, Sadie just had to talk to someone about it. This sort of fright, crawling insistently through her veins, was a new sensation and she didn't like it. Ashley wouldn't have looked at her as he had, unless there was suspicion in his mind. He didn't seem to remember she had pleaded with him not to fool with the stuff. Or did he realize that such urging was the best way to get him to do exactly the reverse? He was shrewd as well as stubborn. Nothing wrong with his thinking—except the delusion of recapturing his youth.

Nick Willard was no dope, either. He wouldn't turn down an amorous adventure, if properly served. He would take, but, when it came to giving, probably wasn't so impetuous. She thought she could make a trade of the secret of Manchester's narrow escape for Nick's interested help. She wasn't worried that the revelation might be laid against her. There were others who knew about it, including the household staff who could be blamed.

Dropping into a chair at the library-table, she pulled the telephone across the polished surface. The Dalebridge operator quickly got a connector with the Fennsburg *Register* and, to her relief, Nick Willard was in.

"Sadie Manchester," she said, when she heard his voice. "Listen, Nick, I want to see you tonight. I've got important news to spill."

"The Fennsburg Steel business?" he asked hopefully.

"Better'n that. Look, pal, I can't say what, now, but I'll be waiting in the garden—the croquet court, you know where it is—at ten tonight. I'll unlock the red gate so no one will see you come in."

"Nix, Sadie, I've a date."

"All right," she said shortly. "Keep it—and miss out on a great big story for your paper. It's tonight—or never."

The voice on the other end was silent a moment.

"If that's the way it is, I'll see if I can break the date," he said at last. "Leave the gate open."

"Okay, the gate'll be open. Ten o'clock."

HANGING up, she wrinkled her nose at a particularly villainous scent of tobacco smoke and glanced around for the source.

She traced the odor to a window and went to investigate. Leaning out, she saw a pair of shoulders and the top of a crumpled gray hat. A wisp of tobacco smoke curled up over the brim.

"Hey!" she called, informally.

The smoker looked up and Sadie saw that it was the man who helped the gardener, and occasionally drove one of the cars. He also served as butler whenever there was formal entertaining. The Judge didn't consider this occurred often enough to justify a full time man, or perhaps deferred to popular valley opinion that butlers were a mark of snobbery.

"Yes, ma'am," the man replied. He took a very black briar from his mouth.

"What are you doing?" Sadie demanded. She had to say something.

He looked around.

"The roses," he said. "Roses are like good-looking women. Both of 'em hev to be clipped now and then to keep 'em from goin' blowzy."

He meandered away, snapping a pair of cutters as he went. Sadie withdrew, pondering the possibility of the fellow being one of the Judge's snitches. She walked slowly across the library, estimating the probability of the gardener's having overheard her phone conversation.

In the reception hall, she saw Dom Fuller and gave him the prescription.

"Take it in to Dalebridge after dinner and get it filled."

"Very well," the secretary replied, folding the slip of paper and stowing it in a shabby wallet. "Did Dr. Ward say it would be all right for the Judge to go through with the Board meeting tomorrow afternoon?"

"They didn't say anything about it."

"I'd like to know," said Dom, uncertainly. He glanced up at the second floor landing of the stairs. "The Judge is to announce to the Board what he's going to do about his Fennsburg Steel holdings."

"You can ask about the meeting before you go to the village, can't you?" she suggested. "What is he going to do about his holdings?"

"I don't know. The Judge wrote it out

himself, as if it were a court decision, this afternoon. Of course, Mrs Manchester, I wouldn't tell you, if I knew." The secretary paused. "Oh, by the way, Mr. Lott and Miss Rinda are upstairs with the Judge. They came a short while ago and I took them up."

"In that case, tell the druggist to make that prescription double strength. The Judge'll need it."

The secretary shook his head and walked away toward the front doors. Sadie stood for a moment, then climbed the stairs. The presence of Rinda Lott called for a change of dress. Sadie wouldn't pass up a chance to flaunt her beauty before that pop-eyed calliope!

She missed this one, though. Opening the door to the boudoir, she discovered Rinda camped on the cream velvet hassock before the vanity. She was busily engaged in refurbishing her face with Sadie's own cosmetics. A brand-new box of face powder Sadie had only just received had been opened and some of its contents spilled.

"Moving right in, hey?" Sadie observed caustically.

"I didn't suppose you'd mind." Rinda's tone was irritatingly insouciant. "I'll be out of your way in a minute."

"That would be good news," grated Sadie, temper rising. "Good, if you meant from now on and not just now."

The girl on the hassock laid a lipstick down and flicked an insolent glance over her shoulder.

"Why don't you go back to the streets where you're at home?" she sneered. "You're a rotten little gold-digger—and you know it! It wasn't good enough to seduce an old man into marrying you. Oh, no! You're not above trying to poison your way into his money, either, are you?"

Sadie walked around the hassock to the end of the vanity, seething but controlled. "You think I tried to murder Ashley?"

"It seems quite obvious."

Sadie nodded, cold fury spreading. She picked up the round box of powder.

"Rinda, you smell!" she burst out. "But not enough. I can fix that!"

With a swift movement, Sadie flipped the contents of the box full into the other girl's face and hair. Enveloped in a cloud of face powder slightly reminiscent of the experiment at Bikini, Rinda

rolled from the hassock to her feet, gasping and sputtering.

Ed Lott stuck his head in at the doorway.

"Ready to go home, Rinda?" His voice bogged down as he recognized the wrathful apparition by the hassock.

"I'll say she is!" exulted Sadie. "Singing *White Christmas* all the way."

The big girl strode across the room. At the door she turned for the last word.

"I'll make you good and sorry for this, you little helicat!"

The door slammed behind the retreating Lotts and Sadie sat down abruptly on the hassock. She didn't feel elated, but there was some satisfaction in having brought into the open the poorly cloaked hostility of Rinda Lott. The exuberance she might have felt was restrained by the certainty of Ashley Manchester's reaction when he heard of it, as he surely would.

Rinda wouldn't be choosy about the weapons she used.

V

WISELY, Sadie decided to go straight to headquarters with the problem. She rapped lightly on the Judge's door and, hearing his call to enter, pushed on in.

"I've had a fight with Rinda," she said.

The old man, resting on the bed, seemed amused instead of angry.

"Any casualties?"

"One," replied Sadie tersely. "Her. I caught her making a filthy mess of my dressing table. We had words, and I dumped a box of powder on her."

"Not exactly ladylike, Sadie."

"Maybe it wasn't. But what are you going to do when a woman accuses you of having tried to murder your husband? Make with a smile?"

"Rinda didn't do that!"

"She did, too! And put in a few other cracks along with it." Sadie eyed the old man tentatively. "I'm sorry I got mad, Ashley, but I did. See here, when Dr. Ward told us this afternoon that those pills were poison, why did you give me that dirty look? Like the first person you thought of was me?"

The Judge chuckled. "Not you, Sadie. Hardly. If you were impatient to come

into my property, you'd not be so stupid as to try to accelerate matters that way."

"You gave me a funny look," Sadie insisted.

"I was shocked," he explained. "Actually, my first reaction was to remember that you had begged me not to take the pills—as if you knew what it involved. Of course, you didn't."

Her eyes flickered as she dwelt on his last sentence. "You said I wouldn't be stupid enough to pull anything like that. Well, I wouldn't need to be very smart to see where I'd have landed, if the pills had worked like they were meant to. I wish—" She broke off.

"You wish what, Sadie?"

"I wish you'd let me pack up and take you away from here. Sooner or later, whoever tried this stunt will get away with another one."

"Your concern is touching." The old man smiled faintly. "However, I am taking steps to remove the temptation. In my desk downstairs is a new will which I drew up this afternoon. If my death is to be profitable to anyone, it will be only so to those I completely trust, Sadie. Practically, that is you alone. I have even gone so far as to change the executor and trustee to a bank outside the valley."

Sadie was dubious. "Yes, Ashley, that's fine and all—but it also sets me up for the griddle worse than ever. I was an odds-on choice for the death-house derby before. Maybe this scratches the place and show entries."

"I've cut no one from the will—only reduced the size of the bequests. Fifty thousand dollars might be an incentive to murder where five thousand would not."

Sadie wasn't convinced of the reasoning. She wondered whose shares had been cropped.

"Several," the Judge replied to her query. "Chris and Mabel Dilbert, Mark Habrick and Alma, the Lotts—"

"Rinda?" Sadie brightened.

The Judge nodded. "Six families in all. You see, Sadie, until you came into my life, I had no one of my own and I thought to make a gesture by including the families of my closer friends. The way it stands now, those items have been reduced to five thousand dollars each. Aside from modest provision for

the servants here there will be an endowment for my college, the establishment of a Manchester Fund for Biological Research, and the property to the extent of four hundred thousand dollars devised to the heir or heirs of Joseph and Margaret Eblis. The rest, more than half, of the estate is to be yours."

"Those two people in the tomb by the croquet court? Where do they come in?"

"Call it sentiment, if you like."

"Who are these heirs? I supposed the family had died out."

"Perhaps not. If no claimant appears in a reasonable time, the bequest will revert to the estate."

COMPRESSING her lips, Sadie stared at the old man for several seconds.

"Well, I hope the idea works out, Ashley. At least, no one can say that changing your will has anything to do with me. Does anybody know about it?"

"Yes. It would do no good, otherwise. I explained my action to those who were here today. The will has been signed and witnessed and goes to the Byfield Trust Company—the new executor and trustee—tomorrow. Remind me to have Cain pick up the old will at Fennsburg National when he goes for mail in the morning. I'll have to give him an order."

Sadie hesitated. "Don't you want something to eat now, Ashley?"

"Yes," said the Judge. "Tell Miss Walton I want my dinner in half an hour—and that it's to be something more solid than beef broth."

Sadie nodded, smiled and left.

* * * * *

Nick Willard's convertible rattled the plank surface of the old wooden bridge across the Dale River and threaded into the dark, tree-bordered Byfield Road: Nick wasn't alone, as he'd wanted to be. Carolyn Charles occupied the other half of the seat. Carolyn was a feature sports writer on the *Register*, flying the by-line of "Chuck" Charles and turning in copy completely lacking the feminine touch.

By right of her prior date with Nick, Carolyn had flatly declined to let him drive to Hawk's Head without her. It wasn't, she insisted, that she didn't trust him with Sadie Manchester—which, frankly, she did not—but her unerring feminine intuition of impending disaster.

The car swept around a sharp curve, and then a long one, passing small estates occupied by Dale Vailey and Fennsburg gentry. A few minutes later, Nick parked under the spreading branches of a huge oak.

"I'll be right back," he assured lamely as he got out.

"I'm giving you no more than fifteen minutes," Carolyn asserted. "Then, my hero, I come in after you."

Nick laughed uneasily, knowing she was quite capable of doing it, and walked back down the road a short distance to the red gate. It was a solid wooden affair set in a narrow opening in the high wall some distance around a curve from the driveway. He found it unlocked, as Sadie said it would be, and went on through. Broad stone steps led down into the sunken croquet court, superimposed (according to local gossip) over the burying plot of the family originally owning the estate. The last owners, apparently more prosperous than their forebears, reposed in a tomb set into the high bank surrounding the court. Behind a wrought-iron barrier the twin sepulchres of Joseph and Margaret Eblis could be seen dimly in moonlight.

Nick Willard came down into the court, looking sharply around. The phosphorescent hands of his watch marked five minutes of ten. He sat down on a stone bench, and some minutes passed before he caught sight of Sadie, in a white clinging evening gown, coming toward him. Little idiot, he grouched, why hadn't she worn something black?

Nick stood up and whistled softly. They met before the grilled opening of the tomb.

"Gee!" Sadie murmured. "I didn't see you till you popped up like a piece of toast."

There was a nervous quaver in her husky drawl. "What's wrong?" he demanded softly. "You're acting jittery."

"Must be because I *am* jittery."

"Some of the Judge's goons around? Maybe I'd better lam."

"My hero!" jeered Sadie. "People who always play it safe never get ahead. There's nothing to worry about—much."

"The way you act and look, I'd say you were bothered about something, but plenty!"

THE reporter was staring at her keenly. Sadie looked up at him gravely. "What I'm bothered about isn't here in the garden, Nick. Somebody's working to frame me for murder."

"Murder?"

"Somebody tried to poison Ashley, Wednesday night."

"What!"

"Yes—and nearly got away with it." Sadie raced through a condensed account of the denouement of Manchester's dinner party, omitting her excursion to the ridge with Avery. "So, you see, I've got something to be worried about, Nick. I read a story about a girl in a spot like this. She had one hard time beating the chair."

He shrugged wide shoulders. "Where do I come in?"

"It's a story for your newspaper, isn't it?"

"Sure. I can use it. But that's not what you got me out here for, Sadie. What do you want?"

"I want you to find out who's trying to put me on the spot."

"Wrong number, sweet. As a sleuth, I'm zero-minus. I wouldn't know where to begin with all the enemies Judge Manchester has."

"It's somebody who doesn't like me, too," Sadie countered. "Anyhow, someone who could use me for the patsy. It would be someone who expected to make, too. Find out who could have got the poison, and who could have switched it for the pills. You could do that."

