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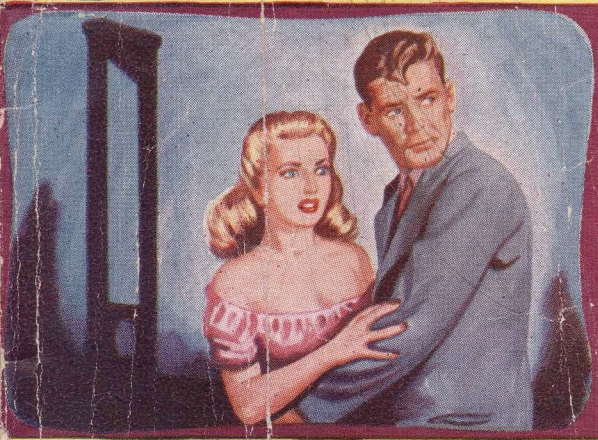

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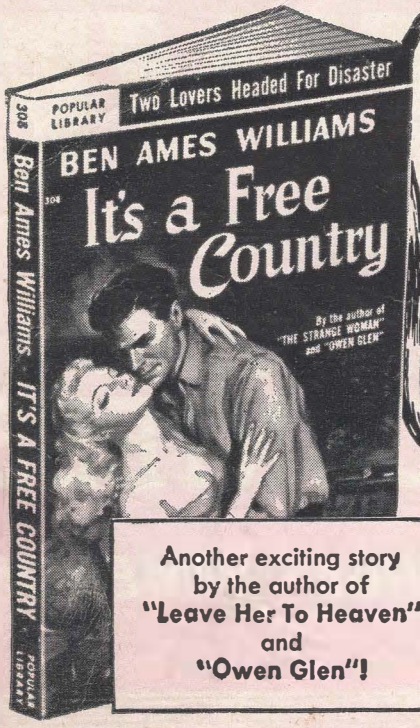

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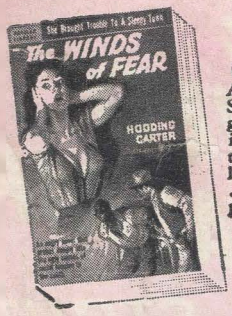

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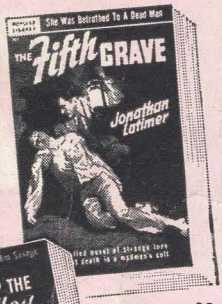

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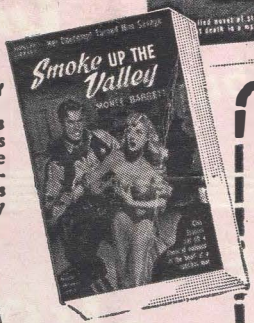

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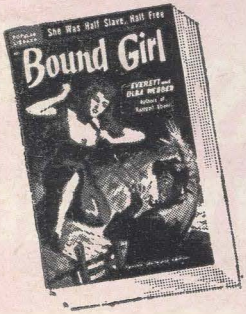

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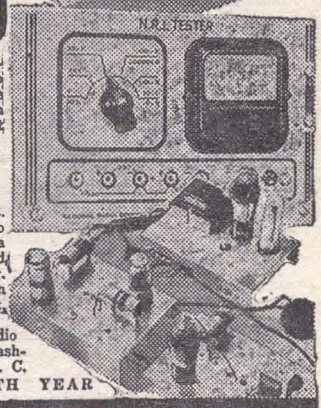

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A Panel of Mystery Fans, Authors and the Editor

YOU would have to look far to find three such celebrated authors as are represented in this issue. Georges Simenon, whose great novel DEATH OF A COUNTESS features Inspector Maigret, has been called the greatest figure in French literature today. You mystery fans who were held spellbound by Simenon's sexy THE DEADLY VOYAGE in our recent issue called for more by this outstanding writer, and so you'll find the answer to your requests on the pages ahead.

Rex Stout is one author who has, in a sense, been put in the shadow by a character he has created, just as Sherlock Holmes may have somewhat eclipsed A. Conan Doyle. In Rex Stout's case, of course, his fabulous detective creation is none other than the king-size, orchid-loving, beer-sampling gourmet—Nero Wolfe. You've seen countless adventures of Nero Wolfe on the movie screen and on TV, and we're happy indeed to bring you one of his most famed exploits—SOME BURIED CAESAR.

For years, scarcely an issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* was complete without a short story or serial by Octavus Roy Cohen. His humorous, warmly human tales about Florian Slappey are world renowned. Cohen is a versatile writer with reputation as a Broadway dramatist, a humorist, a teller of light love tales—and as a mystery novelist. His zestful yarn, THE BACKSTAGE MYSTERY, will win him many new fans, we are sure.

One of the common expressions in our language is "getting away with murder." Many of us get away with it figuratively many times in our lives, but there must be those who get away with it literally, too. The devilish thing, of course, about the perfect homicide is that it is never discovered. Thus there is no way of knowing just how many murders are never uncovered and are tagged as "death from natural causes" when something more sinister is the case.

Some small, but fatal stab wounds in bodily orifices do not bleed much and are never detected by coroners whose chief skill is not medicine, but vote getting. Some poisons have symptoms that can easily be confused with acute cardiac seizures. The same for some deaths by suffocation. Yes, murder is not always what it seems.

That is exactly the situation in LAST ACT FOR MURDER, by Margery Allingham, the gripping book-length mystery that leads off a trio of outstanding crime novels in the next issue. It's a tautly suspenseful story, masterfully handled and with an outcome, we wager, that you'll never guess.

For the second spot, we're pleased to announce that we've acquired DEATH AT COCKCROW, by Frederick C. Davis, whose Crime Club novels we are sure are familiar to most of you.

The background of this unusual murder mystery is some illicit cockfighting in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, the fashionable suburbia that is the haunt of the New York and Philadelphia smart set. You'll know a Whitehackle from a Ginger Buck before this baffler reaches its tense climax, and we assure you that the blood spilled on the pit tanbark is more human than fowl before the last feather has settled.

A brittle, harsh, exciting account of what happens when a beautiful woman murders awaits you in MISCHIEF DONE, by Jack Sheridan, which neatly completes the trio of book length novels in our next issue. Paul was in Myra's blood. She had spent a couple of hot, hungry hellish years with him—before his gaze wandered in a new, enticing direction. Rather than lose him to another woman, Myra chose murder. . . .

In addition, our next issue will offer you a selection of outstanding shorter stories—every one especially chosen for your reading pleasure!

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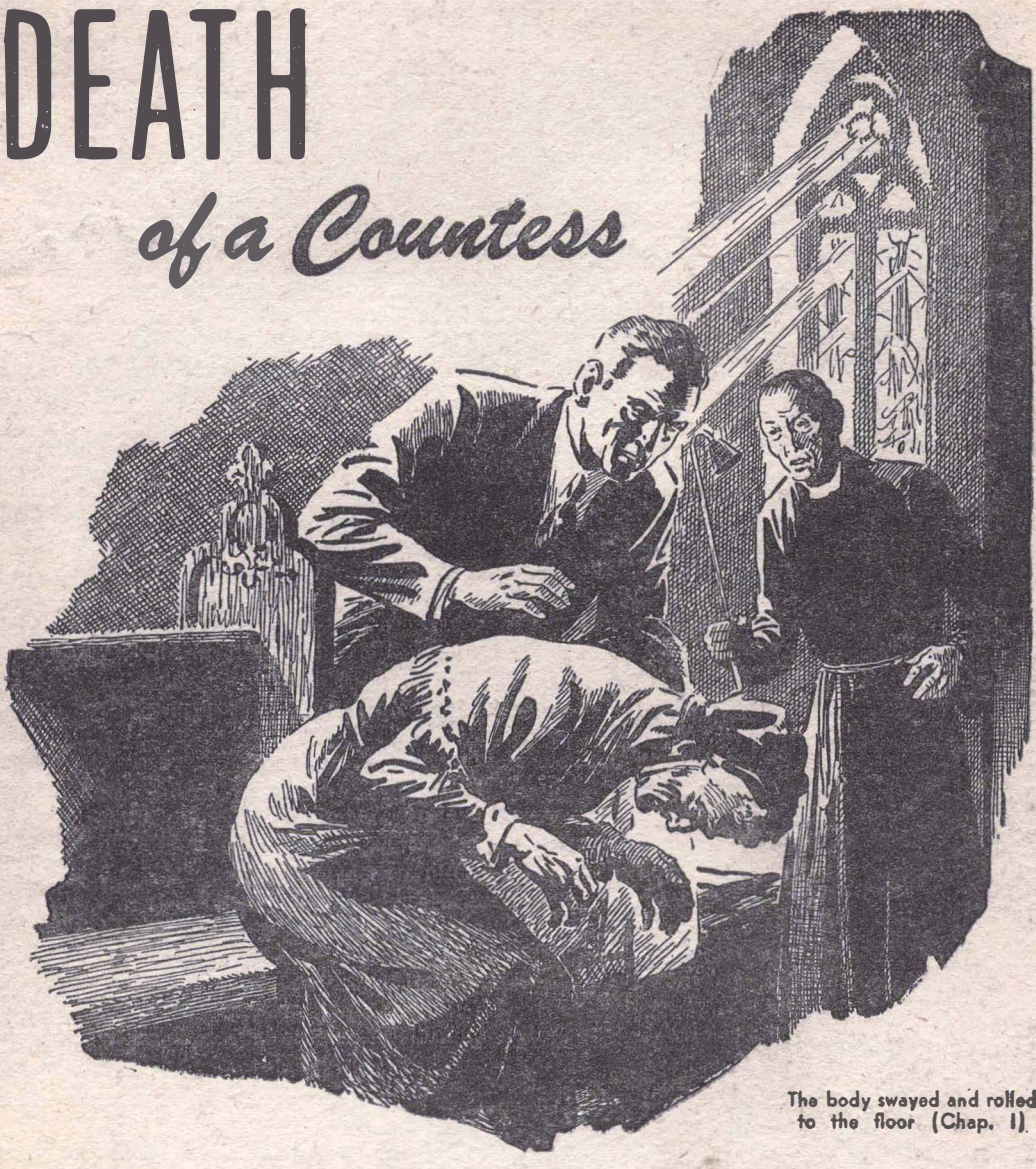
DEATH of a Countess



The body swayed and rolled to the floor (Chap. I)

It was a case of murder beyond the law, for which nobody could be indicted—but it carried its own punishment!

I

THERE was a timid scratching at the door, and a furtive voice:

"It's half-past five! The first bell for mass has rung."

The mattress creaked as Inspector Maigret drew himself up, his bare feet

An Inspector Maigret Novel by GEORGES SIMENON

on the icy floor. He walked to the door, which was fastened with a bit of string wound around two nails, picked up the jug of hot water that Marie Tatin had brought him, shut his door, and looked for some sort of looking-glass to shave by.

The candle would last only a few more minutes. Beyond the skylight was still the darkness of a cold night in early winter.

Owing to the double slope of the roof, Maigret could stand upright only in the middle of the attic. He was cold. All night long a draught had frozen the back of his neck.

While he was dressing, he heard Marie Tatin coming and going in the saloon downstairs, rattling the bars of the stove, clattering china and turning the coffee-mill.

He put on his jacket and his overcoat. Before he left the room he took from his portfolio a paper to which was pinned an official docket:

Moulins Municipal Police.
Passed for necessary action to the Police Judiciaire, Paris.

Then a paper with a message on it:

This is to inform you that a crime will be committed in the church at Saint-Fiacre during the first mass on All Souls' Day.

For several days the paper had lain about in the offices on the Quai des Orfevres. Maigret had come across it by chance, had asked in astonishment:

"Saint-Fiacre near Matignon?"

"Probably, since this was sent on from Moulins."

And Maigret had put the paper in his pocket. Saint-Fiacre! Matignon! Moulins! He had been born at Saint-Fiacre, where his father had been for thirty years agent at the chateau!

MAIGRET had arrived the day before. He had gone to the only inn in the place, the one kept by Marie Tatin. She had not recognized him.

The inspector went downstairs. The rooms were lit by oil-lamps. A table was laid in a corner. There were chunks of gray bread and a smell of coffee-and-chicory and boiling milk.

"Oh, dear!" said Marie Tatin. "There's the second bell already!"

She fled into the kitchen to put on her black dress, her string gloves, and the little hat which wouldn't sit straight on top of her bun.

"I'll leave you to finish your breakfast," she said as she came back. "Will you lock the door behind you?"

"No, no, I'm ready."

She was flustered at having to walk to church with a man! A man from Paris too! She trotted along, little and bent in the cold morning.

Other shadowy forms were converging toward the vague luminosity of the church door. The bells were still ringing. There was a light here and there in the windows—people getting dressed in a hurry for the first mass. When Maigret entered the church, he experienced a wave of warmth, of soft light; the smell of candles and incense. . . .

"Will you excuse me?" Marie said. "I have my own prie-dieu."

And Maigret recognized the black chair with the red velvet cushion that had belonged to old Mother Tatin, the mother of the little girl who squinted.

How many were there in this phantom reunion of half-asleep people? At the most fifteen. There were only three men—the sacristan, the sexton, and Maigret.

. . . a crime will be committed . . .

In Moulins the police had thought it a bad joke and hadn't bothered. In Paris they had been astonished to see the inspector go off.

Maigret heard sounds behind the door to the right of the altar and could guess what was happening—the choirboy coming in late, the priest putting on his chasuble, joining his hands and moving towards the nave, followed by the boy stumbling over his surplice.

The boy had red hair. He rang the little bell. The murmur of liturgical prayers began.

. . . . during the first Mass . . .

Maigret examined each shadowy figure. Five old women, three with their own prie-dieu. A farmer's big wife.

Some younger peasant women and a child.

There was the sound of a car outside. The squeak of a door. Then light footsteps, and a lady in mourning walked down the whole length of the church.

In the choir was a row of stalls reserved for the people of the chateau, stalls made of hard old wood with a high polish. There the lady took her seat, followed by the glances of the peasant women.

Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine . . .

Maigret did nothing but watch the

INSPECTOR MAIGRET

occupant of the Gothic stall. He was slow to recognize the countess of Saint-Fiacre. But it was the Countess all right! Though when he had seen her last she had been twenty-five or twenty-six, a tall, slim, melancholy woman. Now she must be at least sixty. Her face was emaciated, her over-long hands clutched a missal.

Maigret rose with the rest at the first Gospel.

THE Moulins police were right! A crime was out of the question! The sacristan had sat down at the end of the stalls, four places removed from the Countess. The sexton had gone off with a heavy tread, like the director of a theater who does not care to assist at his own performance.

The only men left were Maigret and the priest, a young priest with the fanatical look of the mystic. He did not hurry through the service like the old curé the inspector had known, nor slur over half the verses.

The stained-glass windows grew pale. Day was breaking. A cow mooed in the distance.

And now all heads were bowed for the Elevation. The choirboy rang the thin-toned bell.

Maigret was the only one who did not take Communion. All the women advanced toward the rail, with clasped hands and composed faces. The Host was held for an instant in the priest's hands. The Countess had her head in her hands.

Pater Noster . . .
Et ne nos inducas in tentationem . . .

The old lady unclasped her hands, revealing a tormented face, and opened her missal.

Still four minutes to go. A few prayers, the last Gospel, and it would be the end, and there would have been no crime!

For the warning clearly said, *"the first mass.*

The sacristan rose and passed into the sacristy. The Countess of Saint-Fiacre did not move. Most of the other old women also remained rigid.

Ite missa est. . . . The mass is finished.

It was only then that Maigret felt how terribly anxious he had been, and had scarcely realized it. Involuntarily he heaved a sigh. He waited impatiently, wanting to be outside breathing in the fresh air, watching the people come and go, listening to them talking.

The old women all got up at the same time. Their feet moved on the cold blue squares of the church floor. First one peasant woman and then another made for the door. The sacristan appeared with an extinguisher, and a thread of blue smoke replaced the candle flames.

Day had broken. A gray light filtered into the nave simultaneously with draughts of fresh air.

There were only three people left—then two. A chair moved, and now only the Countess was left. Maigret's nerves twitched with impatience.

The sacristan glanced at Madame de Saint-Fiacre. A look of hesitation crossed his face. At the same moment the inspector advanced. They were both astonished at her immobility and trying to see her face, hidden by the clasped hands.

Maigret, with a certain foreboding, touched her shoulder. The body swayed for a moment as if it had been balanced on a hair, rolled to the floor and lay there inert.

The Countess of Saint-Fiacre was dead.

They took the body into the sacristy where three chairs had been placed end to end. The sacristan ran out to try and find the village doctor.

Maigret had quite forgotten there was anything unusual in his presence here in the church. It took him several minutes to understand the suspicious inquiry in the fiery eyes of the priest.

"Who are you?" asked the priest finally. "How is it that—"

"I am Inspector Maigret of the *Police Judiciaire.*"

He looked the priest in the face. He was a man of about thirty-five, his features regular, but so austere that they suggested the religious ardor of a monk of the Middle Ages.

The priest was troubled by some deep emotion. In a voice which had lost some of its firmness he murmured:

"You don't mean to say that—"

They put a mirror to the lips of the Countess and listened in vain for the heart that had ceased to beat.

Maigret contented himself with the reply that he could see no wound. It was plain that the priest was assailed by terrible thoughts.

Maigret did not realize at first the dramatic implications. But memories of his childhood kept floating up like air-bubbles:

A church where a crime has been committed must be reconsecrated by the bishop.

But how could there have been a crime? No shot had been heard! Nobody had gone near the Countess. During the entire mass Maigret had not once taken his eyes off her. No blood had been shed, and no wound was to be seen!

It was a relief to hear the heavy steps of the doctor, a hearty man who was much impressed by the atmosphere, and kept looking inquiringly from the detective to the priest.

"Dead?" he asked.

On his part there was no hesitation. He unhooked the Countess' bodice while the priest averted his eyes. There was a heavy tread in the church, and the sexton set the first bell going for the seven o'clock mass.

"It seems to me that it's nothing but heart failure," the doctor finally looked up to say. "I wasn't the Countess' regular doctor, but I've been called in once or twice at the chateau. She had a very bad heart."

The sacristy was so small that there was scarcely room for the three men and the corpse. It was overcrowded when two choirboys arrived for high mass at seven.

"Her car must be outside," said Maigret. "We'd better take her home."

II

MAIGRET felt the anguished eyes of the priest fastened on him. Had he guessed that there might have been a crime? At all events, while the sacristan helped the chauffeur to carry the body to the car the priest came up to the inspector.

"Are you sure that . . . I have two more Masses to celebrate. It is 'All Souls.' My congregation—"

Had Maigret the right to reassure the curé that the Countess had died of heart failure?

"You heard what the doctor said," he murmured.

"But you came here today to this particular mass?"

Maigret tried to conceal his uneasiness.

"Just chance, Monsieur le Curé. My father is buried in your cemetery."

And he hurried off to the car in which the Countess had arrived, and which the chauffeur was cranking up.

The corpse took up all the room inside the car. Maigret and the doctor squeezed in beside the driver. The black-liveried chauffeur drove with a distant air. They crossed the steep square, bounded on one side by the church which was built on the slope, and on the other

As the fugitive leaped toward the casement, the little lawyer tripped him and Gautier fell (Chap. XIV)

by the pond of Notre Dame, which was a poisonous gray that morning.

They entered the park. Now the details of the chateau were visible, the shuttered windows on the ground floor and the two corner towers, the only old parts of the building.

The car stopped near the stone steps but the chauffeur didn't dare open the car doors.

"Monsieur Jean can't be up yet," he murmured.

"Well, call somebody. Aren't there other servants in the house?"

The chauffeur went away to summon help. Maigret stayed in the courtyard with the doctor, who started filling a pipe.

"Who is this *Monsieur* Jean?"

Dr. Bouchardon shrugged. "A charming young man."

"A relation?"

"In a way. . . . Well, since you'll know soon enough, he was the Countess' lover, officially her secretary."

Maigret looked the doctor in the eyes and recollected then that they had been at school together. Only the doctor had recognized him. After all, he was forty-two, and had put on weight.

He knew the chateau better than almost anyone else—especially the grounds. He only needed to take a few steps to be able to see the house where he had been born.

And it was just those memories that were troubling him now! Particularly the memory of the Countess of Saint-Fiacre as he had known her, a young woman who had personified for him, a lad of the people, everything that was feminine, graceful, and aristocratic.

Now she was dead. They had pushed her like an inanimate object into the car and they had had to double up her legs.

They hadn't even fastened her bodice.

. . . a crime will be committed . . .

But the doctor had said that she had died of heart failure. What supernatural power could have foreseen that, and why had the police been called in?

The chateau doors opened. A butler in his shirt-sleeves half-opened those big doors but hung back. A man appeared behind him in pajamas, with bleary eyes and rumpled hair.

"What's the matter?" he called.

"That's the boy friend," the doctor growled cynically in Maigret's ear.

From the basement window the cook looked on in silence. Skylights opened in the servants' rooms under the roof.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Maigret roared indignantly. "Why don't you carry the Countess up to her bed?"

It all seemed sacrilege to him because it didn't fit in with his childhood memories. He felt a physical as well as a moral discomfort.

JEAN did not dare come near the car. The butler stood back in dismay.

Maigret exerted his authority.

"Come along! I want two men—you and you." He pointed to the chauffeur and the butler. "Take her to her room."

A bell rang in the hall.

"The telephone!" growled Dr. Bouchardon. "Funny, at this hour."

Jean seemed to be in a daze. It was Maigret who took up the receiver.

"Hello! Yes, this is the chateau."

A voice said:

"Will you let me speak to my mother? She must be back from mass."

"Who is speaking?"

"The Count of Saint-Fiacre."

"One moment. Will you please tell me where you are speaking from?"

"From Moulins. But what the devil?"

"You'd better come on home at once," was all that Maigret would say, and he hung up.

He had to flatten himself against the wall to let the two servants get past with the body of the Countess.

"Are you coming in?" the doctor asked Maigret as soon as the corpse was laid on the bed. "I need someone to help me undress her."

"We'll find a maid," said Maigret, and spoke to Jean.

Jean went up to the next floor and came back accompanied by a woman of about thirty who cast terrified looks around.

"Get out!" the inspector growled to the servants, who had carried the body, and they were only too willing.

He caught hold of Jean by the sleeve and drew him into the alcove of a window in the Countess' sitting room.

Jean was a thin young man, and his striped pajamas, of doubtful cleanliness, did not improve his appearance. His eyes avoided Maigret's, and he had a habit of pulling his fingers as if he were trying to make them longer.

"Listen!" interrupted the inspector. "We're going to talk straight to save time. What exactly is your position at the chateau? How long have you been here?"

"Four years."

"How did you come to know the Countess?"

"I was introduced to her by a mutual friend. I came here in a confidential capacity to look after her personal affairs."

"What did you do before?"

"I traveled—and wrote art criticisms."

Maigret did not smile. Somehow the atmosphere of the vast chateau was not conducive to irony. There was dust everywhere. The walls showed that furniture had been removed—no doubt the finest pieces or those of any value.

"You became the Countess' lover?" asked Maigret bluntly.

"Everyone is free to love."

"Fool!" roared Maigret. As if everything wasn't obvious. "Go and get dressed."

Maigret pushed open the door to the bedroom. The maid had gone.

"Have you found anything?" he asked the doctor.

"I can only confirm what I told you just now," said the doctor. "Death was due to sudden cessation of the heart."

"What brought it on?"

Dr. Bouchardon threw a cover over the corpse, and joined Maigret at the window.

"Perhaps some emotion, perhaps the cold in the church?"

"You found no trace of a wound, of course?"

"None whatsoever!"

"Not even the faintest trace of a prick?"

"I thought of that. No, there's nothing. And she hadn't absorbed poison either."

INSPECTOR MAIGRET'S face was hard. "In a word, the life at the chateau?" he asked in a low voice.

"You know as much as I do. Women like the Countess who are models of good conduct until they are forty or fifty. It was then that the Count died and the son went to study in Paris."

"And here?"

"A succession of secretaries for varying periods. You saw the last."

"And the estate?"

"The chateau is mortgaged. Three of the four farms have been sold. Now and again an antique-dealer comes to see whether there is anything valuable left."

"And the son?"

"I don't know him well. They say he's a card."

"Thank you."

Maigret left the room. As he hastened along the corridor he saw Jean going downstairs in a gray suit but still wearing house slippers. At the same moment a car with an open exhaust entered the chateau courtyard.

It was a small sports-car painted canary yellow, long and narrow. A man in a leather coat leaped from it and burst into the hall, pulling off his cap and shouting:

"Hi! Is everybody still asleep?"

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was thirty, the same age as Jean. They were the same height, but the Count was broad and rather plump. His whole aspect spoke of an active life. His clear eyes were gay and mocking.

Then he noticed Maigret and looked at him curiously.

"What is it?" he asked. "Nothing serious has happened, I hope?"

"Your mother died this morning in church," said Maigret.

"Good Lord! Where is she?"

The Count was baffled and bewildered. In the bedroom he lifted the cover just enough to see the dead woman's face. There was no outburst of grief, no tears, no dramatic gestures. Only three murmured words:

"Poor old girl!"

Jean walked up to the door, but the Count saw him.

"You get out!" he snapped.

Obviously nervous, Maurice marched up and down, and collided with the doctor.

"What did she die of, Bouchardon?" he asked.

"Heart failure, Monsieur Maurice. But perhaps the inspector can tell you more than I can."

The young man turned eagerly to Maigret.

"You're from the police? What's it all about?"

"What about having a few minutes' talk? I should like to have a stroll outside. You stay here, Doctor."

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre followed

Maigret outside, staring absently at the ground.

III

AS the day had advanced the cold had become more intense, probably because of the north wind which whirled the dead leaves from one end of the square to the other, and made them circle like birds over the Notre-Dame pond.

Maigret filled his pipe.

"Had anyone an interest in your mother's death?" Maigret asked Maurice now.

"I don't understand." The Count frowned. "The doctor just said—"

He was worried. Eagerly he seized the paper Maigret held out to him—the one that had announced the crime to the police. He read it and looked up.

"What does it mean? Bouchardon talked of a heart attack."

"A heart attack which someone foresaw a fortnight before!"

Peasants were watching them from a distance. The two men paid no attention as they approached the church, walking slowly.

"What did you come to do at the chateau this morning?" Maigret asked abruptly.

"That's just what I'm saying to myself," said the young man. "You asked me a moment ago whether— Well, yes! There *was* someone who had an interest in my mother's death. Myself!"

His brow was clouded. "As you're from the police," he said, "you'll have already grasped the situation. My mother was a lonely old woman. My father was dead. I'd gone away. Left all alone, I think her mind must have become slightly affected. At first she spent all her time at church. Then—"

"Young secretaries."

"I don't think it was what you imagine and what Bouchardon would insinuate—just a need for affection, the need to look after someone—and those young men took advantage of it. There's not much left of our fortune, and people like the gentleman you've just seen in the chateau have long teeth. In three or four years there would have been nothing left at all."

Bareheaded, he ran his fingers through his hair. Then he stopped and, looking Maigret in the face, he added:

"I came here today to ask my mother for forty thousand francs to cover a check which otherwise would have been dishonored. You see how it all connects up?"

He broke off a branch from a hedge alongside which they were walking. He seemed to be making a violent effort not to let himself be overcome, to keep his emotions in hand.

"And to think that I brought Marie Vassiliev with me!"

"Marie Vassiliev?"

"My friend. I left her in bed at Moulins. She's capable at any moment of hiring a car and running off. Perfect, isn't it?"

The two men walked along the hundred yards beside the church, up and down, now facing the pond, now with their backs to it.

"Listen, Inspector!" said the young Count. "She can't possibly have been murdered—or else I can't understand why she should have been."

Maigret was thinking so intensely that he had forgotten his companion. He was going over in his mind every minute detail of the first mass.

The Countess in her pew—no one had gone near her—she had taken communion, then knelt down with her face in her hands. Then she had opened her missal. A little later her face had again been buried in her hands.

"Excuse me one moment."

Maigret ran up the church steps, went into the building, and walked straight up to the stalls, bent down, and called to the sacristan, who looked round.

"Who took the missal?"

"Which missal?"

"The Countess's. It was left here."

"Are you sure?"

"Come here—you!" said Maigret to the sexton. "You haven't seen the missal which belonged to this pew?"

"Me?" The man spoke like an idiot.

MAIGRET was on edge. "Who's been near this pew?" he asked the sexton.

"The doctor's wife sat there at the seven o'clock mass."

"Well, tell the whole village that there will be a substantial reward for anyone who brings the missal to me."

"At the chateau?"

"No, at Marie Tatin's."

Outside, Maurice de Saint-Fiacre fell into step beside him again.

"I don't understand this business of the missal."

"Heart failure, wasn't it? Might have been brought on by a violent emotion. And it happened a little after communion, that's to say, after the Countess had opened her missal. Suppose that, in her missal—"

But the young man shook his head dejectedly.

"I can't think of any news capable of affecting my mother to that extent." He cast a brooding look on the chateau. "Let's go and have a drink!"

They turned their steps to the inn, where their entrance caused a stir. Four peasants who were having drinks together looked uncomfortable.

Marie Tatin came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

"*Monsieur* Maurice," she stammered, "I'm still upset by what they're saying! Our poor Countess!"

She was weeping!

Maurice listened to her talk with impatience. Then he went and took a bottle of rum down from a shelf and filled two glasses.

A spasm shook his shoulders as he swallowed his in a single gulp, and he said to Maigret:

"I think I must have caught cold on my way here this morning."

The peasants went out. The stove glowed red.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre drank a second glass of rum and looked at Maigret as if to ask him what he should do.

"Let's go!" said the inspector.

"Are you coming here for lunch?" asked Marie. "I've killed a hen and—"

But the two men were already outside.

"The check was post-dated?" asked Maigret, as if continuing a conversation, or a thought.

"Yes," said Maurice, "but it will be cashed tomorrow."

"Do you do much work?"

There was a silence broken only by the sound of their footsteps on the hard road, the rustle of dead leaves tossed about in the wind, and the snorting of horses.

"I am what is known as a good-for-nothing," the Count said then. "I've done a bit of everything. Take that forty thousand. I wanted to start a film company. Before that, I was shareholder in a radio company."

Then suddenly he broke down, stamped on the ground with his heel, and nearly let a sob escape.

"Poor old girl!" he muttered, his lips quivering. "It—it's so ignoble! And that cad Jean!"

As if the mention of his name had made the man appear, they suddenly saw Jean striding up and down the courtyard of the chateau beside the doctor. He seemed to be holding forth passionately, because he was gesticulating with his skinny arms.

"I'll see you directly!" Maigret murmured to Maurice.

He left the Count of Saint-Fiacre at the cemetery gates. Maigret turned in. The grave he was looking for was the third past the cypress:

HERE LIES
EVARISTE MAIGRET

Memories came crowding, memories of his father, of a friend who had been drowned in the pond, of the child at the chateau in its magnificent carriage.

Maigret had no flowers. The grave was neglected. He went off muttering crossly under his breath, so that people turned and stared:

"That missal must be found straight away!"

He had no desire to go back to the chateau, where he felt sickened and exasperated. Not that he had any illusions about his fellow men, but he was furious that his childhood memories should have been desecrated, especially those of the Countess, who had always seemed to him beautiful and aristocratic, like someone out of a picture-book.

And she had become a dotty old woman who kept gigolos!

The "poor old girl," as her son had called her, had been torn between church and chateau!

And the last Count of Saint-Fiacre was going to be arrested for signing a worthless check!

IV

SOMEONE was walking in front of Maigret with a gun on his shoulder, and the inspector suddenly noticed that he was making for the agent's house. He thought he recognized a silhouette that

he had seen from afar in the fields.

"Hi!"

The man with the gun looked round.

"You're agent to the Saint-Fiacres?"

"And you?"

"Inspector Maigret of the *Police Judiciaire.*"

"Maigret?"

"You've been told?"

"Yes, I've just been told. I was out shooting."

The agent was a small man, thick-set and gray-haired, with a skin furrowed in fine deep lines and eyes that looked as if they were lying in ambush behind the bushy brows.

"They said it was her heart," he said. "Why are the police—"

Maigret gave him a searching glance. "What did you say your name was?"

"Gautier. Is it true that the Count has arrived unexpectedly?" he asked in a hesitating, reticent manner.

He did not invite Maigret to come in as he pushed the door open. Maigret went in all the same, and turned toward the dining room, which smelled of cake and old brandy.

"Come in here a moment, Monsieur Gautier. I've a few questions to ask you."

"Quick!" said a woman's voice from the kitchen. "S o m e t h i n g terrible seems—"

"Will you have a drink?" Gautier was busy choosing a bottle out of the sideboard.

"What do you think of this *Monsieur* Jean?" asked Maigret. "By the way, what is his surname?"

"Metayer—quite a good family from Bourges."

"He must have cost the Countess a pretty penny!"

Gautier filled up the glasses with brandy. "He did," the agent admitted. "Your health!"

They drank. Then Maigret asked:

"There was no trouble between him and the Count?"

"Nothing at all. I suppose it's just chance that you're here? There's no reason, since it's just a case of heart trouble?"

There was no way of meeting the agent's eyes. He wiped his mustache and went toward the next room.

"Will you excuse me if I go and change? I was to have gone to High Mass."

"I'll see you again," said Maigret as he moved off to the front door.

He noted that they had paved in stone the courtyard where he used to play marbles on the beaten earth.

THE square was filled with people in their Sunday clothes. Fragments of phrases came to Maigret's ears:

"He's a detective from Paris."

"He's come to report on that cow that died the other week at Mathieu's."

One smart young fellow, with a red flower in the buttonhole of his navy-blue serge jacket, his face well scrubbed and his hair shiny with brilliantine, called after the inspector:

"You're wanted at Tatin's to report on some gas that's escaped!" And he dug his companions in the ribs, vainly stifling his laughter.

He wasn't far wrong though. At Marie Tatin's the air was terrible. Pipe after pipe had been smoked. The place was crowded.

In one corner a woman rose at the arrival of the inspector and took a step toward him, worried, hesitating. Her hand rested on the shoulder of a boy whom Maigret recognized by his red hair.

"First, I want to say, *Monsieur le Commissaire,* that we've always been an honest family. All the same, we're poor, you understand? So when I saw Ernest—"

The lad, quite pale, looked straight in front of him without showing the least emotion. Maigret bent down.

"It was you who took the missal?" he asked.

No answer. Only a sharp wild look.

"Are you going to answer, bane of my life?" his mother asked, and gave him a resounding slap. "For months he's been crying for me to buy him a missal —a big one like *Monsieur le Curé's,* if you please! So when they said Her Ladyship's missal had vanished and he came home early from mass, I grew suspicious. I went into the bedroom and I found this under the mattress."

She handed Maigret a book and for a second time struck the child.

"At his age I wasn't able to read! But that didn't mean that I would ever have been wicked enough to steal a book."

A respectful silence reigned in the room. Maigret held the missal in his hands.

"Thank you, madame."

He was dying to examine it.

"Monsieur le Commissaire," the woman reminded him, "they said there was a reward. It's not because Ernest—"

Maigret handed her twenty francs, which she carefully tucked away into her purse. Then she dragged her son off to the door.

The eyes of Maigret and the boy met. It was only a second, but it was sufficient for a look of understanding and friendship to pass between them. Perhaps it was because Maigret had once desired—but in vain—to possess just such a missal with gilt edges, containing not only the ordinary of the mass but all the liturgical texts in two columns, in Latin and French.

Maigret nearly went up to his room to examine the missal, but the memory of the roof that let in thousands of draughts made him choose the highway.

As he walked slowly towards the chateau he opened the book stamped with the Saint-Fiacre coat-of-arms. Or rather he didn't open it. It fell open by itself at a page where a paper was inserted between two leaves of the *Prayer after communion.*

It was a piece of newspaper which had been cut out carelessly, and even at first glance it looked as if it had been badly printed. It read:

PARIS, November 1st.—A dramatic suicide took place this morning at a flat in the Rue de Miromeil which for several years has been occupied by the Count of Saint-Fiacre and a friend, a Russian young lady named Marie Vassiliev.

After declaring to his friend that he was outraged by the scandal caused by a member of his family, the Count drew a revolver and shot himself through the head, dying a few minutes later without regaining consciousness.

We understand that a particularly painful family drama is in question, as the person concerned is none other than the mother of the unhappy victim.

Maigret pushed the missal into the pocket of his overcoat. It was so thick that it pulled the coat out of shape. He stopped to examine that terrible scrap of paper.

The weapon of the crime! A piece of newspaper!

THE Countess of Saint-Fiacre had gone to the first mass and knelt in the pew which for two centuries had been reserved for her family. She had

"Down on your knees! Now, ask her forgiveness!" (Chap. XV)

taken communion. Then she had opened her missal to read the *"Prayer after Communion."*

Maigret turned the scrap of paper over and over. He found something fishy about it. The impression had not been made on the press of a real newspaper. It was a proof, pulled off flat, by hand. After reading it, the Countess had died of emotion, indignation, shame and anguish!

Maigret's face was terrible, because he had never come across a crime so base and at the same time so cunning.

And it had occurred to the criminal to warn the police!

Suppose the missal hadn't been found?

Yes! That was it! It had not been meant for the missal to be found. It would have been impossible to talk of a crime or accuse whoever had done it! The Countess had died of a sudden heart attack.

Suddenly Maigret turned back.

He hurried directly to the home of the boy who had found the missal. It was a single-storied cottage. The boy's mother came to open the door for the inspector.

"Is your son here?" he asked her.

"He's taking off his things." She opened the door and called: "Come here, you bad lot!"

Maigret could see Ernest in the next room. The boy was in his underwear. He tried to hide.

"Let him get dressed," said Maigret. "I'll talk to him afterwards."

The woman left him and went on preparing lunch. Her husband was probably at Marie Tatin's having an *aperitif*.

At last the door opened and Ernest came slyly in, clad in his weekday clothes.

"Coming for a walk with me?" asked Maigret.

"Do you want him?" exclaimed the mother, sticking her head in the door. "In that case—Ernest, go quick and put on your best suit."

"Don't bother, madame! Come on, old chap!"

The street was deserted.

"Tomorrow," said Maigret, "I'm going to make you a present of an even bigger missal, with the first letter of every verse in red."

The boy was overcome. His eyes glistened.

"Only you've got to tell me honestly where you got this one. I won't scold you."

It was curious to see the old peasant mistrust awaken in the boy. He shut up, already on the defensive.

"Was it on the prie-dieu that you found it?"

No answer. Maigret persisted gently. "Don't you know that I am your friend?"

"Yes. You gave mamma twenty francs."

"Well?"

"When we got home, mamma said she'd only hit me for the look of the thing, and she gave me fifty centimes."

He knew what he was about, this lad!

"And the sacristan?" asked Maigret.

"He didn't say anything to me."

"Who took the missal from the prie-dieu?"

"I don't know."

"And where did *you* find it?"

"Under my surplice in the sacristy. I was going to eat at the rectory. When I was moving my surplice I felt something hard."

"Was the sacristan there?"

"He was in the church putting out the candles. Missals with the red letters cost a lot."

In other words, someone had taken the missal from the prie-dieu, hidden it for the moment in the sacristy under the choirboy's surplice, with the idea, evidently, of coming back for it.

"Did you open the missal?"

"I hadn't had time."

"You can go now. You'll get a missal. Yes. Tomorrow. . . . Good-by, my lad."

Maigret held out his hand, and the boy hesitated a moment before giving him his. He went off.

V

CRIME in three parts!

Someone had set the article, or had it set with the aid of a linotype, which is only found in a newspaper office or at a big printer's.

Someone had slipped the paper into the missal, carefully selecting the page.

And someone had taken the missal and hidden it under the surplice in the sacristy.

Had the same person done it all? Or had each action had a different author?

Perhaps two of the actions had been done by the same person?

As he passed the church, Maigret saw the curé coming out and making for him. He waited for him under the poplars, near the woman who sold oranges and chocolate.

"I'm going to the chateau," said the curé. "It's the first time I've ever celebrated mass without even knowing what I was doing. The idea that a crime—"

"It certainly is a crime!" Maigret declared. He handed the scrap of paper to his companion, who read it and handed it back.

They went on for another hundred yards without uttering a word. Then the priest said, in a somber voice: "I wasn't strong enough."

"You?"

"She was ready to return to the ways of our Lord. But every day, down there—" There was a slight harshness in his accent. "I wouldn't go there! And yet it was my duty."

Two men walking along the main drive to the chateau were coming face to face with them. They recognized the doctor with his brown goatee, and beside him Jean Metayer, long and thin, was discoursing feverishly. The yellow car was still in the courtyard. They could guess that Metayer didn't dare go back to the chateau as long as the Count was there.

The situation was a strange one.

"Come on!" said Maigret.

The doctor must have said the same thing to the secretary, for he dragged him forward until he was near enough to shout:

"Good morning, *Monsieur le Curé!* I am in a position to reassure you. Unbeliever though I am, I can imagine your anguish at the idea that a crime might have been committed in your church. Well, there has been no crime. Our Countess died of heart failure."

Maigret went up to Jean Metayer. "One question."

He observed that the young man was nervous and breathing hard with anxiety.

"When were you at the *Journal de Moulins* last?"

"I . . . Wait a minute!"

His suspicions were aroused. He darted a mistrustful look at the inspector. "Why do you ask me that? Am I compelled to answer?"

"You are at liberty to say nothing."

Perhaps Jean Metayer's face was not that of a degenerate, but it certainly was that of a restless, tormented man. The state of his nerves was abnormal enough to interest Dr. Bouchardon, who was talking to the curé. The doctor was staring at him curiously.

"I know there'll be trouble for me—but I shall defend myself!" said Jean.

"Of course you'll defend yourself."

"First I want to see a lawyer. I've a right to it. Moreover, what entitles you—"

"One moment. Have you studied law?"

"For two years." Jean tried to regain his self-possession, to smile. "Well, there is no charge, nor is it a case of *flagrante delicto*, so you have no authority—"

"Very good! Go to the head of the class!"

"The doctor says heart failure."

"And *I* say that the Countess was killed by the lowest and dirtiest of rats."

Maigret handed him the printed paper. Jean Metayer stiffened suddenly and looked at him as if he were going to slap his face.

"By the . . . you said . . . I won't allow you—"

The inspector laid a hand gently on his shoulder.

"But, my poor boy, I haven't said anything to *you* yet! Where is the Count? Go on reading that clipping I handed you. You can give the paper back to me presently."

A GLEAM of triumph appeared in Metayer's eyes. "The Count is discussing checks with the agent. You'll find them in the library!"

The priest and the doctor were walking in front of them, and Maigret overheard the doctor saying:

"No, no Monsieur le Curé. It's human. It's very human. Now, if you'd only studied physiology a little instead of poring over the works of St. Augustine—"

The gravel crunched under the feet of the four men as they slowly climbed the terrace steps, which were hardened and whitened by the intense cold.

Maigret couldn't be everywhere. The chateau was enormous and the village was crowded. That was why he had only an approximate idea of the events of that morning.

It was the hour when, on Sundays and feast days, peasants delay the moment of going home and savor the pleasure of standing in groups in their best clothes in the village square, or sitting in cafes. Some were drunk already. Others were talking in loud voices. And the little boys in their stiff clothes regarded their papas with admiration.

In the Chateau de Saint-Fiacre, Jean Metayer, his face a yellowish tinge, went off by himself to the upper floor, where he could be heard pacing backward and forward in his room.

"Would you like to come along with me?" the doctor asked the priest, and they went to the room where the dead woman lay.

On the ground floor, a wide corridor onto which opened a series of doors, ran the whole length of the building. Maigret heard the murmur of voices. He had been told that the Count and the agent were in the library.

He meant to go in where they were, but opened the wrong door, and found himself in the salon. The door communicating with the library was open, and in a gilt-framed mirror he saw the reflection of the young Count who was sitting in an attitude of dejection on the edge of a desk. The agent was firmly planted before him on his short legs.

"You should have understood that it was no use insisting!" Gautier was saying. "Especially forty thousand francs!"

"Who answered the telephone?"

"*Monsieur* Jean, of course."

"So efficiently that he didn't even give my mother the message."

Maigret coughed and went into the library.

"What telephone message are you speaking about?"

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre answered without any embarrassment:

"The call I made to the chateau yesterday. I've already told you I needed money. I wanted to ask my mother for the necessary sum. But that—that . . . Well, anyway, *Monsieur* Jean, as they call him here, who was here at the end of the line—"

"—told you there was nothing to be done about it? Yet you came all the same."

The agent was watching the two men. Maurice got up from the desk.

"But I didn't get Gautier here to talk about that," he said nervously. "I haven't tried to conceal the situation from you, Inspector. Tomorrow a charge will be preferred against me. It is obvious that, as my mother has died, I am the only legal heir. So I have asked Gautier to find forty thousand francs by tomorrow morning. Well, it seems that it is impossible."

"Quite impossible!" repeated the agent.

"Obviously one can't do anything before the notary intervenes," said the Count, "and he won't call the creditors until after the funeral. And Gautier says, too, that in any case it would be difficult to raise forty thousand francs on what's left of the estate." He began walking up and down. "The chances are that they won't even let me attend the funeral! But one more question. You talked of a crime, Inspector. Was it one?"

"There probably never will be any charge preferred," said Maigret. "It won't be an affair for the public prosecutor."

"Leave us, Gautier," Maurice said abruptly.

As soon as the agent had gone he asked regretfully:

"Is it really a crime?"

"A crime that is no concern of the official police."

"Explain. I'm beginning to—"

But a woman's voice, talking in the hall, accompanied by the deeper voice of the agent, interrupted him. Maurice frowned, went to the door and opened it with an annoyed gesture.

"Marie! What is it?"

"Maurice! Why won't they let me in? It's intolerable! I've been waiting in the hotel for an hour!"

SHE spoke with a pronounced foreign accent. Maigret knew at once that she was Marie Vassiliev, who must have arrived from Moulins in the old taxi he could see in the courtyard.