"You make it so simple." Nick Willard laughed softly. "I'd have to take a look at the pill bottle and what it came in, and all that. And while I'm doing it, probably get my bean bashed in for being nosey." He grinned quizzically.

"And, for what?"

"For me."

"What does that mean? My rugged charm getting to you?"

"I wouldn't say I was crazy about you," Sadie replied suavely. "But, you're a fella I like. If I was to let myself go—Well, it'd be interesting to see what happened."

Nick stared at her, faintly amused and vividly aware of her warm desirability.

"I don't wait very well, when it's anything I really want," he asserted.

Sadie moved a step nearer.

"I know how that is, Nick. I know all about waiting. But I hear that if you want something bad enough, you get it. Try wanting hard—and see if it's true."

Nick found himself definitely wanting with a promptness that caught him off-guard. "Well, I'll do what I can. It won't be much."

"I've an idea to work on," Sadie told him. "The pill bottle and stuff it came in. There's a Brazilian stamp on it that might help. Maybe one like that wouldn't be so easy to get in Fennsburg."

"I'd have to see it," Nick said.

Sadie nodded. "Then I'll get the stuff for you. It's on a table in Ashley's bedroom. I'll go in and snitch the bottle and things. If he's asleep, he won't even know I was there."

"Shall I wait here?"

"No. We'll go around to the side door and you wait in the reception hall. That's safe, and then I won't need to come out again."

She took Nick through the side entrance into the reception hall, then climbed the stairs to the Judge's suite. At the door, she paused to listen and fancied she heard the old man moving around inside. She lifted her hand and knocked softly, and then once more, listening intently for a repetition of the sounds within she thought she'd heard. There was no response to her rapping and she curled her slim fingers around the knob and turned.

The door was locked. Sadie frowned. Judge Manchester never locked his door—in fact, all the bedroom keys of the chateau had long been missing. She listened again for a repetition of the sounds she thought she'd heard. Lifting her hand to rap, she swiftly changed her mind. He would only come to the door, thank her and say he wanted nothing.

The stuff is off, she thought bitterly. For now, anyway. I'll have to go downstairs and tell Nick I'll snitch the stuff tomorrow. And, darn it all, will I have to go through all that business again to get him to help me?

SADIE went on to her own suite where she shed her silver sandals and replaced them with soft-soled slippers. Then she returned to the corridor and started for the transverse hall, holding up the long skirts, which with heel-

less slippers would have dragged on the floor.

She stepped on a small, hard object opposite the Judge's door, and stopping to pick it up, saw that it was the small disk with the plow insigne from one of the match case souvenirs of Fennsburg Steel. Sure that it hadn't been there when she had stopped at the Judge's door, she dropped it in the long plant box on the stair well railing and went on around to the stairs. In a few moments she had reached the Gothic archway where she had left Nick Willard.

He wasn't there. Sadie explored the passage as far as the door to the side garden, hoping to locate the newsman there, but not finding him, came back to the reception hall. Before she reached the stairway, she saw the silhouette of a man on the terrace in front of the double entrance doors. At first she thought it might be Nick, but then realized that this man was smaller—more Dom Fuller's build. He seemed to be looking out toward the grounds, his back to the glass panel. The silhouette wasn't complete enough to be identified. Sadie hurried up the stairs, not wanting him to see her—if it were really Dom Fuller.

In the corridor leading to her suite, she stopped abruptly as she saw a band of light on the carpet coming from the Judge's suite. Oddly disturbed, she went on to the half-open door and looked in. A puzzled frown marred her forehead as she saw a heavy chair upset on its back and a capsized ash tray which had spewed its contents over the rug.

She pushed the door open wider and started in, then recoiled, grasping the door jamb for support as her knees began to fail her. A crumpled figure sprawled on the floor, almost at her feet. A shriveled, naked foot protruded beyond the hem of a blue dressing gown. With swelling horror, her gaze moved to the lifeless eyes and ghastly face resting in a smear of blood on the polished floor. It was Ashley Manchester who stared up at her without seeing!

VI

COLD with horror, Sadie Manchester backed out of the room, too shocked even to scream. Footsteps toward the rear of the house drew her attention. She saw Dom Fuller who'd stopped and was look-

ing at her curiously. He had a small package in his hand. She gestured for him to come, and he hurried toward her, his small eyes gleaming.

"What is it, Mrs. Manchester—the prescription? I have it here."

Sadie shook her head. "Something terrible has happened. Look!" She lifted her hand toward the open door and let it fall to her side again.

Dom Fuller came closer and stared into the room. "You did that?"

Again Sadie shook her head. "I found him—like that—just now. Will you—call someone? I feel—kind of sick."

Fighting against it, she felt herself being inexorably enveloped in a black fog. She had never fainted in her life, and she wouldn't now. But she found herself sitting on the end of the chaise in her bedroom with no recollection of getting there. Of course, Dom Fuller had helped her. He was standing before her, rubbing the side of his head with his fingertips.

"Are you all right now?" he asked.

She nodded. "Hadn't you better telephone someone? The police?" She looked at the ivory-colored instrument on her bedside table.

"I'll go downstairs," he said, and left her. After that, Sadie sat there for what seemed a long time, making plans which she knew were useless without a clearer idea of what was to happen.

Hearing footsteps in the hall, Sadie got up from the chaise and went to the door. Down the corridor, Dom Fuller was showing the door of the Judge's rooms to a grossly fat man. Sadie decided he must be Steve Folmer, the Dalebridge police chief. He wasn't in uniform as she would have supposed. In Folmer's estimation, wearing the conventional outfit imposed a handicap on the apprehension of wrongdoers and had little effect on the prevention of crime.

"Better run back downstairs, Dom, and call Dr. Ward," the fat man was saying. Then he saw Sadie in her doorway, and nodded. "Hello," he said quite affably.

Sadie smiled absently, and saw another man beyond Folmer as Dom Fuller moved away. This one wore the olive drab of the Dalebridge police. Steve Folmer stepped closer to the doorway.

"Looks pretty dead from here," he said finally, as though to himself. "Guess

we'd better go in, Bill, and see if we can figure out what happened."

Bill Morgan looked over Folmer's shoulder into the room. He was a much younger man with gray eyes and an aggressive chin. Murder was a rarity in the Dalebridge jurisdiction and it could be surmised from Morgan's expression that he thoroughly disapproved of it. He glanced up the hall at Sadie, then followed his chief.

Sadie went back into the boudoir and resumed her seat on the chaise. When they got around to it, the questions would begin. In due course, Steve Folmer came to her door.

"Feel like talkin'?" he asked.

"No."

"I s'pose not, about a thing like this." He lowered himself gingerly into a slipper chair.

"You don't sound much like a cop," observed Sadie.

"That's somethin' to start with." Steve Folmer smiled. "Mind tellin' me when you saw your husband last? Alive."

"A little while before dinner. I stopped in his rooms before I went downstairs. He asked me to have Miss Walton bring his meal upstairs. He was all right, then."

"You could kinda tell me what you did from then on," suggested the policeman.

"I fooled around after dinner, walked around in the garden for a few minutes." She wouldn't tell of the rendezvous with Nick Willard—not yet, anyhow. "I came upstairs—I guess that was nearly half past ten. I stopped to see if Ashley needed anything. He's been sick, you know. But his door was locked."

"Locked? If it was locked, how did you get it open?"

"But, I didn't," Sadie replied. "I came on in here. When I went back again, oh, just a few minutes later, the door was open. The first thing I saw was that furniture had been knocked over—an ash tray and a chair. Then I pushed the door open a little wider and saw Ashley."

SHE shivered at the vivid image her memory had retained. Steve Folmer pushed himself up from the low chair.

"All right, Miz Manchester," he said. "There's a whole lot more I got to find out before I start guessin'. Reckon that's

Doc Ward comin' upstairs. Might be he can say how long ago it was this happened. Want to come along?"

"In there?" Sadie didn't try to conceal her abhorrence.

"You don't have to." He walked to the door more lightly than his bulk would have suggested. He looked back. "Don't go to bed. I'll maybe want to see you again after a while."

Going out into the corridor, he saw Dr. Ward standing at the door to the Judge's rooms with Dom Fuller at his elbow. The doctor made a rather casual examination, then said he thought the Judge hadn't been dead more than an hour and a half, or two hours. On a warm night like this, it would be hard to be definite. Ten o'clock would be a good guess, though.

"What I figured myself," agreed Folmer.

"Then you didn't need to make me tear out here in the middle of the night, Steve. Hang it all, you fellows haven't got a bit of consideration."

"You're coroner for the district."

"Sure, but if I'd have known there was going to be any work attached to it, I wouldn't have taken the job." Dr. Ward turned away from the fallen Manchester and looked curiously about the disordered room. "Have you found out anything?"

"Not much," Folmer disclaimed. "Near as I can make out, he was shot over there between the bed and that closet door. There's blood on the floor from there to here. I guess he dragged himself this far before he died, like as if he was tryin' to get help. Bled a lot, didn't he?"

"The bullet cut the artery when it went through his neck and he probably was conscious for a minute or two—maybe more. Ordinarily, for a man his age and condition, he would have died of the shock, but it seems Ashley didn't. By the way, you'll find the bullet somewhere in here, I think. Looks like there was quite a fight." Dr. Ward scowled at the overturned furniture.

There was more evidence of this than the ash tray and the chair which Sadie had seen. A bronze statue of Justice was on the floor near the foot of the bed, the scales broken off and dark smears which looked like blood showing on the metal.

"That the gun?" Dr. Ward nodded to-

ward a small automatic on a nearby table.

"Yep. It was on the floor near the bed."

"I suppose you've messed up any fingerprints that might have been on it."

"Fingerprints!" Steve Folmer snorted. "There's never any on a gun, Lucas." He saw the secretary standing in the doorway. "Come here, son," he called.

Dom Fuller came in. "Do you remember seein' a key in the lock of that door any time lately?" inquired Folmer.

Fuller's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I've never seen one. The room keys here had been lost before Judge Manchester moved in. He never bothered having new ones fitted."

Steve Folmer eyed the door tentatively. There was a bolt, separate from the lock, operated by a round knob inside the door.

"Miz Manchester says when she first came to the door, it was locked. It could have been locked with that. Then she came back again a couple minutes later and the door was open. If that's right, the killer was inside this room when she first tried the door."

"She could have made that up," commented Dom Fuller.

"Certainly, certainly," agreed the policeman. He looked at Bill Morgan, his assistant. "Find that cartridge shell, Bill? Or a bullet? The doctor says it went right on through."

"There ain't no cartridge in here," asserted Bill. "I'll look at the walls for a bullet hole."

"Keep lookin'. See here, Dom, who was here this afternoon—or up to now?"

"Several people," replied Fuller slowly. "Mr. Dilberg was here about four, with Mr. Habrick. Frank Avery called and stayed fifteen or twenty minutes after that. Mr. Lott came in about five. And Dr. Ward, of course."

WARD scowled. A sardonic twinkle glittered in his eyes when he finally spoke.

"Five as scoundrelly rascals as you can imagine," commented the doctor.

"Rinda Lott came with her father," added the secretary.

"Six," amended Dr. Ward promptly. "One female."

"Miss Lott didn't go in to visit Judge Manchester," volunteered the secretary.

"She stopped in Mrs. Manchester's rooms, and they had a fight of some kind. Miss Lott came downstairs all covered with powder. I heard her say it had been thrown at her by Mrs. Manchester."

"That I should have seen," said Dr. Ward regretfully.

Steve Folmer considered this item for a moment, then glanced at the secretary again. "Dom, this gun here—did the Judge own one like it?"

"He had no gun at all," asserted Fuller. "He disliked any sort of firearms."

"It's a German Mauser," said Folmer, as if to himself. "And probably is going to be some trouble to trace. Dom, you might as well call an undertaker to come out for the remains."

Dom Fuller started out, just missing a collision with Miss Walton, standing outside the door listening to what went on inside.

"You got something on your mind, Erminie?" growled the police chief. "Or, just snooping?"

"I got somethin' on my mind," she said. "You was sayin' somethin' about a gun?"

"Sure was. Know anything about that one?" Folmer jerked his head toward the table where the automatic was lying.

Erminie Walton walked across the room to stare down at the weapon.

"Miz Manch'ster," she said slowly. "She's got a gun just like that."

VII

THE door to Sadie's boudoir was open and Steve Folmer's bulk almost filled the opening. Sadie was still sitting on the chaise, brooding. Folmer walked across the chaise and held out the automatic.

"Ever see this before, Miz Manchester?"

Sadie's gaze wandered past him to the doorway where she saw Dr. Ward and the housekeeper. They had tagged along behind Folmer. Then she looked at the gun in the policeman's hand.

"Looks like one I have," she said. "Only, mine's broken. Won't shoot."

"Where's the one you have?"

"In the table drawer."

Folmer went over and pulled out the

drawer. He rummaged around, then shook his head.

"It ain't here," he announced. "When did you see it last?"

Sadie frowned. "Why, I don't remember. But what's the difference? The one I had wouldn't shoot, I tell you. A fella I knew in New York gave it to me—asked me to get it fixed for him. Oh, a long time ago. He never came back, so I just kept it. I never got it fixed."