She was tall and beautiful, rather artificially blonde. Seeing that Maigret was eyeing her, she began speaking English volubly, and Maurice answered in the same language.

She asked him if he had the money. He answered that there was no longer any chance of getting it, that his mother was dead and that she must go back to Paris, where he would soon join her.

"And where's the money?" she

sneered. "I haven't even enough to pay the taxi!"

Then Maurice de Saint-Fiacre began to get distracted.

The shrill voice of his mistress rang through the chateau and gave an air of scandal to the scene.

"If you're staying here I'll stay with you!" declared Marie Vassiliev.

"Send away the taxi and pay the driver," Maigret ordered the agent, who was still in the corridor.

The confusion increased, a moral confusion that seemed to be contagious. Even Gautier was out of his depth.

"We must have a talk, Inspector," insisted the young Count. "But not now!" He indicated Marie who, with aggressive elegance, was striding up and down between the library and the salon as if she were making an inventory. She paused before a painting.

"Who is that stupid portrait meant to be?" she asked and laughed.

Steps were heard on the stairs, and Maigret saw Jean Metayer, who had on a voluminous overcoat and was carrying a traveling bag.

He must have had some doubts as to whether he would be allowed to go, because he stopped in front of the library door and waited.

"Where are you going?" asked Maigret.

"To the inn. It would look better if I—"

To get rid of Marie, Maurice de Saint-Fiacre took her to a room in the right wing of the chateau.

"Is it true that it would be impossible to raise forty thousand francs on the chateau?" Maigret asked the agent.

"It would be difficult."

"Well, do it, even if it's impossible, by tomorrow morning."

The inspector was reluctant to leave. At the last moment he decided to look over the floor above, and there a surprise awaited him. Whereas downstairs everyone had been rushing aimlessly about, upstairs they had been putting things in order in the Countess' room.

The doctor with the assistance of the maid, had laid out the corpse. It scarcely seemed the same body. The dead woman, attired in white, was lying on her four-post bed in an attitude of dignity and peace, with a crucifix in her clasped hands.

Already there were lighted candles, holy water, and a sprig of box in a cup.

When Maigret came in, Bouchardon gave him a look that said:

"Well! What do you think of it? Nice bit of work, eh?"

The priest, also present, moved his lips in soundless prayer. He stayed alone with the dead while the other two went out.

In the square the groups of people had dispersed in front of the church. Through the window-curtains families could be seen sitting down for their midday meal.

For the space of a few seconds the sun attempted to pierce the bank of clouds, but an instant after, the sky grew overcast again and the trees shivered.

VI

WHEN Maigret reached the inn he saw Jean Metayer installed in the near corner of the window, eating mechanically and looking out on the empty road. Maigret sat down at the other end of the dining room. Between them was a family from a neighboring village who had come in a horse-dray, bringing their

[*Turn page*]

own provisions. Marie Tatin was serving them with drinks.

Poor Marie understood nothing of what was going on. Usually she only rented a room in the attic now and then to a workman who came to do repairs at the chateau or some farm. And now, besides Maigret, she had a new lodger—the Countess' secretary.

She didn't dare ask any questions. All the morning she had heard terrifying things being said by her customers. Among others, there had been mention of the police!

"I'm afraid the fowl is overdone," she said as she served Maigret, and the tone of her voice was as if she had said: "I'm afraid of everything! I don't know what's going on! Holy Virgin, protect me!"

The inspector looked at her. She had always looked the same, fearful and wretched.

"Do you remember, Marie?" he began, and she opened her eyes wide and made a slight defensive movement, "the business of the frogs?"

"But . . . Who—"

"Your mother sent you to gather mushrooms that grew in the field behind Notre-Dame pond. Two boys were playing on this side. They took advantage of a moment when you were busy to substitute frogs for the mushrooms. All the way home you were frightened because the mushrooms croaked."

She looked at him attentively, and finally stammered:

"It's Maigret?"

"Look out! *Monsieur* Jean's finished his fowl and is waiting for the next course."

Marie Tatin was a changed woman, more worried than ever, but with waves of confidence.

What a queer life! Years and years without the slightest incident, with nothing to relieve the monotony. And then, all of a sudden mysterious happenings that hadn't even yet appeared in the papers!

While she went on serving Jean Metayer and the peasants from time to time she threw Maigret a glance of complicity. When he had finished she suggested timidly:

"You'll take a little brandy, won't you, *monsieur*?"

"You used to call me by my Christian name, Marie!"

She tittered. No, she didn't dare!

"But you haven't had any lunch yourself!"

"Oh, yes, I have! I always eat in the kitchen without sitting down. A mouthful here and there."

A motorcycle went past, ridden by a young man much more elegant than the other inhabitants of the village.

"Who's that?" asked Maigret.

"Didn't you see him this morning? That's Emile Gautier, the agent's son."

"Where's he going?"

"Very likely to Moulins! He works in a bank there."

They saw people coming out of their houses, walking along the road or going toward the cemetery.

Maigret was sleepy. He felt as tired out as if he had made a special effort. And it wasn't because he had got up at half-past five in the morning, or that he had caught cold.

It was the atmosphere that was too much for him. He was affected personally by the tragedy, and nauseated.

Yes! "Nauseated" was the word. He could never have imagined that he would return to his village under such conditions. Even his father's gravestone had become blackened, and he had been asked not to smoke!

Jean Metayer was showing off. He knew he was being watched, so he ate with a pretense of calm, even with the shadow of a vague scornful smile.

"A glass of brandy?" Marie Tatin had proposed to him as well.

"No, thank you! I never touch brandy."

His manners were wonderful. In all circumstances he took care to show his good breeding. At the inn he ate as if he were at the chateau.

WHEN he had finished his meal, he asked whether there was a telephone.

"Not here," said Marie, "but there's one opposite."

He went across the road to the grocer's shop kept by the sacristan. He must have made a long-distance call, because they saw him waiting for a long time in the shop, smoking cigarette after cigarette.

When he came back, the peasants had left the inn. Marie Tatin was washing glasses in preparation for vespers, which would bring customers later.

"Whom were you telephoning to?" Maigret asked Jean bluntly. "You know I could easily find out."

"To my father, at Bourges." Jean's voice was dry and aggressive. "I asked him to send a lawyer immediately."

"You're so sure of being troubled?"

"I must beg you not to address another word to me until my lawyer comes. Believe me, I much regret that there is only one inn in the place."

He thought he heard the inspector growl as he went off: "Swine! Dirty little swine!"

And Marie Tatin, without knowing why, was afraid to be left alone with Jean Metayer. The day was one of indecision and confusion right to the end, doubtless because no one felt qualified to direct the course of events.

Maigret, in his heavy overcoat, wandered about the village. He was in the church square, then in the neighborhood of the chateau, where lights went on at one window after another. For night fell fast. The church was lit up and vibrated with the notes of the organ pipes. The sexton closed the cemetery gates.

Groups, scarcely visible in the night, were discussing matters. They didn't know whether it was proper or not for them to pay their respects to the dead. Two men went to the chateau first, and the butler didn't know what he ought to do either. He went to look for Maurice de Saint-Fiacre to ask his opinion, but the Russian girl told him that Maurice had gone for a walk. She was lying in bed fully clothed, smoking cigarettes with long cardboard mouthpieces.

So the butler, with a gesture of indifference, let the two men in.

That was the signal. There were secret conferences as people came out from vespers.

"Yes, indeed! Pere Martin and young Bonnet have gone there already!"

Everyone went in procession. Indoors, the chateau was badly lighted. The peasants filed along the corridor, dragged their children by the hand, and shook them to stop them making noise.

There was no one in the Countess' bedroom but her maid, who was dismayed at the invasion. The people made the sign of the cross with the sprig of box dipped in holy water. The more daring murmured:

"You'd think she was sleeping!"

And others chimed in:

"She didn't suffer!"

Then their steps echoed on the uneven parquet, the stairs creaked.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre came in while the house was being invaded. He stared with surprise at the peasants who wondered whether they ought to speak to him. But he confined himself to bowing to them, and went into Marie Vassiliev's room, where he and she could be heard talking in English.

Maigret was in the church. The sacristan, extinguisher in hand, was going around the candles. The priest was taking off his vestments in the sacristy.

To the right and the left were the confessionals with their little green curtains, intended to screen the penitent from public view.

The sexton, who hadn't seen Maigret, was closing the great door and drawing the bolts. The inspector went down the nave and into the sacristy, surprising the priest.

"Excuse me, *Monsieur le Curé*. First of all I want to ask you a question."

On the surface, the priest's regular features were composed, but his eyes seemed bright with fever.

"This morning, the Countess' missal, which lay on her prie-dieu, suddenly disappeared, and was found under a choir boy's surplice in this room."

There was a silence broken only by the sacristan's footsteps on the church floor and the heavier tread of the sexton going out by a side door.

"I must ask you to forgive me but only four people—the choir boy, the sacristan, the sexton, and—"

"And myself!"

THE priest's voice was calm. His face was lit on one side only by the flickering flame of a candle. From a censer a thin thread of blue smoke rose in spirals toward the ceiling.

"It was I who took the missal and put it in here while I was waiting," he said.

"You knew what was in the missal?"

"No."

"In that case—"

"I am afraid I must beg you to ask me no more questions, *Monsieur* Maigret. It is a secret of the confessional."

With an involuntary association of ideas, the inspector was reminded of other days, where there had been catechism in the rectory dining room, and

of the image which had formed in his mind when the old curé had told the story of a priest in the Middle Ages who had had his tongue torn out rather than betray the secret of the confessional. He found that picture in his mind's eye again, just as it had been thirty-five years before.

And yet he murmured: "Then you know the murderer?"

"God knows him. . . . Excuse me, I have to go and see a sick man."

They went out by the rectory garden, and through a little gate. Down at the chateau people were leaving, but they lingered to discuss the event.

Shortly, the priest and the inspector ran into the doctor, who growled into his goatee:

"Look here, Curé! Don't you think this is becoming too much like a circus? You must keep some sort of order, if it's only to safeguard the peasants' morals! Ah, Inspector! You certainly do things well. Half the village is accusing the young Count, especially since the arrival of that woman! The agent's gone to see the farmers to try and collect the forty thousand francs which are apparently necessary to—" He stopped short, and said, "Damn!" For Maigret had gone.

So now Maigret was thinking, they were accusing him of being the cause of this disorder. What blunder had he made? He would have given anything to see the affair proceed in an atmosphere of dignity.

As he strode towards the inn, he heard a scrap of conversation:

"If they don't get the money he'll have to go to prison."

Marie Tatin was the picture of desolation. She went jogging along like an old woman, although she couldn't be more than forty.

"Lemonade for you? Who ordered two bocks?"

In his corner, Jean Metayer was writing, raising his head from time to time to listen to the conversation.

Maigret went up to him. He couldn't read the scrawls, but he could see that the paragraphs were each preceded by a number.

The secretary was preparing his defense while he was waiting for his lawyer.

Pale and drawn, but resolute, Jean Metayer wrote on. . . .

Maigret's sleep was at once troubled and pleasant, the kind of sleep induced in a cold bedroom in the country that smells of stables, stored apples, and hay. The bedclothes were icy except where he had warmed a cozy hollow with his body. All huddled up, he avoided making the slightest movement.

He had repeatedly heard the dry cough of Jean Metayer in the next attic room, then furtive steps when Marie Tatin got up.

He stayed a last few minutes in bed. When he had lit the candle his courage failed him at the thought of washing in the freezing water in the jug, so he put it off, and came downstairs in his slippers without a collar.

Marie Tatin was pouring kerosene onto the fire, which wouldn't draw. Her hair was in curlers and she blushed when she saw the inspector.

"It's not seven o'clock yet. Coffee isn't ready."

Maigret was a little worried. Half an hour before, he thought he had heard a car go past. Saint-Fiacre was not on the main road, and practically nothing passed through the village except the bus once a day.

"The bus hasn't gone through the village yet, Marie?"

"It never does before half-past eight! More often it's nine."

"Are those the bells for mass already?"

"Yes! It's at seven in winter and at six in summer. If you'd like to sit down and get warm—"

The fire was at last beginning to burn.

"Can't you bring yourself to call me by my Christian name?" he asked, and then got annoyed when he saw a coquettish smile on the poor old girl's face.

"Coffee will be ready in five minutes," she said.

VII

THE cold was even more intense than on the previous day. Maigret, with the collar of his overcoat turned up and his hat pulled down over his eyes, went outside and walked slowly toward the luminous patch of the church.

There were only three women in the nave today. And the mass had something hurried and furtive about it. The priest went hastily from one side of the

altar to the other, turned quickly with his arms outstretched, and mumbled, slurring half the syllables:

"Dominus vobiscum!"

The choir boy, who was finding great difficulty in keeping up with him, said *"Amen"* out of time, and made a dash for the mass bell.

Maigret could hear the murmur of liturgical prayers and sometimes the sound of the priest getting his breath between words. The three women rose. The curé recited the last Gospel. A car stopped in front of the church and hesitating steps were heard on the square.

Maigret, at the back of the church, was standing against the door, so that when the new arrival opened it he found himself literally face to face with Maigret.

It was Maurice de Saint-Fiacre. He was so surprised that he nearly beat a retreat, murmuring:

"Excuse me. I—"

But he took a step forward as he tried hard to regain his self-possession. His eyes had rings under them as if he hadn't slept all night.

"Have you just come from Moulins?" asked Maigret in an undertone while the priest recited the prayer after the Gospel and the women closed their mass books and took up their handbags and umbrellas.

"Yes."

"Shall we go outside?"

The priest and the choir boy had gone into the sacristy, and the sacristan was extinguishing the two candles which had sufficed for a low mass.

Outside it was a little lighter. The white of the nearest houses was becoming detached from the background. The yellow car was among the trees in the square.

Maurice's uneasiness was obvious. He looked at Maigret, amazed to see him unshaven and with no collar under his coat.

"You must have got up pretty early," murmured the inspector. "The first train, an express, leaves Moulins at three minutes past seven. You can't have taken the train."

Maurice's explanation was simple and natural. The presence of Marie Vassiliev at the chateau was an embarrassment. So he had taken her to Moulins by car, put her on the Paris train, came back, and as he was passing had looked in at the lighted church.

And yet Maigret was not satisfied. He tried to follow the anxious glance of the Count, who seemed to be expecting or fearing something.

"She doesn't look to be easy to get along with," insinuated the inspector.

"She's sensitive. The idea that I might want to conceal our friendship—"

"How long has that been going on?"

"A little less than a year. There have been some embarrassing moments."

His glance had at last focused on something. Maigret followed it and saw the curé, who had just come out of the church. He had an impression that the two glances met and that the priest seemed just as embarrassed as the Count of Saint-Fiacre.

With clumsy haste the curé waved a brief salute and fled into the rectory.

"He doesn't look like a country priest," observed Maigret.

Maurice made no answer. Through the lighted window they could see the priest seating himself for his breakfast and the maid bringing him the steaming coffee-pot.

Boys with bags on their backs set off for school. The surface of the Notre-Dame pond was becoming like a sheet of mirror glass.

"What arrangements have you made for the funeral?" asked the inspector. "Did anyone keep watch last night in your mother's room?"

"No. Gautier insisted that it wasn't done any more.

THEY heard the throbbing of an engine in the chateau courtyard, and a few moments later a motorcycle went past toward Moulins. Maigret recognized Gautier's son, whom he had seen the previous evening. The young fellow was wearing a beige mackintosh and a checked cap.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre didn't quite dare drive off in his car, but plainly he had nothing to say to the inspector.

"Did Gautier get the forty thousand francs?" asked Maigret.

"No . . . yes. That is to say—"

Maigret looked at him curiously, amazed to see him so embarrassed on that point.

"Yes or no? I had the impression, yesterday, that he wasn't anxious to get it. But even with the mortgages and debts, they'll realize much more than that."

Maurice wouldn't answer! He looked distracted for no apparent reason. And his next words had no connection with the preceding conversation.

"Tell me frankly, Inspector. Do you suspect me?"

"Of what?"

"You know perfectly well."

"I've no more reason to suspect you than anyone else." Maigret's answer was evasive.

"Thank you! Well, that's what people must be told—you understand? Otherwise my position isn't tenable."

"At what bank will your check be presented?"

"The *Comptoir d'Escompte.*"

"I'll rejoin you at the chateau," Maigret said to Maurice.

It was clear that Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was not at all pleased about something as the inspector got into his car. When Maigret was opposite the inn, Jean Metayer came out of the grocer's. He gave the inspector a triumphant look.

"My lawyer arrives at eight-fifty!" he said acidly. He appeared to be quite sure of himself.

From the skylight in his bedroom, where Maigret had gone to complete his dressing, he could see the chateau courtyard, the yellow sports car, and Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, who didn't seem to know what to do when he reached the chateau. Was he thinking of going back to the village on foot?

In a few minutes the inspector was walking toward the chateau. They met near the church.

"Where were you going?" asked Maigret.

"Nowhere!"

"Perhaps to say a prayer in church?"

And those words were enough to make Maurice turn pale, as if they had some mysterious and terrible meaning.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was not built for drama. He was big, and appeared to be strong, a sportsman with a magnificent physique. But a closer look showed that he was soft. Beneath his muscles, slightly sunk in fat, he had hardly any energy. Right now, after an apparently sleepless night, he looked deflated.

"Have you sent out announcements of the funeral?" Maigret asked him.

"No."

"But your family—the squires round about?"

The young man flared up. "They wouldn't come, you can be sure! In the old days they would have, when my father was alive. In the shooting season we used to have thirty people staying at the chateau for weeks on end."

Maigret knew that well, for when a beat had been on he used to love to put on a beater's white jacket without letting his parents know.

"Since then—" Maurice made a gesture which implied collapse and ruin.

They must have been talking all over the province about the mad old girl who was messing up her last days with her so-called secretaries. And the farms which were being sold one after the other. And the son playing the fool in Paris!

"Do you think the funeral could take place tomorrow?" Maurice asked. "It would be better to get the present situation over as soon as possible."

Day had broken, grayer than the day before but less windy. Maigret saw Gautier crossing the courtyard, coming toward him, said strangely, "You'll excuse me!" and made off toward the chateau.

He had hardly gone a hundred yards when he turned back. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was on the rectory steps. He must have rung the bell, but when he saw that he was discovered he went off quickly without waiting for an answer. His whole bearing showed how ill-at-ease he was.

The inspector went up to the agent, who was waiting for him.

"What is it you want?" Gautier said arrogantly.

"A simple piece of information. Did you get the forty thousand francs the Count needed?"

"No! And I defy anyone in the country to get them! Everybody knows what his signature is worth. He can get himself out of the mess as best he can. It's none of my business."

Saint-Fiacre was retracing his steps, as if he had come to a sudden decision. He stopped near the two men.

"Gautier!" he said. "Will you come

and take my orders in the library?"

As he went off, he added with a visible effort: "See you presently, Inspector!"

As Maigret passed the rectory, he had the distinct impression that he was being watched from behind the curtains. But he could not be absolutely certain because, since it was light, the light inside had been turned out.

A taxi was standing outside Marie Tatin's inn. In the lounge a man of about fifty, sprucely dressed in striped trousers and a black waistcoat edged with silk, was seated at a table with Jean Metayer.

When the inspector came in, the man rose with a flourish and rushed forward with outstretched hand.

"I'm told that you are an officer from the *Police Judiciaire*. Allow me to introduce myself—*Maitre* Tallier, barrister, of Bourges. . . . Won't you have something with us?"

JEAN METAYER had got up, but his attitude showed that he did not approve of his lawyer's cordiality.

In an ingratiating tone the lawyer went on:

"What is it to be? In this cold weather what do you say to a grog all round? Three grogs, my child."

The child was poor Marie Tatin, who was unaccustomed to such ways.

"I hope, Inspector, that you will excuse my client," said *Maitre* Tallier. "If I understand rightly, he has shown you a certain mistrust. But do not forget that he is of good family, has nothing to reproach himself with, and has been roused to indignation by the suspicions he has felt cast on him. His bad humor of yesterday, if I may say so, is the best proof of his absolute innocence."

With this man, there was no need for a companion to open his mouth. He did the whole business, questions and answers, all accompanied by suave gestures.

"Of course, I'm not yet *au courant* with all the details. If I understand aright, the Countess of Saint-Fiacre died here yesterday at the first mass, of a heart attack. A paper was found in her missal which leads one to suppose that her death was induced by some violent emotion. Has the son of the victim, who happened by chance to be in the neighborhood, brought a charge? No! And, moreover, I believe that such a charge would be inadmissible. The incriminating evidence—if, indeed, there is such evidence—is not sufficiently definite to justify a charge before the magistrate."

"Well, then, we're of the same opinion," said Maigret. "No charge, and therefore no legal action."

"But in that case I do not understand why you personally should be concerned in your official capacity. My client cannot rest content merely because he is not to be prosecuted. He must be cleared of any taint of suspicion. What, in short, was his postion at the chateau? That of adopted son. The Countess, left alone, separated from a son who brought her nothing but mortification, was consoled by the devotion and uprightness of her secretary. My client was not content to live idly as he might have done at the chateau. He set to work, sought out good investments. He even interested himself in recent inventions. Could the death of his benefactress have been to his interest? Need I say more? Surely not. It is all so obvious!

"And that, Inspector, is what I wish to help you to establish. I shall first of all have to take some indispensable measures in collaboration with the solicitor. Jean Metayer is a trusting boy. He never imagined that this sort of thing would happen. His belongings are at the chateau. Now others have arrived there, doubtless with the intention of laying hands on—"

"Some pajamas and an old pair of slippers!" growled Maigret, and rose to his feet."

"I beg your pardon?"

Jean Metayer had been taking notes in a little notebook. He calmed his lawyer as he also jumped to his feet.

"Don't bother! I saw from the first moment that I had an enemy in the inspector. And I have since learned that he is indirectly connected with the chateau, where he was born here when his father was agent to the Saint-Fiacres. I warned you, Maitre."

VIII

HANDS of the clock pointed to ten. Maigret calculated that Marie Vassiliev's train must have arrived at the Gare de Lyon in Paris half an hour ago.

"You'll excuse me!" he said. "I shall be seeing you in due course."

"But—"

He went to the grocer's store to use the phone. He waited a quarter of an hour for a Paris connection. Maigret felt all in, both morally and physically before he heard:

"Paris speaking."

"Hello! Is that the *Comptoir d'Escompte?* . . . *Police Judiciaire* speaking. Information please. Was a check signed Saint-Fiacre presented this morning? . . . At nine o'clock? . . . But there was no cover. . . . You asked the bearer to present it a second time? . . . Good! That's what I wanted to know. A young woman, wasn't it? A quarter of an hour ago? And she deposited the forty thousand francs? Thank you. . . . Of course, pay, seeing that the amount is covered."

Maigret came out of the booth with a great sigh of exhaustion. Some time during the night Maurice de Saint-Fiacre had found the forty thousand francs and had sent Marie to Paris to deposit it in the bank!

As the inspector came out of the grocer's he saw the curé leaving his house with his breviary in his hand and setting off in the direction of the chateau. He increased his speed and practically ran, to reach the front door at the same time the priest arrived.

He failed by about a minute. When he got to the great courtyard, the door was closing behind the curé. And after he rang the bell, he could hear steps at the end of the corridor beside the library.

When the butler opened the door, Maigret asked for the Count of Saint-Fiacre.

"I will see whether *Monsieur le Comte* can—"

But the inspector didn't give the butler time to finish his sentence. He went into the hall and made straight for the library, while the butler gave a sigh of resignation. One couldn't even keep up appearances! People pushed their way in as if this were a shop.

Before opening the library door Maigret waited a moment, but could hear no sound. He knocked, and a voice, sounding clear and firm in the absolute silence of the room, said:

"Come in!"

Maigret pushed open the door and stopped. Leaning lightly against the Gothic table, the Count of Saint-Fiacre faced him. Beside him, eyes fixed on the carpet, the priest remained rigid and motionless, as if a single movement would be enough to betray him.

What were they doing there, neither talking nor moving? It would have been less embarrassing to have intruded on some emotional scene than to break into this silence so deep that a word seemed to trace concentric circles like a pebble in water.

Again Maigret noticed how tired Saint-Fiacre was. And the priest's fingers moved restlessly over his breviary. "I'm sorry to disturb you." It sounded like irony, but Maigret had not meant it as such. "But I have news from the bank."

The Count's gaze shifted to the curé, a hard gaze. The whole scene was played in this tempo, as if they had been chess-players, reflecting, head in hand, keeping silent for a few minutes before moving a piece, then resuming their immobility.

But it was not reflection that kept them motionless. Maigret was convinced that it was the fear of making a false move, a clumsy maneuver. Between the three of them was some equivocation. And each of them moved with regret, ready to withdraw.

"I came to get instructions about the funeral!" the priest felt compelled to say.

It wasn't true! A bad move! So bad that the Count smiled.

"I foresaw your telephone call to the bank!" he said. "And I am going to tell you why I decided on that step. It was to get rid of Marie Vassiliev. I made her believe that it was of the utmost importance."

NOW MAIGRET read anguish and reproof in the priest's eyes. "Poor wretch!" he must be thinking. "He's let himself in for it! He's fallen into a trap—he's done for!"

Silence. Then the crackle of a match and the puffs of smoke with which the inspector punctuated his questions:

"Gautier raised the money?"

A momentary hesitation.

"No, Inspector. I'll tell you."

But it was not Saint-Fiacre's face that betrayed any emotion, it was the priest's. He was pale and his lips had a wry twist.

"Listen to me, *Monsieur,*" he began, but he couldn't go on.

It was cold in that vast room where the best of the books were missing. A fire was laid in the hearth. It just needed a match.

"Have you got a lighter or something?" Maurice asked, and as the inspector passed over his lighter and Maurice bent over the fire the priest cast a desolate appealing look at Maigret.

"Now," said the Count as he straightened up, "I'm going to clear up the situation in a few words. For some reason of which I am ignorant, *Monsieur le Curé,* who is full of good will, thinks that it was I who—why should I be afraid of the words?—killed my mother. Because it was a murder, wasn't it, even if it doesn't fall into any legal category?"

The priest did not move, but kept the trembling immobility of an animal that feels danger impending and does not know how to face it.

"*Monsieur le Curé* must have been devoted to my mother. Doubtless he wanted to prevent a scandal falling on the chateau. Yesterday evening he sent me by the sacristan forty thousand-franc notes and a short message."

"You are lost!" was the unmistakable expression on the priest's face.

"Here is the note!" continued Saint-Fiacre, and Maigret read:

Be discreet. I am praying for you.

Suddenly Maurice de Saint-Fiacre no longer felt riveted to the ground nor condemned to immobility. Suddenly, too, he lost the gravity which was foreign to his nature.

He began walking up and down, talking in a lighter voice.

"That, Inspector, is why you saw me hanging round the rectory this morning. I accepted the forty thousand francs, which, of course, must be considered as a loan first, to get Marie out of the place, and then because it would have been unpleasant to have been arrested. But we're all standing. Please sit down."

He went and opened the door and listened to sounds from the floor above.

"The procession has begun!" he murmured. "I ought to telephone to Moulins about a mortuary chapel." Then without any transition he went on: "I suppose you understand that when I accepted the money, I had to swear to *Monsieur le Curé* that I was not guilty. It was difficult, without increasing your suspicions, Inspector. You didn't leave me alone for an instant this morning anywhere near the church. *Monsieur le Curé* came here, I don't yet know why, because just as you came in he was trying to say something."

His face clouded. To dispel his rising resentment he gave a forced laugh.

"It's simple, isn't it? If a man has led the sort of life I have been living, and has signed worthless checks . . . Old Gautier avoids me. He, too, is probably convinced that—" He suddenly looked at the priest with astonishment. "Why, *Monsieur le Curé,* what is the matter?"

The priest certainly looked lugubrious. He would not look the Count in the face, and even tried to avoid Maigret's eyes.

Maurice understood and cried even more bitterly:

"You see! He doesn't believe me any longer. The very person who wants to help me to escape believes I'm guilty!"

He went over and opened the door again and, in spite of the presence of death in the house, called:

"Albert! Albert! Bring us a drink."

The butler came in, went over to a cupboard and took out whisky and glasses. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre remarked with a queer smile:

"When I lived here there wasn't any whisky in the chateau."

"It's *Monsieur* Jean—"

"Ah!"

He gulped down a glass of whisky and locked the door behind the butler as the man went out.

"A lot of things have changed," he muttered.

But he didn't take his eyes off the priest who, more and more uneasy, stammered:

"You'll excuse me. I've got to take catechism."

"One moment. You still believe I am guilty, *Monsieur le Curé.* No, no! Don't attempt to deny it. You can't lie. Only there are certain points I want to clear up, because you don't know me. You weren't at Saint-Fiacre when I lived here, so you've only heard of me at second-hand. The inspector, knows something about it all."

"I beg you—" stammered the priest.

"Won't you have a drink? No? Your

health, Inspector. His face darkened and he went on mercilessly:

"There are a lot of people one might suspect. *You* suspect me, and only me. And I've been wondering why. It kept me awake last night, but I believe I've got it at last. . . . What did my mother say to you?"

The priest became deathly pale.

"I know nothing," he stammered.

"Please, *Monsieur le Curé*. You have helped me, enabled me to put back those forty thousand francs, and that has given me time to breathe and to give my mother a decent burial. I thank you with all my heart. But at the same time you burden me with your suspicions. You pray for me. It is too much, or not enough."

And now his voice had a shade of anger.

"I first thought I'd have this explanation without *Monsieur* Maigret's presence. Now I'm glad that he's here. The more I think about it, the more I have a presentiment of trouble."

"*Monsieur le Comte*, I beseech you not to torture me any more!"

"*Monsieur le Curé*, I warn you that you won't leave here before you've told me the truth!"

HE had come to the end of his tether. And, like all gentle people, he became exaggeratedly ferocious.

"You knew my mother well. I suppose Jean Metayer was a member of your church too! Which of them said something? My mother, wasn't it?"

Maigret recalled the words: "The secret of the confessional." He understood the priest's anguish, under the avalanche of Saint-Fiacre's words.

"What could she have told you? Don't bother—I know. I was present, so to speak, at the beginning of the downfall." He looked around in dull anger. "There was a time when people held their breath when they came into this room, because my father was working. There wasn't any whisky in the cupboard. But the shelves were as filled with books as the cells of a honeycomb are filled with honey."

Maigret could remember that, too, could remember, "*The Count called me into the library*," and Maigret's father would be worried because this indicated a matter of importance.

"He didn't waste logs, but was content with an oil-stove near him to help out the central heating," said Maurice de Saint-Fiacre. Then, turning to the distracted priest: "You never knew all that. You have only known the chateau in disorder, my mother without her husband, with her only son playing the fool in Paris and only coming here to demand money. Then, there were those secretaries—"

His eyes were so bright that Maigret expected to see a tear fall.

"What did she say to you? She was always afraid I'd turn up, wasn't she? She knew something more would have to be sold to get me some more money."

"You must calm yourself!" said the curé in a flat voice.

"Not before I know whether you have suspected me without knowing me, from the first moment!"

Maigret intervened.

"*Monsieur le Curé* hid the missal," he said slowly.

He was throwing out a hint to Saint-Fiacre. He could imagine the Countess, torn between sin and remorse. Perhaps she was afraid of being punished for her sins, perhaps also a little ashamed before her son? She was worried and ill! So mightn't she have said one day in the secret of the confessional: "I am afraid of my son?"

Obviously she must have been afraid. The money that had been given to Jean Metayer was Saint-Fiacre money which would have reverted to Maurice.

Would he come and demand a reckoning?

Maigret could feel those ideas taking shape in the young man's mind, still confused, and he helped to make them definite.

"*Monsieur le Curé* can say nothing if the Countess spoke under the seal of confession."

That was clear. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre cut short the conversation.

"You'll excuse me, *Monsieur le Curé*. I forgot about your catechism. Please forgive me."

He turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

"Thank you. As soon—as soon as possible I shall return the forty thousand francs, for I don't suppose they belong to you."

"I asked Madame Ruinard for them. She is the widow of the late attorney."

"Thank you. *Au revoir*."

IX

BARELY managing to restrain himself, Saint-Fiacre nearly slammed the door after the Priest. Looking Maigret in the eyes, he snapped:

"That was a dirty trick!"

"He wanted—"

"He wanted to save me, I know! He tried to avoid a scandal, to stick together somehow or other the ruins of the Saint-Fiacre chateau. It's not that!"

He poured himself more whisky.

"It's that poor old girl I'm thinking of! Look, you've seen Marie Vassiliev, and you know what she is, and the rest of them like her in Paris. They never have attacks of conscience. But my mother did! And remember that what she was always seeking more than anything else from that fellow Metayer was someone to lavish her affection on. Then she'd rush off to confession. She must have thought herself a monster, and so feared my vengeance."

He gave a terrible laugh.

"You can see me, can't you, indignantly attacking my mother for . . . And the curé doesn't understand. He sees life in terms of texts! He had to save my mother from herself. When she was dead he thought it was his duty to save me. But at present I'll bet he's still persuaded that it was I who—" He looked the inspector fixedly in the eyes, and asked: "What about you?" Then, as Maigret didn't answer:

"For it *is* a crime, a crime that only the lowest swine could have committed —a coward! Is it true that the law can do nothing against him? But I'll tell you one thing, Inspector. Once I get hold of that swine, well, it'll be my affair and mine only. And I won't need a revolver! No, nor any other weapon. Nothing but these hands!"

He passed his hand across his forehead, looked at himself in the mirror and pulled a face at himself.

"All the same, if it hadn't been for the curé they would have locked me up even before the funeral! I wasn't so nice to him. And so the solicitor's widow is paying my debts. Who is she?"

"She's the lady who always dresses in white. Hers is the house with the gilt spikes on the gate on the Matignon road."

[*Turn page*]

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was calming down. His outburst had only been a flash. He poured a drink for himself, emptied the contents of his glass with a gulp and a grimace of disgust. He lifted his head and listened.

"Do you hear?"

"What?"

"The people filing past, upstairs. I ought to be there in deep mourning, red-eyed and wringing my hands with a distressed air. Once they're outside they'll start discussing—" He broke off and demanded, suspiciously: "But just why are you staying in the district if, as you say, the law isn't concerned with this affair?"

"Something new might turn up."

"And would you, if I found out who was responsible for my mother's death, prevent me from—"

His twitching fingers were more eloquent than any words.

"I'll leave you," Maigret cut him short. "I must go and survey the second camp."

"What second camp?"

"The one at the inn. Jean Metayer and his lawyer who came this morning."

"He's got a lawyer?"

"He's a cautious lad. This morning, the persons concerned are situated thus: at the chateau, you and the curé; at the inn, the young man and his legal adviser."

"You think he could have done it?"

"You'll excuse me if I help myself?"

Maigret drank a glass of whisky, wiped his lips, and lit a last pipe before leaving.

"I don't suppose you can work a linotype?" he asked.

Maurice shrugged eloquently. "I can't work anything. That's the trouble!"

"In any case, you won't leave the village without letting me know, will you?"

The Count de Saint-Fiacre gave him a deep, solemn look, and in a deep, solemn voice he replied:

"I promise!"

MAIGRET left him then. As he was going down the front steps he found a man beside him, but had no idea where the fellow had sprung from, but recognized him immediately as the agent, Gautier.

"Excuse me, Inspector," Gautier said. "I'd like to have a few moments' conversation with you. I have been hearing that you more or less belong to this place, that your father had my job. Will you do me the honor of having a drink at my house? I'd like to apologize for your rather cool reception there yesterday. I didn't know you, and was naturally—upset."

The agent with the gray goatee dragged him across the courtyard. Everything was ready in his home—a bottle of brandy whose label proclaimed its great age, and some biscuits. A smell of cabbage, done in pork fat, came from the kitchen.

"From what I hear," Gautier said, "you knew the chateau under quite different conditions. When I arrived things were already getting pretty bad. There was a young man from Paris who . . . This brandy dates back to the old Count's time. Without sugar, I suppose?"

Maigret fixed his gaze on the table with the carved lions that had brass rings in their mouths. Once again he felt morally and physically tired. In the old days he wouldn't have dared enter this room except in slippers because of the polished floor.

"I am much embarrassed," Gautier went on, "and I want to ask your advice. We are poor people—you can't get rich on an agent's job. Some Saturdays there wasn't enough money in the cash-box, so I had to pay the farm-laborers myself. At other times I advanced money for the purchase of cattle that the farmers had to have."

"In other words, the Countess owed you money!"

"*Madame la Comtesse* would have nothing to do with money affairs. Money flowed like water. It was only for really indispensable things that it couldn't be found."

"And it was you who—"

"Your father would have done the same. You can't let people see that the cash-box is empty. And now there's the funeral, and again I'll have to—"

A picture rose to Maigret's mind—his father's little office near the stables at five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. Every person employed at the chateau, from the sewing-maids to the day-laborers, would be waiting outside. And old Maigret, installed at the desk covered with green calico, would be surrounded by little piles of money. They all filed past in turn, making their signature or

a cross on the pay-roll.

"Now I'm wondering how I am going to recover what is due me," said Gautier.

"Yes, I understand. . . . You've changed the fireplace!"

"Well, it was a wooden one. Marble is better."

"Much better!" muttered Maigret.

"All the creditors will be swooping down on us. We'll have to sell! And, with the mortgages—"

The armchair in which Maigret was sitting was new like the fireplace, and must have come out of a shop in the *Boulevard Barbes*. There was a radio on the sideboard.

"If I didn't have a son it would be all the same to me," said the agent, "but Emile has his career to think of. I don't want to bungle matters."

A girl crossed the corridor.

"You've got a daughter too?"

"No, that's a local girl who comes to do the rough work."

"Well, we'll talk about it again, *Monsieur Gautier*. Excuse me, but I've still a lot of things to do."

"A last little glass?"

"No, thank you."

He went off with his hands in his pockets, passed the flock of geese, and walked along beside the Notre-Dame pond, where the waters were no longer choppy. The church clock struck twelve.

At Marie Tatin's, Jean Metayer and the lawyer had begun their lunch. Sardines, fillets of herring, and sausage as hors-d'oeuvres. On the next table were glasses which had contained *aperitifs*. The two men were in fine spirits. They greeted Maigret with ironical glances.

"I hope you have found some truffles for the fowl?" the lawyer asked Marie Tatin.

POOR Marie! She had found a little tin at the grocer's, but she couldn't open it. She didn't dare admit it.

"I've found them, *monsieur!*"

"Well, hurry then! The air of this place makes one simply ravenous."

Maigret went to the kitchen and opened the tin while she squinted and stammered in a whisper:

"I'm all in a muddle."

"Shut up, Marie!" he growled, then felt a need to joke with her to escape from realities. "By the way, the curé asked me to send you three hundred days' indulgence. Something about making up for your sins!"

Marie Tatin looked up at him with fear and a respectful affection.

Maigret had telephoned to Moulins for a taxi. He was surprised to see one draw up scarcely ten minutes after his call. As he made his way to the door the lawyer intervened.

"Excuse me! That is ours. But if you would like a seat—"

"No, thank you."

So Jean Metayer and the lawyer went off first in a huge old wreck which still bore its late owner's coat-of-arms. A quarter of an hour later, Maigret rode away chatting with his chauffeur and observing the countryside—a double row of poplars along the road, tilled fields, and here and there a copse or the glaucous eye of a pond.

The houses were mostly cottages. There were no small landed proprietors—nothing but big estates—one of which, belonging to a duke contained three villages.

The Saint-Fiacre estate had been five thousand acres in extent before they had started selling.

As sole means of transport there was an old Paris bus which a peasant drove between Moulins and Saint-Fiacre once a day.

"If you want the country, here it is!" said the taxi driver. "You ought to see it in the winter."

They reached the Moulins main street just as the clock of St. Peter's pointed to half-past two. Maigret had the man stop opposite the *Comptoir d'Escompte* and paid the fare. As he was turning away to go into the bank, a woman came out of it holding a boy by the hand.

The inspector hurriedly made a dash for a shop-window so as not to be seen. The woman, a peasant in her Sunday clothes, with her hat balanced on the top of her hair, marched along with great dignity, dragging the boy behind her. She was the mother of Ernest, the red-headed boy who had served the priest at mass at Saint-Fiacre.

Ernest would obviously have liked to stop at the stalls, but he was towed along in the wake of the black skirt. His mother said something to him, then disappeared with him into a toy shop.

Maigret did not dare go too near, but he could gather what was going on by some blasts on a whistle which issued

from the shop. Every variety of whistle imaginable was tried out, and finally the choir boy seemed to have decided in favor of a Boy Scout's double-noted whistle.

When he came out he was wearing it on a cord, but his mother was still dragging him along, preventing him from blowing it in the street.

X

IN Moulin's the bank was like that of any other provincial branch. There was a long oak counter and five clerks bending over desks. Maigret went up to a window which had *Comptes courants* written over it, and a clerk rose to serve him.

Maigret wanted to know the exact state of the Saint-Fiacre finances, particularly any transactions made in the last few weeks, or even the last few days, that might throw some light on the situation.

"Emile Gautier, I presume?" Maigret asked.

He had twice seen the clerk going past on his motorcycle. His likeness to the agent was striking—the same strongly marked features and thick bone construction.

But Emile wasn't yet quite a city boy. His hair, still rebellious under brilliantine, rose in a tuft at the top of his head.

"What is it you wish?" he said.

Maigret felt sure he was a model employee who would rapidly gain promotion. He wore a black suit, of durable serge, and a soft collar. His father wore celluloid collars.

"Do you recognize me?" Maigret asked.

"No, but I suppose you are the detective who—"

"I am. And I should like some information about the state of the Saint-Fiacre account."

"I am in charge of that account among others." Emile was polite and well-mannered. "Bring me the Saint-Fiacre account," he said to the clerk who was sitting behind him.

When the large buff sheet was brought to him, his eye scanned it.

"Is it a summary you want, the balance of the account, or a detailed statement?"

"Is a detailed statement available?"

"Come around here, will you? We might be overheard."

They went to the end of the room, still separated by the oak counter.

"My father doubtless told you that the Countess was most unbusinesslike," Gautier said. "I am always supposed to stop checks that are not covered, but as you see, she drew checks without bothering about the state of her account. When I telephoned to inform her, she'd become angry. Even this morning three checks were presented and I was obliged to return them. I have orders to pay nothing until—"

"Then the people at the chateau are completely ruined?"

"Strictly speaking, no. Three of the five farms were sold. The other two are mortgaged, as well as the chateau. The Countess owned a block of flats in Paris which always brought in a small income, but when she suddenly shifted forty or fifty thousand francs to her son's account, it upset everything. I've always tried to do what I could. Two or three times I warned her of the consequences. My father—"

"Advanced her money. I know."

"That's all I can tell you. At the present moment, the balance is exactly seven hundred and seventy-five francs. But last year's land-taxes haven't been paid, and the collector served a summons last week."

"Did Jean Metayer know all this?"

"He knew a lot more."

"You don't think he lived with his head in the clouds, then?"

But Emile Gautier discreetly avoided giving an answer. "That is all you want to know?" he murmured.

"Have any other Saint-Fiacre people got an account at your branch?"

"No."

"Nobody came in today to do business? To cash a check, for instance?"

"Nobody."

"And you've been at this window all the time?"

"I haven't left it." He was still the good employee answering a public official correctly.

Maigret thanked him and left the bank. The traffic in the main street was almost as dense as in a big city, and there were long lines of cars outside each cafe. In a grocer's Maigret saw the mother of the red-headed boy buying

provisions and still holding him by the hand.

A LITTLE farther on, he nearly ran into Metayer and his lawyer, who were walking along discussing things, each with an important air. The lawyer was saying:

"They will have to stop the check."

They did not see the inspector, but continued on their way to the *Comptoir d'Escompte*.

Maigret went on to the printing house of the *Journal de Moulins*. The offices were in the front of the building, all modern, glass and concrete, and with a lavish display of press photographs and the latest news scribbled in blue pencil on long strips of paper.

But to get to the printing press it was necessary to go down a dark alley, guided by the din of the machine. In a dreary workshop, men in overalls were working at high marble tables. In a glass cage, at the end, were the two linotypes rattling away like machine-guns.

"I want the foreman, please!" announced Maigret.

He literally had to bellow against the thunder of the presses. The smell of ink got him by the throat. A little man in blue overalls, squaring up lines of type in a form, put his hand up to his ear.

"Are you the foreman?"

"I'm a compositor."

Maigret took from his case the lines that had killed the Countess of Saint-Fiacre. The man put on his steel-rimmed spectacles and looked at them, wondering what it was all about.

"Does that come from here?" he asked.

"What?"

"I'm asking whether that was printed here," shouted Maigret.

"Come outside!"

They could hear better in the yard. It was cold, but at least they could talk almost in normal voices.

"What is it you were asking?" repeated the compositor.

"Do you recognize those letters?"

"They're Cheltenham nine point."

"From your place?"

"Nearly every linotype is fitted with Cheltenham."

"Are there any other linotypes in Moulins?"

"Not at Moulins. But there are some at Nevers, Bourges, Chateauroux, Autun, and—"

"There's nothing special about this cutting?" prodded Maigret.

"It's been printed on a platen machine. Somebody wanted to make you believe it was cut out of a newspaper, didn't they? I was once asked to do the same thing, for fun."

"Ah!"

"At least fifteen years ago. When we set the newspaper by hand."

"And the paper in this clipping gives you no indication?"

"Nearly all the provincial newspapers are supplied by the same firm. You'll excuse me. I've got to fix up that form. It's for the Nievre edition."

"Do you know Jean Metayer?"

THE man shrugged his shoulders, an eloquent answer.

"What d'you think of him?"

"If you go by what he says, he knows more about this business than we do. He's a bit too smart. They let him mess about in the workshop because the Countess is a friend of the boss."

"Does he know how to work a linotype?"

"H'm. He says so!"

"In short, is it possible that he could have set up this paragraph?"

"If he had two hours before him. And if he began the same line ten times over again."

"Has he managed to get at the linotype lately?"