"Any idea what was wrong with it?"

"Some kind of pin, he said, was broken."

"Did he say firing pin?"

"Sounds as if. I wouldn't know."

Folmer pocketed the Mauser. "Funny, what became of yours—if this ain't it."

Sadie fixed Miss Walton with an accusing glare. "She knew the gun was in the drawer."

"That I did," admitted the housekeeper promptly. "But I don't know that it wouldn't shoot. You said it wouldn't, that's all."

Steve Folmer saw Dom Fuller in the doorway, looking as though he wanted to speak.

"What's burning your tongue, Dom?" he snapped.

"I've been downstairs," explained the secretary. "I saw Judge Manchester's keys sticking in the lock to his study. There's something queer about that. The Judge is—was very particular about the study. Never would let anyone in unless he was there himself. He would never have left his keys like that."

"H'm," stalled Folmer judiciously. "Was he in the study tonight?"

"I don't think so. He spent an hour or so there in the afternoon, writing out a decision on what he intended to do about this Fennsburg Steel holdings to read at the Board meeting tomorrow afternoon. He also drew up a new will."

Dr. Ward blew out his cheeks reflectively. "He didn't leave the keys then, because I saw them later in his rooms. You say he wrote a new will?"

Dom Fuller nodded.

"That's interesting," the police chief commented. "Who did he hurt, changing it from the old one?"

"I didn't see it. He sent me to get Dode Cain, the chauffeur, and Tucker, the stable man, to witness it. He said it had to be by someone who didn't benefit, to make it legal."

"That's right," commented Folmer. "Maybe I'd better go down and look at the study. Where is it?"

"Downstairs, I'll show you."

The three men wended their way to the stairs, down through the tenebrous silence of the reception hall and around to the short passage to the north gardens, into which the study opened. This wing also contained the library, at the front of the house, with Sadie's boudoir directly over it and the Judge's rooms behind hers. The secretary stopped at the study door, making a gesture toward the key container suspended from the lock. Steve Folmer turned the key and the three men filed in, the heavy door swinging shut behind them.

Folmer examined the desk with interest. He tried the drawers, but only the flat one in the center was unlocked and it contained nothing of interest.

"Bring me those keys out of the door, Dom," said Folmer, closing the flat drawer. "Maybe the desk key's there."

FULLER went back to the door and took hold of the knob. It failed to turn as he twisted. He tried again, with no better result.

"We're locked in!"

The three men stood there, staring at the doorknob. The keys were on the other side.

"How about the door to the garden?" suggested Dr. Ward fretfully.

The trio trooped across the room. The garden door, too, was firmly locked.

"I'll be jiggered," growled Folmer with rising wrath. "We'll have to whack on the other door. Maybe somebody will hear us."

"Let us whack," agreed Dr. Ward.

They tramped back toward the hall door, but Steve Folmer abruptly fell out of line. He made a detour toward the end of the room containing the piano. Something bright on the rug had attracted his attention. Grunting, he stooped to pick it up. It was an exploded cartridge.

"Looky here!" he shrilled. "The shell from the gun which killed Ashley Manchester." Then he hedged discreetly. "That is, I guess. Same caliber, anyways."

Dr. Ward came to look. "How'd it get in here?"

"Now you got me, Lucas. How?" Fol-

mer glanced around the room with renewed interest. "Nothing to show the old man was shot in here and went upstairs after. He couldn't of, I suppose, unless somebody toted him up."

"Ridiculous," scoffed Dr. Ward. "With an artery in his neck cut by the bullet? There would have been a trail all the way through the reception room and up the stairs, and what kind of a fool would take the chance of being seen before he got to the Judge's rooms with him?"

"Doesn't make sense," admitted the police chief. "But here's the empty cartridge."

"We don't know that it is," disputed the physician.

"We can maybe find out."

Folmer fished the automatic from his pocket and removed the magazine. There were six cartridges in it. The weapon was designed to shoot seven shots at one loading. The police chief compared the loaded cartridges with the empty one he had found.

"It's the one, all right. But I'm jiggered if I see how it could have got down here. Come on, let's get at the door whacking."

They beat on the door for some time before anything happened, other than bruised fists. Then, as they paused to reconsider the situation, the rattle of the key turning in the lock sounded pleasantly in their ears. The door opened and Chris Dilberg's pinkish face appeared.

"Thought I heard somebody in here," he said. "Where's the Judge?"

"You haven't heard?" Dr. Ward looked at Dilberg questioningly. "Ashley's dead. Somebody shot him."

Steve Folmer pulled out his watch and glanced at it. It was past midnight.

"How long've you been in the house, Chris?" he asked.

"Why, five minutes—maybe. I rang the doorbell several times and no one came, so I walked in."

"You telling me that you come here to talk to Judge Manchester at this time of night?"

"That's right, Steve. It's like this. I got to thinking about something the Judge said this afternoon while I was here. The more I thought about it after I got home, the more it worried me. It sounded like he meant to sell out to Eastern."

"So you come legging it here to talk to him about it?"

"Exactly. Steve, every cent of money I've put aside in the last thirty years is invested in Fennsburg and Dale Valley property. You realize what it would mean, if the Judge sold out to Eastern, I suppose?"

"Sure. You—and a lot of others—would be left holding the bag."

"Well, that's why I came back here, even if it was late. The Judge was to announce what he intended to do tomorrow at a Board meeting. I had to talk to him tonight, to persuade him to reconsider."

STEVE FOLMER shrugged. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you came along. The lock on the door there got stuck, or something."

Chris Dilberg smiled faintly. "No, it didn't," he said. He went on to explain. "The locks on all the doors of this room are ones I designed for the Judge. He wanted locks that could only be opened from outside the room. Figured you can't keep thieves out, but might keep 'em in, once they got there. Seems it worked."

Dr. Ward's gaze was chilling. "That last reference," he said. "Was it meant to include us in the criminal category?"

"Course not, Lucas. You see, when you unlock the door, one turn lets you in, but the door locks again when it swings shut. If you'd turned the key *twice* around, it would have stayed unlocked. Slick, eh?"

"Too slick." Steve Folmer glowered. Dr. Ward cut in brusquely. "Why didn't it trap the person who dropped that empty cartridge?"

The police chief looked at him. "I been thinking about that very thing," he said. "How do you know it didn't?"

"What do you mean?"

"This. Mightn't the killer have been trapped in here, like us, and then the Judge come downstairs and see his keys in the lock? Naturally, he'd open up, to see who was in here. Then the killer up and shot him. After that, he lugged the Judge back to his room and dumped him on the floor an' scooted."

Dr. Ward considered briefly, then shook his head. "Can't agree," he said. "Unless you can point out why he carried him back to his room, and why

there's not a trail of blood all the way upstairs—and more on the floor here. There ought to be a lot of it—from a wound like that. No, Steve, I don't think that's the way it was."

Steve Folmer grunted. "Neither do I," he said. "Well, let's see if we can get into this desk."

Fifteen minutes of sifting through the contents of the drawers, after having located the proper key in the container, failed to turn up either the decision Judge Manchester had written or the will. Folmer looked up to see Bill Morgan standing in the open doorway. "What is it, Bill? Find the bullet? We found the shell in here."

"No sign of a bullet up there, anywhere," the cop replied. "But look here, Chief. While I was searching around, I heard a buzzer go off in the room—two or three times. I hunted for it, but couldn't get it located. Sounded like it came from the closet opposite the bed, but there's no buzzer in it."

Steve Folmer looked at Dom Fuller. "Know anything about that?" he asked.

The secretary shook his head. The police head sat at the desk, thinking about this for a few silent minutes. Suddenly his eyes brightened. "Go back up there, Bill," he said. "And if you hear that buzzer again, let me know right away." Then a minute or so after the echo of Morgan's boots had died away, he tilted back in the swivel chair, pulling the flat drawer out as he leaned, then shoved it back into place.

Bill Morgan reappeared in the doorway. "The buzzer went off again," he said. "I'm sure it's in that closet, but I can't find it."

Folmer nodded and straightened up in his chair. "Yeah, I thought it would. It's this drawer here. When you said the buzzer went off three or four times, I remembered opening and shutting the drawer about that often. It's one of the Judge's trick burglar alarms. Your idea, Chris?"

The inventor shook his head. "Not mine," he disclaimed.

"We got to find where that buzzer is up there," announced the police chief. "But not tonight. Other things are more important. Know anything about guns, Chris?"

"How do you mean, Steve? I'm a rotten shot. The glasses I have to wear for

distance to see the target, make the sights just a blur."

"I wasn't asking how good a shot you are. I meant, about the mechanics of a gun—an automatic." He reached across the desk for the murder weapon. "Could you look into the innards of this shooter and tell if it's been repaired?"

"That would depend on what's been done to it," the old inventor said, taking the gun. He turned it over two or three times in his hand, staring down at it. Then he took off his spectacles. For close, fine work his myopic vision was keener without glasses. "It's an old gun," he went on, "so it may be possible to tell if a part has been replaced. A mere adjustment probably wouldn't show. Is it the . . . murder weapon?"

Folmer nodded. Dr. Ward, watching him, grinned sardonically.

"You can't be sure of that, Steve, till you find the bullet and get a check on it," he scoffed.

"I know that," replied Folmer undisturbed. "I'll give fifty to one it's the murder weapon, though."

DILBERG brought out a pocketknife that was a complete set of small tools. Selecting a small screwdriver blade, he began taking out the screws which held the automatic together. The others watched in silence as he disassembled the weapon on the polished surface of the desk. Before he had finished, the gaunt figure of the housekeeper appeared in the doorway. The men, she said, from the undertaker's were in the hall.

"All right," said Folmer. He motioned to Bill Morgan. "Take 'em up, will you, Bill?" He turned to Dilberg. "Well?"

"This gun *has* been repaired," Chris Dilberg announced. "What gave you the idea that it had, Steve?"

"Sadie Manchester," cut in Dr. Ward, "said she had a gun like this one, but that it wouldn't shoot."

"What was fixed, Chris?" asked Folmer, ignoring Dr. Ward.

"The firing pin. It's a new one."

"Okay. Put it back together again." Folmer stood up. "How much of a mechanic would a man have to be to do a job like that?"

"Well," said Dilberg, "it would have to be someone with a knowledge of metal working. I'd say, from this new pin,

whoever made it knew quite a bit about it."

The police chief walked around the desk and to the hall. The undertaker's men were carrying a long basket through the front doors.

"Bill," Folmer said, "you'll have to stay here all night, I guess. I'm dog-tired. I'm going upstairs for a minute, and then I'm going home. Get that gun from Chris, when he puts it together."

"Will Mrs. Manchester stay here?" queried Morgan.

"That's what I'm going upstairs to find out. Don't seem like there'd be any place around here for her to go, this time of night. If she does stay here, see to it nobody gets near her rooms. I'll be out early in the morning." He broke off. "Who's that?"

It was Miss Walton, and with her, a dark, huskily built young man.

"This is Dode Cain, Steve," the housekeeper explained. "He's the chauffeur. Thought mebbe you'd want to see him."

"Where you been all night?" the police chief demanded sharply.

"In my apartment over the garages," returned Cain. "Ever since dinner. I—I didn't know about this, till Erminie came and told me just now. I went to bed about nine o'clock."

"Alone?" rasped Folmer.

"Naturally."

"I suppose Erminie here waked you up with a kiss," Folmer growled. "Right touching. You've got lipstick on your neck."

Cain moved his feet uneasily. "I saw a girl before I went up to my rooms," he admitted.

Erminie burned him with furious, outraged eyes. "You been foelin' around Serena again, Dode? Can't you leave that girl alone?"

"She don't leave *me* alone," he retorted. "Well, so what? She wasn't with me in my rooms."

"Might have been better for you, if she had been," Folmer said caustically. "All right. I'll have another talk with you in the morning, Cain."

Toiling wearily up the stairs, the fat police head went on around to Sadie's quarters, stopping en route to close the door to Judge Manchester's. He was mildly surprised to find that Sadie had changed into a black satin dress in his absence.

"I was wondering whether you mean to stay here tonight, Miz Manchester," he said, stopping in the doorway and eyeing her reflectively. "I see you've changed your dress."

Sadie made a gesture with her hand. "Where else would I stay?" she asked. "I've no friends here."

"I wouldn't say that," countered the fat man. "But I'm keeping Bill Morgan—the cop who's with me—here on the place tonight, so you won't need to be scared."

"Oh, I'm not scared about anything that might happen to me tonight," she said. "Only that you won't find out who killed Ashley and—that I'll get blamed for it."

"You needn't start worryin' about that, Miz Manchester," he assured her. "I don't see yet where you gain special from the Judge's dying."

"The money." Sadie smiled bleakly.

FOLMER shook his head. "You'd of got that anyway. Unless he left you out of his new will."

"He didn't."

Folmer raised his eyebrows. "Did he tell you what was in it?"

"Yes, just before I went downstairs to dinner tonight. He tol' me that because someone tried to poison him he had reduced all the other shares in the estate but mine. Oh, no—there was one that stayed the same. The heirs of the couple in the tomb in the garden—Eblis."

"Joe Eblis, eh? You know, that's right queer, considering everything."

"It was sentiment, he said."