"How should I know? He comes and goes and bothers us all with his processes of block-making. . . . You'll excuse me. The train won't wait. And I haven't set up my form yet."

It was no good insisting. Maigret nearly went back to the workshop again, but the commotion that reigned there discouraged him. Every minute in there was precious. Everyone ran. The porters bumped into him as they dashed for the exit.

But he managed to take an apprentice aside while the young fellow was rolling a cigarette.

"What happens to the strips of lead when they have been used?" the inspector asked quickly.

"They're melted down," said the youth.

"How often?"

"Every second day. . . . Look, there's

the melting-pot round the corner. . . . Take care! It's hot."

Maigret went out, slightly weary and slightly discouraged. It was now dark and the street lamps had been lit. The pavement was distinct, more so than usual because of the cold. Outside a clothes-shop a barker with a cold in his head was stamping his feet and trying to attract the attention of passersby.

"A winter overcoat? Fine English material from two hundred francs. Come right in! No compulsion to buy!"

A little farther on, in front of the *Cafe de Paris,* where Maigret could hear the click of the billiard-balls, he saw the young Count's yellow car.

He went in to the place, looked all around for Maurice, but couldn't see him, and sat down on a bench. It was the smartest cafe in the town. On a platform, three musicians were tuning their instruments. There were sounds coming from the telephone booth near.

"Beer," Maigret ordered.

"Light or dark?" asked the waiter who came up.

But the inspector didn't at once answer, for he was trying unsuccessfully to hear who was at the telephone. Then Maurice de Saint-Fiacre came out, and the cashier asked:

"How many calls?"

"Three."

"All to Paris, weren't they?"

The Count caught sight of Maigret, came over, and sat down beside him.

"You didn't tell me you were coming to Moulins! I could have given you a lift. Of course, my car is a sports model, and in this sort of weather—"

"Were you phoning Marie Vassiliev?"

"No! I don't see why I should keep the truth from you. . . . Another beer, waiter. No, wait a minute! I'd rather have something hot. Give me a grog. . . . I telephoned to a certain *Monsieur* Wolf. If you don't know him there are plenty that do—on the Quai des Orfevres. He's a money-lender. I've occasionally had recourse to him. I've just been trying—"

Maigret looked at him curiously. "You've been asking him for money?"

"At any rate he liked! Anyhow, he refused. Don't look at me like that! This afternoon I went past the bank—"

"What time?"

"About three. The young gentleman you know and his lawyer were just coming out."

"You tried to draw out some money?"

"I tried. Please don't think I'm trying to make you sorry for me. Some people, when it's a question of money, get bashful. Not me. Well, with forty thousand francs sent to Paris and Marie Vassiliev's fare paid, I'm left with about three hundred francs in my pocket. I came here unprovided for a stay. I've only the suit I've got on. In Paris I owe thousands of francs to my landlady, and she won't let me have my things."

ALL the time he was talking he was watching the balls rolling on the green cloth of the billiard table. The players, young men of the town, now and then cast an envious glance at the elegant Count.

"I should have liked to be in mourning for the funeral," Maurice said soberly. "But there's not a tailor in the place who will give me two days' credit. At the bank they told me that my mother's account was blocked, and that the balance only amounted to seven hundred odd francs. And do you know who gave me this delightful message?"

"The son of your agent!"

"Exactly!"

He swallowed a mouthful of the grog and fell silent, still watching the billiards. The orchestra began playing a Viennese waltz which syncopated curiously with the click of the balls.

It was warm. The cafe was dim in spite of the electric lights, for it was the old-fashioned type of provincial cafe.

Maigret smoked slowly. He, too, stared at the billiard table in the glaring light thrown by the green shades. The door opened, and a gust of icy air swept in.

"Let's go down to the end." It was the voice of the lawyer from Bourges. He passed in front of the table where the two men were sitting, followed by Jean Metayer, wearing white woolen gloves. They did not see the others until after they sat down.

The two tables were practically opposite each other. There was a slight flush on Metayer's cheeks and a slight waver in his voice as he ordered:

"A cup of chocolate!"

"Go on, *cherie!*" Saint-Fiacre said in a mocking undertone.

"Well," murmured the Count, "I shall turn up at the funeral in a gray suit! I can't very well borrow a black suit

from the butler or appear in one of my late father's coats!"

Applause broke out when the musicians had finished their number, and all at once could be heard the clattering of saucers and glasses again.

The door opened and closed, again letting in cold gusts, which were gradually absorbed by the warmth.

"Thirty points!" said a voice, and, to the waiter's inquiry, "A small Vichy. . . . No! A Vittel."

It was Emile Gautier who spoke as he chalked the end of his cue. Then he put the marker at zero. His companion was the assistant manager of the bank, a man ten years older, with a pointed brown mustache.

XI

ONLY at the third shot—which Gautier missed—did he see Maigret. He saluted him, slightly embarrassed. From then on he was so absorbed by the game that he had no time to see anybody.

"Of course, if you're not afraid of the cold, there's room for you in my car," said Maurice de Saint-Fiacre. "Can't I offer you something? I'm not so hard up that I can't offer you an *aperitif!*"

"Waiter!" said Jean Metayer in a loud voice. "Get me Bourges Seventeen."

And a little later he shut himself into the telephone booth.

Maigret went on smoking. He had ordered a second beer. All the time he was thinking of "the old girl," as her son called her, lying upstairs in the chateau while peasants filed past.

But he did not see her like that. He was thinking of her as she had been in an epoch when there were as yet no cars in front of the *Cafe de Paris* and no cocktails were drunk. He was imagining her in the chateau park, tall and willowy, high-born, as she walked beside the perambulator a nurse was pushing.

Maigret had been only a ragamuffin then whose hair, like Emile Gautier's now, rose in an obstinate quiff on the top of his head.

He had been jealous of the Count that day the two had gone off to Aix-les-Bains in a car—one of the first in the place—the Countess all furs and perfume. He had not been able to see her face under her veil. The Count had worn big goggles. It had looked like an heroic abduction. And the nurse had held the baby's hand and made him wave goodby.

And now they were sprinkling her with holy water and her room smelled of candle grease.

Emile Gautier was moving busily round the billiard table, making fancy shots and counting in an important undertone:

"Seven. . . ."

He poised his cue again. He was winning. His chief with the pointed mustache said, "Terrific!" in a sour voice.

Two men were watching each other across the green cover—Jean Metayer, whose lawyer talked incessantly, and the Count.

Maigret was thinking now about a Boy Scout's whistle. A fine double-noted whistle in gun-metal, such as he had never owned.

"Another telephone call!" Maigret sighed as he saw Metayer getting up again.

The inspector followed him with his eyes and noticed that he went neither to the telephone booth nor to the lavatory. The plump lawyer was sitting right on the edge of his chair, looking at the Count, almost as if he might have been attempting a faint smile.

"I'll be back in a moment," said the inspector.

He crossed the room in the direction Metayer had taken, and saw a door which opened onto a wide corridor with a red carpet. At the end was a counter with a large book, a telephone, and an attendant. Metayer was just turning away from the attendant.

"Thank you, mademoiselle." There was a slight gleam of satisfaction in his expression as he glanced at the inspector.

"I didn't know this was a hotel," said Maigret to the girl.

"Why, this is the best hotel in Moulins," she declared.

"Is the Count of Saint-Fiacre staying here?"

"What's he done?" she asked. "Yours is the second inquiry in five minutes. The man who was just here wanted to know whether the Count of Saint-Fiacre went out on Saturday night. I couldn't tell him, then the gentleman asked me where our garage is."

Parbleu! Maigret only had to follow Metayer!

Jean Metayer must have been quick, because when Maigret got to the garage around the corner, Jean was coming out of the place, whistling. The attendant was having something to eat at a little table.

THERE was a ten-franc note on the table. Maigret put down another.

"I'm on the trail of that yellow car over there," he said. "Was it taken out on Saturday night?"

"Yes, around midnight."

"And when was it brought back?"

"It must have been about three o'clock in the morning."

"A man and a woman were in it?"

"No! Only a man. A tall man, well-set-up."

The Count of Saint-Fiacre, obviously!

When Maigret got back to the cafe the orchestra was at it again, and he was surprised to see Jean Metayer's lawyer, *Maitre* Tallier, sitting in his own place beside the Count.

At the sight of the inspector he arose energetically.

"Please excuse me. . . . No, no! You must have your own place."

He sat down on the chair opposite. He was animated, his cheeks flushed, as if he were eager to have a delicate situation brought to a conclusion. He seemed to be watching for Jean Metayer, who wasn't to be seen.

"You will understand, Inspector," he said quickly, "I could not bring myself to go to the chateau, but since fate wills that we should meet on neutral territory, if I may so call it—" He gave them a forced smile. After each word he looked as if he were thanking his two listeners for their approval. "In a situation as painful as this it is useless, as I told my client, to complicate matters further by an exaggerated susceptibility. Jean Metayer understands. And as you came up, Inspector, I was just saying to the Count de Saint-Fiacre that we should only ask to be heard—"

"Parbleu!" growled Maigret. But he was thinking: "It'll be lucky for you if within five minutes there isn't a collision between your face and the fist of the gentleman you're talking to so glibly."

The billiard players were still moving round the green-covered table.

The lawyer was saying: "There are highly complex interests involved, and for our part we are disposed—"

"To do what?" Saint-Fiacre broke in sharply.

"To—to—"

Tallier forgot that it was not his own glass which was within reach, and he drank from Maigret's in sheer embarrassment. "I know the place is perhaps ill-chosen, and the moment, too. But consider that we know better that anyone else the financial situation of—"

"Of my mother. Go on!"

Poor devil of a lawyer! With Maurice de Saint-Fiacre staring fixedly at him, the words came as if they were being torn out of his throat.

"You understand me, don't you, Inspector? We know that a will has been deposited with the public notary. Rest assured the rights of *Monsieur le Comte* have been respected, nevertheless Jean Metayer's name also figures in it. The financial affairs are involved. My client is the only one who knows about them."

Maigret was filled with admiration for Saint-Fiacre, who managed to remain almost angelically calm.

There was even a faint smile on his lips.

"Yes," he said without irony. "He was a model secretary."

"And also a young man of excellent family, who has had a solid education."

"Let's get back to the estate, shall we?"

It was too good to be true. The lawyer could scarcely believe his ears.

"May I suggest drinks all round?" he said eagerly. "Waiter! . . . The same, gentlemen? I believe I'll have a lemonade!"

"As I was saying, my client is ready to help. There are certain people for whom he has only contempt. He will tell you that highly suspicious transactions have been made by people who have been unrestrained by any scruples. In short—" It was difficult. The lawyer had to swallow hard before he managed to go on. "You have found the chateau coffers empty. Now it is essential that the obsequies must be worthy of the Saint-Fiacres. And while matters are being arranged to the best of everyone's interests, my client will see to it—"

"He'll advance the necessary money for the burial? Is that what you're trying to say?"

MAIGRET did not dare look at the Count. He fixed his eyes on Emile Gautier, who was making a masterly new break, and waited, huddled up, for the storm to burst.

But there was no outburst. Saint-Fiacre had risen and was speaking to Jean Metayer who had just come in and was walking toward his own table.

"Do join us at our table, *monsieur*," Maurice said elaborately. "A drink for you, too? Waiter!"

There was applause for the orchestral number that had just come to an end. It was a little embarrassing when the noise had subsided—voices sounded so much louder. There was only the click of billiard balls to break the silence.

"I have told the Count, who entirely understands," the lawyer said to Jean.

"You came from Saint-Fiacre by taxi, gentlemen?" asked the Count de Saint-Fiacre. "In that case, allow me to place my car at your disposal for the return journey. It will be a bit of a squeeze. I have already asked the inspector . . . How much, waiter? . . . No, no, please. This is mine."

But the lawyer had risen and pushed a hundred-franc note into the waiter's hand.

"You are really too charming!" the Count breathed, with his most gracious smile.

Emile Gautier was so interested in watching the four of them going off together and bowing each other out at the door that he forgot to go on with his break.

XII

LAWYER Tallier found himself sitting in the front seat with the Count, who was driving, while in the back Maigret just managed to leave a little room for Jean Metayer.

It was cold. The car lamps were rather dim. The open exhaust prevented conversation.

Did Maurice de Saint-Fiacre usually drive with such abandon? In any case, he covered the distance between Moulins and the chateau in less than a quarter of an hour, taking the turns on the brakes, pitching forward into the darkness, and once by a miracle avoiding a cart which stuck to the middle of the road and forced him to mount the bank.

Their faces were cut by the north wind. Maigret had to grip the collar of his overcoat with both hands.

They went through the village without slackening speed. They could just distinguish the lights of the inn and the church tower. Then Maurice drew up suddenly, throwing his passengers against each other. They were at the bottom of the chateau steps. They could see the servants eating in the basement kitchen. Someone was roaring with laughter.

"You'll allow me, gentlemen, to offer you dinner."

Metayer and the lawyer looked at each other hesitantly. The Count pushed them into the house with a friendly slap on the shoulder.

"Please. It's my turn, isn't it?"

Maigret would have liked to have had a few words with him in private, but he left him no time, and threw open the door of the smoking room.

"Will you excuse me a few moments while you are having an *aperitif*? I must give some orders. You know where the bottles are, *Monsieur* Metayer? Is there anything left worth drinking?"

He pressed an electric button. The butler was a long time in coming, and appeared with his napkin in his hand. Saint-Fiacre snatched it from him.

"Ask the agent to come here," he ordered sharply. "Then get the rectory on the phone, and after that the doctor's house." To the others he said: "You'll excuse me?"

The telephone was in the hall, which was badly lighted, like the rest of the chateau. Electricity was non-existent at Saint-Fiacre, so the chateau had to make its own current, and the batteries were run down. Now the bulbs, instead of giving a white light, showed only weak reddish filaments. There were great pools of darkness where hardly anything could be distinguished as the Count spoke over the telephone.

"Hello! . . . Yes, I absolutely insist. . . . Thank you, Doctor."

Metayer and his lawyer were worried, but they did not dare confess it. Jean Metayer broke the silence by saying to the inspector:

"What can I offer you? I don't think there is any port left. But there is still some whisky."

All the rooms on the ground floor opened on to one another and were sepa-

rated by wide-open doors. First came the dining room, then the smoking room where the three men were, then the salon, finally the library where Jean was busy with the bottles. From all of the rooms the Count's voice could be heard distinctly.

"Hello. . . . Yes. . . . Do I insist? . . . Yes, right away."

When the Count finished telephoning, he walked along the corridor past all the rooms, up the stairs, and his footsteps stopped in the room where his dead mother lay.

Other, heavier steps were heard in the hall. There was a knock at the outer door of the smoking room. It was opened immediately, and the agent stood there.

"You asked for me?"

Then he noticed that the Count was not in the room, looked with amazement at the three who were there, quickly beat a retreat, and consulted the butler, who had appeared again.

"Soda?" Jean Metayer asked uneasily.

Tallier, full of goodwill, began with a clearing of his throat:

"Queer professions we both belong to, Inspector. Have you been long in the police? I was called to the bar nearly fifteen years ago, and I can tell you that I've been mixed up in some of the most difficult affairs you could imagine. . . . Your health! And yours, *Monsieur* Metayer. For your sake I'm glad of the turn things are taking."

THE Count's voice was heard in the corridor.

"Well, you must find some. Telephone to your son, who's playing billiards at the *Cafe de Paris* at Moulins. He'll bring what's necessary."

The door opened and the Count came in.

"You've got drinks? Aren't there any cigars?"

He looked at Metayer inquiringly.

"There are cigarettes. I only smoke—" Jean broke off and looked away in confusion. "I'll go and fetch some."

"Gentlemen," said the Count, "I hope you will excuse the sketchy meal you're going to get. We are not near a town."

"Come—come!" said the lawyer expansively. "I am sure that it will be good. Is that the portrait of one of your family?"

He pointed to a portrait on the wall of the *grand salon,* of a man dressed in morning-coat, his neck encased in a high stiff collar.

"That is my father."

"Yes! There's a great resemblance."

The servant announced Dr. Bouchardon, who looked around suspiciously, as if he foresaw trouble. But Saint-Fiacre welcomed him cordially.

"Come in, Doctor. . . . I suppose you know Jean Metayer? His lawyer, *Maitre* Tallier, a charming man, as you will see. And you know the inspector."

After the doctor and the inspector had shaken hands, Dr. Bouchardon growled into Maigret's ear:

"What kind of a conspiracy is this?"

"I've nothing to do with it. He did it!"

The lawyer, to put himself at ease, kept wandering off to the little table where he had left his glass, and didn't realize that he was drinking more than he should.

"What a marvelous place this old chateau is!" he complimented. "What a setting for a film! That's what I said recently to the public prosecutor of Bourges. If only they'd make films in settings which—" He kept animatedly trying to buttonhole someone.

The Count was disconcertingly amiable to Metayer.

"It's depressing here on long winter evenings, don't you think? I remember how my father used also to invite the doctor and the curé up. But even that doctor was an unbeliever, and discussions always ended by veering round to philosophical subjects."

The curé, with dark circles around his eyes, arrived then, and stood hesitating on the threshold.

"Excuse my being late."

Through the open doors two servants could be seen laying the table in the dining room.

"Offer *Monsieur le Curé* something to drink," the Count said to Metayer.

Maigret noticed that Maurice himself had drunk nothing. But the lawyer was not far from being drunk. He was explaining to the doctor, who gazed at Maigret with amazement:

"A little diplomacy, that's all. Or knowledge of human nature. They are nearly the same age, both of good family. Why should they sit glaring at each other like china dogs? Their interests are identical! The odd thing about it"—he laughed and gulped a swallow of

liquor—"is that it should all have happened by chance in a cafe. How excellent they are, those good old provincial cafes where they make you feel at home."

The sound of a motorcycle was heard outside. In a moment the Count went into the dining room where the agent was waiting, and they could hear the end of a sentence:

"Yes, both of them! If you like! It is an order!"

The telephone bell rang when the Count was back with his guests. The butler came into the smoking room.

"What is it?"

"The undertaker. He wants to know when he can bring the coffin."

"When he likes."

"Very good, *Monsieur le Comte!*"

And the Count cried to his guests:

"Come to table, won't you? I've had the last of the good bottles brought up from the cellar. You'll pass the first one, *Monsieur le Curé.*"

Maigret tried to detain him for a moment by his sleeve, but the Count looked him in the eyes with a hint of impatience, disengaged himself brusquely and went into the dining room.

"I have invited our agent, *Monsieur* Gautier, as well as his son, a young man with a future, to join us at dinner," he informed.

MAIGRET looked at the bank clerk's hair, and, worried though he was, could not help smiling. It was damp. Before he came into the chateau, the young man must have combed his hair, washed his face and hands, and changed his tie.

"Please take your seats, gentlemen!" And as Maurice said that, the inspector was positive that a sob welled up in Saint-Fiacre's throat.

But it passed unnoticed, because the doctor involuntarily distracted attention by seizing a dusty bottle and murmuring:

"You've still got *l'Hospice de Beaune* Eighteen-ninety-six? I thought the last bottles had been acquired by the Larue restaurant and—"

The rest was lost in the noise of chairs being pulled forward. The priest, his hands joined on the tablecloth, his head bowed, said grace.

Maigret caught Saint-Fiacre giving him a piercing look. . . .

The chateau dining room had not lost its character, thanks to the carved paneling which covered the walls up to the ceiling. It was not only solemn but lugubrious, giving one the impression of eating at the bottom of a well.

On each panel there was an electric fixture in the form of candles, but in the center of the round table was a candlestick holding genuine candles. The Count and Maigret, seated opposite one another, could see each other only by looking over the flames.

On the Count's right was the priest, on his left, Dr. Bouchardon. Jean Metayer sat at one end of the table, his lawyer at the other. On one side of the inspector was the agent, on the other Emile Gautier.

From time to time the butler came forward to serve the guests, but the moment he withdrew he was swallowed up in the shadows and nothing could be seen of him but his white-gloved hands.

"Don't you find here that you can almost imagine yourself in a novel by Sir Walter Scott?".

The Count spoke in an indifferent voice, yet Maigret listened intently, for he divined some purpose in all this, and felt that something was about to happen.

"There's only one detail that isn't quite right," went on Maurice de Saint-Fiacre. "In the novel, the poor old woman upstairs would suddenly start screaming."

It was as if an icy draught had swept through the room.

"Is it a fact, Gautier, that she has been left all alone?"

"She—yes," the agent stammered.

Maigret felt someone nudging his foot, but he could not guess who was doing it.

"Has she received many visitors today?" asked the Count.

It was embarrassing to hear Maurice talking of his mother as if she were still alive. Jean Metayer stopped eating and looked straight in front of him.

"Nearly all the farmers in the district!" answered the agent gravely.

When the butler saw an empty glass he approached noiselessly. A black arm ending in a white glove appeared from nowhere. The lawyer was fascinated.

"Marvelous! Albert, you are a wizard. If I could afford a chateau I'd take you into my service."

"This chateau will soon be offered cheaply enough," said Maurice coolly.

XIII

NOW Maigret frowned as he looked at Saint-Fiacre. His voice was curiously indifferent, yet rather strained. Were his nerves on edge? Or was what he had said just sinister joking?

"*Poulets demi-deuil,*" he announced as the butler brought in chickens done with truffles. In the same light tone, he went on: "And the murderer of my mother is going to eat *poulet demi-deuil* like everyone else!"

The agent, in dismay, protested: "*Monsieur le Comte!*"

"But of course! The murderer is here, without a doubt! But don't let that spoil your appetite, *Monsieur le Curé!* My mother is in the house, too, and that doesn't prevent us from eating. . . . A little wine for *Monsieur le Curé,* Albert!"

Again the foot nudged Maigret's, and he dropped his napkin and bent down to get it, but too late. When he straightened the Count was saying:

"I was speaking just now of Sir Walter Scott, not merely because of this room, but because of the murderer. After all, this is a wake. The funeral is tomorrow, and probably we won't separate between now and then. *Monsieur* Metayer has at least stocked the cellar with some excellent whisky."

"Yes, indeed!" the tipsy lawyer cried. "My client belongs to a family of wine-merchants!"

"As I was saying . . . fill up *Monsieur le Curé's* glass, Albert. . . .I was saying that, since the murderer is here, the others play the part of avengers. That is why our party is like a chapter out of Sir Walter Scott. The murderer actually runs no risk. Does he, Inspector? It's no crime to slip a sheet of paper into a missal. . . . Doctor, when was my mother's last attack?"

The doctor looked around with a sulky expression.

"Three months ago," he said, "when you telephoned from Berlin that you were ill in a hotel bedroom and—"

"Asked for some cash! *Voila!*"

"I warned her that the next violent attack of emotion would be fatal."

"So—let's see. Who knew about it? Jean Metayer, of course. Obviously, I did. Pere Gautier, who is almost one of the family. And you and *Monsieur le Curé.*" He swallowed a glassful of Pouilly. "That's just to show you that almost any one of us could be considered as possible suspects."

He seemed to be deliberately choosing the words that would shock most.

"Let us begin with *Monsieur le Curé.* Was it to his interest to kill my mother? The answer isn't as easy as it looks. Leaving the question of money aside—"

The priest choked and tried to get up.

"*Monsieur le Curé* had nothing to hope for. But he is a mystic, almost a saint. Here is a parishioner who causes scandal by her behavior. Sometimes she dashes into church like the most fervent of believers, and sometimes she shocks everybody in Saint-Fiacre. . . . No, no, don't pull such a long face, Metayer. If you like, we'll use psychological methods.

"*Monsieur le Curé's* faith is so strong that it might drive him to certain extremes. Once they burned sinners to purify them. There was my mother at mass; she had just taken communion; she was in a state of grace. But she would plunge back into sin and again be an object of scandal. If she died a holy death, in her pew—"

"But—" began the priest with big tears in his eyes, gripping the table to keep calm.

"Please, *Monsieur le Curé.* We're just trying psychology. I want to prove to you that the most austere people can be suspected of the worst atrocities. If we go on to the doctor, I become more embarrassed. He's not a saint. And, what saves him, he's not even a *savant.* For in that case he might have done the trick with the paper in the missal to test the power of resistance of a weak heart."

The noise of forks and knives had dropped to practically nothing. The expression on every face was fixed, uneasy, haggard. Only the butler went on filling the glasses with clockwork regularity.

"You are gloomy, gentlemen. Is it possible that, among intelligent men, there are subjects one cannot touch on? . . . Serve the next course, Albert. . . . So we'll rule the doctor out, since his mediocrity saves him."

HE turned to Pere Gautier. "Now for you. Yours is a more complicated case. There are two possibilities. First there is the model agent, the hon-

est man who dedicates his life to his employers, to the chateau where he has first seen the light of day. You didn't see the light of day here, but that doesn't matter. Your position is equivocal. There was only one heir, and the fortune was being eaten up piece by piece by this heir. The Countess was acting like a madwoman. Was there still time to save the remnants? That would be truly noble, worthy of Sir Walter Scott."

"But the contrary is also possible! Perhaps you were not the model agent, but a rascal who for years had abused and profited by the weakness of those you served. The farms they were forced to sell, you bought in secret. You got hold of the mortgages. Don't get agitated, Gautier. That's not all. You are practically the real owner of the chateau."

"Monsieur le Comte!"

"Can't you play the game? I tell you it's all just a game! We're playing at being detectives. . . . The time came when everything was going to be sold, and it would come out that you had profited from the situation. Wouldn't it be better for the Countess to die, to save her from knowing what poverty means?"

Turning to the butler in the shadows, a demon with two chalk-white hands, he cried:

"Albert! Go and get my father's revolver. If it is still in existence."

He poured drinks for himself and his two neighbors, and handed the bottle to Maigret.

"Will you pour from your side? We'll wait for Albert. . . . *Monsieur* Metayer, you're not drinking."

"Thank you," said a strangled voice.

"And you, *Maitre?*"

The *maitre* said: "Thank you! Thank you! I've everything I want. Do you know you would make a splendid advocate-general?"

He was the only one who went on eating, drinking glass after glass of burgundy and claret without even noticing the difference.

The church clock struck ten with a tinny sound. Albert came back and handed a large old-fashioned pistol to the Count, who proceeded to load it.

"I'll place it here in the middle of this round table," he said, "at an equal distance from all of us. We have examined three cases—we shall now examine the other three. But first will you allow me to make a prophecy? *Eh bien!* True to the tradition of Sir Walter Scott, I announce that before midnight the murderer of my mother will be dead!"

Maigret shot a keen glance across the table and observed that Saint-Fiacre's eyes were far too bright, as if he had been drinking too much. At the same moment he again felt a foot touching his.

"And now," said the Count, "I shall continue. But do eat your salad. I shall pass on to Emile Gautier, a serious young man, a hard worker who has risen on his own merits and by continued industry. Could he have done the murder?

"First hypothesis. He worked for his father and in collaboration with him. He went to Moulins every day. He knew most about the state of the family finances. He had every facility to see a printer or compositor.

"Second hypothesis. You'll excuse me for saying so, Metayer, but you had a rival. Emile Gautier is no matinee idol for looks, but before you came he occupied the place which you occupied with such tact. Could he have had certain hopes?

"Certainly he was my mother's official protege and none of his ambitions were denied him. Then *you* came—and you conquered. To kill the Countess and let suspicion fall on you—"

Maigret was on hot coals. This was all odious. And apparently the others were wondering whether they could stick it out or rise and leave.

"You see we are now in the realms of pure fantasy," the Count went on. "Even the Countess herself up there would be incapable of providing us with the key to the mystery. The murderer is the only one who knows he has murdered. . . . Go on with your dinner, Emile. Don't let this affect you as it has your father. He looks as if he were going to faint any minute. . . . Albert! There must still be some bottles in the cellar. . . . Your health, young man!" And he turned with a smile to Metayer, who sprang to his feet.

"Monsieur, my lawyer—"

"Sit down! *Que diable!* Don't tell us that you can't take a joke."

INSPECTOR MAIGRET watched him, and noticed that his forehead was covered with great beads of sweat.

"We're none of us trying to make ourselves out any better than what we are, are we? . . . Have some fruit."

The heat was becoming unbearable. Maigret wondered who had turned out the electric light, leaving only the candles on the table.

"Your case is so simple, Metayer," said Maurice, "that it is without interest. The role you played wasn't one that can be played for long. You slept with the will under your pillow, so to speak. There was the risk that it might be altered at any moment. If she died suddenly it would be all over! You would collect the fruit of your—your sacrifice—and, *ma foi*, you could marry some young girl you must have had your eye on at home."

"Pardon me!" the lawyer interjected so comically that Maigret could not restrain a smile.

"Shut up! Get on with your drink!"

Saint-Fiacre must be drunk, beyond the shadow of doubt, Maigret decided. He had the particular eloquence of the drunkard, a mixture of subtlety and brutality, easy diction and slurred words.

"And now there only remains myself!" The Count looked around and called to the butler: "Go upstairs, Albert. It must be depressing for my mother to be left all by herself."

Maigret saw the servant glance interrogatively at old Gautier, who lowered his eyelids affirmatively.

"One moment! First put the bottles on the table. And the whisky. Nobody cares about regulations, I suppose?" Saint-Fiacre looked at his watch. "It's ten past eleven. I've been talking so much I haven't heard your church clock, *Monsieur le Curé*."

Then, as the butler accidentally pushed the revolver while he was putting the whisky on the table, the Count intervened:

"Take care, Albert. It must remain the same distance away from everyone."

He waited until the door was shut again.

"And now," he repeated, "there's only myself. I'm not telling you anything new when I say that I never was any good. Except perhaps when my father was alive. But he died when I was only seventeen.

"I'm on the rocks! Everyone knows that. Gossip columns talk about it openly. I sign worthless checks, borrow off Mamma as often as possible. I invented that illness in Berlin to get a few thousand francs.

"Now what happens? The money that will come to me is being spent by little swine like Metayer. . . . Excuse me, *monsieur*, but we're still speaking in terms of higher psychology.

"Soon there will be nothing left. I telephone to my mother when a bad check will mean prison for me. She refuses to pay. This can be confirmed by witnesses. In any case, if it goes on like this, there will be nothing left of my patrimony in a few weeks.

"There are two hypotheses, as in the case of Emile Gautier. The first—"

Never in all his career had Maigret felt so ill-at-ease. And it was undoubtedly the first time he had ever felt clearly unequal to the occasion. Events had gone beyond his control. And always there was the pressure of that insistent foot of his.

"If only you'd talk about something else!" mumbled the lawyer, who was now almost ready to collapse.

"Gentlemen—" began the priest, but the Count's lifted hand stopped him.

"You must give me at least until midnight! As I was saying, the first hypothesis . . . marvelous! You have made me lose the thread of my thought."

To help him find it again, he poured himself a glass of whisky.

"I know how sensitive my mother is," he went on then, "I slip the paper into the missal with a newspaper clipping in it that will frighten and therefore soften her, the idea being to come back the next day to ask her for the necessary sum and in the hope that she'll be more accommodating.

"But there is a second hypothesis! Why shouldn't I, too, want to kill her? The Saint-Fiacre money isn't all gone. There's still a little left! And in my situation a little money, however little, might perhaps be my salvation!

"I know vaguely that Metayer is mentioned in the will. But a murderer can't inherit. Won't he be the one to be suspected of the crime? He spends a large part of his time at the Moulins printing press and, living at the chateau, he can slip the paper into the missal as and when he likes? Didn't I arrive at Moulins on Saturday afternoon and wait there, with my—er—lady friend, for the

result of this move?"

He rose, glass in hand, and bowed elaborately.

"Your health, gentlemen. You are melancholy. But the entire life of my poor mother in her last years was melancholy. It would be fitting if there were a little gaiety on her last night with us."

He looked the inspector in the eyes.

"Your health, *Monsieur* Maigret!"

Who was he mocking? Himself or all of them?

XIV

MAIGRET felt that he was in the presence of a force against which he could do nothing. He was well aware that certain individuals, at some given moment in their lives, have one hour of fulfillment when they are somehow above themselves and the rest of humanity. Such was the case when a gambler at Monte Carlo wins every time, no matter what he does. It was the case when some unknown member of the Opposition causes the Government to totter and fall, and no one more surprised than he, since all he wanted was a few lines in the *Journal Officiel.*

This, Maigret reasoned, was Maurice de Saint-Fiacre's hour. There was a force in him unsuspected even by himself, before which others could only bow their heads.

But was it drink that had caused this transport? That was still a question in the inspector's mind as the Count went on:

"Let us recall the origin of our conversation, gentlemen, as it is not yet midnight. I said that my mother's murderer was in our midst. I have proved that it might be me or one of you—with the exception, perhaps, of the inspector, the lawyer, and the doctor. Of more than that I am not sure. And yet I prophesied his death.

"Will you allow me one more hypothesis? He knows the law can do nothing against him. . . . But he also knows that there will be six of us who know he has committed the crime. There again we find ourselves confronted with several solutions.

"The first is the most romantic and conforms most to the Scott tradition. But what is characteristic in this crime? It is that there were at least five individuals who had an interest in the death of the Countess, and all of whom perhaps envisaged the means of bringing this death about.

"But only one dared. *Eh bien!* I can well imagine him taking advantage of this evening to do us all in."

With a charming smile, he looked at everyone in turn.

"Is that sensational enough? The old dining room in the ancient chateau, candles, the table laden with bottles. Then at midnight, death. It means the suppression of all scandal. Tomorrow there will be talk of a tragic accident."

The lawyer stirred in his chair and cast an anxious glance into the darkness that had crept up to within a yard of the table.

"If I may remind you that I am a doctor," growled Bouchardon, "I should advise a cup of strong black coffee for all."

"And I should like to remind you that there is a dead woman in the house," said the priest slowly.

Saint-Fiacre hesitated a moment. "I asked you to give me until midnight. I have only examined the first hypothesis. There is another. The murderer, trapped, desperate, will put a bullet through his head. *But I don't believe he'll do it!*"

"All of you come into the smoking room!" yapped Tallier, on his feet and holding on to the back of his chair to keep from falling.

"There is still a third hypothesis. Someone, to uphold the family honor, will help the murderer. Isn't it essential, to avoid a scandal? Mustn't the guilty party be made to commit suicide? The revolver is there, gentlemen, in reach of every hand and it is ten minutes to midnight. The murderer is here, with seven people around him."

He emptied his glass at a gulp. And the anonymous foot went on nudging Maigret's.

"Six minutes to twelve. Is it sufficiently like Sir Walter Scott for you? Is the murderer trembling in his boots?"

He went on drinking!

"At least five people wanting to rob a poor old woman deprived of her husband and of affection. But only one dared do it. It will be either a bomb or a revolver, gentlemen—a bomb which will blow us all up, or a revolver which will get the guilty man only. . . . Four

minutes to midnight. . . ." Then, in a hard voice: "Don't forget that nobody knows!"

He seized the bottle of whisky and served everybody except himself. Did he think he had had enough? One candle went out. The others would soon follow.

"I said midnight. . . . Three minutes to go . . . two minutes. The murderer will die. You can start saying a prayer, *Monsieur le Curé*. And Doctor, I hope you've got your bag with you? . . . Two minutes . . . one and a half. . . ."

And still the insistent foot went on nudging Maigret's. He did not dare bend down to investigate for fear of missing something more important.

"I'm getting out of here!" cried *Maitre* Tallier, and started to make the three dangerous steps that would take him to the door.

ANOTHER candle went out, and Maurice de Saint-Fiacre swayed against the back of his Gothic chair, slumped to the left, made an attempt to right himself, but fell back inert, with his head on the curé's arm.

Confusion followed. Everywhere something was happening, and when it was all over, everyone could relate only the small part of the events he had seen personally.

There were only five candles left to light the dining room. When people moved about, they made their entrances and exits as if from the wings of a theatre because of the darkness.

The man who had fired was one who had been sitting beside Maigret—Emile Gautier. And hardly had the shot rung out than he held out both wrists to the inspector with a theatrical gesture.

Maigret was on his feet. So was young Gautier's father. The three formed a group on one side of the table while another group gathered around the victim.

The Count's forehead still rested on the priest's arm. The doctor bent over him, then looked up with a gloomy expression.

"Dead?" inquired the plump lawyer.

No answer.

Only Jean Metayer was in neither one group nor the other. He stayed beside his chair, anxious, trembling.

Emile Gautier must have had his excuse all prepared, for he had hardly replaced the weapon on the table when he made a declaration, looking Maigret in the eyes.

"It was he who made the announcement, wasn't it, that the murderer would die? And since he was too cowardly to do justice himself, I did what I considered was my duty."

There were running steps in the corridor. The servants had heard the shots. The doctor ran to the door to stop them from coming in. Maigret couldn't hear what he said to keep them out. Besides, he was giving all his attention to Emile, who was saying:

"I saw Saint-Fiacre hanging round the chateau on the night of the crime. That's how I knew."

And old Gautier declaimed like a tenth-rate actor:

"And the judge will agree."

The doctor raised his voice.

"You're sure Saint-Fiacre killed his mother?"

"Certainly! Would I have acted as I did if I hadn't been positive?"

"And you saw him hanging round the chateau the night before the murder?"

"I saw him as clearly as I see you now. He had left his car at this end of the village."

"You have no other proof?"

"Yes, I have! This afternoon the choir boy came to see me at the bank with his mother. His mother made him tell me that shortly after the murder, the Count asked the boy to give him the missal and promised him money."

Maigret was losing his patience. He was being left out of everything.

Why was the doctor smiling into his goatee? And why was the priest gently pushing away Saint-Fiacre's head?

At that moment, however, the tragedy changed to comedy, or farce, for the Count arose like a man who had just awakened from sleep. There was a hard look on his face, an ironical but threatening twist to his lips.

"Say that again!" he demanded.

The cry that rang out was hair-raising. Emile Gautier howled in terror and clung to Maigret as if for protection. But the inspector drew back, leaving the field clear for the two men.

Jean Metayer was the one person who didn't understand, and he was almost as terrified as the bank clerk. To crown all, one of the candles overturned and the tablecloth began to smolder, spreading a smell of burning.

The lawyer put out the fire by pouring a bottle of wine over it.

"Come here!"

Maurice Saint-Fiacre's command was uttered in such a tone that there could be no question of disobedience.

Maigret had seized the revolver. A quick glance showed him that it was loaded with blank cartridges.

He could guess the rest. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre with his forehead resting on the priest's arm—a few whispered words to the curé, for him to let them think him dead for a moment.

Now he seemed bigger, more solid than he had ever been before. His eyes didn't leave young Gautier, even as the agent suddenly ran to a full-length glass casement, opened it and cried, "This way!" to his son.

IN the excitement and confusion young Gautier had a chance of escaping. It was the little lawyer who spoiled the chance.

Did he do it on purpose? Probably he didn't. Or else the drinks he had consumed gave him a sort of heroism. For as the fugitive leaped toward the casement, Tallier stretched out a leg and Gautier fell full length.

A hand seized him by the scruff of the neck, hauled him up and set him on his feet. He howled again when he saw that it was Saint-Fiacre who was forcing him to remain upright.

"Don't move again! Shut the window, someone."

With his fist he struck Gautier in the face, did it coldly. Gautier turned crimson.

"Now talk!" ordered Saint-Fiacre.

No one interfered. No one even thought of doing so, so strong was the feeling that only one man had the right to raise his voice.

But Pere Gautier growled in Maigret's ear:

"Are you going to let him do it?"

Why not? Anyway Maurice de Saint-Fiacre was master of the situation.

"You saw me that night, that's true!" he said. Then, to the others: "Do you know where? On the terrace steps. I was going in. He was coming out. I wanted to take some family jewels to sell them. We found ourselves face to face, in the night. It was freezing. And this little swine said he had come out of— Can you guess? Yes, out of my mother's bedroom!" In a flatter voice he added negligently: "I went back to Moulins."

Jean Metayer opened his eyes wide. The lawyer stroked his chin in embarrassment.

"Even that wasn't sufficient proof for me," the Count went on, "for there were two of them in the house, and Gautier might have been telling the truth. As I have explained, he was the first to profit from an old woman's distress. Metayer came later. Had Metayer, feeling his position threatened, been tempted to take his revenge? I wanted to know. They were both on their guard, both apparently mistrusted me.

"Didn't you, Gautier? The gentleman who signed worthless checks and prowled round the chateau at night, not daring to accuse anyone for fear of being arrested himself."

In a different tone he added: "You'll excuse me, *Monsieur le Cure*, and you, Doctor, for making use of you. But it's already been said that real justice, the justice of the law courts, has no say here. Isn't that so, Monsieur Maigret? Did you at least understand when I kept kicking you under the table?"

He marched up and down, passing from the light into the shadow and back again into the light. He gave the impression of a man who is holding himself back, and who manages to keep calm only at the cost of a terrific effort.

Sometimes he came so close to Emile Gautier that he could have touched him.

"What a temptation it was to take the revolver and fire!" he exclaimed. "Yes, I'd said the guilty man would die at midnight! And *you*, Emile, became the defender of the Saint-Fiacre honor!"

This time his fist hit so hard, right in the middle of Emile Gautier's face, that the bank clerk's nose began bleeding violently.

Emile's eyes were like those of a dying animal.

He tottered under the blow, on the point of weeping with pain, fear, and confusion.

The lawyer wanted to intervene, but Saint-Fiacre pushed him away. He dominated them all.

"Gentlemen, I have a slight formality to carry out."

He opened the door wide and turned to Emile Gautier.

"Come on!" he ordered sternly.

XV

GAUTIER'S feet were rooted to the floor.

There was no light in the corridor. He did not want to be alone out there with his foe!

But he did not hesitate long. When Saint-Fiacre hit him again he went rolling into the hall.

"Go upstairs!" He pointed to the staircase.

"Inspector, I warn you—" panted the agent.

The priest had turned away his head. He was suffering, but he was not strong enough to interfere. They were all at the end of their tether, and at last even Metayer poured out something to drink, anything for his dry throat.

"Where are they going?" asked the lawyer.

They heard them walking along the corridor, which echoed with the sound of their steps.

And they could hear Pere Gautier's heavy breathing.

"You knew all about it," Maigret said slowly and quietly to the agent. "You were acting together, you and your son! You already had the farms and the mortgages, but Jean Metayer was still dangerous. You had to get rid of the Countess and at the same time remove the gigolo who would be suspected."

There was a cry of pain from upstairs. The doctor went into the corridor to see what was happening.

"It's nothing!" he said when he returned. "The swine doesn't want to go any further, so he's being helped."

"It is shameful—it's a crime!" cried old Gautier, rushing out.

Maigret and the doctor followed him. They arrived at the foot of the staircase just as the two upstairs reached the door of the room where the dead woman lay.

They heard Saint-Fiacre's voice saying:

"Go in!"

"I can't!"

"Go in!"

A dull sound. Another blow.

Pere Gautier ran up the stairs, followed by Maigret and Bouchardon. All three arrived at the top as the door was closing, and no one moved.

At first they could hear nothing behind the heavy oak folding-doors. The darkness. There was a single ray of agent held his breath and bit his lip in light under the door.

"Down on your knees!" they heard then.

Then a pause. A raucous intake of breath.

"Quicker! Down on your knees! Now ask her forgiveness!"

Another pause, a long one. Then a cry of pain. This time it was not a fist but a heel that the murderer got full in the face.

"Par—pardon!"

"Is that all you can find to say? Remember that it was she who gave you your education."

"Pardon!"

"Remember that three days ago she was still alive."

"Pardon! Pardon!"

"Better than that! Go on! Tell her you are a miserable worm."

"I am—"

"On your knees, I said!"

"Ow! . . . I—"

"Ask her pardon!"

And suddenly, following those replies punctuated by long silences, came a succession of violent noises. Saint-Fiacre could restrain himself no longer. There were bangs on the floor.

Maigret half-opened the door. Maurice de Saint-Fiacre had Emile Gautier by the neck and was knocking his head against the floor. When he saw the inspector he let go, wiped his forehead, and straightened himself to his full height.

"It's done!" he said shortly. He saw the agent and frowned. "Don't you also feel the need to ask for pardon?"

And the old man was so frightened he fell on his knees.

The dead woman could be seen only dimly by the vague light of two candles. Her folded hands were clasping a rosary.

"Get out!"

The Count pushed Emile Gautier out and shut the door. Then they all started downstairs.

EMILE was bleeding profusely. He could not find his handkerchief. The doctor passed him his.

He was a frightful sight—a tormented face plastered with blood; nose one swollen mass and an upper lip split. And yet ugliest and most hateful were his

shifty eyes.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, with long strides, straight and tall and commanding, like the master of a house who knows what he has to do, marched down the long corridor on the ground floor and threw open the door, letting in an icy gust of air.

"Get out!" he growled to the father and son.

But just as Emile was going, Maurice again seized hold of him impulsively.

Maigret was positive he heard a sob in the Count's throat. He struck Emile again, crying convulsively:

"You swine! You dirty swine!"

But it was sufficient for the inspector to touch him on the shoulder. Saint-Fiacre regained his self-control, literally threw the body down the steps, and shut the door.

But not before they heard the old agent's voice pleading:

"Emile! Where are you?"

In the dining room the priest was praying, leaning on the sideboard. In one corner Metayer and his lawyer sat motionless, their eyes fixed on the door.

Maurice de Saint-Fiacre entered, his head high.

"Gentlemen—" he began.

But he could go no further. He choked with emotion. He was at the end of his control.

He pressed the doctor's hand, and Maigret's. He tried to make them understand that there was nothing more to do but leave at once. He waited. But Metayer and Tallier didn't seem to understand. Or else they were paralyzed with terror.

To show what he meant only needed a gesture followed by a click of his fingers.

Nothing else!

If as much! The lawyer searched for his hat, and Saint-Fiacre groaned:

"Quicker!"

Behind a door Maigret heard a murmur and guessed that the servants were there, trying to guess what was happening in the chateau.

He put on his heavy overcoat. But before he left he felt the need to press Saint-Fiacre's hand once again.

The door was open. Outside it was a clear, cold night without a cloud in the sky. The poplars were clear-cut against a sky bathed in moonlight. Steps rang out somewhere far away, and there was a light in the windows of the agent's house.