"H'm. Know anything about the Eblises, ma'am?" Sadie shook her head. "Joe Eblis was hanged for murder, oh, about thirty years ago. Judge Manchester sentenced him. Nobody ever felt sure Joe was guilty and I guess the judge felt the same way. Not much you can do to make it up to a man who's already had his neck stretched on the gallows. But that must have been the Judge's idea."

"Is that the man out there in the tomb?" asked Sadie, with dull interest.

"That's the one. Mrs. Elbis stayed here for a while afterwards and then went off somewhere. Three, four years ago, her body was shipped back, with instructions to put it by her husband's.

The Judge said it was all right. He had this place then."

"Ashley left a lot of money for their heirs, if there are any." Sadie looked at the police chief curiously. "Are there?"

Folmer shook his head. "I don't know. It's something that'll have to be looked into. Well, I'll see you in the morning, Miz Manchester. Don't worry that pretty head *too* much."

Returning to the study, he found Dr. Ward and Chris Dilberg sipping coffee which Miss Walton had brought them. Bill Morgan was standing by the desk, examining the automatic which Dilberg had finished reassembling. Dom Fuller was still present, too, while the housekeeper and Dode Cain lingered in the doorway.

"Mr. Folmer," said Dom Fuller uncertainly, "I've been meaning to tell you something. When I came home from Dalebridge tonight, I came in through the side entrance into this hall. When I got to the reception room, I saw a strange man leaving at the front."

"Wh-at?" roared Steve Folmer. "A stranger, did you say?"

"Yes, sir. I hurried after him, but by the time I had gone out on the terrace, he was gone—I think down the steps into the croquet court."

"That all you saw, Dom?" pursued Folmer.

"Yes—no, it wasn't. I saw Mrs. Manchester going upstairs while I was still on the terrace."

Folmer frowned. "Sure it was her? Well, I guess that don't matter so much. She told me she had been outside just before she found the Judge's body." Steve Folmer turned to the doctor. "Lucas, you knew the Eblises, didn't you. Manchester left the Elbis heirs a pile of money, I understand. Did Joe and his wife have any children?"

Dr. Ward's forehead crinkled as he concentrated. "Yes," he said, after a pause. "One child. A girl. I delivered it—le's see, it must have been about Nineteen-Ten—"

"It wasn't a girl," Miss Walton cut in vigorously. "It was a boy—and he was six years old when they hanged his father."

Dr. Ward shrugged indifferently. "Maybe so, Erminie. When you've delivered as many brats as I have, you

don't even try to remember their sex." He looked at the housekeeper with curiosity. "How do you happen to know?" he asked. "You weren't any more than a baby then, either."

"That's nothing to do with what I know," retorted the housekeeper. "And I think it's time decent people went to bed, murder or no murder."

"Erminie's dead right about that," said the police chief, grinning. "Coming Chris—Lucas?"

Dr. Ward shook his head. "Nope. I'm staying here, if Erminie will put me up." He glanced at her inquiringly. "And I know she will. It's handy to have a doctor in the house, in case anybody else gets shot at—or something."

VIII

FOLLOWING the noisy departure of Steve Folmer's car, and the subsequent withdrawal of Chris Dilberg's less rickety vehicle, Sadie opened her door, and looked down the hall. Beyond Judge Manchester's room, she saw Bill Morgan in a chair tilted back against the wall. She closed and bolted the door, and went to bed. Then she pulled the chain to put out the bed lamp, and lay there in the darkness, thinking, until she tensed at a faint sound which seemed to come from the little sitting room, separated from the bedroom by an arch. She tugged at the chain, but there was no flaring response of light.

A thin beam, intensely white, suddenly sprayed her face.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," a low voice said. "I'm Jubal Faust, Sadie. I want you to tell me a few things about the murder. I've got to know."

"Jubal Faust?" Sadie felt queerly shocked. "How did you get in? I bolted my door."

"Through your sitting room window, by way of an accommodating tree. First, of course, removing the fuse to your lights. For the time, it's better that you won't recognize me. Now I want to know if you saw Judge Manchester's keys yesterday afternoon, by any chance. If so, where and when."

Sadie recalled having seen them on the table in the Judge's sitting room at the time of Dr. Ward's visit late in the afternoon and told Faust.

"Who was there? Besides Ward?"

"Mr. Dilberg and Mark Habrick."

"That all?"

"When I saw the keys. Afterwards, there were other people. Ed Lott and Frank Avery. Dom Fuller, probably. But I didn't go in there again until just before dinner."

"The keys were gone then."

"How do you know?"

"Because I was there just before you came in. Judge Manchester asked me to take the bottle, the wrapper and the box, to see what I could make of them. There were no keys on the table then."

"You came upstairs to his room, without anyone seeing you?" Sadie sounded incredulous.

"I have my own way of getting about—unseen. By the way, who found the keys?"

"Dom Fuller," replied Sadie. "You only know so much, don't you?" she added.

"That's why I need you, to finish out where my knowledge leaves off. We are in a hot spot, Sadie Manchester. Between us, we may do something about it."

"You don't think that I did it?"

"No."

"I think you killed him," she said huskily.

"You'll have to take my word for it that I did not," the voice returned.

"I won't. You won't let me know who you really are." Sadie brought her hand over her eyes to shield them from the blinding flashlight beam. She tried looking through her fingers, hoping to see the intruder well enough to recognize him later, but it didn't work. All she saw was a shapeless mass and a lighter spot which might have been his face. "I wish you'd shut off that light," she said. "It hurts my eyes—and I couldn't see you, anyway."

"You'll have to put up with it—I shan't be much longer," he answered firmly. "I suppose you saw the body before it was moved?"

"Naturally, I found him."

"Did you notice that one foot was bare? The other wore a blue slipper with a pompon over the toe?"

"Yes."

"Mention this to Folmer—that you saw only one slipper. Make it casual, as though you were only curious."

"All right. I guess I can do that."

"Good! Now, who was the man you met in the croquet court?"

SADIE froze for a moment. She'd been conscious of a third person's presence in the garden and later decided it had just been nerves. "What difference does it make?" she asked.

"I found him, later on, in the croquet court, unconscious, bleeding from a nasty gash on his forehead."

"Oh!"

"A girl came out of the shrubbery and claimed him. I helped her get him into the car. Who was he?"

"He had nothing to do with the murder," Sadie insisted. "I wanted him to find out who tried to poison Ashley. He's a reporter. His name is Willard."

"The girl?"

"I don't know. I thought he was alone."

The silence was heavy as the stranger seemed to consider what she had told him. "I guess that will have to do," he said at last.

"Did you know that somebody shot at me up on the ridge?" Sadie demanded abruptly. "I was up there with a man, the night of the dinner party, last Wednesday."

"Are you sure that it was you he shot at?"

"No. It might have been—the man."

"I think it was. Frank Avery."

"How did you know?"

"I saw you leaving. But don't think I followed you."

"Do you know who did?"

"Not yet." The flashlight was retreating across the room. "I'm going, Sadie Manchester," the intruder said. "I'll be in touch with you."

"Now wait a minute!" she exclaimed. "Who are you?"

"You've seen me often enough," he said.

Frank Avery? The chauffeur Cain? Dom Fuller? She shrugged helplessly and gave up thinking about it. Then, without meaning to, she drifted off into a deep sleep.

In the morning, after considerable thought, Sadie decided in favor of getting dressed and going downstairs for breakfast instead of having it brought up. She had to know what was going on. Having descended to the reception hall,

however, she saw no signs of activity. Reaching the dining room, which was immediately to the rear of the drawing room, she found it equally deserted. She stood uncertainly by the long table for a moment, then hearing voices in the butler's pantry, went on to see about having a breakfast served. As she put out her hand to push open the swinging door, she heard something which caused her to try to stop her thrusting hand.

"—so, the very best thing you can do, Serena, is not to go popping off about this. It will only lead to worse trouble—"

Sadie's reflexes hadn't been quick enough. The door swung a little at the impact of her hand and the voice broke off. Then she pushed the door open and saw Serena and Mark Habrick. Both looked at her with startled expressions.

"Well, what's this?" demanded Sadie, in mock sternness. "Games in the pantry, at this hour of the morning?"

Mark Habrick grinned sheepishly. "It's never too early for fatherly advice."

"I thought your line was banking."

Habrick's grin still wavered. "You'd be surprised, Sadie, at the number of confessions a banker has to listen to."

Sadie smiled acidly. "And of course, Serena's one of your big depositors." She looked at the girl. "Serena, take it from me, the advice men give you behind pantry doors will get you nowhere you ought to go. How about some breakfast?"

"Yes, Mrs. Manchester. Right away."

Sadie turned from the swinging door and retreated to the dining room table, where she pulled out a chair and sat down. She heard Mark Habrick thrust his way through and heard his heavy footsteps as he came up behind her.

"I wouldn't want you think"—he came around her to sit sideways on a chair facing her—"that I fool around young girls."

"You would if they'd let you," returned Sadie indifferently.

Habrick let it go. "Serena has got herself into a little mess. I merely advised her against running to Erminie Walton with it. You know how much sympathy she'd get there."

"You were right about that, Mr. Habrick. Is there anything new this morning, about . . .?"

HABRICK shook his head. "I haven't heard anything, Sadie," he said. "Fat old Steve hasn't shown up here yet. He may have something to tell us, but I doubt it. This sort of business is beyond his ability, I'm afraid. In fact, I've been considering using my office on the Dalebridge town council to insist that Steve Folmer bring in someone competent to get results. He's not a homicidal man, of course."

"What's holding you back?"

"I want to see Steve first. If he hasn't any new development, I intend to round up the council today." He glanced at his watch, then pushed back his chair. "I've some telephoning to do, if you'll excuse me. I'm executor of the Manchester estate, and there will be things here needing attention. So I'm staying away from the bank today."

Sadie glanced at him with more lively interest. "Ashley told me he had made out a new will," she observed.

"Yes, I know. It is probably locked up in the wall safe in the study. Unless we find the combination in his papers, we'll have to send for a safe expert to open it."

As he walked away, Serena brought in breakfast. Sadie finished what she wanted of it and left the dining room. As she started across the reception hall, having no particular destination, she heard Rinda Lott's powerful voice coming from the library, the door of which stood open.

"Really, Steve, I can't see what you are waiting for. It's perfectly obvious she's guilty."

"Is it?" came the police head's drawl.

Alma Habrick's thin soprano chimed in. "Of course it is!"

There was a perceptible pause before Sadie heard Steve Folmer. "What do you say, Mark?"

"The ladies are vindictive," the banker said, half-humorously. "Valley women dislike girls of Sadie's type. As a jury, they'd convict her before they sat down in the box."

Rinda came in again. "Who else had the same chance of poisoning the Judge?" she demanded. "And right after she'd pulled that disgraceful exhibition to embarrass him? By the way, have you found out anything about the package the poison came in?"

"I haven't even got it. Dr. Ward told

me he left it in the Judge's room yesterday afternoon. We didn't find hair nor hide of it, and Bill Morgan's pretty well turned the rooms inside out."

"Sadie, again," Alma gloated. "You see?"

"My eyes, maybe, ain't so good as yours, Alma," the policeman said apologetically. "Nope. I don't see."

Sadie decided to go on in and make a try at defending her interest before those two women utterly destroyed them. Before she reached the library door, however, the group came marching out behind the portly police chief. Folmer came to an abrupt halt as he saw Sadie.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, surprise flooding into his ruddy face.

"Good morning," Sadie cooed, nodding at Rinda and Alma over his shoulder. "It's so dear of you *girls* to come! You've been so sweet and thoughtful all along—" She broke off, her hazel eyes reverting to the fat man. "Are you taking me to jail, Mr. Folmer?"

"Huh?" he grunted.

"I don't think I'd mind it so much, if you kept those two garbage-hunting seagulls out. You must be sure by now that it was my gun you found, and that it would shoot anyhow—without being fixed." She paused, inhaling sharply. "What are you waiting for?"

Steve Folmer stared in amazement. "I—I don't get all this," he mumbled.

Mark Habrick's big frame shook with a laugh which he didn't try very hard to repress.

"Another fine example of the female approach to a problem, Steve," he said. "What about that gun, anyway. Has it been checked?"

"Chris Dilberg gave it a going-over," said Folmer. "A new firing pin has been fitted into it. I've got a man out checking with all the gunsmiths around here to see if he can locate one who fixed the gun. Byfield, too."

"Does it have to be a gunsmith?"

THE police chief's glance rolled around to Sadie. "Ever work in a machine shop, Miz Manchester? Lots of women did during the war."

"I didn't. I did my bit staying up all night at the Interceptor Command, in New York."

Folmer's gaze rested on Sadie ap-

provingly. "I guess we all did what we could, Miz Manchester."

"Call me Sadie. Everyone else does, Mr. Folmer."

"Sadie," he said. "Sounds pretty."

"You see how it is," Rinda Lott said coldly. "Swell chance of our fat police chief solving anything with glamour dust shaking in his eyes! You're on the town council, Mr. Habrick. Why don't you insist that competent persons be brought in?"

Steve Folmer lost his temper. "Oh, shut up, Rinda!" he growled wrathfully. "If you don't, I'm going to forget you've grown up and spank you good, like I used to do when you were a nose-drippin' kid poking around where you hadn't ought to."