"No, please stay, *Monsieur le Curé*," said the voice of Maurice de Saint-Fiacre and it went on in the echoing hall: "Now, if you are not too tired, we will go and keep watch over my mother."

* * * * *

Marie Tatin was busying herself getting ready whole crates of beer and lemonade for the funeral, when Maigret entered the inn.

"You mustn't be angry with me for looking after you so badly, Monsieur Maigret," she said. "But, with the funeral . . . especially those who have come a long way will want something to eat."

And already some peasants were to be seen in the square, wearing their Sunday clothes.

The fields were white with frost, and blades of grass crunched underfoot. Each quarter of the hour the bell tolled out from the little church, announcing the passing of a parishioner.

The hearse had arrived at dawn and the undertakers, installed in the inn, were now in a semicircle round the stove.

"I'm surprised the agent isn't at home!" Marie Tatin had told them. "He's probably at the chateau with Monsieur Maurice."

Maigret was finishing his breakfast when, through the window, he saw the choir boy coming along with his mother, who held his hand. But the mother didn't accompany him as far as the inn. She stopped at the corner of the road where she thought she couldn't be seen, and gave her son a push forward as if to give him the necessary impulse to take him as far as Marie Tatin's inn.

WHEN Ernest came in he was quite sure of himself. As sure as a boy at a prize contest who is to recite a piece he has repeated incessantly for the last three months.

"Is the inspector here?" he asked Marie Tatin, and even as he spoke he saw the inspector and came up to him, both hands in his pockets, one of them fingering something.

"I've come to—" he said hesitantly.

"Show me your whistle?"

Ernest drew back a step, turned away his face, thought a bit, and murmured:

"What whistle?"

"The one you've got in your pocket. Haven't you been wanting a Boy Scout whistle for a long time?"

The child took it mechanically out of his pocket and laid it on the table.

"And now, tell me your little story," said Maigret.

A defiant look, then an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders. For Ernest was a little malignant. Quite clearly his look said: "Who cares! I've got the whistle! I'm going to say what they told me to say."

And he recited: "It's about the missal. I didn't tell you the other day because you frightened me. But Mother wants me to confess the truth. They came and asked for the missal a little before high mass."

He couldn't help getting red, and suddenly snatched up his whistle as if he were afraid it might be confiscated because of his lie.

"And who came and asked you?"

"*Monsieur* Metayer, the secretary at the chateau."

"Come and sit down beside me. Would you like a grenadine?"

"Yes. With prickly water."

"Bring us a grenadine with soda-water, Marie. And now, Ernest, are you pleased with your whistle? Give it a blow."

The undertakers turned their heads at the sound.

"Your mother bought it for you yesterday afternoon, didn't she?"

"How do you know?"

"How much did they give your mother at the bank yesterday?"

The young redhead looked him in the eyes. He wasn't crimson any more, but had turned pale. He shot a glance toward the door as if to measure the distance that separated him from it.

"Drink your grenadine," urged Maigret. "It was Emile Gautier you went to see, wasn't it? He made you learn your piece to say to me?"

"Yes!"

"He told you to accuse Jean Metayer?"

"Yes." And, after a pause for reflection: "What are you going to do to me?"

Maigret was thinking. It looked as if his role in this affair was confined to supplying the last link, a tiny link which made the circle perfectly complete.

Gautier had wanted Jean Metayer to be accused. But his plans had been upset the evening of the previous day. He had realized then that the man who was dangerous to him was not the secretary, but the Count of Saint-Fiacre. And he would have been obliged to go early to pay a visit to the young redhead to teach him a new lesson—to say it was the Count who asked for the missal. But he had not gone early enough.

And now the boy was repeating:

"What are you going to do to me?"

Maigret hadn't time to answer. Down the stairs came the lawyer, into the dining room, and up to Maigret with outstretched hand, but with a shade of hesitation.

"Did you sleep well, Inspector? Excuse me—I want to ask your advice, in the name of my client. It's quite absurd—I'm suffering from a headache."

He sat, or rather fell, onto the bench.

"The funeral's at ten, isn't it?"

He looked at the undertakers, then at the people strolling along the street waiting for the hour of the funeral.

"Between ourselves, do you think it's my client's duty. . . . We have been considering the situation, and it is from sheer delicacy that—"

"Can I go, *monsieur?*"

MAIGRET didn't hear. He was talking to the lawyer.

"Haven't you understood yet?" he asked Tallier.

"If we examine—"

"A word of advice. Don't examine anything at all!"

"In your opinion, it's better to go away without—"

Too late! Ernest seized his whistle, ran to the door and made off as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Legally, we are in an excellent position," said the lawyer.

"Excellent, yes!"

"That's what I was saying to—"

"Did he sleep well?"

"He didn't even undress. He's highly strung, sensitive, like so many young men of good family."

But the undertakers were lending an ear as they arose and paid for their drinks. Maigret arose also, took down his overcoat with the velvet collar, and rubbed his bowler hat with his sleeve.

"You've both got the chance of slipping away during—"

"During the funeral?" The lawyer understood. "In that case, I must telephone for a taxi."

"That's right. . . ."

The priest was in his surplice, Ernest and two other choir boys in their long black robes. The cross was carried by a cure from a neighboring village, who walked rather quickly on account of the cold. They sang liturgical chants.

The peasants were grouped at the bottom of the front steps at the chateau. Nothing could be seen inside the house. At last the door opened and the coffin appeared, carried by four men.

Behind was a tall silhouette—Maurice de Saint-Fiacre, upright, his eyes red.

He was the only one not in mourning. And yet when from the top of the steps he let his eyes wander over the crowd, there was a sort of embarrassment.

All alone he followed the bier.

From where he was, Maigret could see the agent's house which had once been his own home, and whose doors and windows were shut. The curtains of the chateau were drawn, too, except in the kitchen where the servants pressed their faces against the window panes.

The murmur of plain chant was nearly drowned by the steps crunching on the gravel.

The bells pealed out.

Two glances met—the Count's and Maigret's. It seemed to the Inspector that on Maurice de Saint-Fiacre's lips trembled the shadow of a smile. Not the smile of the Parisian skeptic, the son of a decadent family, but a smile serene and confident. . . .

During the mass everyone heard the blare of a taxi. Inside it was a cringing little man running away with a washed-out lawyer suffering from a hangover.

NEXT ISSUE'S THREE MYSTERY NOVEL HEADLINERS

LAST ACT FOR MURDER by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

DEATH AT COCKCROW by FREDERICK C. DAVIS

MISCHIEF DONE by JACK SHERIDAN

It Wasn't the Cat

by

JOHN L. BENTON

PATROLMAN Dan Hartley walked slowly along his beat checking the doors of the buildings on the south side of the street to make sure they were locked. He had been on the Bankford police force for ten years, and had grown a bit stout, but he was a man who knew his job.

In a town the size of Bankford a patrolman got to know quite a few of the people along his beat. Hartley liked it that way, for most of the local citizens were friendly, and it made being a cop a pleasant sort of a job.

It was a cloudy night in early fall and there was a hint of rain in the air. As he reached the front of an apartment building Hartley saw the little blond girl standing on the sidewalk all alone. She was not more than eight years old and she was crying.

"What's the matter, Nancy?" the patrolman asked as he recognized the child. "Why are you crying?"

"Because Mittens has run away," said Nancy as she stopped crying. "I've called and called and looked everywhere for him and I can't find him."

"Mittens," Hartley said. "Oh, you mean your black cat."

"That's right," said Nancy. "The big black cat with the four white paws, that's why I named him Mittens when he was a little baby kitten. He's five years old now and big for his age. Mittens likes you, Mr. Hartley." The little girl waved toward a window of a ground floor apartment. "He always sat in the window and watched you go by, and now—now my pussy-cat is gone."

"Don't you worry, Nancy," Hartley said soothingly. "I'll find Mittens for you. Where is your family?"

"They went to the railroad station to meet Grandmother who is coming to visit us," Nancy said. "I stayed home so I could finish my lessons before Grandmother got here."

"How did Mittens get away?" the patrolman asked.

"He was sitting in the open window like he always does," said Nancy. "He is always so good about not trying to get away. He's a house-broken altered cat, so he never goes out, you know. But something frightened him and he fell off the window ledge and ran away." The little girl's voice broke. "I—I can't

Hartley Was Looking for a Cat, and Found—a Corpse!

find him anywhere."

"You go back inside and wait for your family, Nancy," Hartley said. "I'll find Mittens as soon as I can and bring him back to you."

"All right, Mr. Hartley," Nancy said. "Thank you very much."

THE patrolman frowned as he watched the little blond girl hurry back into the apartment building. Finding a black cat on a dark night like this would be quite a job, but Dan Hartley intended to try.

He drew out his flashlight and switched it on and he walked back into the alley between the apartment house and the building next to it on the right. The bright beam of the flash gleamed in shadowy places, but there was no sign of any cat.

The patrolman walked on until he reached the rear of the buildings. Beyond the rear of the apartment houses and about two hundred feet away was the rear of a row of stores whose fronts faced on the next street.

A man appeared, coming in Hartley's direction. He apparently had come from the rear of the stores. The patrolman turned his flash on the man's face for an instant, then lowered the light as he recognized John Lawson who ran a one-man barbershop over on Main Street.

"What's the matter, Hartley?" Lawson asked. He was a thin, gray haired and sullen man. "Hunting burglars?"

"No," Hartley said. "Looking for a black cat."

"A black cat!" the barber said disgustedly. "I hate cats. I just kicked one out of my way back there." He waved vaguely behind him in the direction of the stores. "At least, I tried to do it, but the cat got away before my foot hit it."

"Don't ever try that again or I'll run you in on a charge of cruelty to animals," Hartley said coldly. He was fond of animals and liked both cats and dogs. "I mean it."

"A fine thing," Lawson said. "We're supposed to have police protection in this town and the cops go around hunting cats."

The barber hurried on back through the alley before Hartley could say anything further. Lawson lived in the same apartment house in which little Nancy Drake and her family resided.

The patrolman sighed. He never had liked John Lawson, and after the talk he had just had with the man Hartley disliked him all the more.

Hartley decided that the cat that Lawson had tried to kick might be Nancy's pet. In that case, there was a bare chance of finding Mittens somewhere over there at the rear of those stores. The patrolman headed in that direction, still searching around with the light of the flash as he went.

It was eleven o'clock on a Saturday night, and even though they had remained open late, Hartley knew that all the stores on Main Street were probably closed now. As he drew closer to the buildings the patrolman saw there was a light burning in the rear of Mark Cooper's grocery store, and the back door of the place stood half open.

"Guess Mark must be working late on his books," Hartley said softly.

It dawned on the patrolman that a grocery store was the sort of place into which a cat might wander. It would do no harm to ask Mark Cooper if he had seen any sign of Mittens.

Hartley reached the rear of the store and stepped in through the half open door. Cooper had made a sort of office in what was really a storeroom at the rear of the store. Here there was an old rolltop desk with a green shaded light hanging by the cord from the ceiling. Big packing cases were stacked all around. But there was no sign of Mark Cooper. Apparently, the office-storeroom was empty.

The patrolman circled around the desk, intending to see if Cooper was in the front part of the store. Then Hartley halted and gasped as he stood staring at the figure sprawled on the floor. The small, middle-aged, bald-headed grocer was lying there face downward in a pool of blood.

INSTINCTIVELY, Hartley realized that this was murder, and he put away his flashlight and knelt beside the still form. A quick examination told him that the grocer was dead, his throat cut. There was a bloodstained straight edged razor lying beside the body.

"Maybe I'm wrong," Hartley muttered as he stood erect. "I thought this was murder, but it might be that Cooper committed suicide. Anyway, I better report this right away."

He started toward the front of the store to find the phone there and make his report, but he stopped suddenly as he heard a faint *meow* coming from one corner of the storeroom. He glanced in that direction and saw the face of a big black cat peering at him from around the edge of one of the packing cases.

"Mittens!" exclaimed Hartley. "So you did come in here."

As he heard his name, the black cat decided that the patrolman was a friend and came cautiously toward him.

"It's all right, Mittens," Hartley said soothingly. "I like cats. I'll take you back home to Nancy just as soon as I can."

The patrolman didn't want to risk the cat getting away again, so he went to the rear of the store and closed it. Mittens came to him and rubbed against his leg to show that he was glad to find a friend. Hartley smiled and reached down and petted him.

"You're safe now, Mittens," Hartley said, and then frowned as he glanced at the corpse. "But I've got some business to attend to here before I can take you home."

He left the cat there, closing the door that shut off the storeroom from the front part of the grocery. There was a light burning in the front of the store and the blinds were drawn and the front door was locked from the inside.

Hartley picked up the phone on the shelf behind the counter and gave the operator the police station number. They had no dial phones in Bankford.

"Patrolman Hartley reporting, Sergeant," Hartley said to the man on the desk at the police station. "I just found Mark Cooper, the grocer at sixteen-twenty-two Main Street lying on the floor in the rear of his store with his throat cut. He's dead . . . Yes, I'll wait here, of course."

It was twenty blocks from the store, to the police station and Hartley knew it would take a few minutes for more police to arrive. He was about to return to the rear of the store when he heard someone knocking on the glass of the front door.

The patrolman went to the door and unlocked it. A heavy-set man stood there. Hartley recognized him. He was Fred Nash, who ran a stationery store and newspaper stand down the street.

"Knew that Mark Cooper must be still here, because he always stops at my place and gets the Sunday paper before he goes home on Saturday night," Nash said. "And I remembered the wife told me to get some milk and butter. I forgot all about it until now."

"Sorry, Fred," Hartley said. "I'm afraid that Mark won't be able to sell you that stuff you need. He's dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Nash. "What happened, Dan?"

"I found him out in the back room with his throat cut," said Hartley. "There's a razor lying beside him and it looks like suicide."

"Gosh," said Nash. "He has been playing the races a lot lately. Heard he had a stack of money on a longshot today, but I don't know whether he won or lost. Mark wouldn't give me the name of the horse."

"Maybe he did lose," Hartley said thoughtfully. "And he was broke and desperate and killed himself. Anyway, it is just as well he was a widower without any family."

"He seemed cheerful enough when he stopped at my place early this evening and bought a package of safety razor blades, on his way back to the store after having dinner," Nash said. "That kid who acts as clerk for him was running the store then."

"I'm waiting for the rest of the police to get here," Hartley said. "If you want to get that milk and butter, the delicatessen across the street remains open until midnight, Fred."

"Thanks, Dan," Nash said. "I forgot about that."

He was wearing dark trousers and a white shirt. As he swung around, Hartley found himself staring at what looked like a bloodstain on the side of the news dealer's shirt near Nash's belt. Before the patrolman could do anything about it, Nash hurried across the street.

A thought struck Dan Hartley, there was something about that razor lying on the floor in the back room that bothered him, but he wasn't sure just what.

He decided to take another look at it.

HE closed the front door of the store, but left it unlocked so that the police could get in easily when they arrived. He knew another patrolman had doubtlessly been sent to take over his beat, so he wasn't worried about that.

He opened the inner door of the storeroom-office and stepped into the room.

The single light was still burning and he noticed a light switch near some packing cases piled up beside the door. He expected Mittens to come running to him, but there was no sign of the cat anywhere around. The back door of the store was still locked.

Hartley walked over and stood staring thoughtfully at the razor. There was blood that was half dry on the blade, but the handle was very clean.

"Now why would a man who used a straight edged razor buy safety razor blades?" the patrolman muttered. "And if Cooper killed himself with that razor, why isn't there any blood on the handle? He certainly wouldn't have bothered wiping it off as he was dying."

Hartley drew his gun, suddenly conscious of danger as he heard a faint noise coming from behind the packing boxes near the inner door. He saw a hand reach for the light switch. But before the fingers could press the switch, there was a hiss and a feline snarl from behind the boxes. This was followed by a howl of pain.

An instant later John Lawson dashed wildly out from behind the packing cases, a big black cat digging in his claws as he clung to the back of the barber. "Get this thing off me!" Lawson shouted. "I hate cats. I can't stand them!"

Obviously Mittens didn't care for his uncertain perch. With a final dig of his claws into Lawson's back as he took off, the cat leaped to the floor.

"Apparently cats don't think much of you either, Lawson," said Hartley, covering the barber with his gun. "You're under arrest on a charge of murder."

The inner door swung open and the Bankford chief of police and some detectives and uniformed men stood there listening to Hartley's words.

"Murder!" exclaimed Lawson. "What are you talking about? Mark Cooper committed suicide when he bet all his money on a longshot in the races today and lost."

"You ought to know, Lawson," said the chief of police. "We've learned that you have been playing a few bets for your customers lately. Phoning them in to the bookmakers for a fee of five dollars."

"So what?" demanded Lawson.

There were voices in the front of the store and Fred Nash appeared. He went to Hartley.

"I just learned that longshot Cooper picked won and paid off forty to one," Nash said. "He had five hundred dollars on the horse and collected around eighteen thousand. Got the money, too."

"I'll bet it won't be found around here now," Hartley said. "Lawson cut Cooper's throat and then stole the money. I met him when he was probably going home with the money in his pocket. But he must have started worrying that he had overlooked something here that might tip off the police that he was the murderer, so he came back."

"There's a mortgage due on Lawson's barbershop in a couple of days," Nash said. "I know, for he tried to borrow some money from me to pay it off. I didn't have the cash."

ALL the men and voices around him had frightened Mittens and he was crouched down at Hartley's feet.

"So Lawson killed Cooper and stole the money." Hartley stared at the stain on Nash's shirt. "What's that spot on your shirt, Fred?"

Nash examined the spot on his shirt. "I don't know," he said. "Raspberry or cherry juice maybe. I was working at the soda fountain at my place." He grinned. "Kind of looks like blood."

"It sure does." Hartley reached down and picked up the black cat with the four white paws. Mittens didn't struggle or even try to get away. The patrolman looked at the chief. "A little girl over on the next street lost this cat. All right if I take him back to her, Chief?"

"Of course," said the chief. "Go ahead, Hartley. We'll take care of things here. I think Lawson will admit his guilt before long."

Hartley stepped out of the back door of the store and headed for the apartment house where a little blond haired girl lived. He carried the black cat in his arms.

"It's all right, Mittens," he said. "You're going home. And won't Nancy be surprised when I tell her how you helped me capture a killer!"

Mittens said nothing, but he was purring contentedly and a bit sleepily. After all, he'd had a rather hectic evening for a cat who had spent all five years of his life in an apartment.

A NERO WOLFE NOVEL

BY REX STOUT

When the corpulent detective and his sidekick are chased by a prize-winning bull, it's the start of a mad merry-go-round of mystery, murder and mirth!

I took the fence at full speed and tumbled (Chap. I)

SOME BURIED CAESAR

I

THAT sunny September day was full of surprises.

The first one came when I turned to look at the back seat. I didn't suppose the shock of the collision would have hurled him to the floor; what I expected was a glare of fury that would top all records; what I saw was his massive round face wearing a look of relief—if I knew his face, and I certainly knew Nero Wolfe's face. I stared at him in astonishment.

He murmured, "Thank God."

I demanded, "What?"

"I said thank God." He wiggled a finger at me. "It has happened,

and here we are. Now go ahead."

"What do you mean, go ahead?"

"I mean go on. Start the confounded thing going again."

I got out and walked around to the front to take a look. It was a mess. I made my report.

"I'd like to get it on record what happened. I was going fifty-five when the tire blew out. She left the road, but I had her headed up and would have made it if it hadn't been for that damn tree. Now the fender is smashed into the rubber and a knuckle is busted and the radiator's ripped open."

"How long will it take you to fix it?"

"I can't fix it."

"Where are we?"

"Two hundred and thirty-seven miles northeast of Times Square. Eighteen miles southwest of Crowfield, where the North Atlantic Exposition is held every year, beginning on the second Monday in September and lasting—"

"Archie." His eyes were narrowed at me. "Please save the jocularity. What are we going to do?"

"We're going to flag a car and get a lift. Preferably to Crowfield, where we have reservations at a hotel."

WOLFE compressed his lips. "I won't ride with a strange driver."

"I'll go to Crowfield alone and rent a car and come back for you."

"That would take two hours. No."

I shrugged. "We passed a house about a mile back. I'll bum a ride there, or walk, and phone to Crowfield for a car."

"No."

I stepped back to survey the surroundings. The road we were on was a secondary highway. I couldn't see the house we had passed, on account of a curve. Across the road was a gentle slope of meadow which got steeper further up where the meadow turned into woods. I turned. In that direction was a board fence painted white, a smooth green pasture, and a lot of trees. Beyond the trees were some bigger ones, and the top of a house. There was no drive leading that way, so I figured that there would be one further along the road, around the curve.

Wolfe yelled to ask what the devil I was doing.

"Well," I said, "I don't see a garage. There's a house across there among those big trees. Going around by the road it would probably be a mile or more, but cutting across that pasture would be only maybe four hundred yards. If you don't want to sit here, I will, and you go hunt a phone."

Away off somewhere, a dog barked. Wolfe looked at me.

"I'm in no humor to contend with a dog. We'll go together. But I won't climb that fence."

"You won't need to. There's a gate back a little way."

It was after we had passed through, just as I got the gate closed behind us, that I heard some guy yelling. I looked across the pasture in the direction of the house, and there he was, sitting on top of the fence on the other side. He was yelling at us to go back where we came from. At that distance I couldn't tell for sure whether it was a rifle or a shotgun he had. Wolfe had gone on ahead while I was shutting the gate, and I trotted up to him and grabbed his arm.

"Hold on a minute. If that's a bug-house and that's one of the inmates, he may take us for woodchucks or wild turkeys."

Wolfe snorted. "That man's a fool. It's only a cow pasture." Being a good detective, he produced his evidence by pointing to a brown circular heap near our feet. Then he glared toward the menace on the fence, bellowed, "Shut up!" and went on. I followed. The guy kept yelling and waving the gun.

There was an enormous boulder in the middle of the pasture, and we were a little to the right of that when the second surprise arrived in the series I spoke of. I felt Wolfe's fingers gripping my elbow.

"Stand perfectly still. Move your head slowly, very slowly, to the right."

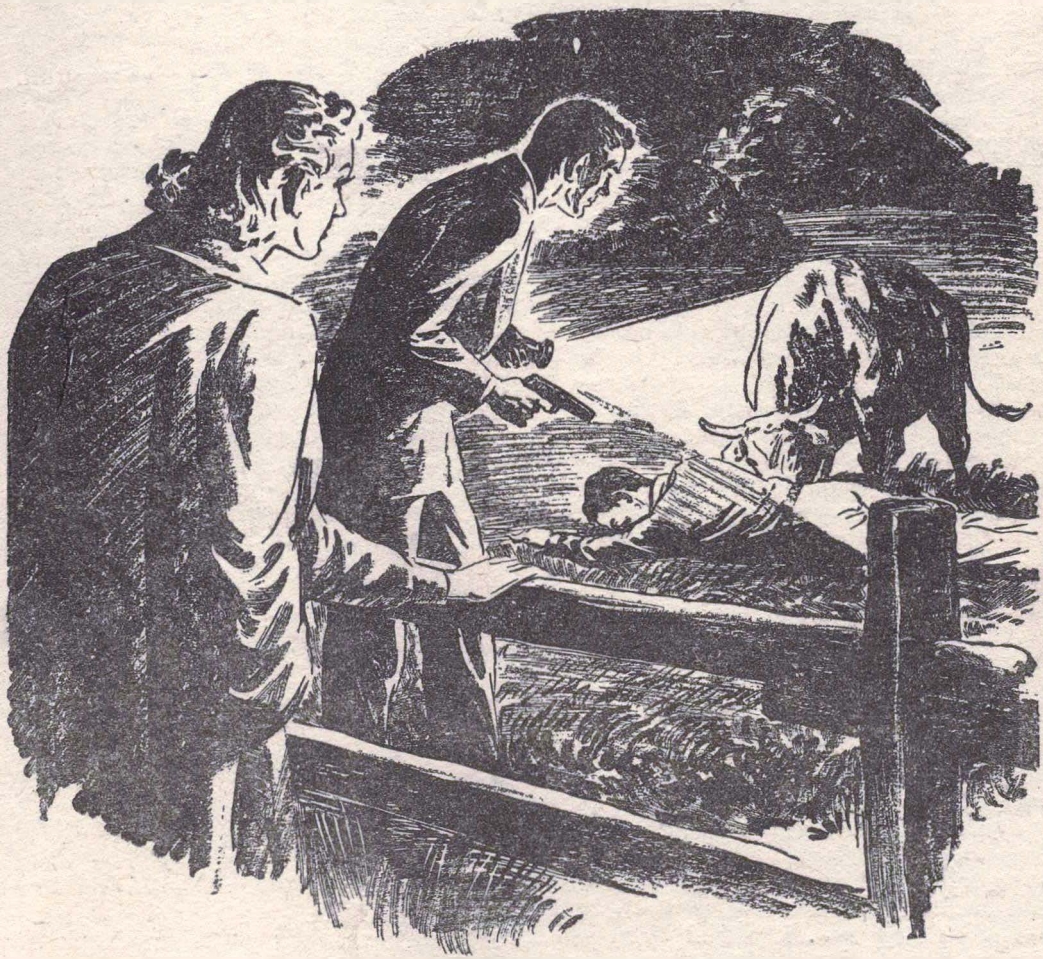
For an instant I thought the nut with the gun had something contagious and Wolfe had caught it, but I did as I was told, and there was the second surprise. Off maybe 200 feet to the right, walking slowly toward us with his head up, was a bull bigger than I had supposed bulls came. He was dark red with white patches, with a big white triangle on his face. Of a sudden he stopped, looking at us with his neck curved.

Detective Wolfe on the Horns of a Dilemma!

I heard Wolfe's voice. "Do you know the technique of bulls? Did you ever see a bull fight?"

"No, sir."

Wolfe grunted. "Stand still. Now—back off slowly, away from me. Keep facing him. When you are ten feet from me, swerve toward the fence. He will begin to move when you do. As long as he follows slowly, keep backing and facing him. When he starts his rush, turn and run."



I aimed the light at the thing on the ground (Chap. IV)

I NEVER got a chance to follow directions. I didn't move, and I'm sure Wolfe didn't, so it must have been our friend on the fence—maybe he jumped off into the pasture. Anyhow, the bull curved his neck and started on the jump. Possibly if we had stood still he would have passed by, about 3 feet to my right, but it was asking too much of human nature to expect me to stand there. I moved, without any preliminary backing, and there's no question, whoever he started for originally, about his being attracted by my movement. I could hear him behind me. I could almost feel him. Also I was dimly aware of shouts and a blotch of something red above the fence near the spot I was aimed at. There it was—the fence. I took it at full speed, and I tumbled, landing flat on the other side, sprawling and rolling. I sat up and panted and heard a voice above me:

"Beautiful! I wouldn't have missed that for anything."

I looked up and saw two girls, one in a white dress and red jacket, the other in a yellow shirt and slacks. I scrambled to my feet. The bull was slowly walking along, a hundred feet off, wiggling his head. In the middle of the pasture was Nero Wolfe, standing motionless on the rounded peak of the boulder.

He called, "Tell that man with the gun to get someone to pen that bull!"

The guy didn't look like a bull penner. He looked scared. He had followed me to the fence, and now he demanded:

"Who air you fellers? Why didn't you go back when I hollered at you?"

"Hold it, mister. Introductions can wait. Can you put that bull in a pen?"

"No, I cain't. And I want to tell you—"

"Is there someone here who can?"

"No, they ain't. They've gone off to the fair. And I want that feller out of there right now. I'm guarding that bull."

I gave him up and turned to the pasture and called: "He's guarding the bull! He wants you out of there right now! He can't pen the bull and no one else can!"

Wolfe bellowed like thunder. "Then you'll have to do it! Archie, climb back into the pasture and get the bull's attention. When he moves, walk back in the other direction, keeping within a few feet of the fence. Was that a woman wearing that red thing?"

"Yes. Woman or girl."

"Then borrow the red thing, and have it with you. When the bull starts a rush go back over the fence. Proceed along it until you're away from him, then get back in the pasture and repeat. Take him to the other end of the pasture and keep him there until I am out."

I looked around. The girl in yellow slacks was there, sitting up on the fence, but not the other one. I had just opened my mouth to request information when I saw a car bouncing along a lane beyond some trees. It stopped with its nose almost touching the fence, and the girl in the red jacket leaned out and yelled at me:

"Come and open the gate!"

I trotted toward her, but when I got there the other guy was standing beside the car, waving the gun around and reciting rules about gates and bulls.

The girl told him impatiently, "Don't be silly, Dave. There's no sense leaving him perched on that rock." She switched to me. "Open the gate, and if you want to come along, get in. Dave'll shut it."

I moved. Dave moved too and squeaked, "Leave that gate alone. By gammer, I'll shoot! My orders from Mr. Pratt was if anybody opens a gate or climbs in that pasture, shoot!"

"Baloney," said the girl. She got impatient again, to me, and scornful: "Do you want your friend rescued or not?"

I unhooked the gate and swung it open. The bull, quite a distance away, turned to face us with his head cocked sidewise. I hopped it, as the car passed through, and the girl called to Dave to get the gate shut in a hurry. The bull, still at a distance, tossed his head and then lowered it and began pawing.

I said, "Stop a minute," and pulled the hand brake. "What makes you think this will work?"

"I don't know. We can try it, can't we? Are you scared?"

"Yes. Take off that red thing."

I grabbed the collar of it and she wriggled out. Then I pulled out my automatic.

She looked at it. "Do you think you could stop that bull with that thing?"

"I could try."

"You'd better not, unless you're prepared to cough up forty-five thousand dollars. That's not just a bull, it's Hickory Caesar Grindon. Put that thing away and release the brake."

The bull was playing rocking horse. He was facing our way, and as we passed him about 30 yards to the left he looked as if he could have picked the car up and carried it on his horns. She pulled up alongside the boulder and sang out, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

WOLFE'S lips twitched a little. "Miss Stanley? How do you do. My name is Nero Wolfe."

"Not *the* Nero Wolfe?" Her eyes widened. "Get in." He grunted his way into the convertible. "Stanley would be a nice name," the girl went on, "but mine is Caroline Pratt. I'm nothing like as famous as you are, but I've been Metropolitan golf champion for two years. This place seems to be collecting champions. You're a champion detective, and Hickory Caesar Grindon is a National champion bull, and I'm a golf champion. . . ."

When we got to the gate Dave opened it, and closed it against our tail as we went through. She eased along under trees, and finally emerged onto a wide graveled space in front of a big new concrete building with four garage doors at one end, where she stopped. Dave had come hopping along beside us, still lugging the gun, and the girl in yellow slacks was sauntering our way. I vaulted over the side of the car to the gravel. The golf champion was inquiring of Wolfe if she could drop him somewhere, but he already had his door open and was lifting his bulk to descend, so she got out.

"Is that bull your property?" Wolfe asked.

"No, he belongs to my uncle. Thomas Pratt." She waved a hand. "This is his place. He'll be here shortly. Meanwhile, if I can do anything. . . ."

"We had an accident," Wolfe explained. "Mr. Goodwin was unable to restrain our car—I beg your pardon. Miss Pratt, this is Mr. Goodwin."

She politely put her hand out and I took it. "Could I use a telephone?" I asked.

"I'll show you the phone." The girl in yellow slacks was speaking. She was blonde, with dark blue eyes. "Come on, Escamillo," she said, and added, "I'm Lily Rowan."

II

LATER, Wolfe and I were shown to a pleasant room with bath. When Wolfe had been served with beer and I had freshened up, I made my report.

"This Mr. Pratt will be back any minute, with a big sedan, and his niece says she'll take us to Crowfield. I phoned the hotel, and they promised to hold our room until ten tonight. Naturally there's a mob yelling for beds."

"A mob yelling for beds." Wolfe looked around. "When will the garage send for the car?"

I said patiently, "Not till tomorrow noon."

"Good." He sighed. "I thought I didn't like new houses, but this one is very pleasant. Of course that was the architect. Do you know where the money came from to build it? Miss Pratt told me. Her uncle operates a chain of popular restaurants in New York. He calls them pratterias. Did you ever see one?"

"Sure. I've had lunch in them often."

"Indeed. How is the food?"

"So-so. Depends on your standard." I would have elaborated, only there was a knock on the door, and a specimen with grease on the side of his face entered and mumbled something about Mr. Pratt having arrived and we could go downstairs when we felt like it.

Wolfe told him we would be down at once and he went out. We finally found them on a flagged terrace shaded with awnings. The two girls were off to one side with a young man, having highballs. Nearer to us, at a table, were two guys working their chins and fluttering papers from a brief case at each other. One, young and neat, looked like a slick bond salesman; the other, middle-aged or a little past, had brown hair that was turning gray.

"Mr. Pratt? My name is Wolfe."

The younger man stood up. The other frowned. "So my niece told me. Of course I've heard of you, but you had no business in that pasture."

Wolfe compressed his lips. "Did your niece tell you what I told her?"

"Yes."

"Do you think I lied? If so, it remains only to thank you for your hospitality. Your niece has kindly offered to take us to Crowfield in your car—if you will permit that?"

"I suppose so." The lummox was still frowning. "No, Mr. Wolf, I don't think you lied, but you're a detective, and you might have been hired. . . . I'll ask you a straight question: did you come to this part of the country in an effort to do something about that bull?"

"No, sir. I came to exhibit orchids at the North Atlantic Exposition."

"Your choosing that pasture was pure accident?"

"We didn't choose it. It was a question of geometry. It was the shortest way to this house."

Pratt nodded. Then he turned to the man with the brief case, who was stowing papers away. "All right, Pavey, you might as well make the six o'clock from Albany. Remember what I said, no more Fairbanks pies. . . ." He went on a while about dish breakage and new leases in Brooklyn and so forth until Pavey had disappeared. Then our host asked abruptly if Wolfe would like a highball, and Wolfe said no thanks, he preferred beer. Pratt yelled "Bert!" at the top of

his voice, and Greasy-face showed up and got orders. As we sat down the trio from the other end came over, carrying their drinks.

"May we?" Miss Pratt asked her uncle. "Jimmy wants to meet the guests. Mr. Wolfe, Mr. Goodwin this is my brother."

I stood to acknowledge, while Pratt went on talking. "Of course I've heard of you," he was telling Wolfe. "Privately too, once or twice. My friend Pete Hutchinson told me that you turned him down a couple of years ago on a little inquiry he undertook regarding his wife."

WOLFE nodded. "I like to interfere with natural processes as little as possible."

"Suit yourself." Pratt took a gulp of highball. "That's my motto. It's your business, and you're the one to run it. For instance, I understand you're a fancy eater. Now I'm in the food business, and last week we served a daily average of more than forty-two thousand lunches in Greater New York. Tell me, how many times have you eaten in a pratteria?"

"Never." Wolfe poured beer. "I always eat at home."

"Oh." Pratt eyed him. "Of course some home cooking is all right. But most of the fancy stuff . . . one of my publicity stunts was when I got a group of fifty people from the Social Register into a pratteria and served them from the list. They gobbled it up and they raved. What I've built my success on is, first, quality, second, publicity."

"An unbeatable combination," Wolfe murmured. "Your niece was telling me something of your phenominal career."

"Yes?" He glanced at her. "Your drink's gone, Caroline." He turned his head and bawled, "Bert!" Back to Wolfe: "Well, she knows as much about it as anyone. She worked in my office three years. That's better than her brother could do. My only nephew, and no good for anything at all. Are you, Jimmy?"

The young man grinned at him. "Not worth a damn."

"Yes, but you don't mean it, and I do. Let me ask you, Mr. Wolfe, what is your opinion of architecture?"

"Well—I like this house."

"You do actually? My nephew designed it. But there's absolutely no money in architecture and never will be. I've looked into it. Where a nephew of mine ever got the idea . . ."

He went on and on, and Wolfe placidly opened another bottle of beer. Four men came swinging around the corner of the house and tramped across the terrace. Pratt had jumped up with a ferocious scowl, facing the intruders. The foremost, a wiry little item with a thin nose and sharp dark eyes, stopped right in front of him and told his face, "Well, Mr. Pratt, I think I've got it worked out to satisfy you. If you'll let me explain the arrangement—"

"It's a waste of time, Mr. Bennett."

"Permit me." The tone was brusque and came from a solid-looking bird in a gray sport suit. "You're Pratt? Lew Bennett here has talked me into this, and I have to get back to Crowfield and out again for New York. I'm Cullen."

Bennett said nervously, "Daniel Cullen."

"Oh." Pratt looked a little awed. "This is an honor, Mr. Cullen. Sit down. Have a highball?" He did introductions all around, including titles and occupations. It appeared that Lew Bennett was the secretary of the National Guernsey League. A big-boned guy with scraggly hair and a tired face was Monte McMillan. The fourth one, who looked even tireder than McMillan, was Sidney Darth, chairman of the North Atlantic Exposition Board.

Bert was sent for drinks. Lew Bennett said, "Mr. Cullen's in a hurry to get back, and I'm confident, Mr. Pratt, you'll appreciate what he's doing as well as we do. You won't lose a cent. It will be a happy outcome."

"I want to say it's an outrage!" It was Cullen, glowering at Pratt. "It ought to be actionable! Where the devil—"

"Excuse me," Bennett put in hastily. "I've been all over that aspect of it, Mr. Cullen, and if Mr. Pratt doesn't see it our way . . ." He turned to Pratt. "The arrangement is simply this: Mr. Cullen has generously agreed to take Hickory Caesar Grindon."

Pratt asked, "What does he want with him?"

"He has one of the finest purebred Guernsey herds in the country."

Cullen growled, "You understand, Pratt, I don't need him. My senior herd sire is Mahwah Gallant Masterson who

has forty-five A R daughters. I'm doing this as a favor to the National Guernsey League."

FOR emphasis Cullen nodded his head vigorously and looked virtuous.

Bennett said, "About the arrangement. Mr. Cullen is quite correct when he says he doesn't really need Caesar. He is acting very generously, but he isn't willing to pay you the sum you paid McMillan. Forty-five thousand dollars is a terrific price for any bull. Mr. Cullen will pay you thirty-three thousand dollars, and Monte McMillan will return twelve thousand dollars of the sum you paid him. You'll get all your money back. It can be paid now with Mr. Cullen's check, which I guess you know is good, and there'll be a truck here before dark to get Caesar. Mr. Cullen wants to show him at Crowfield Thursday."

Pratt turned on McMillan. "You told me this noon that you regarded the deal as closed for good."

"I know I did," McMillan put down his drink. "They've been riding me. They've been—I'm an old Guernsey man, Mr. Pratt."

"You should be ashamed to admit it!" Cullen exploded. "They should expel you from the league and freeze you out! Pratt here doesn't know any better, he has that excuse at least. But you knew what was going to happen to that bull before you sold him!"

"Sure," McMillan nodded wearily. "It's easy for you to talk, Mr. Cullen. What have you got, a couple of billion? What I had, was my herd and nothing else. Then the anthrax came, only a month ago, and in one week what did I have left of my Hickory herd? Four calves, six cows, one junior sire, and Hickory Caesar Grindon. Then Mr. Pratt shows up and he tells me straight what he wants to do with Caesar, and of course I knew it was impossible, even in the fix I was in. But it was a temptation, so to get rid of him I set a figure so high it was ridiculous. Forty-five thousand dollars!" McMillan picked up his glass, put it down again. "Mr. Pratt wrote a check and I took it. It wasn't you, Mr. Cullen, who offered me nine thousand. As I remember it, your offer was seventy-five hundred."

Cullen shrugged. "I didn't need him. What I'm doing is in effect philanthro-

I side-stepped in time and let him have it (Chap. X)

py. I'm not even sure I want Caesar's line in my herd. There have been better bulls than Caesar before now, and there will be—"

"No bull of yours, damn you!" McMillan's voice shook with rage. "You damn lousy amateur! Who are you to make snide remarks about any bull, let alone Hickory Caesar Grindon! Caesar was the finest bull, bar none, that ever got on the register! And you say you're not even sure you want his line in your herd! Well, damn you, I hope you won't get it! At least I won't help you pay for it!" He turned to the secretary of the National Guernsey League. "I'll keep my twelve thousand dollars, Lew. Count me out of your little deal."

What he got for that was an uproar. Bennett and Darth and Cullen all went for him, but were shocked into silence by an unexpected bomb tossed into the fray by Pratt.

"Let him alone!" Pratt yelled. "He's out of it anyhow. I don't want my money back from him or Mr. Cullen or anyone else. What I want is the bull, and I've got him, and a bill of sale. That's final."

Bennett sputtered, "You don't mean that. You can't! Look here, I've told you—"

"I do mean it." Pratt's wide jaw was set. "I've made my arrangements and I'm going to stick to them. I've invited a hundred people—"

They were all on their feet now. Daniel Cullen wheeled.

"You're a maniac, Pratt. Come on, Bennett. Come on, Darth. I've got to catch a train."

He strode off, the other two following. Pratt looked across at the one who was left.

"You know, McMillan," he said, "I don't like the look of that fellow Bennett, and I'm afraid the man I've got guarding Caesar isn't much good. I know I wasn't supposed to get anything for my forty-five thousand dollars except the bull, but I wonder if you'd mind—"

"Sure." McMillan was up, big-boned and lanky. "I'll go take a look. I-I wanted to look at him anyway."

The stockman lumbered off. Pratt muttered, "All that commotion."

Wolfe nodded. "Astonishing. About a bull. It might be thought you were going to cook him and eat him."

Pratt nodded back at him. "I am. That's what's causing all the trouble."

III

WELL, as the Emperor of India would say, that tore it. Wolfe was enjoying one of his real and rare surprises.

"Eat that bull, Mr. Pratt?" he demanded.

Pratt nodded again. "I am. Perhaps you noticed a pit we have started to dig down by the lane. That's for a barbecue which will occur Thursday afternoon. Three days from now. I have invited a hundred guests, mostly from New York. My niece and nephew and their friend Miss Rowan have come for it. The bull will be butchered tomorrow."

"Remarkable." Wolfe's head was still tilted. "I suppose an animal of that size would furnish seven or eight hundred pounds of edible tissue. At forty-five thousand dollars on the hoof, that would make it around sixty dollars a pound. Of course you'll use only the more desirable cuts and a great deal will be wasted. Another way to calculate: if you serve a hundred guests the portions will be four hundred and fifty dollars each."

"It sounds terrible that way." Pratt reached for his glass, saw it was empty, and yelled for Bert. "But consider how little you can get for forty-five thousand dollars in newspaper display or any other form of advertising. Yet think what a stir it will make that the senior grand champion Guernsey bull of the United States is being served to a gathering of epicures? And by whom? By Tom Pratt of the famous pratterias! Speaking of epicures, I've heard you're one. Will you still be in Crowfield? Maybe you'd like to run out and join us. Thursday at one o'clock.

"Thank you, sir, I don't suppose Caesar's championship qualities include succulence, but it would be an experience. By the way, I am curious. You feel no compunction at slaughtering a beast of established nobility?"

"Why should I?" Pratt waved a hand. "They say this Caesar bull has so many A R daughters, that's the point they harp on. Well, there are over forty thousand A R Guernsey cows in this country. Does that sound as if I was

getting ready to barbecue the breed out of existence? To hear that bunch over at Crowfield talk you might think I was. I've had over forty telegrams today howling threats and bloody murder."

"Their viewpoint, of course, is valid to them."

"Sure, and mine is to me. Hey, you want a drink there, Mr. Goodwin. How about you, Miss Rowan?"

A little fed up with the champion bull, I moved to a chair closer to the champion niece and began to murmur at her. I was preparing to remark to the niece that it was after five o'clock and if she was going to drive us to Crowfield we had better get started, when I heard a climax being reached by my employer. Pratt was inviting him to stay for dinner and he was accepting. I scowled at him, hoping vindictively that the food would be terrible, and concentrated on the niece again. I had decided she was all right, wholesome and quite intelligent.

In reply to an invitation from Caroline I was explaining that I would love to take her on at tennis if I hadn't twisted my wrist negotiating the fence, which was a lie, when the second attacking party arrived. In front was an extremely presentable number, I would say about twenty-two, with yellowish brown eyes and warm trembly lips. Behind her was a tall slender guy, in brown slacks and pull-over; and backing him up was an individual who should not have been there, since the proper environment for that type is bounded by 42nd and 96th Streets. In their habitat they don't look bad, but out in the country like that, still wearing a Crawley town suit and a Monteith tie, they jar.

THE atmosphere they created was full of sparks. Our host's mouth fell open. Jimmy stood up with his face red. Caroline exclaimed something. Lily Rowan showed a crease in her brow. The girl got as far as the table, said:

"We should have telephoned."

That met denial. Greetings crossed one another through the atmosphere. It appeared that the bird in the Crawley suit was a stranger to the Pratts, since he was introduced as Mr. Bronson. The girl was Nancy Osgood and the tall slender guy was her brother Clyde. Once more the clarion was sounded for poor Bert. Miss Osgood protested that they didn't want to intrude, they really couldn't stay, they had been to the fair and had only stopped in on their way home, on an impulse. Clyde Osgood, who had a pair of binoculars dangling on a strap around his neck, gazed down at Pratt in a fairly provocative manner and addressed him:

"We just got chased away from your pasture by Monte McMillan. We were only taking a look at your bull."

Pratt nodded. "That darned bull's causing a lot of trouble." He glanced at the sister, and back at the brother again. "It's nice of you children to drop in like this. Unexpected pleasure. I saw your father over at Crowfield today."

"Yeah. He saw you too." Clyde turned, looked straight at Lily Rowan.

"How are you?" he demanded.

"I'm fine. You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm great."

"Good." Lily yawned.

That simple exchange seemed to have an effect on Jimmy Pratt, for he took on added color. Mr. Bronson, looking a little weary, had sat down. Clyde abruptly turned again, got onto the edge of the chair next to Pratt's.

"Look here," he said, "we stopped in to see you, my sister and I."

"A good idea. Now that I've built this place here—we're neighbors again, aren't we."

"Neighbors? I suppose so. Technically, anyhow. I wanted to speak to you about that bull. I know why you're doing it. I guess everyone around here does. You're doing it just to be offensive to my father. You think you can get his goat by sneering at him, by butchering a bull that could top any of his in show competition. I wanted my father to buy Caesar when he was only a promising junior. And you think you're going to butcher him?"

"That's my intention. But where you got the idea that I'm doing it to offend your father—nonsense. I'm doing it as an advertisement for my business."

"You are like hell. It's just another of your cheap efforts to make my father look cheap."

"You're wrong, my boy." Pratt sounded tolerant. "I understand the best bull your father's got is getting pretty old. Well, if your father came to me and asked for that bull I bought, I'd be strongly inclined to let him have him as a gift."

"No doubt! A gift!" Clyde was nearly overcome with scorn. "Would you care to try a little bet with me? Say ten thousand dollars."

They got interrupted. Monte McMillan was coming across the terrace. "Oh, there you are!" He approached Pratt. "These two kids were fooling around the fence on the other side, and I told them they might as well go on, and I wasn't sure where they got to. Not that I would suspect the Osgood youngsters of stealing a bull."

Pratt grunted. "Sit down and have a drink. Bert! *Bert!*" He turned to Clyde: "What is it you want to bet about, my boy?"

CLYDE leaned forward at him. "I'll bet you ten thousand you don't barbecue Hickory Caesar Grindon."

"Ten thousand dollars even?"

"Right."

"Within what time?"

"Say this week."

"I ought to warn you I've consulted a lawyer. There's no legal way of stopping it, if I own him, no matter how much of a champion he is."

Clyde shrugged. Pratt leaned back. "This is mighty interesting. What about it, McMillan? Can they get that bull out of that pasture in spite of us?"

The stockman muttered, "I don't know who would be doing it. If there's any funny business—if we had him in a barn—"

"I haven't got a barn." Pratt eyed Clyde. "One thing. What do we do, put up now? Checks?"

Clyde flushed. "My check would be rubber. You know that. If I lose, I'll pay."

"You're proposing a gentleman's bet? With me?"

"All right, call it that. A gentleman's bet."

"My boy, I'm flattered. I really am. But I can't afford to do much flattering when ten thousand dollars is involved. I'm afraid I couldn't bet unless I had some sort of inkling of where you would get hold of that amount."

Clyde got halfway out of his chair, but his sister pulled him back. He glared at Pratt with his jaw clamped.

"You damn trash, you say that to an Osgood! All right, if my father phones you to guarantee my side, does that make it a gentleman's bet?"

"If your father guarantees it, it's a bet."

Clyde turned and started off, followed by Bronson and Nancy. As she got away Monte McMillan remarked to Pratt:

"I've known that Osgood boy since he was a baby. I guess I'd better go and tell him not to do anything foolish."

He tramped off after them as Jimmy Pratt turned to harangue his uncle. "And you sit there and let him call you trash! I'd have smacked him!"

Pratt chuckled. "You wouldn't smack an Osgood, would you? Take it easy, son. By the way, since you seem to be feeling belligerent, maybe you'd like to help out a little with that bull. How about a little sentry duty tonight?"

"I'd appreciate it if you'd leave me out of that, Uncle Tom."

"All right. I guess we can manage somehow. What's your feeling about it, Mr. Wolfe? Haven't I got a right to eat my own bull?"

IV

NERO WOLFE obliged with a philosophical lecture on degrees of moral turpitude, and bovine genetics. When he had finished, he turned to me with a suggestion since he had accepted Mr. Pratt's kind invitation to dine there, a change of linen would be desirable, and the luggage was still in our car out by the roadside. Jimmy offered his services, but Caroline insisted it was her job, since it was she who had contracted to drive us to Crowfield, so I followed her to the graveled space in front of the garage, where a big sedan was parked near the convertible. I stooped to peer under the trees to where I had caught a glimpse of a high long mound of freshly dug soil, with picks and shovels leaning against it.

"Pit for the barbecue?" I inquired.

Caroline nodded. "I think it's pretty awful, but I couldn't very well refuse uncle's invitation to come up for it. Get in."

When she had swung the sedan around and had headed down the drive I said, "Which is it, advertising, or a Bronx cheer for father Osgood?"

"I don't know. I'm thinking about something."

So I held myself aloof while the sedan moved on to the scene of the accident. I got out. On the other side of the

pasture I could see the top third of Monte McMillan above the fence, his face turned our way, and moving along this side of the boulder, with slow imperial tread, looking bigger than ever, was the bull. There were two suitcases, two bags, the sprayer, and the crates of plants. After I got them all transferred I locked the car up again, took another glance at the bull and climbed in beside Miss Pratt.

"I was thinking about Lily Rowan," she said.

I nodded. "She calls me Escamillo. She told me that you and she are going to the fair tomorrow, and suggested that she and I might have lunch together."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I couldn't on account of my table manners. I don't like hitch-lunchers."

Caroline snorted. "She wasn't trying to hitch. She would pay the check. She's rich and a vampire. She's dangerous."

"You mean she bites you in the neck?"

"I mean what I say. I used to think the talk about some woman being dangerous, was romantic hooey, but it isn't. Lily Rowan is one. I know of at least three men she has played the devil with. You saw Clyde Osgood today. Not that Clyde was ever one of nature's noblemen, but he was doing all right until, during a trip to New York two years ago, he met Lily Rowan, and she took a fancy to him. She did worse than bite him in the neck. She swallowed him. Then last spring she spit him out again. And now Lily Rowan is after my brother Jimmy."

I raised the brows. "And?"

"She mustn't get him—yet. I would have supposed Jimmy had too much sense, but apparently that has nothing to do with it. Also I thought he was in love with Nan Osgood; I thought that last winter. A month or so ago Lily Rowan started after him. And even Jimmy—even Jimmy will fall for it! How the devil does she do it? Damn her!"

"I couldn't say. I could ask her."

"This isn't a joke. She'll ruin him."

SHE surveyed me without much favor.

"I don't regard it as a joke," I told her. "Her being up here—you invited her just to help things along a little and have it over with?"

"I invited her because I thought that seeing her like this, out here in the country, might bring him to. But it hasn't."

"Then there's no way of stopping it except to send your brother to Australia or cut her throat."

"I could do that, cut her throat. I could murder her. But maybe there is another way. Something she said about you today while you were upstairs gave me an idea. I believe you could take her away from Jimmy. Provided you don't try. She likes to do the trying. Something about you has attracted her; I knew that when she called you Escamillo."

"Go on."

"That's all. Except, of course, I don't mean to ask a favor of you. You're a detective and this is a matter of business. When you send me a bill I'll pay it, only if it's very big I might have to pay in installments."

"I see. First I act coy, then I let her ruin me, then I send you a bill."

"This isn't a joke. Will you do it?"

"Look," I said, "*I* think it's a joke. Let's say she goes ahead and ruins your brother. In my opinion, if he's worth the powder to blow him up, he'll soon get unruined. Besides, I couldn't take an outside job even if I wanted to, because I work for Nero Wolfe on salary. But since you want to make it strictly a matter of business, I'll do this for you: I'll eat lunch with her tomorrow, provided you'll pay the check. That will will be two dollars, for which inclusive, I'll make you a detailed report of progress."

It surely wouldn't have been too much to expect that I might have had a little peace and quiet during the hour that remained before dinner time, but no such luck. I had unloaded the crates of plants and taken them upstairs to the bathroom, and had carted up the two suitcases, and my final journey was with the two bags. When I put them down Wolfe murmured casually:

"It would be well, I think, to unpack."

I stared. "You mean take everything out?"

"Yes."

"And put it back in again after dinner?"

"No. We shall sleep here tonight."

I inquired pleasantly, "How did you coerce Pratt into having us as house

guests? Just turn on the old charm?"

"There was no coercion. Technically we are not guests. Mr. Pratt proposed a commission to me, and I accepted."

"I see. What kind of a commission, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not a very lucrative one. Nor very difficult. Surveillance."

"I suspected it the minute you told me to unpack. Okay. That's a new one. Pasture patrol. Bodyguard for a bull. I sincerely trust you'll enjoy a good night's sleep, sir, having this lovely room all to yourself."

"Don't take a tone with me, Archie. It will be dull, that's all, for a man as fidgety—"

"Dull?" I waved a hand. "Don't you believe it. Dull, out there alone in the night, sharing my secrets with the stars, while you snooze in that excellent bed. And then the dawn! Mr. Wolfe, how I love the dawn!"

"You won't see the dawn."

"The hell I won't. Who'll bump me off—Clyde? Or will the bull get me?"

"Neither, I have made arrangements with Mr. Pratt and Mr. McMillan. The man called Dave will be on guard while we are dining. At eight-thirty you will relieve him, and at one o'clock you will be relieved by Mr. McMillan.

"Okay. But darned if I'll lug that shotgun around. I'll take that up with McMillan. Incidentally, I've accepted a commission too. For the firm. Not a very lucrative one. The fee has already been paid, two bucks, but it'll be eaten up by expenses. The client is Miss Caroline Pratt. She paid me two bucks to save her brother from a fate worse than death. Boy, is it fun being a detective!"

I DIDN'T get to share any secrets with the stars. Clouds had started to gather at sundown, and by half past eight, when I relieved Dave, it was pitch-dark. I played a flashlight around the pasture again, and picked up the bull. If someone was fool enough to try taking him out it would have to be through a gate, and the one on the other side was more likely than this one.

Ten minutes later I was passing our sedan still nestled up against the tree. There was the gate. I climbed up and sat on the fence and played the light around, but it wasn't powerful enough to pick up the bull at that distance. I switched it off.

I had been there I suppose half an hour, when a noise came from the direction of the car. It sounded like something heavy bumping against it. I turned the light that way, and saw quite plainly, edging out from the front fender, a fold of material that looked like a sleeve. I stepped along the grass to the car, grabbed, and got a shoulder.

There was a squeal and a wriggle, and a protest: "Say! That hurts!" Then Lily Rowan stood up, a dark wrap covering the dress she had worn at dinner. "If I hadn't stumbled against the fender," she declared, "I'd have got right up against you before you knew I was there, and I'd have scared you half to death."

"Goody. And what are you doing here?"

"I came out for a walk." She laughed. "Are you going to have lunch with me tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"You are?" She sounded surprised. "Let's get in your car and sit down and be comfortable."

"It's locked and I haven't the key. Anyhow, I'm guarding the bull. You'd better run along."

"Nonsense." She planted herself on the running board. "Clyde Osgood lost his head and made a fool of himself. How could anyone possibly do anything about that bull, with only the two gates, and one of them on the side towards the house, and the other one right there? Now come here and give me a cigarette, Escamillo." I lit for her and she inhaled. "Thanks. Let's get acquainted, shall we?"

We sat there for two more cigarettes, and might have finished the rest of my shift there on the running board, if it hadn't been for a noise I heard from the pasture. It sounded like a dull thud. I stood up and said I was going to do a patrol around to the other side. Lily protested that it was all foolishness, but I started off and she came too. The bull wasn't within range of my light.

We kept along the fence, left the orchard, and reached the other gate, without locating the bull. I stood still and listened, and heard a noise, or thought I did, like someone dragging something, and then went ahead, with Lily trotting along behind, flashing the light into the pasture. I was relieved when I saw the bull on ahead, only ten yards or so

from the fence. Then I saw he was standing on his head, at least that was what it looked like at that distance in the dim ray of light. I broke into a jog. When I stopped again to direct the light over the top of the fence, I could see he was fussing with something on the ground, with his horns. I went on until I was even with him, and aimed the light at him again, and after one look I felt my wrist going limp.

"It's a—it's— Oh, make him *stop!*"

I supposed there was a chance he was still alive, and if so there was no time to go hunt somebody who knew how to handle a bull. I climbed the fence, switched the light to my left hand and with my right pulled out my automatic and slowly advanced. I figured that if he made a sudden rush it would be for the light which I kept spotted on his face. He didn't rush. When I was ten feet off he lifted his head and I jerked the pistol to aim at the sky and let fly with three shots. The bull pivoted like lightning, and danced off sidewise. He didn't stop. I took three strides and aimed the light at the thing on the ground.

"It's Clyde Osgood," I called to Lily. "Dead. Very dead. Beat it." Then I heard shouts from the direction of the house and headed the light that way and yelled: "This way! Down beyond the pit!"

WITHIN three minutes after I had fired the pistol four of them were on the scene: Pratt, his nephew Jimmy, Caroline Pratt, and McMillan, the stock raiser. Pratt pushed his chest against the fence, looking. Pratt said, "Get him out. We have to get him out of there. Where the hell is Bert?"

Bert came trotting up with a big electric lantern. Dave appeared out of the darkness, carrying the shotgun. McMillan came back from somewhere and said the bull was up along the fence and should be tied up before the rest of us entered the pasture, and he couldn't find the tie-rope that had been left hanging on the fence and had I seen it or anyone else. We said no, and McMillan said any strong rope would do, and Dave volunteered to bring one. I climbed up on the fence and sat there, and Caroline asked me something, I don't know what, and I shook my head at her.

It was after Dave had returned with some rope, and McMillan had gone off with it and come back in a few minutes and said the bull was tied up and we could go ahead, that I became aware that Nero Wolfe had joined us.

"How did you get here?" I demanded.

"I walked. I heard shots and wondered about you." He stuck out a hand. "May I have the light?"

I handed it to him, and he turned and went, along the fence. Then I heard McMillan calling to me to come and help. Dave had brought a roll of canvas, and Jimmy and McMillan were spreading it on the ground while Pratt and Dave and Bert stood and looked on, Bert holding the electric lantern.

"Take his feet Goodwin, will you?" McMillan said. "We'll ease him onto the canvas and then we can all get hold. We'd better go through the gate."

We all helped with the carrying, except Dave, who went on ahead to get the gate open. On the terrace of the house there was a hesitation and discussion of where to put it, when Caroline suddenly appeared and directed us to the room off the living room that had a piano in it, and we saw that she had spread some sheets over the divan at one end. We got it deposited and stretched out, and Pratt, looking sick, said: "Now we'll have to telephone. We'll have to notify the Osgoods. All right. A doctor too. We have to notify a doctor."

I left and went upstairs. In our room Wolfe was already in the comfortable upholstered chair. I crossed to the bathroom, took off my shirt to scrub my hands and splash cold water over my face, then put it on again, and my necktie and coat. Finally I went out and sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair.

Wolfe let his eyes leave the page long enough to ask, "Not going to bed? You should. Relax. It's eleven o'clock."

"Yeah, I know. There'll be a doctor coming, and before he gives a certificate he'll probably want to see me. I was first on the scene."

He grunted and returned to his reading. I stayed on the edge of the chair and returned to my thoughts. I don't know when I began it, since it was unconscious, or how long I kept it up, but when Wolfe spoke again I became aware that I had been rubbing the back of my left hand with the finger tips of my

right as I sat staring at various spots on the floor.

"You should realize, Archie, that that is very irritating. Rubbing your hand indefinitely like that. What is it, temperament? It was a shock, of course, but you have seen violence before, and the poor monstrosity life leaves behind when it departs—"

"I can stand the monstrosity. But I was supposed to be keeping an eye on that bull, wasn't I? And I sat over by the roadside smoking cigarettes while he killed a man."

He sighed. "Will you never learn to make exact statements, Archie? You said the bull killed a man. That isn't true. Mr. Osgood was almost certainly murdered, but not by a bull."

"You're crazy. I saw it." I goggled at him.

"I'll wager you didn't see the bull impale Mr. Osgood, alive, on his horns. Did you?"

"No. When I got there he was pushing at him on the ground. I didn't know whether he was dead or not, so I climbed the fence and walked over and when I was ten feet away—"

Wolfe frowned. "You were in danger. Unnecessarily. The man was dead."

"And you have the nerve to say the bull didn't kill him. What are you trying to do, work up a case because business has been bad?"

"No. I'm trying to make you stop rubbing the back of your hand so I can finish this chapter before going to bed. I'm explaining that Mr. Osgood's death was not due to your negligence and would have occurred no matter where you were. I might suggest a thousand dangers to your self-respect, but a failure on the job tonight would not be one. You didn't fail. You were told to prevent the removal of the bull from the pasture. You had no reason to suspect an attempt to harm the bull, since the enemy's purpose was to defend him from harm, and certainly no reason to suspect an effort to frame him on a charge of murder. I do hope you won't begin—"

He stopped on account of footsteps in the hall. They stopped by our door. There was a knock and Bert entered. He looked at me.

"Could you come downstairs? Mr. Osgood is there and wants to see you."

V

At the foot of the stairs I was met by Pratt, who led me into the big living room and to where a long-legged gentleman sat on a chair biting his lip.

"Your name's Goodwin, is it?" the long-legged man barked at me. "It was you that drove the bull off and fired the shots?"

"Yes, doctor."

"I'm not a doctor! I'm Frederick Osgood."

"Excuse me, I thought you looked like a doctor."

Pratt spoke: "The doctor hasn't got here yet. Mr. Osgood lives only a mile away and came in a few minutes."

Osgood demanded, "Tell your story. I want to hear it."

I told him up to the point where the others had arrived.

"Your story, then, is that you weren't there when my son entered the pasture."

"My story is just as I've told it."

"What are you and Wolfe doing here?"

I said conversationally, "If you want a good sock in the jaw, stand up."

He started to lift. "Why, damn you—"

I showed him a palm. "Now hold it. I know your son has just been killed and I'll make all allowances within reason. What's the matter with you? Are you hysterical?"

He bit his lip. "No, I'm not hysterical. I'm trying to decide whether to get the sheriff and the police here. I can't understand what happened. I don't believe it happened the way you say it did."

"I have a witness. Lily Rowan."

"Is *she* here?" Then he demanded, "Was my son with this Lily Rowan?"

"Not while she was with me."

"What do you know about a bet my son made today with Pratt?"

A rumble came from Pratt: "I've told you all about that, Osgood."

"I'd like to hear what this man has to say. What about it, Goodwin? Did you hear them making the bet?"

"Sure, we all heard it, including your daughter and your son's friend—name of Bronson." I surveyed him with decent compassion. "Take some advice from one who has had the advantage of watching Nero Wolfe at work. You're rotten at this, terrible. If you're really

working on an idea the best thing you can do is turn it over to professionals. Have you got a suspicion you can communicate?"

"I have."

"Suspicion of what?"

"I don't know, but I don't believe my son walked into that pasture alone, for any purpose whatever. Pratt says he was there to get the bull. That's an idiotic supposition. My son wasn't a greenhorn with cattle. Is it likely he would go up to a loose bull, and if the bull showed temper, just stand there in the dark and let it come?"

Another rumble from Pratt: "You heard what McMillan said. He might have slipped or stumbled, and the bull was too close—"

"I don't believe it! What was he there for?"

"To win ten thousand dollars."

Osgood got to his feet. "You damn skunk. I warned you not to say that again." But before he could go for Pratt, a stocky little man arrived carrying a black bag.

"Sorry I couldn't make it sooner, Mr. Pratt. Oh! Mr. Osgood! This is terrible. A very terrible thing. Terrible."

Thirty minutes later I went upstairs and reported to Wolfe.

"Doc Sackett certified accidental death from a wound inflicted by a bull. Frederick Osgood, bereaved father, suspects a fly in the soup, his chief reason being that Clyde was too smart to fall for a bull in the dark and that there is no acceptable reason to account for Clyde being in the pasture at all. He offered those observations to Doc Sackett, along with others, but Sackett thought he was just under stress and shock, which he was. Sackett refused to delay the certification, and arranged for an undertaker to come in the morning. Whereupon Osgood, without even asking permission to use the telephone, called up the sheriff and the state police."

"Indeed." Wolfe commented. "Remind me to wire Theodore tomorrow. I found a mealy bug on one of the plants.

THE next morning we decamped for a Crowfield hotel. The contract for bull-nursing was called off, telegrams had been sent out cancelling invitations to the barbecue, and though Pratt mumbled something about our staying on to be polite, the atmosphere of the house said go. So the packing, and lugging to the car, and spraying the orchids and getting them on board too, and the drive to Crowfield with Caroline as chauffeur, and the fight for a hotel room which was a pippin—I mean the fight, not the room—and getting both Wolfe and the crates out to the exposition grounds and finding our space and getting the plants from the crates without injury. . . . It was in fact quite a morning.

There was an ethical question troubling me which couldn't be definitely settled until one o'clock. In view of what had happened at Pratt's place I had no idea that Lily Rowan would show up for the lunch date, and if she didn't what was the status of the two dollars Caroline had paid me? Anyhow, I had decided that if the fee wasn't earned it wouldn't be my fault, and luckily my intentions fitted in with Wolfe's plans which he presently arranged, namely, to have lunch with Shanks. So a little before one I left the main exhibits building and headed for the tent which covered the eatery operated by the ladies of the First Methodist Church. That struck me as an incongruous spot to pick for being undone by a predatory blonde, but she had said the food there was the best available at the exposition grounds, and Caroline's reply to an inquiry during the morning ride to Crowfield had verified it, so I smothered my conscience and went ahead.

Lily was there, all right, at a table against the canvas wall toward the rear. I pranced across the sawdust and sat down across the table from her. A Methodist lady in a white apron came up and wanted to know what we would have. Lily Rowan said, "Two chicken fricassee with dumplings."

The Methodist bustled off. Lily remarked: "The chief reason I came was to see how surprised you would look when you found me here, and you don't look surprised at all."

We babbled on, and the fricassee came. The first bite made me marvel at its excellence. It gave me an idea, and a few minutes later, when I saw Wolfe and Charles E. Shanks enter the tent and get settled at a table on the other side, I excused myself and went over and told him about the fricassee, and he nodded gravely.

I was corralling the last of my rice when Lily asked me when I was going back to New York. I told her it depended on what time the orchids were judged on Wednesday; we would leave either Wednesday afternoon or Thursday morning.

"Of course," she said, "we'll see each other in New York."

"Yeah?" I swallowed the rice. "What for?"

"Nothing in particular. Only I'm sure we'll see each other, because if you weren't curious about me you wouldn't be so rude, and I was curious about you before I even saw your face, when I saw you walking across that pasture. You have a distinctive way of walking. You move very— I don't know—"

"Distinctive will do. Maybe you noticed I have a distinctive way of getting over a fence too, in case of a bull. Speaking of bulls, I understand the barbecue is off."

"Yes." She shivered a little. "Naturally. I'm thinking of leaving this afternoon. When I came away at noon there was a string of people gawking along the fence. They would have crossed the pasture and swarmed all over the place if there hadn't been a state trooper there."

"With the bull in it?"

"The bull was at the far end. That what's-his-name—McMillan—took him there and tied him up again." She shivered again. "I never saw anything like last night. . . . What were they asking questions for? Why did they ask if I was with you all the time?"

"Search me." I put sugar in my coffee and stirred. "Did they ask if Clyde had come to Pratt's place to see you?"

"Yes. I didn't understand that either. Why should they think he had come to see me?"

"Oh, possibly Clyde's father sicked them on. I know when I mentioned your name to him last night and said you were there, he nearly popped open."

SHE shrugged indifferently. "He's a pain. He has no right to be talking about me. Anyway, not to you." She paused. "Clyde would have been more apt to come to see Caroline Pratt than me. But at one time Clyde and I were good friends."

"Did Clyde attract you much?"

"He did for a while." She shivered delicately. "You know how tiresome it is when someone you found exciting gets to be nothing but a nuisance. He wanted me to marry him. Caroline would have been a swell wife for him. That's why I said he would have been more apt to come to see Caroline than me last night."

"Perhaps he did. Have you asked her?"

"Me ask Caroline anything about Clyde? I wouldn't dare mention his name to her. She hates me."

"She invited you up for the barbecue, didn't she?"

"Yes, but that was because she was being clever. Her brother Jimmy and I were beginning to be friendly, and she thought if he saw me out here in the country, a lot of me, he would realize how superficial and unhealthy I am."

"Oh. So you're unhealthy?"

"Terribly." The corner of her mouth went up another sixteenth of an inch. "Because I'm frank and simple. Because I never offer anything I don't give, and I never give anything and then expect to be paid for it. That's why I'm unhealthy. But I doubt if Caroline thinks I'm superficial."

"Excuse me a minute," I said, and stood up.

Even in the midst of being ruined I had had Wolfe's table across the tent in the corner of my eye. A man was now standing by Wolfe's chair talking to him, and Wolfe had glanced in my direction with a lift to his brow which I considered significant. As I arrived the man turned his head and I saw it was Lew Bennett, the secretary of the National Guernsey League.

"Archie, I must thank you." Wolfe put his napkin down. "For suggesting the fricassee. It is superb. You have met Mr. Bennett."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you conveniently extricate yourself from that . . ." He turned a thumb in the direction I had come from.

"You mean right now?"

"As soon as may be. Now if you are not too involved. Mr. Bennett has been looking for me at the request of Mr. Osgood, who is waiting in the exposition office. Mr. Shanks and I shall have finished our lunch in ten minutes."

"Okay. I'm badly involved, but I'll manage it."

I went back to my table and told Lily

we must part, and summoned the Methodist to give me a check. The damage proved to be $1.60, and, having relinquished a pair of dimes for the missionaries, I reflected with pride that the firm had cleaned up 20 cents net on the deal, then explained to Lily that I should probably be occupied all afternoon.

"Dear Escamillo. Darling Escamillo," she purred. "But the afternoon comes to an end, doesn't it? What will you be doing this evening?"

"Search me. I work for Nero Wolfe."

VI

IN the exposition offices, the room to which Bennett led us, was large, lofty, and the only furnishings were three big tables and a dozen wooden chairs. Three of the chairs were occupied, one by Sidney Darth, Chairman of the North Atlantic Exposition Board, one by Frederick Osgood, and one by Nancy Osgood. Bennett did the introductions. Darth mumbled something about people waiting for him and loped off, followed by Bennett. Osgood surveyed Wolfe with an aristocratic scowl.

"So you're Nero Wolfe. I understand you came to Crowfield to exhibit orchids."

Wolfe snapped at him. "Mr. Bennett said you wished to consult me, but surely not about orchids."

"I don't give a damn about the orchids." Osgood preserved the scowl. "The purpose of your presence here is relevant because I need to know if you are a friend of Tom Pratt's, or are being employed by him."

"Relevant to what, sir?" Wolfe sounded patient. "Either you want to consult me or you don't. If you do, and I find that I am in any way committed to a conflicting interest, I shall tell you so. Now what can I do for you?"

"I want you to investigate the death of my son Clyde."

Wolfe asked, "What aspect of your son's death do you want investigated?"

Osgood said savagely, "I want to know how he was killed."

"By a bull. Wasn't he? Isn't that the verdict of the authorities?"

"Verdict, hell. I don't believe it. My son knew cattle. You were at Pratt's place, Wolfe. Knowing the circumstances as you do, do you think he was killed by the bull?"

Wolfe sighed. "Expert opinions cost money, Mr. Osgood. Especially mine. I charge high fees. For instance, without committing myself to an investigation, my fee for an opinion, now, would be a thousand dollars."

Osgood stared. "A thousand dollars just to say what you think?"

"That's the price, sir."

"All right. I'll pay for your opinion. What is it?"

"Well." Wolfe half shut his eyes. "Clyde Osgood did not enter the pasture voluntarily. He was unconscious, though still alive, when he was placed in the pasture. He was not gored, and therefore not killed, by the bull. He was murdered, probably by a man, possibly by two men, barely possible by a woman or a man and a woman."

Nancy had straightened up with a gasp and then sat stiff. Osgood got up, took two steps, and was looking down at his daughter. "You hear that, Nancy?" he demanded, as if he was accusing her of something. "I knew it, I tell you, I knew it." He jerked his head up. "Good God! My son dead—murdered!"

Nancy looked at Wolfe and asked indignantly, "Why do you say that? How can you know Clyde was murdered?"

"Be quiet, Nancy." Osgood turned to Wolfe. "All right, I've got your opinion. Now I want to know what you base it on."

"My deductions, from the facts. I was there last night, with a flashlight. But why come to me. Why not the District Attorney and the sheriff. Do they hesitate to institute an investigation of your son's death?"

"They don't merely hesitate, they refuse. They say my suspicions are arbitrary and unfounded."

"But you have position, power, political influence."

"No. Especially not with Waddell, the District Attorney. I opposed him politically, and it was chiefly Tom Pratt's money that elected him. But this is murder! You say yourself it was murder!"

NERO WOLFE became slightly irritated. "They may be convinced it wasn't. That's quite plausible under the circumstances. Do you suggest they would bottle up a murder to save Pratt annoyance?"

"No. Or yes. I don't care which. I only know they won't listen to reason and I'm helpless, and I intend that whoever killed my son shall suffer for it. That's why I came to you."

"Precisely." Wolfe said. "The fact is, you haven't given them much reason to listen to. You have told them your son wouldn't have entered the pasture, but he was there; and that he wasn't fool enough to let a bull kill him in the dark, which is conjectural and by no means a demonstrated fact. You have asked me to investigate your son's death, but I couldn't undertake it unless the police exert themselves simultaneously. There will be a lot of work to do, and I have no assistance here except Mr. Goodwin; and I can't commandeer evidence. If I move in the affair at all, the first step must be to enlist the authorities. Is the District Attorney in Crowfield?"

"Yes."

"Then I suggest that we see him. I engage to persuade him to start an investigation immediately. That of course will call for an additional fee, but I shall try not to make it extravagant. After that is done, we can reconsider your request that I undertake an investigation myself. Do you have a car here? Mr. Goodwin ran mine into a tree."

We found Osgood's big black sedan parked in a privileged and exclusive space at one side of the Administration Building, and piled in. I sat in front with Nancy who drove. It was two miles from the exhibition grounds to the town of Crowfield. We finally rolled up to a big old stone building with its status carved above the entrance:

CROWFIELD COUNTY COURT HOUSE

Osgood, climbing out, spoke to his daughter: "You go on home, Nancy, to your mother. I'll phone when there is anything to say."

Wolfe intervened, "It would be better for her to wait for us here. In case I take this job I shall need to talk with her without delay."

"Why the devil should you need to talk to my daughter?"

"To get information. Will you please wait here, Miss Osgood."

Carter Waddell, the District Attorney, was pudgy and middle-aged and inclined to bubble. He told Osgood he was perfectly willing to reopen the discussion they had had earlier in the day, though his own opinion was unaltered. Osgood said he didn't intend to discuss it himself, but that Mr. Nero Wolfe had something to say.

"By all means," Waddell bubbled. "Certainly. Mr. Wolfe's reputation is well known. Doubtless we poor rustics could learn a great deal from him. Couldn't we, Mr. Wolfe?"

Wolfe murmured, "I don't know your capacity, Mr. Waddell. But I do think I have something pertinent to offer regarding the murder of Clyde Osgood."

"Murder?" Waddell stretched his eyes wide.

"Of course," Wolfe sighed. "Did you ever see a bull kill a man, or injure one with his horn?"

"No, I can't say I have."

"Did you ever see a bull who had just gored a man or a horse or any animal? Immediately after the goring?"

"No!"

"Well, I have. A dozen times or more, at bullfights."

WOLFE wiggled a finger. "When a bull thrusts his horn deep into a living body, blood spurts all over the bull's face and head, and often clear to his shoulders and beyond. The bleeding of a man killed in that manner is frightful; the instant such a wound is made a torrent gushes forth. It was so in the case of Clyde Osgood. His clothing was saturated. I am told that the police report that where he was killed there is an enormous caked pool of it. Is that correct? You acknowledge it.

"Last night Mr. Goodwin, my assistant, found the bull turning Clyde Osgood's body over on the ground, with his horns, without much force or enthusiasm. The natural supposition was that the bull had killed him. Not more than fifteen minutes later, when the bull had been tied to the fence, I examined him at close range with a flashlight. He has a white face, and there was only one smudge of blood on it, and his horns were bloody only a few inches down from the tips. Was that fact included in the police report?"

Waddell said slowly, "As I remember it, no."

"Then I advise that the bull be inspected at once, provided he hasn't been already washed off. The appearance of the face will be conclusive proof that

the bull didn't kill Clyde Osgood."

The District Attorney, without any sign of bubbling, said, "You've made a point, I grant that. But I'd like to have a doctor's opinion about the bleeding. Isn't it possible that the bull withdrew his horn so quickly that he escaped the spurt of blood?"

"No. The spurt is instantaneous, and bulls don't gore like that anyway. They stay in to tear. Has the wound been described to you?"

Waddell nodded. "That's another thing," he said. "That wound. If it wasn't made by the bull, what could possibly have done it. What kind of weapon?"

"It is right there, not thirty yards from the pasture fence. Or was. I examined it."

"The weapon that killed him?"

"Yes. I had a fair idea what to expect, so I went looking. During the afternoon I had passed by an excavation —the barbecue pit as I learned afterwards—with freshly dug earth and picks and shovels lying there. My guess was that a pick might have been used. I went with a flashlight to see, and found confirmation. There were two picks. One of them was perfectly dry, with bits of dried soil clinging to it, and the other was damp with no particle of soil clinging to the metal. Obviously the thing had been recently washed. Not far away I found the end of a piece of garden hose. It was connected somewhere, for when I turned the nozzle a little, water came. Around where the nozzle lay the grass was quite wet when I pressed my palm into it. It was more than a surmise, it was close to a certainty, that the pick had done the goring, got deluged with blood, been carefully washed with the garden hose and replaced on the pile of excavated soil where I found it."

Waddell was looking discomposed. "Couldn't it have been washed for some legitimate reason? Did you inquire about that?"

"I made no inquiries of anyone. At eleven o'clock at night the pick handle was wet. If you regard it as a rational project to try to find a legitimate nocturnal pick-washer, go ahead. The time might be better spent, if you need confirmation, in looking for blood residue in the grass around the hose nozzle and examining the pick handle with a microscope. It is hard to remove all vestige of blood from a piece of wood. Those steps are of course obvious, and others as well."

THE District Attorney sent a glance, half a glare, at Osgood, and away again, back at Wolfe. "You're telling me. Now look here, don't get me wrong. I'm the prosecutor for this county and I know my duty. If there's been a crime I don't want to back off from it and neither does Sam Lake, but whether I find a legitimate nocturnal pick-washer or not—this strikes me as cuckoo.

"Did the man climb into the pasture carrying the pick—where the bull was —and then Clyde Osgood climbed in after him and obligingly stood there while he swung the pick? Or was Clyde already in the pasture, and he climbed in with the pick and let him have it? Can you imagine aiming anything as clumsy and heavy as a pick at a man in the dark, and him still being there when it landed? And wouldn't the blood spurt all over you too? Who is he and where did he go to, covered with blood?"

Osgood snarled, "I told you, Wolfe. Listen to the damn fool! Look here, Carter Waddell—"

"Please, gentlemen!" Wolfe had a palm up. "We're wasting a lot of time." He regarded the District Attorney. "You're going about it wrong. You should merely stop squirming and struggling.

"The fact is that Clyde Osgood was murdered by someone with that pick, and unhappily your function is to establish the fact and reveal its mechanism; you can't obliterate it merely by inventing unlikely corollaries."

"I didn't invent anything. I only—"

"Pardon me. You assumed the fictions that Clyde climbed the fence into the pasture and obligingly stood in the dark and permitted himself to be fatally pierced by a clumsy pick. The first is unlikely and the second next to incredible.

"Clyde Osgood was first rendered unconscious, probably by a blow on the head, and further dragged or carried ten or fifteen yards into the pasture, and left lying on his side. The murderer then stood behind him with the pick and swung it powerfully in the natural and ordinary manner, only instead of

piercing and tearing the ground it pierced and tore his victim. The wound would perfectly resemble the goring of a bull. The blood-spurt would of course soil the pick, but not the man who wielded it. He got the tie-rope from where it was hanging on the fence and tossed it on the ground near the body, to make it appear that Clyde had entered the pasture with it; then he took the pick to the convenient hose nozzle, washed it off, returned it where he had got it, and went—" Wolfe shrugged "—went somewhere."

"The bull," Waddell said. "Did the bull just stand and look on and wait for the murderer to leave, and then push the body around so as to have bloody horns?"

"I couldn't say. It was dark. A bull may or may not attack in the dark. But I suggest the murderer, knowing how to handle a bull in the dark, before performing with the pick, approached the bull, snapped the tie-rope onto the nose ring, and led him to the fence and tied him. Later, before releasing him, he smeared blood on his horns."

Waddell frowned some more. "That would be getting pretty familiar with a bull, even in the dark. I don't suppose anyone could have done it except Monte McMillan—he was Monte's bull, or he had been. Maybe you're ready to explain why Monte McMillan would want to kill Clyde Osgood?"

"Good heavens, no. Mr. McMillan may be capable of murder, I don't know, and he was certainly resolved to protect the bull from molestation—but don't get things confused. Remember that the murder was no part of an effort to guard the bull; Clyde was knocked unconscious not in the pasture, but somewhere else."

Waddell sat with his mouth screwed up.

"Well, what about it?" Osgood barked.

The District Attorney capitulated. "Damn it," he said in a pained voice. "Of course. We've got to get on it as quick and hard as we can. What a mess. At Tom Pratt's place. Clyde Osgood. Your son, Fred. And you know the kind of material I have to work with—for instance, Sam Lake—on a thing like this. I'll have to pull them away from the exposition. I'll go out and see Pratt myself, now."

VII

HE jerked himself forward and reached for the telephone. Osgood said to Wolfe, bitterly, "You see the prospect."

Wolfe nodded, and sighed. "It's an extraordinarily difficult situation, Mr. Osgood."

"I know damn well it is. I may have missed the significance of the bull's face, but I'm not a fool. The devil had brains and nerve and luck. I have two things to say to you. First, I apologize again for the way I tackled you this afternoon. Second, you can see for yourself that you'll have to do this. You'll have to go on with it."

Wolfe shook his head. "I expect to leave for New York Thursday morning."

"But, man! This is what you do, isn't it? Isn't this your job? What's the difference whether you work at it in New York or here?"

"Enormous. In New York I have my home, my office in it, my cook, my accustomed surroundings. If you could only see and smell the hotel room in which I shall have to sleep tonight and tomorrow night—and heaven knows how many more nights if I accepted your commission."

"Then leave it. Come to my house. It's only sixteen miles out, and you can have a car until yours is repaired, and your man here can drive it."

"I don't know." Wolfe looked doubtful. "Of course, if I undertake it I shall need immediately a good deal of information from you and your daughter, and your own home would be a good place for that."

I stood up with my heels together and saluted him. Machiavelli was a simple little shepherd lad by comparison with Nero Wolfe.

There was an encounter before we got into the Osgood house, which was only about a mile from Pratt's place. As we crossed the portico, a man approached from the other end, looking dusty and sweaty. It was Bronson. Osgood tossed a nod at him, then, seeing that he intended to speak, stopped and said, "Hullo."

Bronson came up. He said deferentially, "I hope you won't mind, Mr. Osgood. I've been over there."

"Over where?" Osgood demanded.

"Pratt's place. I walked across the fields. I knew I had offended by disagreeing this morning with your ideas about the—accident. I wanted to look it over. I met young Pratt, but not his father, and that man McMillan—"

"What did you expect to accomplish by that?"

"Nothing, I suppose. I'm sorry if I've offended again but I was discreet. I suppose I shouldn't be here; I should have left this morning, but with Clyde dead—I'm the only one of his New York friends here. So it seemed—"

"It doesn't matter," said Osgood roughly. "Stay. I said so."

"I know you did, but frankly— I'll leave now if you prefer it."

"Excuse me." It was Wolfe's quiet murmur. "You had better stay, Mr. Bronson. Much better. We may need you."

A few minutes later, Wolfe, Osgood and I were seated in a large room with French windows, and were being waited on by a lassie with a pug nose who had manners far superior to Bert's but was way beneath him as a drink-slinger. Nancy had disappeared but was understood to be on call. Osgood was scowling at a highball, Wolfe was gulping beer which, judging from his expression, was too warm, and I had plain water.

WOLFE was saying testily, "My own method is the only one available to me. I either use that or none at all. When did your son arrive here from New York?"

"Sunday evening. My daughter and his friend Bronson rode up with him."

"Why did your son come after so long an absence. What did he say?"

"He came—" Osgood hesitated. "They came to be here for the exposition."

"Why did he come, really? To get money?"

"How did you know that?"

"You had stopped your son's income. Was his need specific?"

"Specific as to the sum. He wanted ten thousand dollars."

"Ah." Wolfe's brows went up a trifle. "What for?"

"He wouldn't tell me."

"Did you let him have it?"

"No. I absolutely refused." Osgood set his jaw, and looked at space. "Now he's dead," he went on. "If I thought that ten thousand dollars had anything to do—"

"Please, sir. Please. Let's work. I call your attention to a coincidence which you have probably already noticed; the bet your son made yesterday afternoon with Mr. Pratt was for ten thousand dollars, and I understand Mr. Pratt telephoned you and you guaranteed payment by your son if he lost. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Well." Wolfe frowned. "It seems a little inconsistent . . . first you refuse to advance ten thousand dollars needed urgently by your son to keep him out of trouble, and then you agree on the telephone to underwrite a bet he makes for that precise sum. Did you have any particular reason to assume that your son would win the bet?"

"How could I? I didn't know what he was betting on."

"You didn't know that he had wagered that Mr. Pratt would not barbecue Hickory Caesar Grindon this week?"

"No. Not then. Not until my daughter told me afterwards—after Clyde was dead."

"Didn't Mr. Pratt tell you on the phone?"

"I didn't give him a chance. I told him that any debt my son might ever owe him would be paid, and I hung up."

"Didn't your son tell you what the bet was about when he got home a little later?"

"No. There was another scene. I was in a temper, and that roused his, and he walked out. As I said, I didn't find out until afterwards what the bet was about or how it was made. I left the house and got in a car and drove over the other side of Crowfield to the place of an old friend of mine. When I got back, after ten o'clock, there was no one around but my wife, and she was in her room crying. About half an hour later the phone call came from Pratt's nephew. I went there to find my son dead."

WOLFE sighed. "That's too bad," he said. "I mean it's too bad that you were away from home, and weren't on speaking terms with your son. I had hoped to learn from you what time he left the house, and what he may have said of his destination and purpose. You can't tell me that."

"Yes, I can. My daughter and Bronson have told me."

"Pardon me. If you don't mind, I'd rather hear it from them later. Now regarding motive; what about Mr. McMillan?"

"None that I know of. I've known Monte McMillan all my life. Even if he had caught Clyde trying some fool trick with the bull—Monte wouldn't murder him—and you say yourself—"

"I know. Clyde wasn't caught doing that." Wolfe sighed again. "That seems to cover it. Pratt, McMillan, the nephew, the niece, Miss Rowan. What about Mr. Bronson?"

"I don't know him. He came with Clyde and was introduced as a friend."

"You never saw him or heard of him before?"

"No."

"What about the people employed here? Anyone with a grudge against your son?"

"No. Absolutely not. They all liked him. Except—" Osgood stopped abruptly. "No, that's ridiculous!"

"What is?"

"Oh—a man who used to work here. Two years ago one of our best cows lost her calf and Clyde blamed this man and fired him. The man has done a lot of talking ever since, denying it was his fault, and making wild threats. Pratt hired him last spring. His name is Dave Smalley."

"Was he there last night?"

"I presume so. You can find out."

I put in an oar: "Sure he was. You remember Dave, don't you? How he resented your using that rock as a waiting room?"

NERO WOLFE'S eyes widened. "You mean the idiot who waved the gun and jumped down from the fence." He turned from me back to Osgood. "It won't do, Mr. Osgood. You remarked, correctly, that the murderer had brains. Dave is innocent." Wolfe paused, then snapped at Osgood: "I'd like to repeat a question which you evaded a while ago. Why do you hate Mr. Pratt?"

Osgood shrugged. "I don't hate him, I only feel contempt for him."

Wolfe sighed. "Will you summon your daughter now?"

Osgood got up. "I'll tell her myself," he said. "It would be better if you questioned her without me around. I'll send her here at once."

With this, he left the room.

VIII

SITTING in the chair Osgood had vacated, Nancy looked not only tense but antagonistic. Wolfe regarded her with half-closed eyes. "We'll be as brief as we can with this, Miss Osgood," he said, with honey in his mouth. "I thought we might reach our objective a little sooner with your mother and father absent."

She nodded, and Wolfe resumed:

"We must manage to accompany your brother yesterday afternoon as continuously as possible from the time he left Mr. Pratt's terrace. Were you and Mr. Bronson and he riding in one car?"

Her voice was low and firm: "Yes."

"Tell me briefly your movements after leaving the terrace."

"We walked across the lawn and back to the car and got in and came— No, Clyde got out again because Mr. McMillan called to him and wanted to speak to him. Clyde went over to him and they talked a few minutes and then Clyde came back and we drove home."

"Did you hear his conversation with Mr. McMillan?"

"No."

"You returned home, and Clyde had a talk with your father. Was that immediately after you got home?"

"Yes. Dad was waiting for us at the veranda steps."

"Infuriated by the phone call from Mr. Pratt. Were you present during the scene?"

"No. They went into the library—this room."

"When did you see your brother again?"

"At dinnertime."

"Who was at table?"

"Mother and I, and Mr. Bronson and Clyde. Dad had gone somewhere."

"What time was dinner over?"

"A little after eight."

"Your movements after dinner, please."

"I went to mother's room with her and we talked a while, and then I went to my room. Later I came downstairs and sat on the veranda. I was there when Dad came home."

"And Clyde?"

"I didn't see him after I went upstairs with mother after dinner."

She wasn't much good as a liar. I moved my eyes for a glance at Wolfe, but he merely murmured a question:

"So you don't know when your brother left to go to Pratt's?"

"No."

"Didn't he tell you or your mother that he was going to Pratt's?"

"So far as I know, he told no one."

"Now Miss Osgood," Wolfe said in a new tone, "I have more questions to ask of you, but this next is probably the most material of all. When did your brother tell you how and why he expected to win his bet with Mr. Pratt?"

"He didn't tell me at all. What makes you think he did?"

"I thought it likely. Your father says that you and your brother were very close to each other."

"We were."