Rinda clutched at Alma Habrick's arm. "Come on, Alma. Let's get out of here. I only came to offer to sing at the ceremony tomorrow. I hardly expected to be insulted like this."

Mark Habrick watched the retreating figures with considerable calm.

Steve Folmer looked at Sadie. "Don't suppose you've seen Bill Morgan around, have you? He's overdue."

"I've just finished my breakfast."

Sadie's attention had been diverted momentarily by a leaf drifting down to the floor a couple of yards behind the two men. She glanced up automatically toward the plant boxes which lined the railings around the stair well above, just in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of something resembling a face withdrawing from the foliage. She thought of Jubal Faust, wondering if the face upstairs might not have been his; and this recalled her promise to mention the slipper with the pompon.

"Something I've been wondering about, Mr. Folmer," she said quickly. "Did you say Ashley fell down by the bed after he was shot?"

"That's the way it looked to me," he said. "Why?"

"I—I keep seeing his bare foot," she said. "Just one. The other foot had a slipper on. I suppose one was on the floor where he fell down. Is that how you knew where he was shot?"

Steve Folmer stared at her blankly, then blurted out, "Gee whillikins! Miz—Sadie!" His eye caught Bill Morgan, hurrying in through the front doors. "Bill!" he roared.

The uniformed cop came across the reception hall in long strides. "I know I'm late," he said apologetically. "But I've been plenty busy, Chief."

"You're going to be busier," promised Folmer. "Something we missed, maybe. Something we missed, okay, if you didn't see Judge Manchester's other slipper, while you were searching his room last night."

"By George!" exclaimed Morgan, crestfallen. "That's right. He only had on one and the other one wasn't anywhere in that room!"

Folmer nodded slowly. "Guess that settles something I ain't been at all sure about. The Judge wasn't shot in that room! That's why we didn't find the bullet, or a hole in the wall where it hit—and the empty ca'triddle was down-stairs here, in the study. Bill Morgan, we just got to find that missing slipper!"

IX

MARK HABRICK was saying, "The job's getting too big for you, Steve, as I said a while ago. Of course, I intend to support you, if you insist on working it out yourself, but frankly, Steve, there'll have to be some progress to report pretty soon. The newspapers will start to howl any minute now. You haven't given them anything to print except the bare announcement of the murder."

"What else is there?" demanded Folmer. "I was figuring on giving out something to keep 'em quiet this morning, and now this slipper business comes up."

"Something else, too," Bill Morgan said. "While I was down at the jail house, a highway cop came in. Said he'd just heard about the murder—and he had something to tell."

"Well, what?"

"He was patrolling Byfield Road last night. About ten-thirty or so, he pulled in at the gas station this side of the bridge. While he was there a blue convertible stopped for gas. Two people in it—one of 'em a girl. The other was a man—and he had been bleeding from a gash on his head. This highway cop went over and asked how come. The girl said they'd had an accident and she was hurrying him to a doctor. The highway

cop lets it go at that, but takes the license number, just in case."

"Somebody got hit with that statue up in Manchester's room," commented Folmer. "That might have made a pretty deep gash. Did you get the license number from the cop?"

"Yes. The convertible belongs to a reporter, named Nick Willard, who works on the *Register*. So I called the paper to see if he was there. He didn't show up for work this morning, they told me, and neither did a girl named Carolyn Charles. Everybody on the paper thought it was an elopement."

"H'm," rumbled Steve Folmer. "Eloping brides don't commonly sock their sweethearts over the head—at least, not right away. I'll want to know how he was hurt. Suppose you called the highway police and told 'em to watch out for Willard's car, didn't you, Bill?"

Bill had—and also discussed the case with the Fennsburg department. Steve Folmer plainly wasn't pleased about the latter.

"Okay, we might as well get on with the work here," the chief said. "Come on, Bill. I'm going to take another look at that pesky room. Don't suppose it will do any good, but we ain't going to get anywhere till we find out for sure whether the Judge was killed in it, or somewhere else."

"He must have been," Habrick called after him. "Or you'd have found blood on the stairs and carpet, wouldn't you?"

The fat police chief paused, screwing his head around to look back. "Maybe not," he said. "We might turn up a bloody rug or something he could have been rolled up in."

With Bill Morgan following, Folmer began the—to him—arduous ascent of the stairs. Habrick glanced at his watch.

"I'm expecting Frank Avery," he told Sadie. "Some matters about the estate to go over. And I guess I'd better get on the phone to get a safe expert out here as soon as possible. Nothing much can be done until that new will is found."

He went back into the library and Sadie wandered out to the terrace. She stood there a moment, thinking. Then a sharp hail caused her to look up, and she saw Frank Avery coming up the drive. She waited for him to join her.

"Within thirty days, I promised you," he said softly.

Sadie instinctively tried to match his low tone with the whisper of Jubal Faust. "Do you do it with tea leaves?" she asked.

"No. Only perspicacity. Of course, there's no need for me to offer condolence."

Sadie lifted one shoulder expressively. "You can save it, on account of it may come in handy later. I'm everybody's choice in this gallows sweepstakes, you know."

"Don't let it get you down, Sadie. There isn't a chance of pinning it on you. I'm doing a bit of investigation on my own. And, incidentally, I've got a clue about who it was that shot at us the other night. Now I've got to see Habrick. I'll hunt you up later."

He strode away toward the entrance of the house. Sadie went down into the croquet court, walked around the sides to the other end and up out of it. Presently she came across the gardener-butler tying up some rosebushes to sticks driven into the earth at the side of a path. He looked around at her approach and nodded.

"Good morning, Mr. Ballen," Sadie greeted.

"Mornin'," he replied, straightening up. "I'm right sorry to hear about your trouble, ma'am. Yes, I am."

You couldn't translate his nasal twang into the undertone in which Jubal Faust had spoken, she decided—unless this fellow was talking like a country-jake on purpose.

"Nice of you," replied Sadie automatically. "Thanks."

A LITTLE way farther along Sadie turned into a path which led steeply upward to the swimming pool terrace. It was a lovely, secluded spot to rest, whether one cared for swimming or not, with gaily colored outdoor furniture scattered along the laurel-screened side. She sat down in a wicker peacock chair, and closed her eyes, thinking dully how compelling the urge to sleep could be. A line floated in, "Ate a hearty breakfast before the hour of execution." She shuddered involuntarily.

The light thud of something striking the ground alongside the chair

ended the morbid trend of her thoughts. Her eyes popped open and she saw a long envelope close to her feet. From its appearance, it contained a bulky object and she could see writing in pencil on the address side.

She leaned over the arm of the wicker chair and picked it up, smoothing the envelope to read what was written on it:

Leave this stuff under hat bag on Judge's closet shelf as quickly as possible. It must be found there. Destroy envelope.

It was initialed with a flourish that Sadie decided could be a J.

Sadie tore open the end of the envelope and shook the contents into her lap. It was the shiny white cardboard box with the bottle of pills inside and the wrapper in which it had arrived at Hawk's Head. Her first thought was how dangerous it would be for this to be found in her possession. She didn't doubt that it had been tossed at her feet by Jubal Faust while she was drowsing, probably from the higher ground behind the laurels just in back of her.

Whether or not she carried out the penciled instruction, it would be a very fine idea to get the poison evidence out of sight as quickly as she could. She stuffed the cardboard box into the top of one stocking, the wrapper in the other, and slipped the envelope into the front of her dress. Then she got up and left the pool, taking a path which went through the shrubbery in a more direct line to the house.

She saw no one until she reached a flight of stone steps coming down into the garden outside the door to the side entrance. Then she saw the chauffeur, Dode Cain, just going through the gate into the kitchen yard. A moment later Frank Avery came into sight around a rhododendron bush.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, startled. "I've—I've just been looking for you."

Sadie stared at him coolly. "Any special reason?"

"I said I would." He grinned.

"Make it some other time, Frank," Sadie suggested. "It wouldn't look so good right now to get caught strolling in the laurels with you."

"That's quite right, it wouldn't," he acknowledged. "But I shall want to see you soon. I'll phone you."

He remained where he was, watching

her as she picked her way along the flagstone walk toward the side entrance. Sadie reached the archway into the reception room without seeing anyone else, but, arriving there, caught sight of Ed Lott coming from the front doors and heading toward the library.

She waited until he had gone on in and heard him greet someone. The voices of Mark Habrick and Steve Folmer replied. After a moment of consideration, she decided to use the servants' stairway at the rear and thus avoid being seen from the library. Before she was quite out of the reception hall, she saw Bill Morgan coming down the main stairs. But since he was facing the other way, she didn't think he could have seen her.

She wanted very badly to reach the Judge's rooms and dispose of the poison evidence according to the instruction on the envelope. The tense moment came when she arrived opposite the Judge's closed door. With a quick glance back down the corridor, she seized the knob and twisted it. The door opened easily. Sadie slipped in and closed it again.

She stopped for a moment and surveyed the sitting room. Most of the furniture had been piled in a corner and the rug taken up. The bed and small pieces had been pulled completely out of the alcove, leaving it stripped. She went across the sitting room and entered the alcove. At the closet door, which was closed, she topped, pulling up her skirts to retrieve the box and the wrapper. Then she opened the door to the closet.

"Gee!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening.

A PANEL composing part of the rear wall of the closet had been pushed in on hinges, revealing the top of a narrow flight of stairs. Sadie could see dark stains on the treads. The stairs, she knew without much thinking, must lead down to the Judge's study underneath. She wondered if the discovery hadn't been what sent Bill Morgan downstairs just as she was about to come up. To tell the fat policeman of his find.

Looking up, she saw the hat box spoken of in the note, on the upper of two shelves. At the same moment the lock on the door to the hall clicked and she froze at the sound of someone en-

tering the room, and then someone else behind the first one.

"I've been all over this room, inch by inch, Chief," she heard Bill Morgan say. "There's no slipper and no bullet hole anywhere."

"It's right curious, Bill," replied Folmer. "If you didn't see anything, it ain't likely I will, either. But I'll take one more look."

Sadie stood inside the closet, her nerves jumping. She started to reach up to drop the cardboard box and the wrapper on the shelf, then swiftly reconsidered. Finding her in the closet and that stuff on the shelf, when Bill Morgan had probably searched it thoroughly, wouldn't help her. They'd know in a minute that she'd put it there. She glanced at the open panel and almost in the same motion stepped through the opening, instantly aware that she hadn't been as silent as she meant to be.

"What was that?" demanded Bill Morgan's voice. "I heard something."

"So did I," agreed Folmer. "Like as if it came from the closet over there."

Sadie heard the tramp of heavy shoes across the bare floor outside. The panic of a moment ago was the dullness of complete ennui compared with the consternation that now assailed her. Holding the incriminating box and wrapper in one hand, she reached down and whisked off her pumps. Then, with the approaching footsteps coming close to the closet, she started down the narrow stairway. Beyond the third or fourth step was utter blackness.

Her foot, groping for the next step, came down on something soft and she barely succeeded in choking back a startled exclamation. The object felt like a soft slipper and even in her excitement she wondered if it were the missing one of Judge Manchester's. . . .

If Steve Folmer, cautiously descending the steep stairway, had not paused to pick up the bedroom slipper with the pompon over the toe, he would have caught sight of Sadie before she had time to get into the study and swing the concealing section of bookcases into place. With the pumps clutched against her and the damning poison evidence in the other, she ran to the garden door and found it locked. Then she raced around the desk to the other door, with the same result.

There was no other way out. The thought brought the listless courage of despair. Stooping swiftly, she thrust her feet into the pumps and then stood upright again. As the bookcase began to swing outward, she dropped the cardboard box and its wrapper into a wastebasket partly filled with crumpled paper. A second later Steve Folmer stepped into the room, followed by Bill Morgan.

"H'mph! Didn't expect to find *you* here, Miz Manchester," the chief growled.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Sadie drawled unevenly. "Who were you looking for?"

"Nearly anybody else. Looks as if you've been making a fool of me."

"I'm a little mixed up, myself," said Sadie. "That is—I don't quite understand what's biting you. I haven't done anything wrong."

"What was your reason for not telling me about this stairway?"

"Because I didn't know anything about it. I just found it a few moments ago."

"I suppose you were just walking around in the house and just happened to be in the Judge's closet and only by accident caught on how to open that panel," he jeered.

SADIE felt her insides freezing. "You and your men have been tramping all over the house since last night without even getting the idea that the stairway existed," she said. "Even a yokel cop should have doped it out that there must be a way in and out of the room upstairs that no one except Ashley and the man who killed him knew about. So, I thought I'd better take a look for it myself!"

Folmer's face flamed. "I ain't so sure it was a man. It was your gun—and a woman in a pinch can shoot good enough."

"Maybe. Could she also carry her victim up those stairs?"

"So you know he was shot down here, eh?" Morgan cut in.

"Wouldn't you say he was?"

"Judge Manchester was shot just behind that bookcase at the foot of the stairs," said Folmer. "Anyhow, there's a mess of blood there. All right, say you couldn't lug the body up those stairs.

But that ain't saying you didn't have help. This fellow Willard—"

"He wasn't upstairs—" Sadie broke off, too late.

"Oh, ho! Now we find out that Willard was here!" gloated Morgan. "This we didn't know before." He glanced triumphantly at his chief. "Looks like we're getting somewhere, boss."

"We've sure got to bring that feller in, Bill," said Folmer. "I'll be right curious about that crack on his head. *Somebody* got hit with that statue. Well, no use standing here gabbing. Come on, we'll go back upstairs." He turned to Sadie. "I ain't going to charge you yet, Miz Manchester," he said. "Not till we roun' up Willard and check on a couple of other things. But I warn you, don't try to set a foot outside this house. There'll be somebody watching all the time."

X

UPSTAIRS Sadie marched, straight to her rooms. Restless and more shaken than she dared admit, she got out of her clothes and showered, hoping to relax her kinked nerves. This helped, but not nearly enough. Then she dressed again, defiantly choosing a summer frock designed to be revealing. Emerging from her rooms she walked to the head of the staircase where she stopped to look down. She saw the tall, angular figure of the Fennsburg Steel sales manager, Ed Lott, standing outside the library door. He was talking excitedly to Mark Habrick who was listening without seeming to be particularly impressed.

"I tell you, Mark, this wretched little tart either killed Manchester, or engineered it," Lott declared. "She hoped he would die in a few months and leave her all his property. When he didn't—well, she decided to hurry things up."

"I never knew that you were so concerned about the Judge, Ed," commented Habrick placidly. "Or this girl, either. It wouldn't be because she spoiled Rinda's plans, would it? His backing would have put her in opera—she thought."

"Rinda had reason to expect marriage with the Judge. She really cared for him, despite the difference in ages. Their interests were mutual."

"Don't kid yourself, Ed. Rinda's mo-

tives were no different than Sadie's. Sadie, at least, was honest about it."

Ed Lott, gesticulating and mumbling heatedly, followed the banker into the library. Sadie came on downstairs, grateful for Habrick's defense, even though it conceded her mercenary standards. Suddenly hungry, she went to the pantry where she found Ballen, the assistant gardener, in the pantry, fixing himself some sandwiches.

"Have you seen Miss Walton—or Serena?" Sadie inquired. "I'd like my lunch."

"Steve Folmer come an' got both of 'em couple of minutes ago," the man said, spreading a thick smear of butter on the bread he had sliced. "Reckon I could fix you somethin'."

"No, never mind. I'll wait till they come back." Sadie started backing through the swinging door. "Anyhow, I'd like a cocktail first."

She crossed the dining room and went into the alcove bar. There she got a bottle of bourbon, vermouth and bitters from the shelf, and mixed a manhattan. Finishing, she came out from behind the bar and perched on one of the bar stools. She wondered dully why Steve Folmer had rounded up the housekeeper and Serena. Not to do her any good—he was convinced now that she had murdered Ashley. All he would be interested in would be the strengthening of his case, to make sure of conviction. Policemen were like that. Not many of 'em cared too much whether they arrested the right person.

Ballen came in from the pantry with a couple of sandwiches on a plate.

"Thought maybe you'd like these," he said apologetically. "It's right good ham—and I cut the bread thin, like women-folks like it."

"Oh, thanks," Sadie said, with a grateful smile. It wasn't the food as much as the friendly gesture. "Do you *think* that I killed my husband?" she demanded suddenly, searching the gardener's face for an answer he might avoid putting into speech.

The man's eyes were blandly candid. "I ain't ever been married," he replied. "I still got my original notions about women. The pretty ones can always get what they want without murderin' anybody. I don't see no reason to figger different with you, lady. I had me a big

argument with Dom Fuller about that."

"How does he feel about it?"

"Dom ain't been lucky with women, which is easy to see why, with him lookin' like a squirrel with a tummy-ache. Seems like he found the bottle of poison and the stuff it come in, in the study a while ago. He went runnin' to Steve Folmer with it—Steve bein' in the library with Ed Lott and Mark Habrick. After Steve looks at the wrappin' paper good, he says the package never had been mailed."

"That's what Dr. Ward said."

"Did he? Well, seems Steve was right curious about where the body who fixed it up could get a Brazil stamp. Ed Lott rec'lects that the Judge c'lected stamps, a long way back. Dom Fuller finds a stamp album in a shelf with other books, and sure enough, on a page where Brazilian stamps were stuck, one was missin'. Right in the middle of the page." He broke off, looking at something beyond Sadie.

"That wouldn't prove it was the same stamp."

"It does, though."

SADIE twisted around quickly on the bar stool and saw Dom Fuller standing in the archway to the drawing room. He was practically leering at her in badly suppressed exultation.

"The missing stamp was a series Nineteen-Thirty-Five, three hundred reis, brown and violet issue with a view of Gavea," he said pompously. "So was the stamp on the package. It would have been more clever to have used a later issue than that."

"If you had a choice, why didn't you?" flared Sadie. "You seem to know all about such things."

"If I had fixed up the package, I certainly should have." Dom lifted his chin slightly, giving Sadie the works with his stabbing contempt. "Mr. Folmer wants you in the library. At once!"

Steve Folmer wasn't in the library when Sadie got there. She waited a few minutes, then, when he did not appear, decided to look for him in the study. Dom Fuller was inside, emptying the contents of the filing cabinets and stacking them on the floor.

"Looking for more stamps?" she queried blithely.

"No. I'm hunting for the new will—

or the combination of the wall safe," he replied. "I don't suppose Judge Manchester trusted you with the combination."

"Of course he did."

"What is it? I've been hunting all over."

"It's his birth year. Where's Mr. Folmer? You told me he was in the library."

"Did I say the library? He's upstairs. What year was the Judge born?"

"I don't know that one," Sadie answered. "You'll probably have to take it up with his mother. She's in heaven."

Sadie turned around, heading back through the reception room to the stairway. A few moments later she was standing in the doorway to the boudoir. A lot of her clothes from the closets had been dumped on the bed and she saw Bill Morgan methodically going through the drawers of a chest. Ed Lott and Mark Habrick stood together in the center of the room watching Steve Folmer, who had just turned away from the garments on the bed. None of them saw Sadie immediately. Bill Morgan held up black lace step-ins, grinning.

"Making quite a mess out of my room, aren't you?" drawled Sadie. She gave Bill Morgan a hard-eyed scrutiny. "If you like my underthings so much, I'll send you some. Try those on for size."

Morgan's face showed more red than the sun had burned into it. Steve Folmer came around the foot of the bed. He seemed not amused.

"Things are beginning to pile up," he said hoarsely. "That gun. You had it repaired at the Byfield Gun Shop. The man I've got out checkin' the gunsmiths around here just phoned in."

Sadie's spirits sagged sharply. "How did it get to Byfield?" she demanded. "I've never been there."

"The gun was brought there by a woman wearing a red dress and a black hat. She was carrying a black patent leather bag. You've got a couple of red dresses here and Bill found a patent leather bag in one of the drawers there."

"I've never been in Byfield," Sadie repeated insistently.

"That's as may be," returned the police chief, looking at a slip of cardboard in his hand. "This woman also wore a polo coat. That's what you call 'em, like that one on the bed, ain't it?"

Sadie nodded. "It's a polo coat," she

said, "and there's probably hundreds of them in Dale Valley. I haven't worn that one since spring. In fact, I've been meaning to give it to Serena."

"You're a little too late," sneered Ed Lott. "Tell her what you found in the pocket, Steve."

Folmer displayed what he had in his hand. "I found this card of the Byfield Gun Shop," he said portentously. "The man who runs the place is on the way over here to identify the woman who brought the gun to be repaired. I want you to be wearin' one of your red dresses."

Sadie leaned against the doorjamb, her knees losing their rigidity. "He's coming here now?" she asked. Folmer nodded grimly. "Okay, then, brother, but do you intend to give me a fair deal—or put me in a frame for this man?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Show him more than one woman wearing red and black. Go get the maid, Serena, and put her in one of my red dresses. She's my size." Another thought came. "I happen to know she's been in Byfield lately, too."

"What's the use of all this horsing around, Folmer?" fumed Ed Lott. "You've already got enough evidence to support an indictment. Lock her up!"

"I'm runnin' this show," Folmer reminded him tartly. He turned to Morgan. "Bill, run downstairs and see if you can get Serena to volunteer to do this. She don't have to, if she don't want to."

Mark Habrick spoke up. "I think Sadie is entirely justified in demanding that this Byfield man pick out the woman he believes came to his shop from several others," he said. "I agree that his judgment would be influenced by a red dress and black hat, but I'm afraid that two women wearing similar outfits would only confuse him into a rash guess. Murder is serious business, Steve, not a parlor game."

"What's your idea, Mark?"

"Let this gunsmith have the opportunity of seeing Sadie and the girl together, but dressed as they are. Don't confront him with them. I've no faith in this police line-up method, when it comes to an ordinary civilian being asked to identify anyone."

Folmer digested this solemnly. "Wouldn't be surprised if that ain't a good idea, Mark," he said. "That's what

I'll do. But findin' this card in the pocket of that coat don't leave much doubt about who he'll pick."

* * * * *

Sadie stood between Chris Dilberg and Mark Habrick near the flower-banked casket at the iron gates to the Manchester tomb, only dully conscious of the eulogy droning from the lips of the minister. All of the Hawk's Head household were present. Erminie Walton, Dode Cain, and Serena, were in a little group of their own. Mr. Ballen, the gardener-butler, was somewhere behind Sadie. Ed Lott and the hateful Rinda stood nearby with Alma Habrick. Mark Habrick, Chris Dilberg, Dom Fuller and Dr. Ward were there also.

Her eyes stole a look at Serena. The girl was dressed in a gray suit, a trifle behind the fashion. She looked better than she had when the Byfield gunsmith had attempted to identify the woman who had come twice to his shop—once with the gun and then to pick it up later. He had been confused, even though not asked to select one of two women wearing red and black. Obviously considering that he must chose between them, he had given Sadie the nod, saying that he couldn't be entirely sure. His impression had been that the woman was a trifle taller. It wasn't fair, Sadie fumed. Serena, in flat heels, appeared to be a couple of inches shorter than Sadie.

There hadn't been any other developments. Nick Willard was still missing, the only reason Steve Folmer had delayed this long in formally accusing her. He was plainly of the opinion that the murder had been a dual enterprise of wife and lover.

The minister reached the close of his peroration and stepped aside for the pallbearers to roll the bier into the tomb. The crowd began to return to the cars on the driveway.

Sadie saw the bulky figure of Steve Folmer waddling purposefully toward her. He was still a couple of yards away when someone shouted. Swinging his head around, surprise lighted up his ruddy face. Following his gaze, she saw a uniformed policeman approaching. She didn't see him very clearly as Nick Willard and a strange girl came marching along before him.

"Of all the places!" Steve Folmer

mumbled, then started lumbering across the grass.

Dilberg and Habrick walked a few paces after him, staring at the approaching reporter. No one was looking at Sadie when she felt a touch at her elbow. When it occurred to the police chief to glance back, he stopped flatfooted, fresh surprise flooding into his eyes.

Sadie was gone.

XI

BRAKES squeaked shrilly as the roomy but ancient sedan of Ballen, the Manchester's gardener-butler, came to a coughing stop opposite the red gate. Ballen climbed out and walked briskly to the gate, pushed it open and disappeared through the opening. About five minutes later, he came out again and went over to the car, stopping alongside to peer in through the window over the rear door. Then he twisted the handle and opened it.

"All right," he said. "Come out."

Sadie looked wild-eyed and harassed.

"Here?" she demanded huskily. "Why bring me here, after going to the trouble snaking me away at the cemetery?"

"Did you think I was helping you to run away?"

Sadie looked at the gardener-butler curiously. His voice had undergone a drastic change, showing no trace of the countryman's nasal speech.

"What are you trying to do with me?"

"Keep you out of jail while I finish up this work."

"You're Jubal Faust—I don't trust you," she said defiantly. "You set me up in that hidden stairway so that Folmer would catch me in it."

"Yes."

"Then why are you so suddenly anxious to keep me from being arrested?"

"I set you up—as you call it—to give the Judge's murderer the feeling that he was getting away with it. He had to feel secure before he made his next move."

"Nick Willard didn't do it," Sadie argued.

"I'm aware of that." Faust chuckled. "I found where he was hiding and chivvied him into the funeral procession without knowing where he was going. You see, I knew Steve Folmer intended to take you in after the ceremony at the vault. To snatch you out from under his

nose. I had to provide a diversion. It worked, by some miracle. There's even more to it. Folmer, after he had you locked up, would probably have gone home and called it a day. I wanted him here tonight."

"Why didn't you just come out and tell him, instead of all this fooling around?"

"Come on—I'll show you why."

He took the girl by the arm and escorted her to the red gate. Traversing the lower gardens, they came out through the hedge and went down into the croquet court.

"Do you see this croquet hoop?" He pointed toward a spot on the grass.

Sadie saw it. The stiff wire was badly bent.

"Your friend, Willard, was in too big a hurry to leave when he heard Dom Fuller coming in. He ran across here and tripped over the hoop, bashing his head on the coping around the court," Faust glanced at Sadie. "That, my dear, is all that he had to do with the murder."