"But he told you nothing of that wager? It wasn't mentioned even as you rode home?"

"No. Mr. Bronson was— Well, it only takes a couple of minutes to drive here from Pratt's."

"Mr. Bronson was what?"

"Nothing. He was there, that's all."

"Is he an old friend of your brother's?"

"Not an old friend."

"Is he a friend of yours too?"

"No." She raised her voice a little. "Why should you ask me about Mr. Bronson?"

"My dear child." Wolfe compressed his lips. "For heaven's sake don't start that. I intend to look into Mr. Bronson as well as everyone else unlucky enough to be within range. For example, take Miss Pratt. Did you approve of your brother's engagement to marry Miss Caroline Pratt?"

NANCY stared in consternation, opened her mouth, and closed it.

Wolfe shook his head at her. "I'm not being wily, to disconcert you and corner you. I don't think I need to; you have made yourself too vulnerable. To give you an idea, here are some questions I shall expect you to answer: Why, since you regard Mr. Bronson with loathing, do you permit him to remain as a guest in this house? Why would you prefer to have the mystery of your brother's death unsolved and to leave the onus to the bull? Why did you tell me that you didn't see your brother after dinner last evening? I know it was a lie, because I was hearing and seeing you when you said it. You see how you have exposed yourself?"

Nancy was standing up, and the line of her mouth was thinner than ever. "My father! I'll see if he wants—"

"Nonsense," Wolfe snapped. "Sit down. Why do you think I had your father leave? Now what about Mr. Bronson? Who is he?"

"If I told you about Bronson—" She sat down. "I can't. I promised Clyde I wouldn't."

"Clyde is dead. Come, Miss Osgood. We'll learn it anyhow, I assure you we will. You know that. Now who is Bronson?"

"He's a crook."

"A professional? What's his specialty?"

"I don't know. I don't know him. I only met him a few days ago. I only know what Clyde—" She stopped. "What good will it do you or Dad or anyone to know that Bronson killed him?"

"Bronson murdered your brother?"

"Yes."

"Indeed. Did you see it done?"

"No."

"What was his motive?"

"I don't know. It couldn't have been to get the money, because Clyde didn't have it."

"The amount being, I presume, ten thousand dollars. Don't ask me how I know that, please. And Bronson was insisting on payment?"

"Yes. That was why he came up here. It was why Clyde came, too, to try to get the money from father. He had to pay it this week or—" She stopped, and stretched out a hand, and let it fall again. "Please," she said, pleading. "*Please.* That's what I promised Clyde I wouldn't tell."

"The promise died with him," Wolfe told her. "Was it money that Clyde had borrowed from Mr. Bronson?"

"No. It was money that Bronson had paid him."

"What had he paid it for?".

He pulled it out of her, patiently, in pieces. Clyde had shot his wad on Lily Rowan, and had followed it with various other wads, pried loose from his father,

requisitioned from his sister, borrowed from friends. Then he had invited luck to contribute to the good cause, by sundry methods from crackaloo to 10-cent bridge, and when he was in up to his nose, a Mr. Howard Bronson permitted him to inspect a fistful of real money and expressed a desire to be introduced into certain circles, including the two most exclusive bridge clubs in New York; Clyde, with his family connections, had entree to about everything from the aquarium up.

Clyde had needed the dough not some time tomorrow, but now, and Bronson had given it to him; whereupon Clyde had mollified a few debts and slid the rest down his favorite chute, before dawn.

Following a lifelong habit, he had confided in his sister, and her horror added to his own belated reflections had shown him that in his desperation he had taken an order which no Osgood could possibly fill. He had so notified Bronson, with regret and the expressed intention of repaying the ten grand at the earliest opportunity, but Bronson had revealed a nasty streak. He wanted the order filled, or the cash returned, forthwith; and a complication was that Clyde had rashly signed a receipt for the money which included specifications of what Bronson was to get for it.

BRONSON threatened to show the receipt to the family connections. Bad all around. When Clyde decided, as a last resort, on a trip to Crowfield for an appeal to his father, Bronson's distrust of him had got so deplorable that he insisted on going along and he couldn't be ditched; and Nancy had accompanied them for the purpose of helping out with father. But father had been obdurate, and Monday it was beginning to look as if Clyde would have to confess all in order to get the money, which would be worse than bad, when on Pratt's terrace luck reared its pretty head again and Clyde made a bet.

Wolfe got all that out of her, patiently, with various details and dates, and then observed that while it seemed to establish Bronson as a man of disreputable motives it didn't seem to include one for murder.

"I know it," Nancy said. "I told you he couldn't have done it to get the money, because Clyde didn't have it, and anyway if he had had it he would have given it to him."

"Still you say he did it? Why?"

"Because I saw Bronson follow Clyde over to Pratt's place last night."

"Tell me about it."

"It was around 9 o'clock, maybe a little later. When I left mother's room I came downstairs to look for Clyde, to ask him why he had made the bet with Pratt. I was afraid he was going to try something wild. I found him out by the tennis court, talking with Bronson, and they shut up when they heard me coming. I said I wanted to ask him something and he came away with me, but he wouldn't tell me anything. I told him I was pretty sure I would be able to get the money through mother, and reminded him that he had sworn to me he would stop acting like a fool, and said if he did something else foolish it might be the finish of him. He said that for once I was wrong and he was right, that what he was doing wasn't foolish; I would agree with him when I found out about it, but he wouldn't tell me then."

"You got no inkling of what he had in mind."

Nancy shook her head.

"Anything said about the bull or anyone at Mr. Pratt's place?"

"No, nothing."

"You left him outdoors?"

"I did then. I came back to the house and ran up to my room and changed to a dark-colored sweater and skirt. I didn't know whether Clyde intended to go anywhere or do anything, but I was going to find out. I couldn't find him. If he was up to anything it could only be at Pratt's, so I decided to try that. I went through a gate into the meadow, which was the shortest cut, and across another field to the end of the row of pines, the windbreak.

"It was pitch dark, of course, but when I was about half way along the windbreak I saw a glimmer of a flashlight ahead, and I got careless and started to run, because I wanted to find out if it was Clyde. Then I stepped into a hole and tumbled and made a lot of noise. Clyde called, and I answered. He came back to me, and Bronson was with him, carrying a club, a length of sapling. Clyde was furious. I demanded to know what he was going to do, and that made him more furious. He said . . . oh, it

doesn't matter what he said. He made me promise to go back home and go to bed—"

"Again without divulging his campaign."

"Yes. I came back home as I had promised I would. If only I hadn't! If only—"

"I doubt if it would have mattered. But you haven't told me yet why you think Mr. Bronson murdered your brother."

"Why, he was there. He went to Pratt's with him. He's the kind of man who would do anything vile."

"Do you know when Bronson got back here?"

"No. I was on the veranda until Dad came."

"Then there's a job for you. Find out from the servants if anyone saw him return, and let me know. It may save some time." Wolfe pushed his lips out, and in again. "I should think Mr. Bronson would be a little apprehensive about your disclosing his presence at Pratt's last night. Have you any idea why he isn't?"

NANCY nodded. "Yes, I have. He—he spoke to me this morning. He said he had left Clyde at the end of the windbreak, and came back here and sat out by the tennis court and smoked. He said he thought my father was mistaken, that the bull had killed Clyde, and that everyone else would think so. He showed me the receipt Clyde had signed and given him, and said he supposed I wouldn't want Clyde's memory blackened by such a thing coming out, and that he was willing to give me a chance to repay him the money before going to my father about it, provided I would save him the annoyance of being questioned about last night by forgetting that I had seen him with Clyde."

Wolfe grimaced. "Can you pay Bronson the ten thousand dollars?"

"Not now. But I've been trying to think of a way ever since Bronson spoke to me this morning. Didn't Clyde win his bet with Pratt? Surely he won't have that barbecue now, will he? Won't he owe the money?"

"My dear child!" Wolfe opened his eyes at her. "That's a superb idea, to collect from Pratt to pay Bronson. I like it. Magnificent and neat. I assure you I'll do all I can."

He broke off as a knock sounded at the door. Two men entered. I halted, slightly popeyed, when I saw it was Tom Pratt himself and McMillan. Then affairs began to get simultaneous and confused. I caught a glimpse of Mr. Howard Bronson standing at one of the French windows looking in, and saw that Wolfe had spotted him too. At the same time a purposeful tread sounded from the hall, and then Mr. Frederick Osgood was among us, wearing a scowl that beat all his previous records. He directed it at Pratt, ignoring inessentials.

"Out!"

"Now wait a second, Fred." McMillan sounded as if he wasn't brooking anything much either. "Just a second and give us a chance. There's hell to pay around here, and Pratt doesn't like it any better than you do. Waddell, and Sam Lake with a bunch of deputies, and a herd of state police, are tearing things apart over there, not only on account of Clyde, but on account of what happened an hour ago." McMillan paused. "Caesar's dead. My bull Caesar."

IX

OSGOOD'S scowl had got adulterated by a touch of bewilderment. But he exploded again: "What the devil do I care about your bull?" He transferred to Pratt: "You get out of here. Get!"

"Mr. Osgood! Please!" Wolfe had left the comfortable chair and was approaching. "Mr. McMillan, what's this about the bull? What killed him?"

"Anthrax."

"Indeed. That's a disease, isn't it?"

"It's sudden and terrible death. Technically it's a disease, of course, but it's so swift and deadly that it's more like a snake or a stroke of lightning."

Wolfe nodded. "I knew of it, vaguely, in my boyhood in Europe. But wasn't Caesar healthy this morning? When did you observe symptoms?"

"With anthrax you don't observe symptoms. You go to the pasture in the morning and find dead cattle. That's what happened at my place a month ago. It's what happened with Caesar at five this afternoon. One of Sam Lake's deputies went down to the far end of the pasture and found him keeled over dead. I had gone to Crowfield to see

Lew Bennett. They phoned me and I came back out, and Pratt and I decided to come over here."

Osgood's scowl had got adulterated some more. Wolfe turned and said brusquely:

"Mr. Pratt. I'd like to buy the bull's carcass. What will you take for it?"

Osgood blurted, "You can't buy an anthrax carcass. The state takes it."

Pratt demanded, "What do you want it for?"

McMillan said sourly, "They're already there. A member of the State Board was at Crowfield, and he got there as soon as I did, with a dozen men. Why, what did you expect to do with it?"

Wolfe sighed. "I suppose Mr. Waddell has told you of my demonstration of the fact that Clyde Osgood wasn't killed by the bull. I wanted the hide. Juries like visual evidence. What is the member of the State Board doing with his men? Carting it away?"

"No. You don't cart it away. You don't want the hide either. You don't touch it, because it's dangerous. What the state men are doing is collecting wood to pile it around the carcass for a fire." McMillan slowly shook his head. "He'll burn all night, Caesar will."

"How did he get anthrax? I understand you delivered him to Mr. Pratt last Friday. Did he bring it with him from your place?"

"He couldn't have. It doesn't wait that long to kill. The question of how he got it—that's one thing we came over here to discuss." McMillan faced Osgood. "Look here, Fred, say we sit down. I'm played out. We want to ask you something."

Osgood said curtly, "Come to the veranda."

They all moved, Wolfe followed, and I brought up the rear, after a glance to see that Nancy was just getting up from her chair and Bronson was no longer visible through the French window. I requested her not to forget to ask the servants what Wolfe had told her, and she nodded.

When I got to the veranda they were seated in a group in the wicker chairs and Osgood was asking, "What do you want to discuss, Monte?"

"About Clyde," McMillan said. "You're going to be sore naturally, but it won't help any to fly off the handle. The fact is that Clyde was in that pasture. What for? Waddell and Sam Lake, and Captain Barrow, of the State Police, admit that Nero Wolfe's reconstruction of it is possible, but it's hard to believe, and one reason it's hard is that if somebody did all that, who was it? That's chiefly what has them stumped."

"Do you claim the bull killed him?" Osgood demanded.

"I don't claim anything. Don't get me wrong, Fred. What they say is this, that the main difficulty with supposing that Clyde climbed into the pasture himself was to try to figure what for. What could he have intended to do? You can't hide a bull in a barrel. But when Caesar was found dead of anthrax—it was Captain Barrow who suggested it first as a possibility—that might account for Clyde entering the pasture. As you know, anthrax can be communicated subcutaneously, or by contact, or by ingestion. If Caesar was fed something last night, something that had been activated—well—"

FREDERICK OSGOOD was stiff, and his eyes glassy, with cold rage. "Look out, Monte. If you're suggesting that my son deliberately poisoned that bull—"

McMillan said gruffly, "I'm not suggesting anything. I came here because I thought you ought to be warned by a friend. Waddell's attitude, and Captain Barrow's, is that it was you who insisted on an investigation, and if there is any part of it you don't like, you've got yourself to thank for it. Anyhow, they'll be here any minute now, with the idea of finding out where Clyde had been the past few days and whether he had access, or could have had access, to any source of anthrax."

"Anybody who comes here—" Osgood had to stop to control his voice. "It—it's infamous. I—I—"

There was a sound of wheels crunching gravel, and a car rolled to a stop at the foot of the veranda steps. First out was a state cossack in uniform, a captain, and following him appeared the district attorney. They came up the steps and headed for the group.

I missed that battle. Wolfe got up from his chair and started off, and I arose and followed him. With a nod to Waddell as we passed he went on, entered the house, stopped in the main

hall, turned to me and told me to wait there for him, and disappeared in the direction of the library. I stood and wondered what was causing all his violent commotion.

In a few minutes he came back frowning. "Entirely too fast for us, Archie. We are being made to look silly. We may even have been outwitted. I got Mr. Bennett on the telephone, but drew a blank. Did you bring a camera along?"

"No."

"Take a car and get over there. Someone must have a camera—the niece or nephew or Miss Rowan. Borrow it and take pictures of the carcass from all angles. . . . Hurry, before they get that fire started."

I trotted out to where Osgood's sedan was still parked, and got in and got it going. When I reached Pratt's place I parked in the space in front of the garage, jumped out and headed for the house. But I was only halfway there when I heard a call:

"Hey! Escamillo!"

I turned and saw Lily Rowan horizontal, lifted onto an elbow, on a canvas couch under a maple tree.

"Hullo, plaything. Have you got a camera? I want to take a picture of the bull before they get their—"

"What bull?"

"*The* bull."

"No one will ever take another picture of *that* bull. They've started the fire."

"Where?"

"Down at the other end . . ."

I was off on the lope, which may have been dumb, but I was in the throes of emotion. I heard her clamoring, "Wait! Escamillo, I'm coming along!" but I kept going. Leaving the lawn, as I passed the partly dug pit for the barbecue, I could smell the smoke, and soon I could see it, above the clump of birches toward the far end of the pasture. I slowed to a trot and cussed out loud as I went.

There was quite a group there, 15 or 20 besides the ones tending the fire. I joined them unnoticed. A length of the fence had been torn down and we stood back of the gap. Apparently Hickory Caesar Grindon had had a ring built around him of good dry wood, in ample quantity, for there was so much blaze that you could only catch an occasional glimpse of what was left of him between the tongues of flame. It was hot as the devil, even at the distance we were standing. Four or five men in shirt sleeves, with sweat pouring from them, were throwing on more wood from nearby piles.

THE group of spectators stood, some silent, some talking. I heard a voice beside me:

"I thought maybe you might get around."

I turned for a look. "Oh, hello, Dave. What made you think I'd be here?"

"Nothin' particular, only you seem like a feller that likes to be around where things is goin' on. You know, it gets you thinkin', a sight like that, derned if it don't. Do you read pohtry?"

"No. Neither do you."

"The hell I don't. A book my daughter give me one Christmas I've read twenty times, parts of it more. In one place it says 'I sometimes think that never grows so red the rose as where some buried Caesar bled.' Of course this Caesar's bein' burnt instead of buried, but there's a connection if you can see it."

I wasn't in a mood to listen to Dave recite poetry.

Osgood's collision with Waddell and Captain Barrow had ended by the time I got back. They were waiting, I discovered, for me. The captain was collecting fingerprints and since Wolfe had already obliged, I figured I might as well. After he had got my ten specimens he announced that he was ready for a call on the foreman of the stock barns, and at Wolfe's suggestion Osgood and McMillan had accompanied him. Pratt had departed for home, which left Wolfe and me alone with District Attorney Waddell.

Waddell was glad to cooperate, he said, with Fred Osgood's representative. More than willing. He had pursued, and intended to pursue, the investigation without fear or favor. No one had a supported alibi except Lily Rowan and me. Waddell conceded anyone could have done it. When you went on and asked why anyone would have done it, that was different. There was no one there with anything like a decent known motive to murder Clyde Osgood unless you wanted to make an exception of Dave Smalley.

"I've explained," said Wolfe patient-

ly, "that the murder was planned. Did you examine the bull?"

"I looked at him, and so did Sam Lake and the police. There was one splotch on his face and a little caked on his horns, but not much. A bull likes to keep his horns clean."

"What about the grass around the hose and the pick handle?"

"We sent the pick to Albany for laboratory inspection. There were a few, kind of clots, we found in the grass, and we sent them too. We won't know until tomorrow."

"They'll report human blood, and then what? Will you still waste time blathering about Clyde approaching the bull with a meal of anthrax, and the bull, after consuming it, becoming resentful and goring him?"

"If they report human blood that will add weight to your theory, of course. I said I'd cooperate, Wolfe, I didn't agree to lap up your sarcasm."

"Pfui." Wolfe shrugged. "You know perfectly well Clyde Osgood was murdered. Drop all notion of filing it as an accident, Mr. Waddell; you may as well close that path, for you won't be allowed to return by it."

Soon after that McMillan and Captain Barrow had returned and they had all left, after Wolfe had arranged for McMillan to pay us a visit at 9 o'clock that evening.

X

McMILLAN was punctual. It was nine on the dot, and we were sipping coffee, when a maid came to say he was below. I went down and told him that Wolfe calculated there might be more privacy if he didn't object to coming upstairs, and he said certainly not. Wolfe greeted him and said, "You look tired."

The stockman nodded. "I'm about all in."

"It was obliging of you to come. In my capacity as an investigator for your friend Mr. Osgood, may I ask you some questions?"

"That's what I came for."

"Good. Then first, you left Mr. Pratt's terrace yesterday afternoon with the announced intention of telling Clyde not to do anything foolish. Miss Osgood has told me that you called Clyde from the car and conversed with him a few minutes. What was said?"

"Just that. I knew Clyde had a streak of recklessness in him—and I thought he might need a little quieting down. He said he was going to win his bet with Pratt. I told him there was no way he could do it and the sensible thing was to let me go and arrange with Pratt to call the bet off. He refused, and that was all there was to it. I couldn't get anything out of him, and he went and got in his car."

"Without giving you the slightest hint of his intentions."

"Right."

Wolfe grimaced. "I strongly suspect you're lying, and I'd like to explain why. Briefly, because Clyde Osgood wasn't an imbecile. I suppose you have heard from Mr. Waddell of my theory that Clyde didn't climb into the pasture, but was put there. I still incline to that, but whether he voluntarily entered the pasture or not, he certainly went voluntarily from his home to Pratt's place. What for?"

"You're not arguing with me," McMillan said drily. "About my lying—"

"I'm coming to it. Frankly, I am not now dealing with the murder. I haven't got that far. I must first find a reasonable hypothesis to account for Clyde's going there—or rather, for his evident expectation of winning that bet. Didn't he tell you he expected to win the bet?"

"Yes."

"And he wouldn't tell you how?"

"No."

"Well." Wolfe compressed his lips. "I can't believe that, because he could expect to win the bet only with your assistance."

McMillan stared. "I don't think you want to start talking like that to me."

"Oh, yes I do," Wolfe assured him. "But I mean no offense, I'm speaking only of Clyde's expectations. I must account for his expecting to win that bet before I can approach the murder at all. I have considered, thoroughly, all the schemes he might have had in mind, and there is one which appears neat, not too atrocious, and practicable though perhaps difficult. He couldn't have expected simply to remove the bull from the pasture, because he couldn't have hid him from the resulting search. But why couldn't he remove Caesar and put another bull in his place?"

The stockman snorted. "Because he couldn't."

"Why not? There were, I don't know how many Guernsey bulls at the exposition, only seventeen miles away, and cattle trucks there to haul them in. There were some much closer, here at his father's place within leading distance. Might not one of them resemble Caesar sufficiently in size and coloring to pass as a substitute? A substitute for only one day, since the butcher was to come on Wednesday? Who would have known the difference?"

McMillan snorted again. "I would."

"Granted. You could have mistaken no other bull for your Caesar. But everyone else might easily have been fooled. That's why I ask, did Clyde make you a proposal to aid in such a substitution and did you accept or decline?"

THE stockman wore a grim smile. "You're slick all right. Maybe the next thing is, did I murder him?"

"Did he make you a proposal?"

"No." McMillan abruptly stood up.

Wolfe lifted his brows. "Going?"

"I don't see much point in staying. I came as a favor to Fred Osgood."

"And as a favor to him, you have no information at all that might help? Nothing that might explain—"

"No. I can't explain a damn thing." The stockman took three heavy steps and turned. "Neither can you," he declared, "by trying to smear any of the mess on me."

He strode to the door and opened it, and it closed after him.

Wolfe sighed, shut his eyes, and sat. I stood and looked at him a minute, then got busy with the tray. Not being sure whether a maid was supposed to be available at 10 o'clock at night I navigated to the kitchen, unloaded, and proceeded via the pantry and dining room to the main hall. There was a light in the library, and through the open door I saw Howard Bronson reading a newspaper. I completed the circuit back to Wolfe's room.

He was still dormant. I sat down and yawned, and said: "It is in the bag. Lily killed him, thinking that by erasing evidence of her past she could purify herself and perhaps some day be worthy of me. Caroline killed him to practice her follow-through. Jimmy killed him to erase Lily's past, making twice for that one motive. Pratt killed him to annoy Mr. Osgood. McMillan killed him because the substitute he brought for Caesar proved to be a cow. Dave killed him because he missed breakfast the day he was fired two years ago and has never caught up. Bronson killed him— By the way, I just saw Mr. Bronson in the library reading a newspaper as if he owned the place."

"Go and get him. Bring him here. Now."

Bronson sat down in the chair McMillan had vacated and looked tolerably amused. Finally he said in a cultivated tone, "I understand you wanted to ask me something."

Wolfe nodded. "Yes, sir. Were you able to overhear much of my conversation with Miss Osgood this afternoon?"

"Not a great deal. In fact, very little." Bronson smiled. "What was that for, to see if I would make an effort at indignation? Let me suggest we won't really need finesse. I know a little something about you, I'm aware of your resources, but I have a few myself. I'm fairly intelligent."

"Indeed? Then we can discuss facts calmly, without a lot of useless pother, facts which I have got from Miss Osgood. For instance, that you are what Mr. Osgood—and many other people—would call an unscrupulous blackguard."

BRONSON flipped a hand. "Oh, well. Calling names—"

"Just so. My only reason for labeling you an unscrupulous blackguard is to clarify our positions. I'm in the detective business, and you're in the blackguard business, and I want to consult with you about both. I am counting on you to help me in my investigation of a murder, and I also have a suggestion to make regarding one of your projects —the one that brought you here. Regarding the murder—"

"Perhaps we'd better take the last one first and get it out of the way. I'm always open to a reasonable suggestion."

"As you please. You have a paper by Clyde Osgood. You showed it to Miss Osgood this morning."

"A receipt for money I paid him."

"Specifying the services he was to perform in return."

"Yes."

"The performance of which would render him likewise a blackguard, in the estimation of his father."

"That's right."

Wolfe stirred. "I want that paper. Now wait. I offer no challenge to your right to expect your money back. I concede that right. But I don't like your methods of collection. You may have a right to them too, but I do not like them. Miss Osgood aroused my admiration this afternoon, which is rare for a woman, and I want to relieve the pressure on her. I propose that you hand the paper to Mr. Goodwin; it will be safe in his custody. Within ten days at the outside I shall either pay you the ten thousand dollars, or have it paid, or return the paper to you. I make that pledge without reservation." Wolfe aimed a thumb at me. "Give it to him."

The blackguard shook his head, "I said a reasonable suggestion."

"You won't do it?"

"No."

"The security is superlative. I rarely offer pledges, because I would redeem one, tritely, with my life."

"I couldn't use your life. The security you offer may be good, but the paper signed by Osgood is better, and it belongs to me. Why the deuce should I give it up?"

I looked at Wolfe inquiringly. "I'd be glad to undertake—"

"No, thanks, Archie. We'll pass it, at least for the present. I hope, Mr. Bronson, that your antagonism will find—"

Bronson interrupted. "Don't get me wrong. I said I'm not a fool, and I would be to antagonize you. I know very well I'm vulnerable, and I know what you can do. If I make an enemy of you, I might as well leave New York. I've had a bad break on this Clyde Osgood thing, but I can try again and expect better luck, and I don't want you hounding me. Believe me, I'm not antagonistic. You have no right to get sore about my not surrendering that paper, because it's mine, but otherwise I'm for you. If I can help any I will."

"No finesse, Mr. Bronson?"

"None."

"Good. Then tell me first, have you ever handled cattle?"

"I've never had the slightest association with cattle."

"Where is the club you were carrying last night when you accompanied Clyde Osgood to Pratt's place?"

"Club?"

"Yes. A length of sapling."

"Why . . . I don't think . . . Oh, yes. Sure, I remember. When we got to the fence, Clyde went on and I came back. He took the club with him. Why, was he knocked on the head? I thought he was killed with a pick, according to your—"

"I need the truth about that club."

"You've had it."

WOLFE wiggled a finger at him. "Nonsense! Isn't it a fact that you yourself carried the club to Mr. Pratt's place?"

"No. I didn't go there."

"You stick to that?"

"It's the truth.

"I warn you, beware. But say we take that, for the moment, for truth, tell me this: why was Clyde going to Pratt's? What was he going to do there?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"Did Clyde Osgood tell you how and why he expected to win the bet?"

"No."

"Did he make any remark, drop any hint, that led you to guess?"

"No."

"You're making a bad blunder."

"No, I'm not. I may be getting in bad with you, but I can't help it."

"You're a fool after all." Wolfe turned and snapped at me: "Archie, get that paper."

I got upright and across to Bronson's neighborhood quick enough to forestall any foolish motions he might make. I stuck my hand out and said:

"Gimme."

He shook his head and got up without haste, kicking his chair back without looking at it, looking instead at me with his eyes still steady and clever.

"This is silly," he said. "Damned silly. You can't bluff me like this."

I asked without turning my head, "Do you want it, Mr. Wolfe?"

"Get it."

I started to reach, and I'll be damned if he didn't try a dive with his knee up, and without flashing a flag. He was fairly quick, but I side-stepped in time. Then I let him have it, a good stiff hook that lifted him out of his dive and turned him over. I was beside him, bending over him, by the time he got his eyes open again.

"Stay there," I told him. "I don't know which pocket it's in. Do you think you can remember that? If so, gimme."

His hand started for his inside breast pocket, and I reached in ahead of him and pulled out a brown leather wallet. He grabbed for it and I jerked away and told him to get up and sit down, and backed off a little to examine the loot.

"My word!" I whistled. "Here's an accumulation of currency out of all proportion. A couple of thousand or more. Pipe down, you. I don't steal from blackguards. But I don't see—ah, here we are. Secret compartments, you might say. I unfolded it and ran my eye over it, and handed it to Wolfe. "Return the balance?"

He nodded, reading. I handed the wallet back to Bronson, who was back on his feet. Wolfe said, "Here, Archie," and handed me the paper, and from my own breast pocket I took the brown ostrich cardcase, gold-tooled, given to me by Wolfe on a birthday, in which I carried my police and fire cards and operator's license. I slipped the folded paper inside and returned it to my pocket.

Wolfe said, "Mr. Bronson. There are other questions I meant to ask, such as the purpose of your trip to Mr. Pratt's place this afternoon, but it would be futile. I am even beginning to suspect that you are now engaged in an enterprise which may prove to be a bigger blunder than your conduct here with me. As for the paper Mr. Goodwin took from you, I guarantee that within ten days you will get it back, or your money. Don't try any stratagems. I'm mad enough already. Good night, sir."

Bronson went.

XI

PRECISELY at 10 o'clock the next morning, Wednesday, a motley group piled into Osgood's sedan, bound for Crowfield. During the thirty-minute drive no one said a word, except for a brief discussion between Osgood and Nancy to arrange for a meeting later in the day, after errands had been performed. First we dropped Osgood on Main Street in front of an establishment marked Somebody or other, MORTICIAN. Clyde's funeral was to be Thursday afternoon.

Our next stop was two blocks down, at the hotel, where Bronson left us, then Nancy muttered at me, "Thompson's Garage, isn't it?" and I told her yes, and three minutes later she let me out there, the idea being that since there might be a delay about our car she would proceed to deliver Wolfe at the exposition grounds, for which I was grateful, not wanting him muttering around underfoot.

The bill was $66.20 which was plenty, even including the towing in. I paid and departed with the car. Next I was supposed to find Lew Bennett, secretary of the National Guernsey League. I tried the hotel and drew a blank, then went out to the exposition grounds. I found him in the shed devoted to Guernseys, said that Nero Wolfe wanted to see him as soon as possible. Urgent.

He said he'd be there.

It was noon by the time I got to our space in the main exhibits building. It was judgment day for more than Guernseys, as 4 o'clock that afternoon was zero hour for the orchids. Wolfe was there spraying and manicuring. I reported on Mr. Bennett.

He grimaced. "Then I must wait here. Our next move depends on Mr. Bennett."

I propped myself against the edge of the dahlia table across the aisle and yawned. I must have shut my eyes for the first I knew there was a tug at my sleeve and a voice:

"Wake up, Escamillo, and show me the flowers."

I took her elbow and eased her across the aisle. "Mr. Wolfe, you know Miss Rowan. She wants to be shown the orchids."

He bowed. "That is one compliment I always surrender to."

She looked him in the eye. "I want you to like me, Mr. Wolfe. Or not dislike me. Mr. Goodwin and I are probably going to be friends. Will you give me an orchid?"

"I rarely dislike women, and never like them, Miss Rowan. But I'll give you orchids at five o'clock, after the judging.

The upshot of that was that she went to lunch with us. The Methodist tent was fuller than the day before, probably because we got there earlier. Wolfe, as always in the company of good food, was sociable and expansive. Lily let him do most of the talking, and I began to suspect she might even be smooth.

As I put down my empty coffee cup Wolfe said, "Still no Bennett. It's one-thirty. Find out about him, Archie."

"Right." I got up. Lily arose, too, saying that she was supposed to be with Mr. Pratt and Caroline and they were probably looking for her.

THEY were going strong at the judging lot. Bennett was within the enclosure, along with judges, scorekeepers and cattle with attendants. I dived under the rope and made for Bennett. He blinked at me in the sunlight and said he was sorry, he hadn't been able to make it. I told him okay, that was forgiven, but couldn't he come to the Methodist tent right now. Impossible, he said, he would be at the Methodist tent, no fooling, within half an hour.

I got outside the ropes again, but instead of beating it I decided to hang around and wait for him. I watched the judging for a few minutes, then wandered along in front of the sheds. There was no one around at all, the judging being the current attraction, so naturally I observed the moving object that caught my eye, especially since the first sight showed me that the object was familiar. It was Nancy Osgood, and the glance she cast behind her as she entered one of the sheds was either furtive or I was getting fanciful. I slid over to the shed and inserted myself through the door.

She wasn't within view. There were plenty of cows, but no Nancy. I strolled along between the rows of hind ends. Toward the middle of the shed there was a partitioned compartment on the left, containing no cow; but an instant's peep disclosed that it contained three other things; a large pile of straw with a pitchfork handle protruding from its center, Nancy Osgood, and Jimmy Pratt. I would have passed on, but I had been seen. Jimmy's voice was gruff and discourteous:

"Well?"

I shrugged. "Well enough. Hoping you are the same." I started to move on, but his voice came even gruffer:

"Wait and look and listen. The more you see and hear the more you can tell."

"Don't, Jimmy." Nancy sounded very distressed. "Were you following me, Mr. Goodwin? What for?"

I stepped inside the stall. "Yes," I told her. "I was. For about forty seconds. I happened to see you enter this shed looking behind you for bloodhounds, and followed you out of curiosity." I surveyed young Pratt. "It's a good thing you're training for architecture instead of the diplomatic service. You lack suavity. If this is a clandestine rendezvous and you suspected I might report it, it might be better to rub me with salve than sandpaper."

He reached for his pocket. "Oh, in that case—"

I let him go on. His hand emerged with a modest roll, from which he peeled a ten. "Will that do?"

"Swell." I took it. My first impulse was to stick it in the pocket of Nancy's jacket and tell her to buy stockings with it, but at that moment our party was joined by a lanky guy in overalls carrying a pitchfork. With only a glance at us he rammed the fork into the pile of straw and started to lift the load. I stopped him by shoving the $10 bill under his nose.

"Here, brother. I represent the exposition management. We've decided you fellows are overworked. Take this as an expression of our esteem."

"I'll be derned. They must be crazy." He took the bill and stuffed it in his pocket. "Much obliged to you."

"Don't mention it." I waved airily. He elevated the load of straw a big one, about one-fourth of the entire pile, and departed.

"You said salve, didn't you?" Jimmy Pratt sounded resentful. "How the hell could I know you're Robin Hood?" He turned to Nancy. "He knows about Bronson and the paper Clyde signed, anyway, since he was there when you told Wolfe. As far as your father hearing about our being together is concerned—"

I was extremely glad he had shifted to Nancy, because it gave me an opportunity I was badly in need of. What I had seen was something that had been uncovered by the removal of a portion of the straw. It was a brown custom made oxford perched on its heel, an inch of brown sock, and the cuff of one leg of a pair of Crawley trousers. So, as I say, I was glad Jimmy had shifted to Nancy, for it gave me an opportunity to kick at the straw capriciously and thereby get the shoe and sock and trouser cuff out of sight again. Nothing was left visible but straw.

NANCY was talking to me: "Perhaps I shouldn't, after Mr. Wolfe said he would help me, but I met Jimmy this morning and we . . . we had a talk . . . and I told him about that paper and Bronson still having it . . . and he thought he could do something about it and I was sure he shouldn't try it without seeing Mr. Wolfe first . . . and we arranged to meet here at two o'clock and discuss it."

I had unobtrusively got myself moved around to where I could reach the pitchfork handle which was protruding erect from the center of the pile of straw. With my eyes respectfully attending to Nancy, my hand idly played with the straw, which is nice to touch, and without much effort it found the spot where the handle of the fork joined the tines. Two of my fingers—feeling with the ends of their nails, which don't leave prints—explored downward along a tine, but not far, not more than a couple of inches, before they were stopped by something that was neither tine nor straw. I kept the fingers there half a minute, feeling, and then slowly withdrew my hand.

Jimmy demanded, "What's the use of deadpanning her? Either you and Wolfe are going to act as decent as he talked—"

"Deadpan?" I grinned. "Not on your life. Wolfe and I always do what he says. But you children are only going to make it harder by being indiscreet all over the fair grounds. Osgood is a difficult enough client already. Now if you'll do what I say I'll guarantee that Wolfe and I will be as decent as doves, and Osgood will never see that paper."

Jimmy was frowning. "Well?"

"Separate. Disunite. Immediately. You go out at the other end and I'll take her this way."

"He's right, Jimmy. It was awfully foolish, but you insisted—"

"But I've got to know."

"Damn it, do what I say!"

"Please, Jimmy."

He took her hand and looked her in the eye and said her name twice as if he was leaving her bound to a railroad track, and tore himself away. I told her to come on and left the stall and turned right with her, toward the door by which I had entered.

I left her in the middle of a crowd, thinking that was as good a place as any, and elbowed my way to the Methodist tent. Wolfe was still there, at the table. He frowned up at me.

"Well? Mr. Bennett?"

I sat down and nodded and restrained my voice. "I have to make a brief but tiresome report. Item one: Mr. Bennett will be here in ten minutes or so. He said. Item two: I found Nancy Osgood and Jimmy Pratt in a cowshed, discussing means of getting the paper which I have in my pocket. Item three: In the same shed I found Mr. Bronson lying under a pile of straw, dead, with a pitchfork stuck through his heart. No one knows of the last item but me—or didn't when I left."

Wolfe heaved a deep sigh. "I told that man he was a fool."

I nodded. "Yeah. You also told him you were beginning to suspect he was engaged in an enterprise which might prove to be a big blunder. I'll bite. How did you know it?"

He ignored my questions. "Confound it," he muttered. "Too late again." He sighed. "You say no one knows?"

"Correct. Except the guy that did it." I explained in detail what had happened in the cowshed.

"Then the discovery awaits removal of more straw."

"Which may have already happened, or may not occur until tomorrow."

"But probably sooner. You were all seen by the man who removed the straw."

"Sure, and by anyone else who might have glanced in. Shall I go back now and discover him?"

Wolfe shook his head. "That wouldn't help. Nor, probably, will there be a trail for the official pack, so there's no hurry. I wouldn't have guessed Bronson would be idiot enough to give him such a chance, but of course he had to meet him somewhere. But it is now all the more imperative— Ah, thank goodness! Good afternoon, sir."

XII

BREATHLESS, still in his shirt sleeves, Lew Bennett stood beside him. "You want to see me? Worst time you could have picked. The very worst."

"So Mr. Goodwin has told me. I'm sorry, but I can't help it. Be seated, sir. Have you had lunch?"

"No."

"Preposterous." Wolfe shook his head at him. "In the midst of the most difficult and chaotic problems, I have never missed a meal. Archie, order a portion of the fricassee."

I flagged a Methodist and told her to bring it with an extra dime's worth of dumplings, which was an idea Wolfe had invented. Bennett succumbed and dropped into a chair.

Wolfe said, "That's better. Now. I've been hired by Mr. Osgood to solve a murder, and I need to know some things. You may think my questions irrelevant or even asinine; if so you'll be wrong. Now tell me, did anyone ever suggest to you the possibility of removing Hickory Caesar Grindon secretly and putting another bull resembling him in his place?"

Bennett's eyes looked wary. "No," he said curtly.

"Would such a plan have been feasible?"

"Feasible?" Bennett swallowed chicken. "No. Monte McMillan was there."

"If Mr. McMillan hadn't been there, or had been a party to the scheme, might it have worked?"

"It might have."

"Yet Caesar was a national grand champion. Didn't he approach the unique?"

"Hell, no. There's plenty of good bulls, and quite a few great ones. The grand champion stuff is all right, and it's valid, but sometimes the margin is mighty slim."

"Still I am not satisfied. If another bull was to be substituted for Caesar by . . . well, let us say by Clyde Osgood . . . it couldn't be a near-champion, for the bull was destined to be butchered, and near-champions are valuable too. Would it be possible for an average bull, of comparatively low value, to have a fairly strong resemblance to a champion?"

"Might. At a distance of say a hundred yards. It would depend on who was looking."

"So that if Caesar had been replaced by another bull it couldn't have been detected by the absence of any identifying mark."

"No. Only by comparing his color pattern with your knowledge of Caesar's color pattern or with the sketch on his Certificate of Registration."

Wolfe sighed. "One more thing while you have your pie and coffee. This may require some reflection. Putting it as a hypothesis that Clyde Osgood actually undertook to replace Caesar with a substitute, how many bulls are there within, say fifty miles of here, which might have been likely candidates?"

"That's quite an order." Bennett slowly munched a bite of pie. "Of course there's one right here, up at the shed. A Willowdale bull, three-year-old. He'll never be in Caesar's class, but superficially he's a lot like him, color pattern and carriage and so on."

"Are you sure the one in the shed is the Willowdale bull?"

Bennett looked startled for an instant, then relieved. "Yes, it's Willowdale Zodiac all right. He was judged a while ago, and he's way down in pigment." He sipped some coffee. "There's a bull over at Hawley's, Orinoco, that might fill the bill, except his loin's narrow. Then of course another one would have been Hickory Buckingham Pell, Caesar's double brother, but he's dead."

"When did he die?"

"About a month ago. Anthrax. With most of the rest of McMillan's herd."

"What about the Osgood herd? Any candidates there?"

BENNETT slowly shook his head. "Hardly. There's a promising junior sire, Thistleleaf Lucifer, that might be figured in, but he's nearer brindle than red fawn. However, you might miss it if you had no reason to suspect it, and if you didn't have Caesar's pattern well in mind."

"What is Lucifer's value?"

"Oh, between five hundred and eight hundred dollars."

"I see. A mere fraction of forty-five thousand."

Bennett snorted. "No bull ever lived that was worth forty-five thousand dollars. McMillan didn't get that for Caesar as a proper and reasonable price for him. It was only a bribe Pratt offered to pull him in on a shameful and discreditable stunt."

One of the men I had noticed in the judging enclosure approached us.

"Can't they get along without me for ten minutes?" Bennett demanded. "What's wrong now?"

"Nothin's wrong at the lot," the man said. "But we can't lead from the shed

and back, on account of the crowd. There's a million people around there. Somebody found a dead man under a straw pile in the Holstein shed with a pitchfork through him. Murdered."

Bennett jumped up. "Who?"

"Don't know. You can't find out anything. You ought to see the mob."

That was all I heard, because they were on their way out. A Methodist started after Bennett, but I intercepted her and told her I would pay for the meal. She said ninety cents, and I relinquished a dollar bill and sat down again across from Wolfe.

"The natural thing," I said, "would be for me to trot over there and poke around."

Wolfe shook his head. "It's after three o'clock, and we have business of our own. Let's attend to it."

He got himself erect, and we departed for the orchid display.

At 4 o'clock the judges came, with retinue and scale sheets. One of them was a moonfaced bird from the Eastern States Horticultural Society and the other was Cuyler Ditson, who had been a judge several times at the Metropolitan. The pair started to squint and inspect and discuss, and a modest crowd collected. It was a pushover. Wolfe got the medal and all three ribbons, and all Shanks got was a consoling pat on the back. But they both knew how it would look in the next issue of the *American Orchid Gazette*, and they knew who would read it. Shanks was dumb enough to get mad and try to start an argument with Cuyler Ditson, and Raymond Plehn gave him the horse laugh.

After the judges had left and the crowd had dispersed, Wolfe and I sprayed the orchids again. After this was done, he arranged with an official for their care until Saturday, when the exposition would close and they would be crated for us and shipped back to New York.

Then at Wolfe's suggestion, I hunted up a telephone booth and called the garage about our sedan. It's lucky my pump is strong, for I got the surprise of my life. They told me the sedan had been repaired and was now waiting out in front of the exposition building where we now were.

So I took Wolfe outside, levered him into the tonneau and drove him back to the Osgood place. The sedan ran like a dream.

ONLY one thing of importance happened that night, afterward. Wolfe called up Waddell and got into an argument. When he came back into the bedroom, he was steaming.

"Archie," he said, glaring at me, "Mr. Waddell is an irritating man. Just now he goaded me into a rash pledge. We are committed to deliver the murderer of Clyde Osgood and evidence of his guilt into the district attorney's hands before tomorrow night."

I gaped at him. "Are you crazy? I don't believe such evidence is in existence."

"It isn't. When the bull was cremated, nothing remained to demonstrate the motive for the murder. But I am going to manufacture it."

"What—another bull?"

"No! The evidence. At eleven o'clock tomorrow morning we will visit the filing department of the Guernsey League and take steps."

I said, "If you ask my opinion, I think the best thing we can do is disguise ourselves as well as possible and jump in the car and drive like hell for New York."

On our way into town, the following morning, Wolfe gave me a briefing regarding our schedule for the day. It appeared we had a program—that is, Wolfe had one—and he began to lay it out as I drove.

I was to take the car and proceed to Osgood's. I was to pack our luggage and load it in the car, have the car filled with gas and oil, and report at the room where we had met Bennett not later than 3 o'clock.

"Luggage?" I sipped coffee. "Poised for flight, huh?"

Wolfe sighed. "We'll be going home. Home."

"Any stops on the way?"

"We'll stop at Mr. Pratt's place." He sipped. "By the way, I'm overlooking something. Two things. Have you a memorandum book with you? Or a notebook?"

"I've got a pad. You know the kind I carry."

"May I have it? And your pencil. Thank you." He put the pad and pencil in his pocket. "The second thing, I must have a good and reliable liar."

"Yes, sir." I tapped my chest.

"No, not you. Rather in addition to you."

"Another liar besides me. Plain or fancy?"

"Plain. But we're limited. It must be one of the three persons who were there when I was standing on that rock in the pasture Monday afternoon."

"Dave might do for a liar. He reads poetry."

"No. Not Dave. What about Miss Rowan? She seems inclined to friendship."

"Will she lie?" Wolfe asked me.

"Why not?"

"It's important. Can we count on it?"

"Yes."

"Then another detail is for you to telephone, find her, and make sure she will be at Pratt's place from three o'clock on. Tell her you will want to speak to her as soon as we arrive there."

When we drew up in front of the Guernsey League building, in town, and I had parked the car, we got out and went immediately to the filing room of the organization. Before leaving the Osgood home, Wolfe had telephoned on ahead and Lew Bennett was there. Wolfe at once put on the pressure, saying that by granting what he wanted, Bennett would confer a personal favor to Mr. Osgood as well as aiding the cause of justice and benefitting the community at large.

"What I would like to have are the color pattern sketches of Hickory Caesar Grindon, Willowdale Zodiac, Hawley's Orinoco, and Hickory Buckingham Pell."

Bennett was frowning. "You mean the original sketches? They can't leave the files; it's a strict rule. They're irreplaceable and we can't take risks."

"I understand. You can sit here at this table with them and they will be constantly under your eye. I need only an hour or so with them, possibly less."

Bennett agreed. He made a notation of the sketches that Wolfe wanted, went to get them, and I took a walk.

Later, when I returned to the filing room, Wolfe's factory of evidence was still in operation. Wolfe was there alone, seated at the table, with half a dozen sketches of bulls, on small sheets of white paper about 6 by 9 inches, arranged neatly in a row. One of them, separate, was directly under his eye, and was marked "Hickory Buckingham Pell."

"What about Bennett keeping his sketches under his eye?" I demanded. "Did you worm yourself into his confidence, or bribe him?"