Faust took Sadie's arm again and walked around the cement walk to the Eblis tomb where he stopped before the wrought-iron barrier, looking in.

"My parents," he said simply. "I told you a moment ago that I'd explain why I haven't been able to appear openly. Judge Manchester sentenced my father to hang for a crime it later became very doubtful that he had committed. While the Judge merely did his duty, I think you can realize that my appearance at this moment would have been foolhardy. I didn't dare reveal my identity—'like father, like son,' with a revenge motive tacked on. As Ballen, I should have been told to keep my nose in the garden."

"For all the good you've done me, that would have been swell."

"Don't be so sure." Faust smiled grimly. "Judge Manchester, of course, knew who I was. As a matter of fact, he made a modest provision for me in his will. I can claim it at any time I come forward as Julian Eblis."

"Modest, the man says!" exploded Sadie. "Four hundred thousand dollars! He told me so himself."

"What!" Faust's amazement was obviously genuine. "Why, I never supposed—" He shrugged. "Well, that would supply another motive for sending me to the chair. Come on. We'd bet-

ter get over to the other end of the court. I want to watch the house."

Sadie followed along. "If you didn't shoot Ashley, who did?"

FAUST climbed two or three of the steps toward the rim of the sunken court where he stopped to stare across the lawn toward the house. Sadie came up to join him.

"I can't give the killer a name," Faust said. "Did anyone stand to lose under the terms of the new will, Sadie?"

"Yes. Six families. The way I understood it, they were each to get fifty thousand dollars before. Ashley cut it to five grand apiece.

"Which families?"

"I only know of three—the Lotts, Habricks, and Dilbergs."

"How about Frank Avery? Erminie Walton, Dom Fuller?"

"He didn't mention them."

"Judge Manchester was Dom's god. He wouldn't have killed him under any circumstances." Faust angled a glance at Sadie, suddenly amused at something. "It was Dom who shot at you, up on the ridge," he added. "I found his gun in the glove compartment of his car. One shot fired."

"Nasty little rat!"

"He wasn't shooting at you, I think," assured Faust. "Avery was poaching."

"How do you know he didn't use that gun to kill Ashley?"

"It was an army forty-five. He was killed with a much smaller caliber."

"Like mine," responded Sadie succinctly. "You said you couldn't give the killer a name. What's your best guess?"

"The three best bets are Ed Lott, Dilberg, and Mark Habrick. Ed and Chris would have been sunk financially if the Judge made up his mind to sell out to Eastern. Possibly Habrick, too, but I've heard he has been unloading what he owns here. Any one of these three had opportunity to pick up the study keys. This is all aside from what they'd lose by the new will—and I know there's something in that will that makes it even worse for one of them."

"So you knew about the new will."

"I only know of something Judge Manchester told me he intended to put in it, not what you've just told me." Faust's words trailed off. "Look!" he whispered.

Sadie peered across the stretch of turf to the terrace and saw a bulky figure walking toward the front entrance.

"Dr. Ward!" she ejaculated softly.

"I didn't expect to see *him* here," muttered Faust. "Can one man constitute a family?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told me of six families, but only the names of three. Dr. Ward's the only one left of his." He paused, watching the doctor as he disappeared into the house. "Hang it! I hadn't considered this angle."

"Well, what're you going to do? Keep me standing here all night?"

"No. I've better work for you." He chuckled softly.

Sadie caught her breath. "Oh, you have! Setting me up again? I'm getting tired of being one of those wooden ducks, if that's what you're planning."

"Tonight's the pay-off. The safe expert will be here tomorrow, so the killer must get into the wall safe now. If he doesn't get the will, all his trouble will have been for nothing, and it will be one tough job to prove you didn't do the killing. You see, it's quite evident he's had that in mind all along—to make you the natural goat."

"I can see *that*, all right." Sadie grunted. "But I can't see letting you stick my neck out again."

"This time, I'll be right at your elbow."

"I should have waited for Mr. Folmer. By now, I would've been in a nice, safe jail."

"Ward's in the library. Come on—we've got to see what he's up to." Faust ran up the remaining steps.

SADIE hesitated a moment, then trailed Faust around the edge of the grass as he circled toward the lighted library windows that reached almost to the ground. Faust came to a halt opposite one which gave a good view inside, pressing back into a blue spruce. Sadie joined him, conscious of the triphammer thud of her heart and vaguely irritated by it. Surely, old Dr. Ward wasn't anyone of whom to be afraid.

She saw him standing by the table in the center of the room, staring curiously around at the crowded bookshelves, as though uncertain of the location of what he had come for.

"Ed Lott!" whispered Faust.

Sadie saw the tall figure of the sales manager in the doorway to the reception hall and behind him, Rinda and Frank Avery. Apparently Dr. Ward heard them, as his shaggy head swung around.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Lucas," growled Ed Lott, coming on into the room with Avery and Rinda at his heels. "Looking for something?"

"Thought maybe I'd find Sadie here, being the most unlikely place for her to run to," said the doctor. "Any special reason for you folks coming?"

"Frank had an idea about that safe combination," said the sales manager. "Seems that Dom Fuller told him that Sadie said it was the numbers in Manchester's birth year."

"Chris Dilberg said that should be in the family Bible," chimed in Rinda.

Sadie saw another delegation in the doorway—Chris Dilberg's pink face, and Alma Habrick. As she looked, Mark Habrick also came into view.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Habrick. "What's going on here?"

"A little game we thought up," responded Dr. Ward. "Eenie, meenie, minie, moe, how old was Ashley."

"The birth date, Mark," said Lott. "It is also the combination for the wall safe in the study."

"I was under the impression that I am the administrator of the estate," commented Habrick frostily. "It would seem to be in my province to attend to opening the safe."

"I had no intention of doing so without notifying you, Mark," growled Lott. "Frank was the Judge's attorney, you know. He was going to get you on the phone if we found the date in the family Bible. As for opening the safe, remember that it is in the Judge's study which is locked up. Steve Folmer has the keys."

Habrick nodded. "Of course," he said. "Well, let's see if we can locate the Bible."

This didn't take long. Rinda Lott came from a corner of the library which Sadie wasn't able to see, bearing the heavy, silver-clasped volume which she deposited on the table. Habrick opened it up to the center pages.

[Turn page]



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"Eighteen seventy-two," he announced. "Well, if we knew where Steve was, we could probably open it up."

"He's scally hootin' around trying to locate Sadie Manchester," said Dilberg.

"There's no crushing hurry about this," said Habrick. "Tomorrow will do just as well."

"How about calling a meeting here for tomorrow morning—say at ten o'clock," suggested Chris Dilberg. "You could do that, couldn't you, Frank—to read the will?"

"As Judge Manchester's attorney, I suppose you mean," replied Avery. "Sure, if that suits everyone. I've only two objections. One, as an heir to the estate, Sadie will have to be present—"

"Wives who murder their husbands don't inherit, you know," Rinda Lott interrupted.

"She'll have to be present—or represented," amended Avery, with a sour look at Rinda. "Wives such as you mention lose no rights until they are convicted. My second point is, we don't know for a certainty that the will is really in that wall safe. I presume it is, but we may find that it is not." Avery looked at his watch. "I have a dinner engagement," he said. "Shall we be getting on?"

PRESENTLY Sadie became aware of Jubal Faust's quiet breathing close to her ear as she watched the party in the library filing out into the reception hall. Ed Lott, the last, closed the door behind him as he went out. Sadie turned to Faust.

"Your suspects are leaving," she said. "All in one lump."

"But not all in one car," he returned. "Now I will really have to move. I hope none of them comes up the road as far as the red gate and sees my car."

"Where are we going now," demanded Sadie. "I ought to go to Dalebridge and check in at the jail house. This is getting me nothing."

"You aren't going anywhere," said Faust. "I have a key to the garden door of the study, which I have used when I needed to see the Judge privately. I'm going to let you into the study, to wait until I get back with Steve. It's practically certain he's gone to the cabin I live

at, up Byfield Road, to wait for us to show up. He'll have learned that you left the cemetery with me."

Sadie shook her head. "You're going to leave me in no study, Mr. Faust! What was that business you gave me a while ago, about 'being righ' at my elbow' when things started popping?"

"If you'll do what I want you to, you'll be all free and clear within an hour."

"Spill what you want me to do before I give in again," she insisted.

It took Jubal Faust several minutes to tell her—and some after that to persuade her. She didn't like the idea of sitting alone in Judge Manchester's study, waiting for someone who was probably—certainly, if Jubal Faust was on the level—the one who had shot Ashley Manchester. And, if the person came, what Faust proposed would stretch her courage and skill beyond anything that had ever been required of them before.

XII

ONCE more she was a wooden duck, Sadie thought resentfully. She had been sitting in the study as a decoy for about fifteen minutes, at first grateful for the silence of the big house and then appalled by it. The servants, she supposed, had either retired to their rooms, or gone off somewhere. The silence had begun to ring in her ears, and the desk lamp she had turned on, after Jubal Faust had let her in by the garden door, didn't do much more than create a lot of fear-inspiring shadows here and there in the room.

Her senses snapped to the awareness of a faint creaking sound. The stairs, the hidden ones, were not so well built as everything else in the chateau. Someone was coming. She fought to pull herself together, for the control she knew she would need desperately, if what Jubal Faust had assured her was to happen were true. Steve Folmer and Faust, returning for her, would not come that way. She stared fixedly at the section of bookcase that covered the entrance, stared so hard that she could almost read the titles of the calfskin legal books that filled it. The creaking became more audible.

The bookcase began to swing out. She saw the beam of a flashlight in the opening. It winked out as the holder realized there was a light on in the study. Mark Habrick stepped out, looking not so surprised as she might have expected.

"Sadie!" His voice somehow startled her. "What are you doing here?"

"Maybe waiting for you," she answered.

He closed the stair entrance. "I rather suspect you imagined this a good place to hide," he said tentatively. "Rather clever, if it had worked."

"It worked."

Habrick lifted his eyebrows. "It seems not. You've been found."

"I expected to be, but I didn't think it would be you." She managed a hard, crisp smile. "I was curious to see who it was that killed Ashley."

"Why did you suppose the murderer would come here, Sadie?"

She made a gesture of indifference with her slim hand. "The new will is in the safe over there. He had to get it tonight, before the safe-man came tomorrow—or before Frank Avery got it open with the birth date numbers. But don't get me wrong, Mr. Habrick. I don't care who killed Ashley. All I want is that I don't go to the chair for it."

"I see," he replied. "Do you expect this killer to get you clear, someday?"

"Now that I know who it is, I do," she answered. "If it had turned out to be Ed Lott—no. He would have sold me down the river. You won't."

"You really think that I killed the Judge?"

She smiled knowingly, looking up at him. "Have you a cigarette? I need one and I haven't any."

Habrick reached in his pocket and came up with a package. She pulled one out and stuck the end in her mouth.

"Match?"

He got out his matchcase—the Fennsburg Steel souvenir—and handed it to her. She tore out one of the paper matches and struck it, eying the side of the case. The plow insignie was missing.

"Of course you killed him," she said. "I found the little shield with the plow on it outside his door, right after he was killed. It came off this. It was still fas-

[Turn page]

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tened on that afternoon—I noticed it when you gave Dr. Ward a light at the foot of the stairs. Remember?"

"Is that your best evidence?" Habrick asked.

"No, but what's the difference?" She shrugged again. "I don't mean to tell on you. I said before, it doesn't matter to me who did it. What does matter is that you've got to help me get out of it."

"What do you propose?" he taunted. "I could agree to anything now, and act differently later, you know."

"Go ahead and get the will out of the safe," she said. "Then give it to me. I'll hide it somewhere else and turn myself in to Steve Folmer. When you get me clear, I'll tell you where it is."

HE blinked quickly, but Sadie caught it and knew what he was thinking. Abruptly coming to a decision, he walked to the wall safe and began experimenting with the dial. There were several possible combinations of the numbers in Judge Manchester's birth date.

Sadie watched him. She dropped the cigarette on an ash tray, then picked it up again and stubbed it out. He was still twiddling the dial. She pulled up her skirt and thrust something in the stocking top. Glancing up, she saw him pulling open the round door to the wall safe.

"Keno!" she said softly.

He glanced back at her, his eyes enlarged with controlled excitement.

"Right," he mumbled. He pulled out a couple of long envelopes and glanced at them. What he read satisfied him. As Sadie had expected him to, he thrust both envelopes in an inside pocket and smiled grimly. "There, my little cigarette peddler, this settles that matter, doesn't it?"

"Aren't you going to give me the will?" she asked quietly.

"Certainly not. I see no reason to trust you with it. You see, the Judge unfortunately told me that he was taking the administration of the estate from me and giving it to a Byfield bank. I couldn't have that, my dear."

"You rat! What are you going to do now?" she demanded.

"Bid you good evening—go back up the stairs, bolting you in as I go, of

course, Steve Folmer will be happy to let you out."

"I can't stop you, can I?"

"You certainly can't." He strode across the room toward the hidden stairs. "I hope Steve won't be too long in coming."

Sadie threw her head back and laughed. "You fool!" she exclaimed. "I can prove that you were here. You don't know it, but you might just as well have written your name in a guest book."

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, starting back toward her.