"He went to eat. I'm not hurting his sketches. Keep quiet and don't disturb me."

I sat and diverted myself by trying different combinations on the puzzle we were supposed to be solving until Lew Bennett entered. As he did so Wolfe put my memo pad, with the pages he had worked on still attached, into his breast pocket, and the pencil. Then he sighed, pushed back his chair and got to his feet, and inclined his head to Bennett.

"Thank you, sir. There are your sketches intact. Guard them; preserve them carefully; you already thought them precious; they are now doubly so. It is a wise precaution for you to insist that they be made in ink, since that renders any alteration impossible without discovery. Come, Archie."

When we left Bennett was leaning over the table squinting at the sketches. "Now, Archie," Wolfe said as we climbed into the car, "it all depends on the execution. I'll go over it briefly for you. . . ."

XIII

UPON arriving at Pratt's place I parked in the graveled space in front of the garage, and we got out. Wolfe headed for the house. Over at a corner of the lawn Caroline was absorbed in putting practise and greeted me from a distance as I passed by on my way to meet Lily Rowan as arranged on the phone.

Lily was in the hammock. I said, "Thank you for doing me the favor in regard to the camera. Now I want to offer to do you one, and I'm in a hurry. How would you like to take a lesson in detective work?"

"I'd love it."

"Fine. The lesson is simple but requires control of the voice and the facial muscles. You may not be needed, but on the other hand you may. You are to stay here, or close by. Sometime in the next hour or two I may come for you, or send Bert—"

"Come yourself."

"Okay. And escort you to the presence of Mr. Wolfe and a man. Wolfe will ask you a question and you will tell a lie. It won't be a complicated lie but it will help to pin a murder on a man, so I want to assure you that it is not a frame-up. The man is guilty. If there were a chance in a million that he's innocent—"

"Don't bother. Do I have any company in the lie?"

"Yes. Me; also Wolfe. What we need is corroboration."

"Then as far as I'm concerned it isn't a lie at all. Truth is relative. I see you've washed your face. Kiss me."

"Pay in advance, huh?"

"Not in full. On account."

It didn't take long to explain. Four minutes later I was on my way to the house.

Wolfe was on the terrace with Pratt and Jimmy and Monte McMillan. Pratt was raving. He appeared specifically and pointedly sore at Wolfe for vague but active reasons which had probably come to him on the bounce from District Attorney Waddell.

"Please, Mr. Pratt," Wolfe was saying as I joined them, "I didn't want to disturb you. I needed to have a talk with Mr. McMillan in private. When I told him so on the phone this morning, I took the liberty of suggesting your house. There was a special reason for it, that the presence of Miss Rowan might be desirable."

"Lily Rowan? What the hell has she got to do with it?"

"That will appear. If my presence is really offensive to you, we'll go elsewhere."

"I don't give a damn. Help yourself."

We got ourselves separated. McMillan, who still hadn't opened his mouth, followed Wolfe, and I brought up the rear. As we started up the stairs, I got my pistol from the holster, slipped it into my side coat pocket. There was one item on Wolfe's bill of fare that might prove to be ticklish.

When we reached the upstairs room, and Wolfe was settled in a big chair, McMillan said:

"This is the second time I've gone out of my way to see you, as a favor to Fred Osgood. It's getting monotonous."

Wolfe shook his head. "I don't like it," he said. "I have no desire for the taste of victory." He put his hand in his breast pocket, produced the memo pad, and held it out. "Take that, please, and examine the first three sheets. Thoroughly."

McMILLAN took the pad and looked it over.

"You've got me," he declared. "Is there a trick to it?"

"I wouldn't say a trick. Do you identify the original those sketches were drawn from?"

"No. They're not very good."

"That's true. Still I would have expected you to identify them. He was Hickory Buckingham Pell. Your bull that died of anthrax a month ago."

"Is that so." McMillan returned his eyes to Wolfe. "It's possible. Where did you get these drawings?"

"That's just the point." Wolfe laced his fingers across his belly. "I made them myself. You've heard of that homely episode Monday afternoon, before your arrival. Mr. Goodwin and I started to cross the pasture and were interrupted by the bull. Mr. Goodwin escaped by agility, but I mounted that boulder in the center of the pasture. I was there some fifteen minutes before I was rescued by Miss Pratt. The bull was parading not far off, back and forth, and I took my memorandum pad from my pocket and made those sketches of him. May I have the pad back, please?"

McMillan didn't move. I arose and took the pad and put it in my pocket.

"You must have a screw loose," McMillan said. "The bull in the pasture was Caesar. Hickory Caesar Grindon."

"No, sir. The bull in the pasture was Hickory Buckingham Pell. The sketches I made Monday afternoon prove it, but I was aware of it long before I saw Mr. Bennett's official records. Now you know very well what I'm doing. I'm undertaking to demonstrate that Clyde Osgood and Howard Bronson died by your hand."

McMillan's gaze was steady. "You're going to undertake to prove something."

"I am. I have already shown proof that Caesar, the champion, was never in that pasture."

"Bah. Those drawings? Anybody would see through that trick. Do you suppose anyone is going to believe you?"

Wolfe's eyes moved. "Archie, get Miss Rowan."

I hot-footed it downstairs and across the lawn to the hammock. A few minutes later I was back in the room with Lily.

Wolfe said: "Miss Rowan. I believe Mr. Goodwin has informed you that we would ask you for an exercise of memory. I suppose you do remember that on Monday afternoon the activity of the bull marooned me on a rock in the pasture?"

She smiled at him. "I do."

"How long was I on the rock?"

"Oh . . . I would say fifteen minutes."

"During that time, what was Miss Pratt doing?"

"Running to get her car and driving to the pasture and arguing with Dave about opening the gate, and then driving to get you."

"What was Dave doing?"

"Waving the gun and arguing with Esca—with Mr. Goodwin and Caroline."

"What were you doing?"

"Taking it in. Mostly I was watching you, because you made quite a picture—you and the bull."

"What was I doing?"

LILY took a deep breath before answering. "Well, you climbed to the top of the rock and took a notebook or something from your pocket and it looked as if you were writing or drawing in it. You kept looking at the bull and back at the book or whatever it was. I decided you were making a sketch of the bull. That hardly seemed possible under the circumstances, but it certainly looked like it."

Wolfe nodded. "I doubt if there will ever be any reason for you to repeat all that to a jury but if such an occasion should arise would you do it?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

I went to open the door and told Lily, "That will do, Miss Rowan, thank you." She crossed and stopped at my elbow and said, "Take me back to the hammock." I muttered at her, "Go sit on your thumb. School's out." She made a face at me and glided over the threshold, and I shut the door and returned to my chair.

McMillan said, "I still say it's a trick."

Wolfe sighed. "What if it is? Are you in a position to condemn tricks? As a matter of fact, I do know, from the evidence of my own eyes, that the bull was Buckingham. Remember that I have studied the official sketches. Buckingham had a white patch high on his left shoulder; Caesar had not. The bull in the pasture had it. The white shield on Buckingham's face extended well below the level of the eyes; on Caesar it was smaller and came to a point higher up. The bull was Buckingham. You know it; I know it. With Mr. Goodwin and Miss Rowan to swear that they saw me making the sketch, I think we may regard that point as established."

"What else?"

"That's all. That's enough."

McMillan abruptly stood up. I was on my feet as soon as he was, with my gun in sight. Wolfe's voice came, sharp. "You can't go out of that door; Mr. Goodwin won't let you. Come and sit down."

XIV

QUIETLY McMillan stood for a minute and looked at him. Then slowly he moved to his chair, sat, and covered his face with his hands.

Wolfe said, "I don't know how you feel about it. You asked me what else. If you mean what other proof confronts you, I repeat that no more is needed."

I returned the gun to my pocket. Wolfe resumed: "As I said, I suspected Monday afternoon that the bull in the pasture was not the champion Caesar. When Clyde offered to bet Pratt that he would not barbecue Hickory Caesar Grindon, he opened up an amusing field for conjecture. How did Clyde propose to win his bet? By removing the bull and hiding him? Fantastic; the bull was guarded, and where could he be hid against a search? Replace the bull with one less valuable? Little less fantastic; again, the bull was guarded, and while a substitute might be found who would deceive others, surely none would deceive you, and you were there.

"I considered other alternatives. There was one which was simple and plausible and presented no obstacles at all; that the bull in the pasture was not Hickory Caesar Grindon and Clyde had detected it. He had just come from the pasture, and he had binoculars, and he

knew cattle. I regarded the little puzzle as solved and dismissed it from my mind, since it was none of my business.

"When the shots fired by Mr. Goodwin took us all to the pasture Monday night, and we found that Clyde had been killed, it was still none of my business, but the puzzle gained in interest and deserved a little effort as an intellectual challenge. I examined the bull, looked for the weapon and found it, and came to this room and sat in this chair and satisfied myself as to the probabilities. Of course I merely satisfied myself as a mental exercise, not the legal requirements for evidence. First, if the bull wasn't Caesar you certainly knew it, and therefore you had swindled Pratt. How and why? Why, to get forty-five thousand dollars. How, by selling him Caesar and then delivering another bull, much less valuable, who resembled him. Then where was Caesar? Caesar was dead." Wolfe paused. "Wasn't Caesar dead when you took the forty-five thousand dollars from Pratt?

McMillan made no sound.

"Of course he was," Wolfe said. "He had died of anthrax. In your desperation an ingenious notion occurred to you. Buckingham, who resembled Caesar superficially but was worth only a fraction of his value, was alive and well.

"You announced that Buckingham had died, and the carcass was destroyed; and you told Pratt that he could have Caesar. You couldn't have swindled a stockman like that, for the deception would soon have been found out; but the swindle was in fact no injury to Pratt, since Buckingham would make just as good roast beef as Caesar would have made."

WOLFE paused for a moment. McMillan merely stared back at him, wooden faced.

"Cyde, then, had discovered the deception, and when you heard him propose the bet to Pratt, and the way he stated its terms, you suspected the fact. You followed him out to his car and had a brief talk with him and got your suspicions confirmed, and he agreed to return later that evening and discuss it with you. He did so. You were supposed to be asleep upstairs.

"You left the house secretly and met

[*Turn page*]

Clyde. Clyde informed you that he knew of the deception and was determined to expose it in order to win his bet with Pratt. You, of course, faced ruin, so you knocked him unconscious, evolved a plan to make it appear that he had been killed by the bull, and proceeded to execute it."

No movement and no response.

"Well. That was the way I arranged the puzzle Monday evening, but, as I say, it was none of my business. It didn't become my business until the middle of Tuesday afternoon, when I accepted a commission from Mr. Osgood to solve the murder, having first demonstrated that there had been one. At that moment I expected to have the job completed within a few hours.

"Proof that the bull was not Caesar, I intended to procure, with Mr. Bennett's assistance, as soon as the district attorney completed his inquiries. That delay was idiotic. I should not have postponed it one instant. For less than three hours after I had accepted the case I learned from your own lips that the bull was dead and his carcass was to be immediately destroyed.

"Mr. Goodwin rushed over to take photographs, but the bull was already half consumed by fire. You acted quickly there, and in time. Of course you gave him the anthrax yourself. It would be—perhaps you would tell me how and when you did it."

McMillan said nothing.

Wolfe shrugged. "Anyhow, you were prompt and energetic. As long as the bull was destined to be cooked and eaten—this was to be the day for that, by the way—you ran little risk of exposure. But when all thought of the barbecue was abandoned, and it was suspected that Clyde had been murdered, the bull's presence, alive or dead, was a deadly peril to you. You acted at once. You not only killed him, you did it by a method which insured that his carcass would be immediately destroyed. You must have been prepared for contingencies."

Nero Wolfe heaved a deep sigh, shook his head, and then went on:

"As for me, I was stumped. You had licked me. With all trace of the bull gone but his bones, there seemed no possible way of establishing your motive for murdering Clyde. I had no evidence even for my own satisfaction that my surmise had been correct—that the bull was not Caesar.

"Tuesday evening I floundered in futilities. I had an interview with you and tried to draw you out by suggesting absurdities, but you were too wary for me. Then I tried Bronson, surmising that Bronson therefore knew you were guilty and that he was blackmailing you. I assumed those things, but he admitted none of them, and of course I couldn't prove them.

"Yesterday morning I went for Bennett, and I got a great deal of information, but nothing that would constitute evidence. Then came the news that Bronson had been murdered. Naturally that was obvious. Suspecting that he was blackmailing you, I had told the man he was a fool, and he had proved me correct.

"There too you acted promptly and energetically. Men like you, sir, when once calamity sufficiently disturbs their balance, become excessively dangerous. They will perform any desperate and violent deed, but they don't lose their heads. I wouldn't mind if Mr. Goodwin left me with you in this room alone, because it is known that we are here; but I wouldn't care to offer you the smallest opportunity if there were the slightest room for your ingenuity."

McMILLAN lifted his head and broke his long silence. "I'm through," he said dully.

Wolfe nodded. "Yes, I guess you are."

Wolfe sighed. "You killed Clyde Osgood to prevent the exposure of your fraud. Now it threatens you again. That's the minimum of the threat."

McMillan tossed his head, as if he were trying to shake something off. The gesture looked familiar, but I didn't remember having seen him do it before. Then he did it again, and I saw what it was; it was the way the bull had tossed his head in the pasture Monday afternoon.

He looked at Wolfe and said, "Do me a favor. I want to go out to my car a minute. Alone."

Wolfe muttered, "You wouldn't come back."

"Yes, I would. My word was good for over fifty years. Now it's good again. I'll be back within five minutes, on my feet."

"Do I owe you a favor?"

"No. I'll do you one in return. I'll write something and sign it. Anything you say. You've got it pretty straight. I'll do it when I come back, not before. And you asked me how I killed Buckingham. I'll show you what I did it with."

Wolfe spoke to me without moving his head or his eyes. "Open the door for him, Archie."

I didn't stir. I knew he was indulging himself in one of his romantic impulses, and I thought a moment's reflection might show him its drawbacks; but after only half a moment he snapped at me, "Well?"

I got up and opened the door and McMillan, with a heavy tread but no sign of the blind staggers, passed out. I stood and watched his back until the top of his head disappeared on his way downstairs. Then I turned to Wolfe and said sarcastically, "Fortune-telling *and* character-reading. It would be nice to have to explain—"

"Shut up."

I kicked the door further open and stood there, listening for the sound of a gunshot or a racing engine or whatever I might hear. But the first pertinent sound, within the five minutes he had mentioned, was his returning footsteps on the stairs. He came down the hall, as he had promised, on his feet, entered without glancing at me, walked to Wolfe and handed him something, and went to his chair and sat down.

"That's what I said I'd show you." He seemed more out of breath than the exertion of his trip warranted, but otherwise under control. "That's what I killed Buckingham with." He turned to me. "I haven't got any pencil or paper. If you'll let me have that pad—"

Wolfe held the thing daintily with thumb and forefinger, regarding it—a large hypodermic syringe. He lifted his gaze. "You had anthrax in this?"

"Yes. Five cubic centimeters. A culture I made myself from the tissues of Caesar's heart the morning I found him dead. They gave me hell for cutting him open." He shrugged. "I did that before I got the idea of saying the carcass was Buckingham instead of Caesar. I only about half knew what I was doing that morning, but it was in my mind to use it on myself—the poison from Caesar's heart. Watch out how you handle that. It's empty now, but there might be a drop left on the needle, though I just wiped it off."

"Will anthrax kill a man?"

"Yes. How sudden depends on how he gets it. In my case collapse will come in maybe twenty minutes, because I shot more than two cubic centimeters of that concentrate in this vein." He tapped his left forearm with a finger. "Right in the vein. I only used half of it on Buckingham."

"Before you left for Crowfield Tuesday afternoon."

"Yes." McMillan looked at me again. "You'd better give me that pad and let me get started."

I got out the pad and tore off the three top sheets which contained the sketches, and handed it to him, with my fountain pen. He took it and scratched with the pen to try it, and asked Wolfe, "Do you want to dictate it?"

"No. Better in your own words. Just—it can be brief. Are you perfectly certain about the anthrax?"

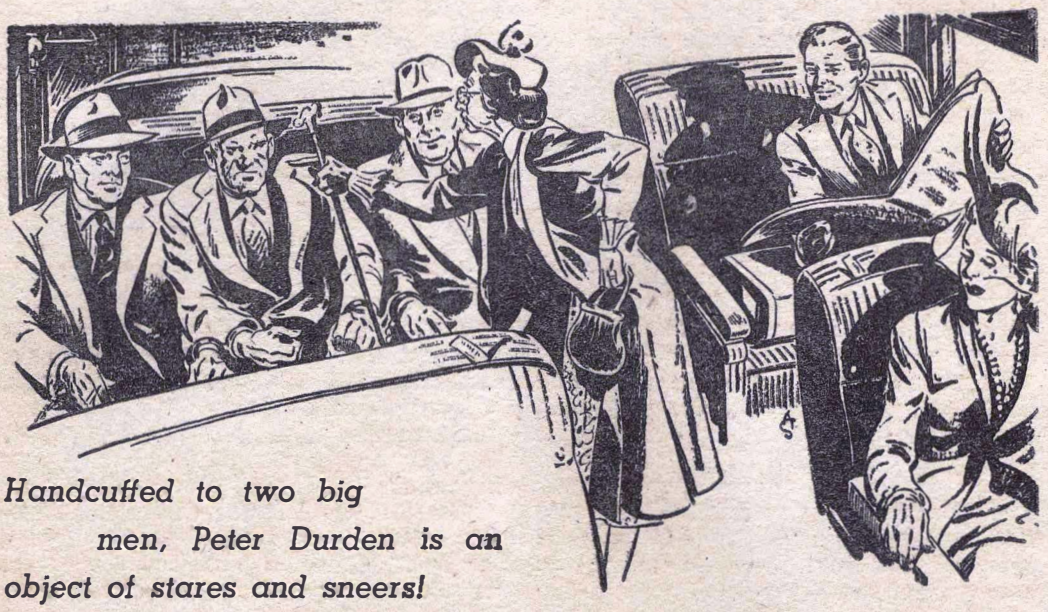
"Yes. A good stockman is a jack of all trades."

Wolfe sighed, and shut his eyes.

I sat and watched the pen in McMillan's hand moving along the top sheet of the pad. Apparently he was a slow writer. The faint scratch of its movement was the only sound for several minutes. Then he asked without looking up: "How do you spell 'unconscious'? I've always been a bad speller."

Wolfe spelled it for him, slowly and distinctly.

"They're going to electrocute you!" she said



Handcuffed to two big men, Peter Durden is an object of stares and sneers!

The Face of Murder

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

IT was obvious to everyone on the train, en route north to Sing Sing, that I was a desperate character. I would, by the look of me, kill my mother for a dime. The chase which ended in this ignominious journey, fruit of a daylight bank robbery, had been long, desperate and tiring. I hadn't had time to get a shave or a haircut or my clothes pressed. Nobody else, after the capture, bothered. Maybe they liked me to look the way I did—grim, desperate, hungry, a big two-hundred pounder, with grey steel eyes, huge hands, a mighty body.

I was handcuffed between two men who were utterly indifferent to my feelings. I sat in the middle, cuffed to each one. I think it amused them, the way people stared at me and didn't bother to hide their contempt.

"That's him! That's the man who killed George Cye and Ralph Osmen! How did they *dare* face him? They could see he is a murderer!"

"You mean the man in the middle?" asked the mother of the 'teen age girl who hadn't minded how I felt. "He looks even worse than his pictures, doesn't he?"

"What would he do if I just went up and started talking to him?"

The men on either side of me chuckled with glee. Each jabbed an elbow into my side. I hated them both more than I can explain. Peter Hobsen and Dag Rice. They gloried in those handcuffs. They gloried in the fact that two men were cuffed to one, so there could be no escape. They wanted people to see the handcuffs, and people were seeing them—

making comments, not caring who heard.

"What kind of a mother gave birth to a thing like *him?*" someone else said. They were all shocked and horrified that I should be riding in an open car with them.

I shivered, for if ever a man had an angelic mother, I did. That I got mixed up in crime was no fault of hers. Certainly she did not desire it. Contact with crime and criminals was a horror to her, even to *hear* about them. And she couldn't help hearing, for I was a sensation, after a fashion, from the start.

MY name is Peter Durden. Does it ring a bell? It should. The name and the picture have been in the newspapers of the nation for months. The capture has been a many-days wonder. I'm a marked man. If any man or woman anywhere outside of prison would trust me—well, I could be wrong about that, but evil *does* rub off on a man.

"He doesn't even look human!" one passenger said. The others looked it.

I could feel eyes boring into my back. I never believed anybody could really feel any such thing—but I did on that never-to-be-forgotten journey when I sat cuffed between two burly, beetle-browed men and rode toward Sing Sing where the seat was kept hot for murderers and bank robbers who kill and are captured.

I caught the eye of a young woman, who turned in her seat, ahead and to the left, to stare at me. Her eyes were veiled to everyone in the car except me. I could read her thoughts. I attracted her as a snake attracts a bird. If there had been the slightest possibility she would have come to me; it's the attraction, the lure of the forbidden, to which so many respond, scarcely knowing they respond.

I wanted to sneer at her. I wanted to wink at her, but in this direction lay trouble. I didn't want to keep staring at her as she stared back at me, our eyes locked, for I hated looking into the naked soul of a woman so young. There was trouble ahead for her, but none of it would be of my making. Not while these handcuffs said what they plainly meant.

I stared at the girl, and she did not turn away until she was good and ready. There was courage in her, no doubt about that. In other circumstances I would certainly have made an opportunity to speak to her. As it was I comforted myself with the thought that she probably wasn't very nice to know, had bad breath or some other insurmountable fault. I found myself looking back at her, but she didn't meet my eyes again.

"Ain't it too bad, Durden?" said one of the men to whom I was cuffed. "If it wasn't for us you could make up to that gal."

Both men were acutely aware of everybody in the car. They were natural-born exhibitionists. Neither had missed my passage of eyes with the young woman. Maybe they felt sorry for me. Maybe they thought that by being unable to contact her—except visually—I was automatically saved from a lot of trouble.

An elderly woman stopped right before me. I thought she was going to spit in my face, for her mouth worked as if she were getting it up for me. She began to speak softly, slowly, but her voice got louder, more savage.

"I'm glad they got you!" she said. "The time will come when the last wretch like you will be electrocuted and it will be safe on the streets for our daughters and ourselves! Why does God allow men like you to be born? Why can't we tell, when you are born, so you can be smothered before we find out just how evil you are? If I had my way I'd kill you with my own hands. Know why? Because there were two I loved long ago, two little girls, and do you know what happened to them? A *man*, a man just like you! He looked enough like you to be your twin and for all I know maybe he was! *Was*, I said, because they took him and electrocuted him, just as they're going to electrocute you!"

I didn't open my mouth, even, to answer her. It would have done no good. She would scarcely have heard me. She

had looked at my face, knew I was a criminal, a murderer. It was written all over me. Such men as I had one place to live: prison; one place to die: the electric chair. In New York State, that is. There were other places where one could hang, be shot, or sniff cyanide.

I merely watched the woman's eyes, and knew that she herself was a potential murderer. Had a persecution complex, I thought. Maybe she made up the two girls she had loved so much. I had no way of knowing.

"If I could just express myself . . ."

She slapped me—hard, first with her right hand, then her left, and several in the car applauded. The two men with me did nothing whatever to deter her. In fact, they chuckled. They enjoyed it immensely. They didn't feel *my* shame, did not realize that by doing nothing, saying nothing, they shared it. So long as the handcuffs held, and the train rolled, and there was no possibility of further escape, they owed me nothing. The woman stepped back to watch the red grow in my face. I could have said something, could have apologized, though for what, I would have been at loss what to say. I clamped down my lips.

"Stubborn," she said. "Nothing to say! I'll bet if you could just get out of those cuffs you'd like nothing better than to strangle me, wouldn't you?"

I CONSIDERED the question. The car was silent now, waiting for me to say something. I wondered if the two with me would say anything but they did nothing except to enjoy the situation. I was helpless in many ways. It wasn't a good way for a man my size to be.

"I can see murder looking out of your eyes," said the woman.

Maybe she could by that time, and the fact thrilled her. I'd have wagered she would have welcomed an attack, but I've no right to say any such thing when she merely behaved toward me according to her lights. There are people who glory in being hurt, and in hurting. This woman gloried in both—and in having people watch while either or both happened to her. She had hurt me, not my face so much as my feelings—if a man like me were allowed any!—and now she was imagining, with all her might, what it would be like if I were retaliating, if I were hurting her, *dreadfully!*

If I said a word, she would stay on, enjoying it. I kept silent. The two to whom I was fastened kept silent, too, but Hobsen chuckled, his face very red. How well these two men understood everything! I could have battered their heads together, but I didn't wish to be cuffed to a couple of unconscious men. I'd have everybody in the car shrieking. There would be railroad dicks. The train might be stopped at the next station, more officers brought aboard.

And if I said anything, made a move, I'd attract the fullest attention of everybody in the car. The women would go to other cars, dragging their gawking kids. The men would huddle together for safety.

So I sat up and took it, and the woman went away.

The hours wore on. There was no sleep, for I was a desperate man. Because I was desperate, the men with me were desperate, too. Would one help me if the other . . . but there was no use talking. There could be no sleep—and therefore no surcease from the other passengers.

I heard myself analyzed, openly, frankly, several times. Men came from cars forward and aft to look at me, look away, comment on me. I might have been a statue for all they considered any possible sensitivity I might have. And all it did to Hobsen and Rice was make them chuckle.

Several times, in fact, they laughed together, aloud, and people stared at them, puzzled.

I found nothing at which to laugh. Normal men didn't laugh at the swift approach of the electric chair.

"He's clearly a criminal type!" said one.

"Look at him and you know you're looking at a murderer, and maybe an emotional fiend besides!"

I thought we would never reach Sing

Sing, a spot I knew of old, a spot that could hold no joy for me or any man. Even Hobsen and Rice were no longer concerned about my discomfiture. They stayed silent, did not chuckle, did not gouge me in the ribs again.

There were railroad stations, and more. Then the tunnel and the gates of the great penitentiary. I saw them, believe it or not, with a sigh of relief. The trail was ended, and I no longer had to listen to the remarks of people who knew criminals on sight, and of just what they were capable.

"I'd know him for a murderer anywhere, however he happened to be dressed."

Inside the prison they uncuffed us. I rubbed my wrists, and the P.K. said:

"Must be short-handed, Durden, sending you on such a long drag with a couple of toughs like Hobsen and Rice! They'll kill their own mothers for a dime. You must have had fun!"

"Yeah," I said ruefully, "I had a grand time!"

I didn't tell him how. Eventually Hobsen and Rice would—before they went to the chair for those murders. They had to; it was too good to keep.

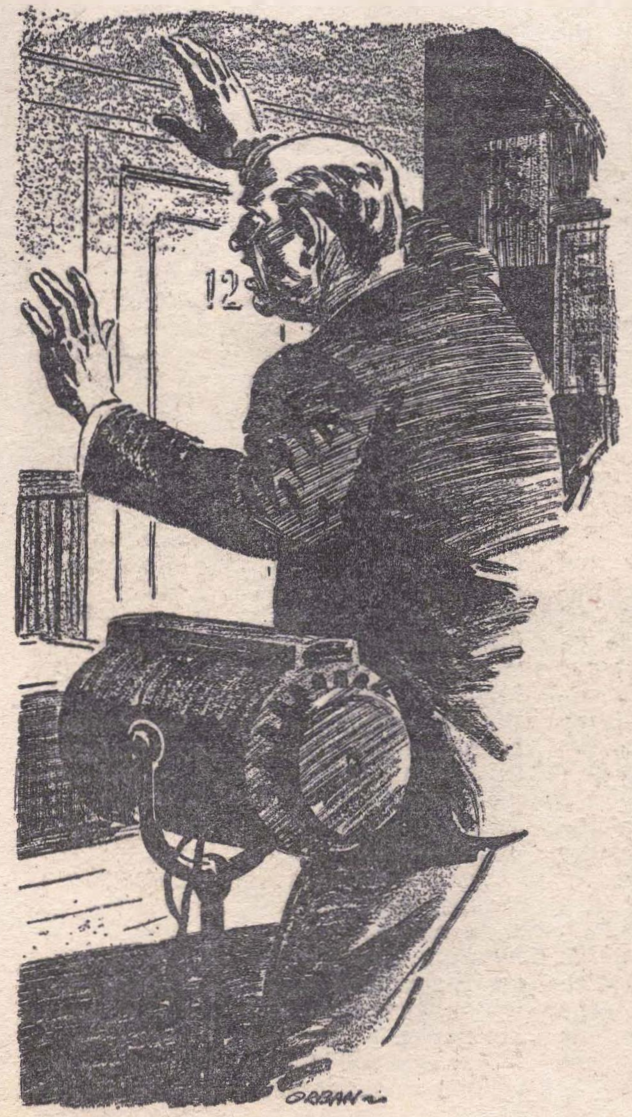
The BACKSTAGE MYSTERY

A TENSE DETECTIVE NOVEL BY

Carey Weldon was carrying the unconscious form of Doris Manning (Chap. IV)

There was only one thing that could stop matinee idol Wylie Thornton from eloping with the town's richest heiress—the intervention of murder!

OCTAVUS ROY COHEN



I

TERRY MOONEY gazed ecstatically at the *Evening Record* which had come to him hot from the press. For the first time the lad's copy had achieved a first-page spread. Terry gave vent to a shout of joy and shoved the paper under the parrot-like beak of the misanthropic gentleman at the copy desk.

"Now," exulted Mooney, "will you ever again say I'm not a real newspaperman?"

The head of the copy desk snorted. "Do you call that a newspaper story?"

Young Mr. Mooney smiled. "Mister, that yarn is going to be read throughout the length and breadth of this fair city—and don't you ever think otherwise. One hundred and fifty thousand souls are destined to become absorbed in that particular lit'ry effort—and how!" The city editor, really a good-natured chap, smiled at the boy. Good kid. Terry retired to his corner of the office, where he set himself to a careful inspection of the story. He read:

"When the curtain descends upon the last act of *The Home Port* at the Edwin Booth

Detective Jim Hanvey Tackles a Case With Too

Theater tonight, patrons of the local stock company will have witnessed the final performance of Wylie Thornton, handsome and talented leading man, who departs from this city on the midnight train to accept the star part in a production which is scheduled to open on Broadway within the next three or four weeks.

"Of course, the management has known for several days of Mr. Thornton's intention, but announcement was withheld until today owing to the fact that everyone connected with the theater had held hopes of inducing him to alter his decision. Though it is believed that the new drama is certain to take New York by storm, the local management has Mr. Thornton's promise to return to the Edwin Booth Resident Players in the event that the new show does not happen to be a great success.

"Wylie Thornton has for five months been winning a place for himself in the hearts of the local public. He played the leading role in the first performance of the Edwin Booth Resident Players and to him must go a large share of the credit for the enormous success which that organization has enjoyed for nearly half a year. But not alone on the stage has Wylie Thornton endeared himself to the hearts of the public. For five months he has been a popular and prominent figure in the social life of this city. He has graced scores of dances, dinners and after-theater parties at the various palatial homes which dot the mountainside, and has been seen frequently at the Country Club Saturday night dances. On other occasions his fine figure has been noticed on the golf links and tennis courts.

"It is understood that Wylie Thornton is one of the highest paid stock actors in America. As he fares forth to greater triumphs on Broadway, he carries with him the sincere friendship, profound admiration and devoted good wishes of his legion of local friends; all of whom wish him luck—and at the same time hope that he may some day return to his place with the Edwin Booth Resident Players."

THROUGHOUT the city Terry Mooney's collection of adjectives was read with an interest which more than justified the prominence accorded it by the astute city editor. But there were five persons who perused Terry's literary effort rather grimly. To them it meant trouble—and, in one case at least, it flashed a message of danger.

Saturday afternoon, September eighteenth—and the mercury hung at 85. The city was somnolent, and, in some cases, querulous. Even the magnificent home of Major David Manning in the hilly and fashionable West Side Section seemed unusually quiet. Major Manning's home on Ralston Street was one of the show places of the city. It stood behind an emerald lawn; and imposing white columns rose from a spacious veranda which spanned the entire front of the house. Those who were fortunate enough to be on the Manning visiting list spoke in awe of the tremendous rooms and invariably wondered why the Major insisted on living in such a huge home when there was nobody in the family but himself and his daughter, Doris.

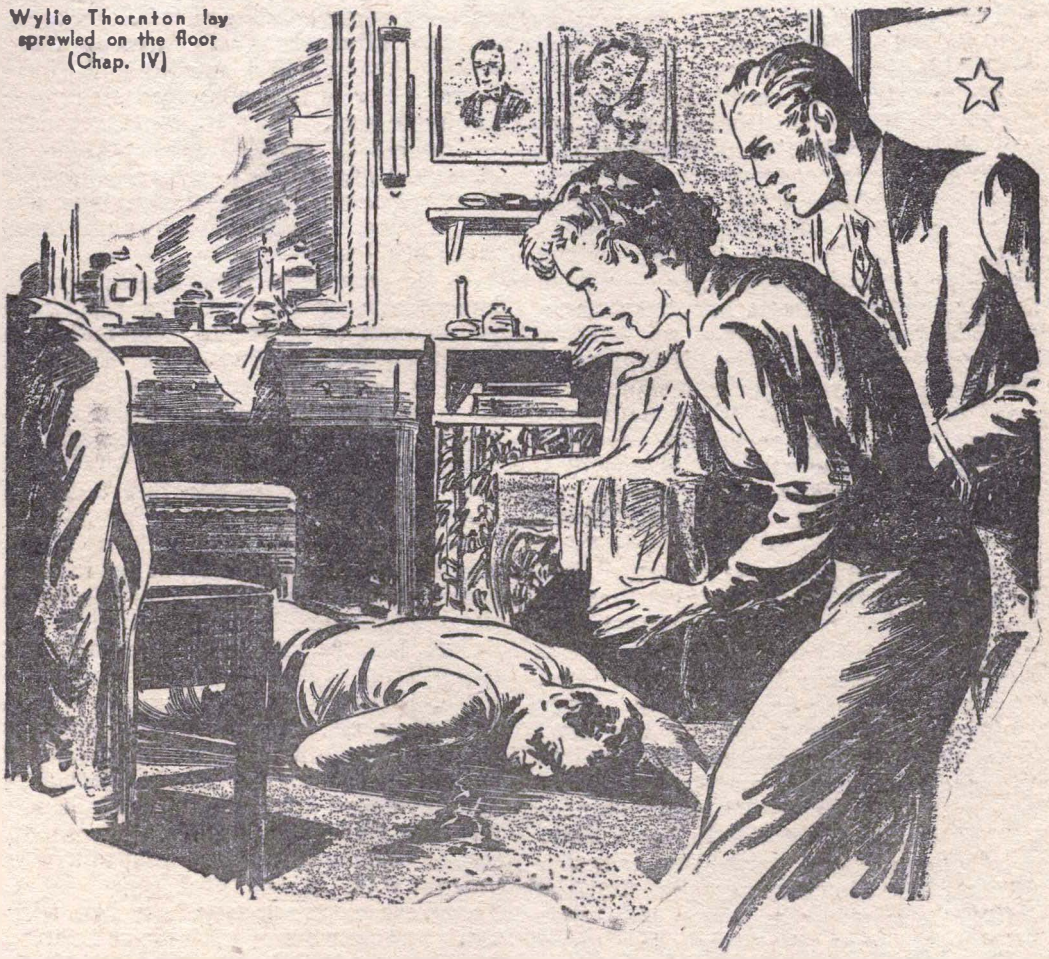
True, Major Manning had a housekeeper. At the moment that a gaily whistling newsboy flung his paper on the veranda, she emerged from the front door and dropped wearily into a wicker chair. But though Mrs. Ellington's official position was that of housekeeper, blood as blue as that of the Mannings ran in her veins. Devastated family fortunes had caused her eagerly to accept the task of seeing that the Manning home was properly run, and her position in the household was actually that of a member of the family. The Major was fond of her, and Doris had come to look upon her as a mother.

For perhaps ten minutes she fanned herself, then languidly crossed the veranda and picked up her copy of the *Evening Record.* She returned to her chair, accepted a glass of iced tea which the butler brought, and casually opened her paper.

Her eyes fell instantly upon the eight-column streamer which announced that

Many Suspects—and Far Too Many Motives!

Wylie Thornton was leaving the city that night for New York. And the effect upon her was startling. For perhaps a minute she stared, refusing to credit the evidence of her senses. Then, after reading the first two paragraphs, she rose and crossed the veranda in short, determined strides; passed into the huge reception hall and seated herself at the



Wylie Thornton lay sprawled on the floor (Chap. IV)

telephone. Then she called the number of the Fourth National Bank, of which Major Manning was president.

Mrs. Ellington waited for twenty seconds, then the Major's voice came to her.

"Yes, Martha?"

She lowered her voice. "David," she asked, "have you seen this evening's edition of the *Record?*"

"No. Not yet. What about it?"

"It carries an announcement that Wylie Thornton is leaving for New York after the performance tonight. But that isn't what I called you for, David."

"Yes? What is it?"

Mrs. Ellington moistened her lips. "David, all this morning Doris has been packing, as though she were preparing for a trip."

"You are sure of that?"

"Certain."

"Say nothing to anyone," snapped

Major Manning. "I'll be there in five minutes."

IF MRS. ELLINGTON had planned to rouse him from his carefully cultivated calm, she had succeeded admirably. As a matter of fact, there was probably nothing else in the world which could so have disturbed him.

For ten years Major Manning had been a widower, and during that time he had made a valiant effort to be both mother and father to his daughter, Doris. Nineteen years of age, with short, nut-brown hair and a slim, boyish figure, she was unquestionably pretty; and maddeningly independent.

Major Manning recalled—bitterly—his early pride when Doris first had appeared in a production of the local Little Theater. Almost from the start Doris had been acclaimed the brightest star of the amateur firmament. She had a natural flair for the footlights, and whether dramatic instinct had been born in her—or whether it had been nourished by the fluent praise of her friends, the fact remained that the Little Theater became the most important element in her life; overshadowing the usual round of lunches, teas and receptions to which most girls of her age devoted themselves.

Then five months ago the cobwebs had been dusted from the seats of the Edwin Booth Theater, the city's most venerable playhouse, and into that structure had come the Edwin Booth Resident Players, prepared to woo fame and fortune by presenting—with weekly change of bill—all of last year's Broadway successes. For the fourth week of their highly successful venture a comedy had been scheduled which required the services of an extra actress, and—as was customarily done under the circumstances—the Director of the Edwin Booth Players communicated with the Director of the Little Theater and asked that the latter recommend a young lady who might not die of stage fright if given a small part with a professional company.

Doris Manning was instantly recommended, and from the hour of the first rehearsal, Jed Samuels, the director, knew that he had run across someone of more than ordinary talent. He investigated her and was amazed to learn that she was the daughter of the city's wealthiest man, a girl of tremendous social prominence, and then he devoted himself to the task of developing every spark of her latent ability. Before the end of that first week, Jed Samuels fitted Doris into a small part for the week following, and gradually it had come to be accepted that Doris Manning was a regular member of the company. Save perhaps for the leads, she was the best actress in the organization. For the entire five months' run of the company, she had played with them, appearing in more than half of their productions.

The Major had not been won over without some semblance of a struggle. Doris, alternately headstrong and cuddly, twisted him around her pretty fingers. She was accustomed to having her own way.

The Major recalled grimly that the strongest objections had been voiced by Carey Weldon, Doris's fiance. The Major wished now that Carey had been more stubborn.

In the past five months a great change had come over Doris. Carey Weldon, a young man of sensitive soul, had been first to notice a cooling of Doris's ardor. He had bided his time, and watched. Then ugly gossip had come to his ears—gossip which linked the name of Doris Manning with that of Wylie Thornton, the leading man of the Edwin Booth Players.

For a long time Carey paid no attention to these rumors. Then he investigated as best he could—and discussed the matter with Major Manning.

The Major was duly incensed, but thoughtful. Wylie Thornton was handsome. He was a huge man physically, well over six feet in height; and he was an excellent actor and had been a patient instructor for Doris. That they had developed a friendship was natural. But that Doris should have allowed herself to become infatuated with him was unthinkable. In the first place, Wylie Thornton was a married man. His wife, a wiry little woman with great, blazing eyes and a vitriolic tongue, was said to be devoted to her handsome, selfish husband, and also to be of an intensely jealous nature.

MAJOR MANNING at first refused to believe that his daughter could have succumbed to the lure of such a man as Thornton. But with the passing of months it became increasingly evident

that the attraction was deep-seated. Doris did not attempt to deny it when questioned by her father. The Major was frightened and told Weldon so quite frankly.

Mrs. Ellington met the Major on the veranda. She placed a copy of the *Evening Record* in his hands. The Major absorbed every word of Terry Mooney's story.

When he finished he looked at his friend and housekeeper.

"What do you make of it, Martha?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Doris has been packing all morning, David."

"And you think that she is planning to elope with Thornton tonight?"

"I'm afraid so, David."

For a moment he did not speak and when he did his voice came so harshly that Martha Ellington had a moment of stark fear.

"She will not go with him," he said. "Tonight—or ever." The Major produced a cigar and chewed it reflectively.

"Martha," he asked suddenly, "where is Doris now?"

"Out. She may have gone downtown to do some last-minute shopping."

Manning shook his head. "It beats me," he admitted. "Doesn't it mean anything to her that the man is married?"

"That's the thing I can't understand. Doris is naturally decent."

Manning rose abruptly. "I'm going to phone young Weldon."

He stepped into the reception hall and called Carey Weldon's real estate office. Carey had gone to the Country Club for a round of golf. Manning immediately telephoned the club.

"They've sent for Carey," he announced when he returned to the veranda. "I'll wait here until he calls, or until Doris comes in."

Several minutes passed. Then suddenly there came the wail of a siren, and a little coupe swung violently into the driveway from the street. Martha Ellington immediately rose and walked inside. The scene promised to be difficult enough without the added embarrassment of her presence.

The Major knew that Doris had seen his car and realized what was coming. She leaped from her coupe, carrying several parcels. He fancied he detected a hint of apprehension in her eyes, but he wasn't sure. She walked toward him as though nothing had happened.

It was she who spoke as she came up the veranda steps, planted a light kiss on his forehead, dropped into a chair opposite.

"Home early, aren't you, Dad? What's wrong?"

He gazed straight at her. "Have you seen the *Record*, Doris?"

"About Wylie Thornton, you mean? Yes, I've seen it."

"Was that the first you knew that he was planning to go?"

TINY spots of color appeared in either cheek, but she refused to evade. "No. I've known for several days."

She lighted a cigarette, and he noticed that her fingers trembled.

"I want to ask you a straight question, Doris. Are you—" He choked momentarily. "Are you planning to leave for New York with Wylie Thornton?"

Again the high color in her cheeks. "Yes, Dad—I am."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

"You are—are—eloping?"

Her cigarette dropped to the floor of the veranda, but her eyes held his.

"Don't you know me better than that, Dad?"

"But Doris, you say you are going with him. . . ."

"Exactly. And let me make it all clear: I believe that I have a future on the stage. Wylie believes so, too. He suggested that I come to New York with him so that he might work me into his company in a small part. It is my great opportunity, Dad, and I'm going."

"But surely—don't you realize what this will start?"

"Scandal, you mean? Gossip? What of it? No, I don't mean that, really. The truth is, Dad, that the play is to be read and the first rehearsal held in New York Monday. Wylie has wired that he was bringing an ingenue with him. If I don't go on the midnight train tonight, I'll be too late."

"I see. . . . But does that alter the fact, dear, that you will be starting a scandal which cannot ever be lived down?"

"Yes. Because you see, Dad, as soon as it can be arranged Wylie is going to divorce his wife and marry me."

II

HER words were a stunning blow, but the Major realized that it was essential for him to remain calm. "You tell me, Doris, that this is not an elopement: that you are going with Wylie Thornton in a purely platonic manner. Does Thornton understand it that way?"

"Certainly."

"And he intends to divorce his wife and marry you?"

"Yes."

"Has Mary Thornton been informed of this?"

The girl shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Because Wylie is afraid of a row. She's a narrow-minded, nagging creature—"

"—who loves him, I judge?"

"I suppose so. But he doesn't care for her."

"And you, Doris—you are very much in love with him?"

"Yes, Dad."

"What about Carey Weldon?"

She shrugged. "He'll snap out of it. You see, Dad, the trouble with Carey is that he's just a nice, conventional, wealthy young businessman. His horizon is too narrow for me. Just as he, himself, is too narrow. But Wylie has romance. He's not humdrum. He's an artist."

Major Manning was finding it increasingly difficult to keep himself under control.

"Does he happen to know that you have an independent income of twenty-five thousand dollars a year from your mother's estate?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"Does he know it, Doris?"

"Yes."

"I see. . . ."

The girl spoke with more than a hint of annoyance. "Are you trying to insinuate, Dad, that he is marrying me for my money?"

"I'm not insinuating anything, dear. I'm trying to make you think for yourself."

"You don't know him, Dad. You are prejudiced."

"That is true."

"Why?"

"Because I see him a little more clearly than you do, Doris. The paper this evening goes into ecstasies over the man's social popularity. Doris, he is not a gentleman!"

She sprang to her feet. "That is not fair, Dad."

"Yes it is, dear. And a great deal more. Did you know, for instance, that he is an inveterate gambler—and a drunkard?"

"He is not. Of course, he drinks!"

"He has been reeling drunk at a dozen parties. And last night—"

"You're talking about the affair at John Norris's house!" she flared. "Wylie was not to blame. John Norris has always hated him, and last night he grossly insulted him—and in his own home."

The Major shook his head patiently. "John Norris ordered Thornton out of his house because Thornton was beastly drunk and had been making himself grossly objectionable. But if Norris—or any other man—ordered me out of his house, do you suppose that I would have done what Wylie Thornton did?"

"Yes. Just exactly. He knocked Mr. Norris down—which was what the man deserved."