"With that entrance bolted and both doors locked—how could I have got in?" she taunted, and her courage soared at something else. "I have your matchcase. I've no cigarettes, and there's a fresh butt on the ash tray. But even that doesn't matter, now. You can't get out either."

"What's to stop me?" He was still moving toward her.

"Jubal Faust," she said. "Listen. You can hear him coming down the stairs."

* * * * *

Flesh-colored chiffon draped on a chaise near the front windows of the apartment contained, covered, but did not altogether conceal the delectable figure of Sadie Manchester. This, she thought lazily, is the life! Without the trouble of even moving her tawny crowned head, she could look out at Radio City, harsh in the sunlight haze of late afternoon.

Two days had gone by since Jubal Faust, and Steve Folmer had interrupted Mark Habrick's hastily contrived plan to leave Sadie locked in Judge Manchester's study. The banker had not even put up a fight, but just sort of wilted before irretrievable disaster. Sadie wasn't too clear about it all. The letdown from the tense ordeal she had gone through had left her sensitive only to the wonderful feeling of dissipated worry and fear. Now that she'd had time to reflect, she found there were some things her curiosity would like to have cleared up.

The man was on his way upstairs to settle this matter. Julian Eblis, he had announced himself on the house phone. The door buzzer sang and she got up,

[Turn page]

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trailing across the big living room like a ruffled, oversized bubble. She opened the door, but hesitated before she greeted him. In immaculately tailored clothes, a fresh haircut and all, he hadn't much resemblance to the man who had puttered around the rosebushes at Hawk's Head.

"Sorry I haven't been able to make it down before," he said—and sounding not in the least as though he were disturbed about it. "There were things to do, statements to make, and all that sort of thing, pending the indictment, you know. But I thought there might be a couple of things about the murder you would like to know."

"Well, there are," admitted the girl, and arranged herself on the chaise. Faust came over and sat on the end of the chaise, calmly pushing Sadie's glamorous feet out of the way.

"Shall I describe the murder first?"

VIGOROUSLY she nodded her sleek head and smiled.

"Go ahead," she responded. "No use trying to stop you, I guess."

"No use at all." Faust nodded. "Well, here it is: Judge Manchester was probably in bed upstairs when he heard the trick buzzer. So he knew, of course, that someone had opened the desk drawer in the study. He got up and foolishly came down the hidden stairs to investigate. Of course, Habrick was firmly locked in. As soon as the Judge opened the section of bookcase, Habrick shot him—with the gun Serena had taken to Byfield to have repaired."

"Serena?"

"Yes. Cain told me that he had taken her to Byfield one afternoon, wearing a red dress, black hat and a polo coat—your coat."

"My dress—one I gave her," Sadie murmured.

"When I jumped her about it, just before the funeral, she swore she had taken a package, without knowing what it contained, to the shop for Judge Manchester. I knew, of course, that he hated firearms to the extent that he wouldn't have one around, but she stuck to the story. Now she admits that Habrick had sent her. She was deathly afraid of him after the killing."

"Two of us were scared," commented Sadie.

"Having shot Manchester, Habrick could only leave by the stairs. Intending you to shoulder the blame, as he had all along."

"All along?"

"Yes. If this scheme to poison the Judge had succeeded, you were a set-up to take the rap. You see, he had planned for some time to do the murder, to insure his control over the Manchester interests as administrator. He had several plans, no doubt, but learning that the new will would remove him as administrator decided him on using the gun—*your* gun, which he had stolen and had repaired for just such an emergency.

"After the killing, he carried the Judge back to the bedroom and disarranged it to give the appearance of a fight. The broken statue was a nice touch, but not as clever as he supposed. If suspected, he would have shown no mark of having been hit with it. But, if he'd considered, that would be true of you, also.

"Before he could get out into the hall, you came along. He had to wait until he heard you go into your rooms. Then he left, taking the back stairs and leaving by the kitchen door.

"You see, Sadie, the thing that damned him irrevocably was his using the hidden stairs when he returned for the will. That passage was known only to Steve Folmer, yourself, Bill Morgan—and the killer. Of course, me, too. It had been built by my father and Judge Manchester didn't know it was there until I came to work for him. I made use of it when I wanted to confer with him, without being seen going and coming from his rooms."

"Smart as the devil, aren't you?" taunted Sadie. "Is Habrick going to get convicted?"

"It's a certainty. Were you ever in Canada, Sadie?"

"No."

"Banff is lovely in summer. Now that this is over, it would be a nice place for us to go."

"Us?" ejaculated Sadie, sitting up. "You mean—us?"

[Turn page]

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"You're my type," he said blandly.
Sadie's hazel eyes opened wide.
"When you make up your mind, you
really travel, don't you?" she asked
caustically. "Get this, Mr. Ballen Jubal
Eblis Faust—pick one—now that
Sadie's out of that mess. She's not even
dreaming of a man."

"Winter in San Francisco would be
fun, too," he added, without apparently
having heard her. "Or, perhaps Mex-
ico."

Sadie examined his face uncertainly.
She was beginning to wonder if that
vague urging she felt meant anything,
or if it was a response to this fella's
salesmanship. It was a new sensation.

"You see, darling," he went on, "I've
known hundreds of women, here and
there, but you are far the most com-
pelling I've ever met. You think this
over, and I'm sure you'll agree that the
two of us together will be far happier
than either, alone."

"I don't know," said Sadie reluctant-
ly. "Maybe. That's not what's bothering
me. The answer I can't get is what hap-
pens when a compelling woman meets a
compelling man." She looked across at
Faust gravely. "Something tells me that
she always gives in."

THE READERS' JURY

(Continued from page 8)

type of investigating that Inspector
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To get back to E. C. R. Lorac and the
type of entertainment in store for you
in "A Screen for Murder," we might
say that you'd be apt to meet the char-
acter Elias Trowne anywhere east of
Suez.

A real adventurer, Trowne. Of the nomad species, you know—London today, Saigon tomorrow, Taxco next month. He wrote fascinating tales about these travels, and though they perhaps strayed from the truth here and there, a good story was a good story, Trowne felt, and let him that would make something of it go blow his nose. Ironically enough, Trowne's death is brought about in a place not only tranquil to one accustomed to high adventure but completely law-abiding, a little London restaurant catering to the true epicure of any land, Le Jardin des Olives.

On the night that eight distinguished explorers and adventurers gather there, summoned by a formal invitation to the effect they are to be initiated into that renowned and exclusive travelers' club, the Marco Polo, Trowne is murdered. But not before the eight guests discover the invitations to be a hoax with all indications pointing to Trowne as the perpetrator. Deciding to make the most of matters, however, they remain and have a successful party of their own.

But when Trowne's body is found, concealed behind a screen in the private dining hall in which this party is conducted, suspicion falls upon all eight of the distinguished group. And getting to the bottom of matters, leads Inspector Macdonald of Scotland Yard through one of the most baffling cases of his career.

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Abbie Harris was staying there as a kind of chaperone to the new owner, Coralbelle Britton, or simply "Coral" as she was known. Coral was a pretty girl, small, with brown eyes and brown hair, and tingling with perfect health. She

[Turn page]

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"I want to add as much as I can to my collection—to impress Brow Scott with my earnestness," she explained to Abbie, waving a piece of breakfast toast. "I want to marry the guy!"

"And this collection of yours will convince him of your wifely desirability?" Abbie asked dubiously. "What is he, an undertaker?"

"What is he? He's a Texan—I call him the Texas Tornado. He's the white hope of the archeological department at college. He's only the man I'm determined to get, and he's been the hardest to make of any I've ever—" She furrowed her smooth brow. "Abbie, I've simply got to have something to show. You should see the letters I've been sending him. Why do you suppose he's coming East to see me? Because I've led him to believe this is the place the Indians came to die, that's why."

Abbie smiled. "All right," she said. "We go Indian-grave digging."

In the hills, Coral pointed to a likely looking spot, cast aside her shovel and ran her hands along the heavy, steel, skewerlike object she held.

"Where once the earth has been disturbed by digging a grave it never quite settles back to its original state; the test rod finds the soft spots," she explained.

Then, executing what at first appeared to be a pole vault, Coral thrust the steel rod into the soil. It penetrated three feet instead of three inches and the momentum of her swinging stride practically impaled her. Her diaphragm took the full impact and she hung over the rod like a scarecrow on a broken stick.

After recovering, taking a few experimental breaths and rubbing her middle with both hands, a beatific expression spread over her small, tanned face. "I was right," she said with satisfaction.

"You were almost skewered on that—that—skewer!" Abbie said tartly.

Investigating the soil a bit more with the rod, Coral then fell to with her shovel. She was in the hole up to her knees when Abbie, who had dozed in the warm shade of a hedgerow, was

suddenly aroused by a frightened, baby sound.

"What's the matter, Coral?"

"I don't know." The girl was rigid, stiff with perception. Down in the hole, bent a little, was the shovel.

"You don't know what?"

"I'm afraid to lift the shovel."

"Why?"

"I don't exactly know why. I just don't like the feel. And I'm not deep enough."

Abbie said, "Well, get out of that hole. Come on."

Coral set her mouth, bent, shut her eyes and lifted. The dirt fell away from the thing on her shovel. She opened her eyes cautiously.

Considering the number of bare-toothed skulls snarling behind the glass of the cabinet in Coral's sitting room, the girl's reaction to this latest find was curious. No maiden in an old-fashioned movie serial ever scrambled out of a Cobra pit any quicker than Coral out of that half-dug grave.

And this is but one of many stirring moments you'll encounter in Amber Dean's swell mystery yarn, "Tavern of the Dead," in the coming issue of **TRIPLE DETECTIVE**. We think you will particularly enjoy the easy, breezy style of this novel, and coupled with the suspenseful circumstances which bring Christopher Wing to the tavern in search of his missing brother as well as Carol's Texas friend and several big-money operators, we're convinced you'll find it mighty fine entertainment.

Besides the three detective novels, expertly abridged to cut down your reading time, the next **TRIPLE DETECTIVE** will of course also contain the usual number of select mystery short stories and interesting features. It will be a splendid issue from cover to cover—look forward to it!

JURY JOTTINGS

NOW to the ballot box again and a vote in the affirmative from one of our West Coast readers, George Ballew, of Oakland, California:

Being an avid detective story fan, I've been following **TRIPLE DETECTIVE** since it first appeared on the stands. Attracted by the bar-

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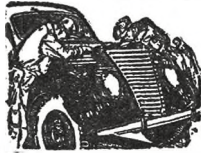


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gain of three novels for the price of one, I was skeptical at first as to the quality I would find in my bargain buy. But all the good names were there—Brett Halliday, Steve Fisher, Manly Wellman, Hugh Pentecost, to name a few—and so I risked a quarter. Since then, believe me, I've not been so hesitant. Fact is, I no longer consider it the slightest risk and am there to shell out willingly whenever I spot a new issue on the newsstands (which from a Scotchman is no meager admission, I can tell you). Yours for more good reading!

Thanks, George. You've fair made our ears burn with your pro ballot. We agree with you, of course—whole-heartedly and even unabashedly, if you will . . .

Next comes one from the deep South, from Zack Lederly, of Jackson, Mississippi, whose ballot is also affirmative in a roundabout sort of a way. Says Zack:

I've always figured women writers, by and large, as a goodsized pain in the umptumhorn. In other words, they write like what they are and for other women. To the fellow who likes a bit of manly reading—well, spend your allowance elsewhere, bub. But in your Winter issue, sandwiched in between Jonathan Stagge and John Creasey, who can tell me stories any day in the week, is a dame called Gale Gallagher, with a yarn called "I Found Him Dead."

I read the story last, of course, and only because I was stuck with it. And, Mister, let me say it changed my opinion somewhat. Let me now say that most women writers are a pain, but Gale Gallagher definitely is not. She can park her typewriter on my doorstep any old time at all. Let's have her again with something as lively as "I Found Him Dead."

Thankee, Zack, but let us hope to change your unfounded bias against women writers even more with our next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. For word-slinging, we'll pit these gals coming up with some of the best male authors in the business. You take the Amber Dean story, "Tavern of the Dead." Mark our words to that effect. You're going to like it fine. And then there's Helen Reilly who for years has been way up in the clouds among the detective story elite.

Which adjourns the court for this session, folks. To any of you who have not yet cast your ballot, let us say we'd be pleased no end to have it. Just address it to The Editor, TRIPLE DETECTIVE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. And thanks again to all you reading jurors.

—THE EDITOR.

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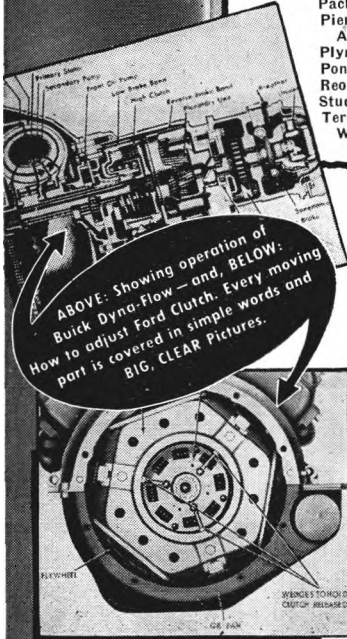
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