FOR a moment the Major stared at his daughter, a frown on his brow.

"Quite heroic of Thornton, wasn't it?" There was irony in Manning's tone. "Weighing more than two hundred pounds to Norris's hundred and twenty. No, my dear, he isn't your sort. He may appear romantic to you, but your money, dear, is what he wants."

Doris was facing her father. Her voice was like ice. "Listen to me, Dad. We might as well understand each other clearly." She drew a long breath. "I am a woman and I have my own life to live. My mind is made up. I love Wylie Thornton and I am going with him tonight. Is that quite clear, Dad?"

The Major fumbled with a fresh cigar. When he spoke it was in a voice so calm that even he was amazed.

"Doris," he said, "you are my daughter, and it is my duty to protect you at any cost. You shall not leave this city with Wylie Thornton tonight."

Her little fists clenched. "You can't stop me, Dad."

"I can. And I shall."

"You mean," she asked shortly, "that you'll resort to the medieval method of locking me in my room?"

"No. Nothing like that."

"Then how?" Something in her father's eyes arrested her words, struck at her heart. "Dad! You wouldn't—"

"I can only repeat what I said before, Doris. You will not leave this city with Wylie Thornton tonight."

For a few seconds she stared. Then, terrified by something which she could not understand or analyze, she turned abruptly and vanished inside the house.

It was exactly six o'clock when Carey Weldon's roadster came whirling down Ralston Street. The Major was at the curb, his face like a thundercloud. He clambered in beside the young man and suggested that they take a drive.

"There's the devil to pay, Carey," Manning said. "Have you seen this afternoon's *Record?*"

"No. Why?"

"It carries a first-page story announcing that Wylie Thornton is leaving town tonight to accept an engagement in New York. But here's the mess, Carey. Doris is leaving with Thornton!"

The car slewed violently to the right and came to a protesting halt. Manning looked up at the young man and the face he saw was that of a man gripped by murderous fury. For the first time in the years of their friendship, Major Manning heard the young man swear.

It was Major Manning who broke the stream of bitter invective.

"Good Lord, Carey! I didn't think it would affect you that strongly. Really, son, you don't seem quite sane."

"I'm not." His eyes became deadly. "May I attend to this thing, Major? In my own way?"

"You mean you would kill him?"

"Yes, I'd kill him."

Manning placed a paternal hand on the boy's knee. "No, son. If you should kill him, Doris would be involved. Don't you see?"

Weldon was gripping the wheel until his knuckles stood out whitely. "Very well. What are we going to do? You're certainly not going to permit the elopement."

"No-o. In justice to Doris it isn't exactly an elopement. Thornton claims that he has a part for her in the Broadway production in which he is to star. Rehearsals start Monday."

"That is a lie!" growled Weldon. "I know it is a lie."

The Major received an impression of something unsaid—something which

"I hung one right on his button" (Chap. IX)

Weldon knew and would not explain. Tactfully he passed it over.

"Of course," went on Manning, "I'm not going to permit Doris to go with Thornton. She is infatuated with the man, and she cannot see him as we do. For instance, when I mentioned that disgraceful affair at John Norris's home last night, her sympathy was all with Thornton."

WELDON gave a bitter laugh. "What a pity that they stopped Norris when he went upstairs for his gun."

"It was—in a way," Manning said reluctantly. "John Norris doesn't threaten idly. As for me, I propose to see that he does not go with Doris tonight, no matter how drastic are the steps I must take to prevent it."

"Even to killing him?"

Manning hesitated for a moment. "Naturally, that would be the last desperate resort."

Carey Weldon was thoughtful for a moment. Then he shrugged.

"Very well, Major. Have you a plan?"

"Yes. According to the newspapers, tonight is Thornton's farewell appearance. I propose that we eat together at the club, then go to the theater just before the performance. I'd like you to stand guard in the alley which leads from Oak Street to the stage entrance. I shall go backstage and sit in the wings where I can see the archway which leads to the dressing room corridors and also the scene door on the city alley at the rear of the theater. It will then be impossible for Doris to go backstage without one of us seeing him, and equally impossible for Thornton to leave the theater from backstage without being seen."

"Suppose, though, that Doris makes no attempt to see Thornton at the theater—which is quite likely—what will you do?"

Manning smiled grimly. "I shall warn Thornton not to attempt to take Doris with him tonight, or allow her to join him wherever he might be."

"Do you really think you can frighten him?"

"I believe so. Even if a man is not actually a coward, he is careful under such circumstances. You see, Carey, I will make it quite clear to Thornton that I am not bluffing." . . .

Mary Thornton stood at the window of her bedroom in the Raleigh Hotel, a slim and tragic figure. One thin arm hung limply at her side, and in her hand was a copy of the *Evening Record.* A half dozen times she had read Terry Mooney's story of Wylie Thornton's departure. It was the first she had known of it.

She heard the clang of the elevator, then her husband's heavy step in the hall.

"Hey, sweetness, where are you?"

"In here," she answered in a thin, tired voice.

He posed in the doorway. Always posing, always the actor, even before the woman to whom he had been married for twenty years.

"Big house this afternoon?" she asked casually.

"Yes." He smiled conceitedly. "The women all flock to see me. I've been trying to get Jed to put on an extra matinee."

She smiled bitterly. "What are you doing tomorrow, Wylie?"

"Oh, nothing special."

"Have you seen the *Record* this afternoon?"

"No. I'm not interested in these tank town papers."

"You might be interested in this," she said quietly.

She placed the folded newspaper in his hands. He read the story, then looked up at her.

"It is all a damned lie!"

She shook her head. "It is the truth."

"It isn't. I'll swear it isn't."

And then something broke within her. Her long, lonely vigil, the heartbreak which had followed a realization that he was inflicting upon her the cruellest hurt of which he was capable, all flooded to the surface and she found relief in words.

They quarreled. It was not a decent quarrel, it was a bitter, loud-voiced brawl. They said things which human beings should not say to one another, and they said them in the most hurtful way.

"I know you, Wylie Thornton," his wife said, "and I know all about this Manning girl. Oh! the poor little fool! If she knew you as I do!"

He struck an attitude.

"If you insist on accusing me of that, Mary," he said in his best dramatic man-

ner, "I shall leave the hotel."

"Leave, then!" She caught her breath hysterically. "But when you go, remember this: Before I let you leave this city with Doris Manning, I'll kill you!"

His lips curled into a sneer. Then, with a grandiloquent gesture, he strode from the room.

III

BIG and imposing, the Edwin Booth Theater was on Oak Street, near the corner of Sycamore. It was a venerable structure, and shortly before seven when Wylie Thornton walked toward it, the lights across the front had not yet been turned on and the street before the barnlike old house was gloomy and deserted. Across the way a garage door cast a fitful radiance, but on both sides of the theater were warehouses, now dark.

The dressing rooms were on two floors, and the stairway leading to the upper floor terminated on the stage level close to an archway. It was an odd arrangement. The owners of the theater also owned the warehouse next door. The stage and the house itself used up the entire depth of the theater so that the dressing room corridors ran parallel to the stage alley and on the opposite side of it. Thus the dressing rooms really were in the warehouse building, though not, for practical purposes, a part of that structure.

Save for an electric bulb which glowed faintly from over the stage door itself, the alley was unlighted. And backstage the illumination was equally faint, save in the property room where Pete McIntosh worked.

Tonight, McIntosh was standing at the door of his property room getting a breath of air. At seven o'clock the big figure of Wylie Thornton came through the stage door. The eyes of the two men met. Thornton, summoning his dignity, vanished through the archway and strode down the lower floor corridor toward his dressing room, which was at the very end.

The property man turned back to his work. Presently he heard the stage door slam. He looked up and saw the slim figure of Mary Thornton, who had come in through the alley. It was plain to him, from her nervous, hurried manner, that she was under great emotional stress. He looked away as the woman passed through the arch and turned toward her husband's dressing room. McIntosh didn't particularly like Mary Thornton, but she certainly had his sympathy. He fancied that it must be a terrific strain on any woman to be Wylie Thornton's wife.

McIntosh was not sure how long it was before something came to his ears.

"Fighting again!" he murmured, and moved toward the dressing room corridor. He could not hear what they were saying, but he knew that this was a very serious quarrel. The property man frowned. He crossed the stage and the auditorium and entered the box office from the back of the house.

"Mike," he told the treasurer, "they're at it again. Thornton and his wife. In Thornton's dressing room."

Mike Marion rose. "Serious enough for me to butt in?"

"Yeh, I think *so*. They're sure raising hell."

They started through the house together. Suddenly McIntosh grabbed his friend's arm.

"Look," he commanded, jerking his thumb toward the big doors on the other side of the house.

Mike looked. The two men saw the slim, bent figure of Mary Thornton walking down the stage alley toward the street. Mike sighed with relief.

"Well, thank goodness for that!"

"Ditto," said Pete. "I'm darn glad she's gone."

MIKE turned back to his box office and McIntosh followed. The two men settled themselves in comfortable chairs in the cubbyhole and smoked contemplatively for a few moments. Then the treasurer spoke.

"Louse that he is," said Mike, "I'm sorry he's going. The women are cuckoo about him. He's got It in a large way, and it keeps our bank balance healthy. I wish his New York show would flop so he'd come back."

"As for me, I hate his insides. Listen, Mike—I've seen some cheap babies in my time, but this gimmick Thornton is the champ. If I'd been anything like that feller's size, I'd have taken a few cracks at him just for the sheer fun of the thing."

Mike Marion grinned. "Well, just control that terrible temper of yours a few

hours more, buddy. At midnight he beats it, and you can be happy while I worry with the deficit."

Three persons appeared at the box office window in quest of tickets and the treasurer moved forward to meet them.

Pete McIntosh glanced at his watch. It showed half past seven.

SLOWLY, the Edwin Booth Theater came to life. Three or four stage hands now showed up, and a few minutes later the members of the company commenced to arrive.

Lola Gresmer reached the theater at seven-forty. As leading woman she was a person of some importance. Tall, brunette, and of fine figure, Lola Gresmer was unquestionably beautiful, but even her best friends could not claim that she was an exceptional actress.

Between Miss Gresmer and the leading man there was an open enmity which he had fostered. He crabbed her lines, cut short her laughs, stole her applause; tricks of the profession which mean little to the layman but are the grossest insults of the stage.

Tonight Jed Samuels, the director, congratulated her on her emancipation.

"I've stood him for five months, Jed," she said smilingly. "I suppose I could have borne it even longer."

"You're a good scout, Lola. You haven't had a decent chance in this town, but you will from now on."

The dynamic little director watched her as she passed to the dressing rooms. Then he went in search of Pete McIntosh to discuss their property list.

Meanwhile, Major Manning and Carey Weldon had arrived at the theater. They stood together in the gloom of the stage alley.

"You stay out here, Carey," suggested the Major. "I'll go backstage."

Weldon watched the Major's impressive figure mount the three little steps leading to the stage door and then pass inside.

He lighted a cigarette and lounged against the old brick walls of the theater. After a while he noticed that the double doors of the emergency exit were open and with a sigh of relief he stepped inside the theater and took his seat on the very end of Row R. From this point of vantage he could see the alley as well as though he were in it and he was spared the embarrassment of being stared at.

SUDDENLY he leaped to his feet. Walking swiftly up the alley was a slim, trim figure of medium height. One long stride and he was in the alley.

"Just a minute, Doris, please."

Doris Manning turned angry eyes to the kindly face of her fiance. "What is it, Carey?" she demanded.

"You are going backstage to see Wylie Thornton?"

"Yes."

He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Doris. Your father is back there."

"Oh, he is, is he? Why are you and Father spying on me?"

"Because, Doris, we both love you. Don't you see, dear, why I'm asking you not to go backstage now? If you care for this man Thornton, I think you would be putting him in very grave danger by exciting your father any further."

She stared at Weldon and saw truth in his eyes. "But I must see Wylie."

"Later, then, dear. Not now." He hesitated for a moment. "Did you come downtown in your own car?"

"Yes."

"Suppose we take a little ride, you and I. Perhaps if we talk this thing over calmly, we might find a way out."

Reluctantly she agreed and he accompanied her to the spot where her sport roadster was parked. She settled herself under the wheel. He climbed in beside her and they rolled away toward the suburbs.

When at last he spoke his voice was infinitely gentle.

"I want you to listen to me until I finish, Doris," he said. "You know I love you, and always will. Also, you know how much you mean to your father. Neither of us believe your feeling for Thornton can last. I want you to wait —to think the thing over. Won't you see it my way, Doris?"

She had not moved during all the time he was talking. When she did answer her voice came firmly.

"Nothing that you can say will alter my plans, Carey."

Her air of finality shocked him. He bit his lip, tried to make his tone as quiet as before.

"You are not afraid of the effect this

will have on your father?"

She hesitated for a moment. "I'm sorry about that, of course. But I have my own life to live."

Carey was betrayed into sarcasm. "I think," he said quietly, "that I have heard similar remarks—on the stage."

Her cheeks flushed, and she swung the car violently in a semicircle, narrowly avoiding collision with a big sedan. Her eyes were blazing with anger. He bent forward and spoke again.

"If you persist in going through with this thing tonight, Doris, you are jeopardizing Wylie Thornton's life."

"You make me sick!" she flared. "You can't frighten me."

"Perhaps not," he answered coldly. "But I can't let you elope with a man like Wylie Thornton."

"You presume to dictate to me!"

"I have that right, you know, Doris. I happen to be engaged to you."

Angrily and recklessly she took her hand from the steering wheel without slackening speed. From the third finger of her left hand she tore the diamond ring and handed it to Carey.

"That is a status," she said brusquely, "which is easily remedied."

"You mean our engagement is ended?"

"Exactly. And you might tell that to Dad. You can tell him also that scandal or no scandal I am going to speak with Wylie."

The car jerked to a halt before the theater alley. He stepped out, bowing gravely. Her voice came to him sharply.

"I'll be back as soon as I can find a parking place," she said. "You had better tell Dad."

She saw his tall, slim figure move slowly across the street and reach the theater alley. His fists clenched and he started toward the stage door.

IV

As Mathilde Norris watched her husband settle himself with his evening cigar and newspaper, the scene of the previous night came back to her with horrid clarity. She remembered following two or three of her guests upstairs and finding John Norris inspecting his revolver.

"There's no use trying to stop me," he told them calmly. "I am going to kill him." John Norris, who was the city's most important real estate operator, did not bluster. He merely stated a fact. And when he started from the room they restrained him by force. He did not struggle. "It doesn't matter whether you stop me now," he said quietly. "If I don't kill him tonight, I will some other time."

Mathilde watched her husband open the newspaper. She saw his sharp-featured face grow stern at the eight-column streamer. Her heart was pounding.

"Doesn't that satisfy you, John?" she asked.

He smiled thinly. "Doesn't *what* satisfy me?"

"The fact that Wylie Thornton is leaving town through fear of you."

Her husband, never very communicative, was terrifying in his absolute calm. He produced a platinum pocket knife and meticulously slit the entire story from the paper. Then placing the clipping in his vest pocket, he rose and started for the stairway.

Mathilde darted after him and grabbed his arm.

"John! Please—I know what you're going for. But you mustn't! Besides—it isn't there."

"What isn't?"

"Your—your gun."

His face grew stern. "Where is it?"

"I won't tell you. I hid it, and I'm not going to help you be a murderer."

An icy smile creased his lips. "You don't understand very well, do you, Mathilde? For the first time in my life, Mathilde, a man knocked me down. Now he plans to escape me, but I can kill him. And I shall."

She gazed upon her husband in horror, wishing that he had something of the bluffer in his makeup. But she knew there was none of it there. She pleaded with him. When all of her other arguments failed, she fell back upon the one tender spot in the man's being.

"And about me, John?" she asked. "Have you considered that? Remember, I have had him at the house frequently. I guess I have been a fool with my lion-hunting. If you kill him, people will seek another motive, and that motive will be myself."

John Norris's eyes grew tender. Queer—the depth of the love for his wife. He carried the newspaper with him to the veranda, seated himself again and thought carefully. Finally he looked up.

"I'll alter my decision a trifle," he told

her, "because of what you say. I shall drive to the theater, now, and I shall take you with me. When I get there I will give Wylie Thornton a chance to apologize to me before you. If he does so, I will drop the matter."

Her lips were on his. "Oh! I am so happy. I know he will apologize, because he is afraid of you."

As they stepped into the car she asked one question: "You haven't a gun?"

"No. Plenty of time for that later—if I need it."

THEY arrived at the theater at seven forty-five. Norris parked straight across the end of the theater alley in fine disregard of traffic regulations. As he slipped out from under the wheel, his wife reached over and pressed his hand. He gave her a brief smile.

"I'll be back in a minute, Mathilde," he promised. "With Thornton."

She watched his small, erect figure disappear through the stage door. For five minutes she suffered a torture of apprehension. And then the stage door opened and her husband emerged. He was alone! She realized what that meant. Wylie Thornton had refused to apologize. Norris would arm himself—and return.

She watched him as he walked down the alley. A horrible fear clutched at her as he took his place at the wheel and jammed his foot on the starter. He threw the gears into second and the car leaped ahead.

Finally she found the courage to speak.

"Where are you going, John?"

His voice was strained and unnatural. "Hot night," he said. "Thought you might like to drive in the country."

Mathilde Norris felt that she must know or scream.

"What—what happened, John?"

He struggled to be casual. "Nothing much. I went into Thornton's dressing room and he apologized immediately. Under the circumstances it seemed that forcing him to repeat the apology before you, was somewhat of a pose. So I accepted it and told him that the affair was ended."

She had watched him closely. For a moment, when he finished talking, she was silent.

"Why don't you say something?" he asked. "Don't you believe me?"

"Of course I believe you, John. Of course I do."

But Mathilde Norris knew that her husband was lying.

Scarcely had John Norris driven off with his wife when Carey Weldon again reached the theater alley. For two or three minutes he stood staring at the stage door. Then, with sudden grim determination, he vanished backstage. Less than five minutes later he reappeared, and almost collided with Doris.

His face was white and drawn as he placed himself directly in Doris's path.

"You are acting like a spoiled child," he accused. "I have warned you what would happen if you went back stage."

"Carey Weldon," she said with what dignity she could muster, "I'm going back to see Wylie, and neither you nor Dad can stop me."

She pushed by him and started up the three little steps. Worried and desperate, he followed her. His heart was pounding.

They entered the wings. The clock over the callboard showed ten minutes after eight as they came through the stage door. Carey waited for the explosion. Doris's presence would be the signal for which the girl's father had been waiting.

But nothing happened. Weldon looked over his shoulder. There was the canvas seat on which the Major had been sitting but Manning was not there.

The girl followed the direction of Carey's eyes.

"Is that where Dad was supposed to be?"

"Yes."

There was relief in her voice. "Thank goodness he's not there, then."

She moved through the archway and turned down the dressing room corridor, with Weldon at her side, pleading with her. She paid no attention to him. Martin Vance, the character man, stepped out of his dressing room and called a cheery "Good evening," as she passed.

She nodded and walked right on to Wylie Thornton's dressing room.

She knocked lightly on the door. There was no answer. With a defiant gesture Doris Manning turned the knob and opened the door. Carey Weldon stood at her shoulder and he, too, saw the terrible spectacle, even before she uttered her first scream.

AT their feet, sprawled grotesquely on the floor and lying face down, was the body of Wylie Thornton. He was partly dressed—and on the floor was a tiny pool of blood.

For a few seconds Doris Manning stared at the body of the man whom she fancied she loved. Then, slowly, she raised her eyes. It was then that a scream escaped her lips—a hysterical scream which brought pudgy, good-natured Martin Vance running down the corridor, and behind him a half dozen other persons. For Doris's eyes were focused in fascinated horror on the figure of a man who stood in the corner of the dressing room, next to the dressing table where, obviously, Wylie Thornton had been making up for the evening performance.

Major Manning stood erect, fearless. Unmindful of the half dozen persons who crowded the doorway behind her, Doris Manning uttered the thought which hammered in her brain.

"Oh! Dad," she cried, "why did you kill him?"

Carey Weldon caught Doris as she fainted. Dressing room doors opened and members of the cast crowded about the threshold. Jed Samuels elbowed his way through the door and took in the situation at a glance.

"Don't anybody else come in the room," he snapped, "and don't anybody leave the theater. Vance, telephone Police Headquarters. McIntosh, you phone for a doctor."

The low, quiet voice of Major Manning broke in. "You don't need a doctor, Samuels. He is dead."

"Then phone the coroner," Samuels ordered. He surveyed the group at the door, and singled out the little ingenue. "Anice," he said, "you're a good scout. Take one of the men with you and go up to the Raleigh Hotel. Tell Mrs. Thornton, and bring her down here in a taxi."

Anice Garet nodded. "I hate the job, but I'll do it."

"That's the girl." The efficient man eyed the others sternly. "I'm asking you not to disturb anything." Then Jed Samuels stepped in front of the curtain, silenced the orchestra and raised his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I regret to inform you that there will be no performance tonight. One of our principal players has been severely injured. May I ask that you file out quietly and stop at the box office for your ticket refund? I thank you."

Returning to Thornton's room, Jed Samuels passed Carey Weldon, who was carrying the still unconscious form of Doris Manning. Walking beside them, with a silk kimono over her exquisite figure, was Lola Gresmer.

Weldon mounted the winding stairway with Doris and placed her on a couch in Lola's dressing room.

"I think you had better go downstairs, Mr. Weldon," Lola said. "The Major may need you."

Carey made his way back to Thornton's dressing room again. Apparently the Major had not moved. At sight of Carey he spoke quietly.

"I want you to do me a favor, son. Telephone the Mountain House and ask Jim Hanvey to come here immediately."

"Jim Hanvey? Who is he?"

"Probably the best detective in America. He has been down here investigating a series of forgeries at my bank. I think I will need his help."

"I'll phone him, sir. Immediately."

OUT in front, the audience had not immediately left the house. Wild, fantastic rumors had reached them, and they stood about talking. Then someone telephoned the *Morning Record*. The bulldog edition was quickly made over, and across the top of the front page blared an eight-column streamer. A three-column picture of Wylie Thornton smiled from the first page. The city editor himself had done the story. Boiled down it was nothing more than the bare statement that Wylie Thornton had been killed.

This done the city editor swept the office with his eye. Seated calmly at his desk was a very self-possessed young man, Ken Johnston by name, and admittedly the best pavement pounder in the city.

"You, Johnston!" yelled the city editor. "Drop everything else and cover this. We want another extra in half an hour."

Johnston rose unhurriedly. The harassed eyes of the city editor continued to rove.

"Hey, Mooney!" he yelled. "Come here."

Terry Mooney answered the summons.

"You're on the *Evening Record,* aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Didn't you write that spread in this evening's edition—the one about Thornton leaving for New York?"

"Yes, sir."

"You hang around with that theater gang a good bit, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

Ken Johnston edged in.

"They say he's engaged to the ingenue, Chief. What's her name, Terry?"

"Anice Garet."

"Right-o," growled the city editor. "Johnston, take Mooney with you. You, Mooney, keep both eyes open for human interest. Johnston will look after the news end. Now get out of here both of you."

They left the office together: the veteran and the youngster. Half hour later, the city editor received a call from his star reporter.

"Chief, this is Johnston. Got a few facts. Inspector Marty Gallagher here from headquarters. Major Manning discovered in the room with the body. His daughter found him there and accused him of the murder. Manning probably under arrest. And say, Chief, I think Jim Hanvey—you know, the big bank sleuth—I think he's going to work this case with Gallagher."

V

JIM HANVEY was a mountainous sort of person, in whose physical makeup there was not the slightest suggestion of symmetry. He extended fatly two ways from a prodigious tummy, and, amazingly enough, the clothes he wore seemed entirely too large. But it was Jim Hanvey's head which riveted one's attention. It was huge and fleshy, rising supreme above three softly flowing chins. He had a kindly mouth and remarkable eyes, small and drowsy, which gave the impression of seeing nothing. Hanvey was chatting now with Major Manning outside Thornton's dressing room, and while he talked he fumbled with a peculiar object hanging on his vest. Ken Johnston moved closer—followed by Terry Mooney and Police Inspector Marty Gallagher.

"For the love of Mike," he asked, "what is that awful-looking thing?"

Jim Hanvey turned. "This," he said, designating the article on his watch chain, "is the delight of my existence. It was given to me years ago by a crook I sent up for a stretch. It's a toothpick—eighteen-karat gold—and it comes in awful handy. See?" He pressed a button and a wicked looking little blade flashed out. "It's swell, don't you think?"

"Yes," answered Johnston dazedly, "I sure do."

Hanvey turned to Gallagher. "Inspector," he said, "I've been in this town working on a case at the Major's bank. He asked me to come down here and help out. I told him it was up to you."

Gallagher was tall, heavy set, quietly efficient. "You mean, Jim, as an employee of the Major?"

"Well, he says he didn't kill Thornton. But he understands that if I come into this thing, it'll be to turn over anything I find against him—if I do."

"Is that correct, Major?" Manning nodded dignified assent. "Then so far as I'm concerned," said Gallagher, "I'm tickled pink."

Terry Mooney shoved forward. "Inspector, I'm from the *Evening Record.* I'm working with Johnston. Is it official that Jim Hanvey has definitely come in on the case?"

"Sure."

Mooney turned eagerly away, but Hanvey stopped him. "Hey, son, don't you go saying I'm in charge. This is the Inspector's case, not mine."

Terry warmed to the friendly smile on the big face. "I understand," he said quickly, and darted for the backstage telephone.

The two detectives walked inside the dressing room, closing the door behind them.

Jim stared about through sleepy eyes. Sprawled at full length Wylie Thornton looked huge. He was clad in dinner trousers and an undershirt.

"He was supposed to wear dinner clothes in the first act," Bill Sherman, the coroner, explained.

Gallagher designated an odd-looking weapon which lay on a little shelf in a wad of cotton. "That's the gun. Thirty-two caliber, and one bullet has been fired."

HANVEY was staring at it. "Silencer," he remarked. "Ain't that unusual?"

"Yes, and no. They used that silencer last week in a melodrama they were playing. It belongs in the property room."

"Any idea how it got in here?"

"Yeh. Pete McIntosh, the property man, says he missed it this morning. He told me that Wylie Thornton copped the gun and put real bullets in it to protect himself, after a man named Norris threatened his life. However, I'm leery about the gun helping us. The corrugated handle doesn't show any fingerprints."

"How come Major Manning is mixed up with this actor?"

"That's a story, too. His daughter, Doris, has been playing small parts with this company. Thornton was leaving tonight for New York and the dope is that Doris was going with him. You can imagine what Manning would do if he knew that his daughter was about to elope with a married man?"

"Thornton's married?"

"Yeh. We've sent up to the hotel for his wife."

Hanvey knelt by the body and turned it over. The bullet had gone cleanly through the heart, but it was not the wound which appeared to interest the fat detective.

"Thornton was slugged, wasn't he?" he said.

"What do you mean—slugged?"

Jim designated an ugly black-and-blue place on the left side of the dead man's jaw. "Somebody hung one there and hung it hard. You reckon Major Manning could have done that?"

"It don't sound reasonable. Manning ain't young, or near Thornton's size. But if Manning did slug Thornton, there ought to be a skinned place on his knuckles, oughtn't there?"

"Perhaps," agreed Jim. "Why not look?"

Marty left the room and returned a few seconds later. He was shaking his head.

"Not a mark on the knuckles of either hand, Jim," he said, and the two men proceeded to a search of the body. Articles in Thornton's pockets were carefully examined and placed in a handy cigar box. On the floor they found a copy of the *Evening Record*. It was Marty Gallagher who first discovered something which appeared very important. Lying on the floor about six feet from the body was Wylie Thornton's wallet. Gallagher made a quick examination of its contents.

"I think we have something here, Jim." The Inspector rose and started for the door. "Wait just a minute."

He returned shortly with the treasurer, Mike Marion. "Didn't you tell me, Mr. Marion, that Thornton collected his salary from you this afternoon?"

"Yes. Right after the matinee."

"How much was it?"

"Six hundred dollars."

"Check or cash?"

"Cash."

"What did he do with the money?"

"He put it in his wallet."

"Thanks, Marion. That'll be all."

Somewhat bewildered, the little treasurer returned to his office. Marty Gallagher turned back excitedly to Hanvey.

"You heard what that guy said. Thornton got six hundred dollars in cash. And presumably he had a few dollars in his wallet when he got paid, didn't he?"

"Yeh."

"Well, how do you explain this, Jim? In that wallet now there are just exactly two hundred and twelve dollars!"

JIM blinked. "Gosh! You don't say."

"But I do say. Wylie Thornton was robbed."

"By Major Manning?"

"Hell! No! The Major wouldn't rob a man. He was robbed, though."

"Suppose," drawled Hanvey, "that he gave that money to his wife when he went to the hotel for dinner? If he was planning to leave town without her, that wouldn't be unlikely, would it?"

"Oh, thunder! You're always spiking my guns."

"Take it easy, Marty. We'll talk to Mrs. Thornton. Meanwhile, what else is in that wallet?"

"Railroad ticket and a lower from here to New York on the midnight train tonight. Nothing else. And I'll bet my shirt he didn't slip his wife any dough. A bozo that's planning to leave his dame flat for another woman ain't shoving her four hundred cartwheels just beforehand." Gallagher shook his head. "What do you suggest now?"

"Well, I'd suggest that if Mary Thornton is here we have a talk with her. If she ain't here, then let's chat with Major Manning."

They found the Major in the passageway. Beside him was the tall figure of Carey Weldon and hovering about them were three reporters: Ken Johnston of the *Morning Record*, Terry Mooney of the *Evening Record* and Max Ross of the *Star*. Gallagher informed Major Manning that he would like to talk with him about the killing. Ken Johnston suggested that the reporters be permitted to listen in.

To Gallagher's amazement, Manning agreed. "I have nothing to conceal," explained the Major with quiet dignity. "Carey Weldon and I reached the theater about seven thirty-five," he was saying as he approached its conclusion. "I left Carey in the theater alley and I came backstage and sat in the wings." He paused and cleared his throat. "At about seven forty-five John Norris came backstage and passed into the dressing room corridor. He may or may not have gone to Wylie Thornton's dressing room. In about ten minutes, he reappeared. His face was drawn and worried and he was hurrying. At a little after eight o'clock I determined to talk with Thornton. I went to his dressing room door and knocked. There was no answer. I cracked open the door, and I saw Thornton's body on the floor. Gentlemen, I was horrified, but queerly enough, not surprised."

"And you did what, then?"

"I stepped inside and closed the door."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to think. Almost immediately the door opened again and it was my daughter. She saw the body and accused me of killing Wylie Thornton."

Gallagher's eyes were hard as granite. "It is your belief that John Norris did this killing?"

"I did not say so."

"Perhaps not. But you were very careful to give us that impression." Gallagher was disgusted and showed it. "Let's go out of here, Jim. And you, Major Manning, are under arrest. You reporters can telephone that to your papers if you want."

"Thanks," said Johnston quickly.

They filed out of the room. A plain clothes man approached Gallagher.

"Chief, Mrs. Thornton is in Thornton's room. She came in with that little actress and we couldn't keep her out. She was raising hell, Chief."

"All right. Let's talk to her, Jim."

Hanvey shrugged. "You go get her out of there, Marty."

GALLAGHER strode down the hall, followed by Ken Johnston and Max Ross. Terry Mooney started after them, but Anice Garet stepped through the open door of a dressing room and grabbed Terry's arm.

"Please, Terry, don't go with them."

"But I have to, dear. I'm on this story for the paper." Mooney was conscious of a shadow hovering nearby. He introduced Anice to Jim Hanvey.

"Aren't you the young lady who fetched Mrs. Thornton?"

"Yes." The girl's eyes were filled with tears. "It was terrible. She just sat there and stared at me, and then all of a sudden she started screaming."

Hanvey's voice was infinitely soothing: "Gosh! You look awful young to be an actress."

"I'm twenty." She smiled in spite of herself.

Terry Mooney cut in. "She's a peach, Mr. Hanvey."

"He's prejudiced," said the girl.

"And so'm I," endorsed Jim. "Golly, if I had met a girl that looked like you when I was twenty years younger—"

Anice looked squarely at the big detective and slipped her hand into his.

"Jim Hanvey," she said, "you're regular! I was all in, and you've snapped me out of it. I want to say thanks."

He grinned like a kid. " 'Sall right, sister. And you can pay me back some time."

"How?"

"Well, it's this way. Me, I got one hobby in the world and that's young love. Besides I'm lonely in this town. How about you and Mooney sort of taking me under your wing?"

"You mean that?"

"I never was more serious in my life. I like you two kids."

"Hanvey!" It was Gallagher's voice calling and Jim waddled heavily through the door.

VI

MOVING lightly despite his weight, Jim Hanvey joined Gallagher in the corridor. The Inspector was flanked by Max Ross and Ken Johnston, when Terry

Mooney joined the group.

"Mrs. Thornton is in one of those dressing rooms yonder, Jim," Gallagher said and turned to Terry Mooney. "Say, you—Johnston tells me that you're a playwright or something. Is that so?"

Mooney flushed. "I'm trying to learn to write plays."

"You hang around the theater a good bit, don't you?"

"Yes. I'm trying to study stage technique."

"Were you backstage here earlier this evening?"

"Yes. I came to see Miss Garet."

"When you were here to see Miss Garet, did you see Pete McIntosh?"

"No, sir."

"Hmm . . . ." Gallagher did some deep thinking. "What sort of a bird is he?"

"Pete's a fine fellow."

"Has he got a temper?"

"Well, I've seen him pretty mad, if that's what you mean."

"It is. Did he like Wylie Thornton?"

"I don't think so. In fact I know he didn't. But then nobody in the company or crew liked Mr. Thornton."

"The more I question, the worse the thing gets." Gallagher turned to Hanvey. "I'm going to take you in to talk with Mary Thornton. I want you to handle her—you do it a heap easier than me."

Jim Hanvey followed Marty Gallagher into the little dressing room. Marty awkwardly introduced Hanvey and the stricken widow lifted haggard eyes to the face of the fat detective.

Hanvey framed his first question with care. "When was the first you knew of this—this tragedy, Mrs. Thornton?"

"I learned of it from Anice Garet. I was shocked, but not surprised."

"Why not?"

"Because I had telephoned to the home of Major Manning earlier in the evening to tell him that my husband was eloping tonight with his daughter."

"Why did you do that, Mrs. Thornton?"

"Because I thought the Major would prevent the elopement."

"How?"

"I don't know. . . . And I didn't *care.* You see, Mr. Hanvey, I had just quarreled bitterly with my husband over Doris Manning. In fact, my last words to him were—were—"

"Were what?"

"A threat. I—I told him that if he tried to go through with this thing, I would kill him."

"But you were not serious, of course?"

"I thought I was—then."

"And what happened?"

"He left the hotel and I telephoned Major Manning's home. Later, I went to the theatre."

"To see your husband?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"A little after seven o'clock. He was in his dresing room."

"What happened?"

SHE shuddered and for a moment or two was unable to answer because of emotion.

"I begged him not to run away with Doris Manning. We started our quarrel all over again."

"Did he give you any money?"

"No."

"Did he agree not to elope with this girl?"

"No. He said he was going with her."

"And what did you do?"

"For the second time this evening I threatened to kill him."

"What did you do after this second threat?"

"I went back to the hotel."

"And stayed there until Miss Garet came to tell you what had happened?"

"Yes."

Hanvey placed his hand gently on her shoulder. "You have been awfully kind, Mrs. Thornton. And now, if you'll let me, I'll send you back to the hotel. And I'd advise that you take a strong anodyne and get a good night's rest."

A few minutes later, Gallagher grabbed Hanvey's arm.

"You're a marvel, Jim. Of course I'm having her room watched. It's as plain as the nose on your face that she killed her husband."

"Hmm," murmured Jim. "Maybe so, Marty—but on a face like mine, you got to remember that a nose ain't so awful plain."

"You mean she didn't kill her husband?"

"I honestly don't know whether she did or not."

Marty was relieved. "Well, I'm certain she did. She threatened twice to kill him, and she had just bumped him off with the prop gun which he had loaded with real bullets. The silencer kept it from

making any noise. Later all that other mess happened, and finally when Major Manning went into that dressing room Thornton was dead—just like he says."

"I see .... And it was Mary Thornton who copped the four hundred berries out of his wallet? Why?"

"Perhaps she needed money. Or if it wasn't that, she did it so that it would look like robbery."

"Then," asked Hanvey, "why didn't she take the whole six hundred and twelve?"

"How the hell do I know? Women get funny ideas."

Jim was quietly reflective. "I was just thinking that for such a little woman she sure packs an awful wallop."

"What you mean—wallop?"

"That bruise on Thornton's jaw."

Gallagher was disgusted. "How do you know she didn't slug him with the butt of the gun?"

"I don't. Do you think she did?"

"Sure I do."

"A blow that would leave a bruise like that would most likely knock a man down, wouldn't it, Marty?"

"I guess so."

"Then what did she do—shoot him after he fell, or wait until he got up?"

Gallagher's face was flushed. "Say, what's the big idea of quizzing me like this? Do you reckon I killed him?"

"No," grinned Hanvey, "but I sure ain't ready to believe that Mary Thornton did. There's a whole lot of this case that we haven't unearthed yet, Marty. What do you say if we run out and have a talk with this Norris bird?"

Marty Gallagher and Jim Hanvey rode into the fashionable west side of the city in a taxicab.

Save for a light in the living room downstairs, the Norris house was dark. They dismissed the taxi, moved up the concrete walk and rang the bell. No answer.

"Nobody home, and the servants gone," muttered Gallagher.

"Seems so, Marty. Let's siddown."

They moved along the tile veranda and selected two comfortable chairs. They were scarcely seated, however, before a car turned in at the driveway, paused, and a woman alighted; a woman about thirty years of age. Then they heard the voice of John Norris.

"You wait on the porch, dear, while I put the car up."

THE car disappeared behind the house, and Mathilde Norris walked onto the veranda. Two shadows rose.

"Mrs. Norris?" Jim Hanvey's voice was quiet.

"Who are you?" All the terror of earlier in the evening surged once again into her breast. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"We're from Police Headquarters," said Marty Gallagher, and the effect of his words was startling.

"What has happened?" she gasped.

"What has happened where, ma'am?"

"I—I don't know. But there is something wrong."

"What makes you think that?"

"You—you wouldn't be here if there wasn't."

"Why, I don't know, ma'am." Jim waited for a moment, and then: "You and Mr. Norris have been out riding, ma'am?"

"Yes. In the country."

"How long?"

"Oh! several hours." She stepped close to Hanvey and stared up into his eyes. "Something *is* wrong, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid so."

"What?"

"We have come to question your husband about Wylie Thornton's murder!"

"But John had nothing to do with it!" she flashed. "And you can't fool me. You've simply heard about last night."

"Didn't he go to the theater tonight?"

"No! We just went for a drive to Springdale. I've been with him every minute."

The slim, erect figure of John Norris rounded the house and appeared on the veranda.

"What is this?" he asked coldly.

Mathilde grabbed his arm. "Don't say anything, dear. These men are from the police station and I have told them that we were not at the theater tonight."

"You shouldn't have done that, Mathilde," he said quietly. He turned to the two visitors. "You have come to ask me about the death of Wylie Thornton?"

They saw Mathilde stare at her husband with horrified eyes.

Hanvey spoke quietly. "You have been in the country most of the evening haven't you, Mr. Norris?"

"Yes."

"Then how did you know that Thornton was dead?"

Norris was cool: "Because it happens

that I visited his dressing room and saw his body."

"I see. And when was this?"

"About eight o'clock."

"May I ask why you visited his dressing room?"

"I went there with the intention of forcing him to apologize for something which occurred in my home last night. Perhaps you have heard about it?"

"Yes. We heard. So you went to his dressing room. What happened?"

"Nothing. He was dead when I got there."

"What did you do when you saw his body?"

"Nothing. I waited long enough to be reasonably certain that no one had followed me to the dressing room, then I looked carefully up and down the corridor, and left.

"Did you see Major Manning anywhere about the theater?"

"I saw no one."

"Then you took Mrs. Norris for a long ride? Why?"

"To establish an alibi. I wished to avoid unpleasant publicity if that were possible."

Hanvey nodded. "I'd like to congratulate you, Mr Norris, on your frankness."

"Am I to consider myself under arrest?"

"Gosh, no! You didn't kill Thornton, did you?"

"Certainly not."

"Then there's nothing to arrest you for. And now we'll say good night to you and Mrs. Norris. I'm sorry we had to trouble you, and I hope you won't mind if we are compelled to question you again later."

"That will be quite all right. And thank you."

Gallagher followed Hanvey down the steps to the street. "Why didn't you make a pinch?" Gallagher demanded.

"I want him to feel safe. And I'd like you to have him tailed."

They had reached the corner, and in the glow of the arc light Hanvey produced a newspaper.

"Here's a trophy I got off their porch, Marty," he grinned. "It's their copy of the *Evening Record.* Looks like Norris has clipped out the story about Thornton leaving town."

Marty Gallagher gazed at the big man in amazement.

"Durned if you don't beat the Dutch, Jim Hanvey. Fooling around with papers.... Won't you ever get it through your head that Wylie Thornton bought a paper between the hotel and the theater and that that was the one you found on the floor of his dressing room? And I'll bet you're nursing a bunch of other dinky clues, aren't you?"

"Maybe, Marty. I always was a durn fool for paying attention to little things and letting the big ones take care of themselves."

VII

WHEN the detectives returned, an air of hushed solemnity hung over the theater. The body had been turned over by the coroner to an undertaker. Gallagher assembled the company.

"There's a whole lot of this thing we haven't found out yet," he announced frankly, "but there ain't any use keeping all of you worried. I'm going to let you go home. But before you do, please everybody leave address and telephone number with Mr. Samuels. Also, before you go I want to know if any of you saw Major Manning backstage before we found Thornton."

Two or three said that they had.

"Did anybody see Mr. Weldon?" went on Gallagher.

Lola Gresmer's eyes flashed to Martin Vance. Hanvey saw the look.

"Didn't you see Mr. Weldon?" he inquired.

Vance also saw Carey Weldon smile and nod.

"Yes, sir," said Vance. "I saw him."

"When?"

"Just a few minutes before the body was found."

"That was when he was with Miss Manning?"

"No, sir. Before that. He was alone."

"Where did you see him?" Gallagher cut in.

Vance looked utterly miserable.

"I saw him coming out of the dressing room corridor," he said weakly. "But I don't think—"

"I didn't ask you to think, Mr. Vance." He gestured toward the white-faced assemblage. "Go home, all of you. Major Manning, I'll ask you and Mr. Weldon to come downtown with Mr. Hanvey

and myself. That will be all."

It was a queer procession that went to the police station: Gallagher with Major Manning and Doris and Max Ross. Hanvey with Carey Weldon, Terry Mooney and Ken Johnston. At headquarters Gallagher addressed Major Manning and Carey Weldon.

"Gents," he said, "I can either make this pleasant or unpleasant. You can write your own ticket."

"What do you mean?" asked the Major.

"Just this: I'd like to have you agree to stay with us for a couple of days. If you say no, I can hold you under a murder charge."

"I'll stay," said Carey Weldon promptly.

"So will I," agreed the Major.

Gallagher turned to the desk sergeant. "Private room for each—and they're to talk to nobody without orders from us."

Doris, pale and drawn, touched Hanvey's sleeve. "May I go into the room with my father?" she pleaded. Jim looked at Gallagher who nodded.

"All right with me. Sergeant, I'm turning 'em over to you."

The Inspector, Jim Hanvey and the three reporters adjourned to Gallagher's private office. Ken Johnston spoke.

"Chief," he said, "I think you kind of slipped with Major Manning. Unless I'm mistaken, we've already shoved an extra on the streets saying that he had been charged with killing Thornton."

Marty shrugged.

"Let it go," he grinned. "If you need protection on it, we'll make the charge. He'll be getting off light enough with just that anyway."

"You don't think he did it?"

"Hell, no! I ain't saying this for publication, but I'm betting my badge Mary Thornton bumped him off." He turned to Hanvey. "Don't you think I'm right now, Jim?"

The big man moved his head slowly from side to side. "I ain't got but one definite idea on this case," he confessed. "And that is, it wasn't suicide."

"Funny, ain't you!" scoffed Gallagher. He touched a button on his desk and the uniformed policeman answered. "Dean," he snapped, "bring Weldon in here." He turned to the newspapermen. "You boys can sit in, if you want, but don't print anything without talking it over with us."

Carey entered the room. He met Gallagher's eyes levelly.

"Just a few questions, Mr. Weldon. As I understand things, you had been riding with Miss Manning just before you went backstage the first time. Did you have a pleasant ride?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because Miss Manning broke off her engagement to me during that ride."

"Did you ask her whether she intended eloping with Thornton tonight?"

"Yes."

"What did she say?"

"She said she was not eloping."

"Did she say anything about marrying Thornton?"

"Yes. She said that Thornton intended to divorce his wife and marry her."

"You were really sore, weren't you, when she broke off the engagement?"

"I suppose I was."

"That was when you went backstage, presumably to speak to Major Manning, wasn't it?"

"That was when I went backstage to speak to Major Manning. It was not presumably."

"I see. Did you speak with him?"

"No. I didn't see him."

"Weren't you surprised at not seeing him sitting where he was supposed to be?"

"Yes."

"What did you do then?"

"I looked for him."

"In Wylie Thornton's dressing room?"

"No."

"Didn't you have reason to believe that he might be in Thornton's dressing room?"

"I didn't think he was there."

"But you should have thought so under the circumstances, shouldn't you?"

WELDON'S eyes blazed. "If this is a third degree, it will get you nowhere, Gallagher. I am trying to tell the truth."

"Oh! surely you are." Marty's voice was heavy with sarcasm. "It just fortunately happens that the truth isn't hurting you a bit. That's fine."

"Are you accusing me of killing Thornton?"

"Not yet, I'm not. But I'm getting pretty damned interested in that idea. Now answer me this: Weren't you suf-

ficiently sore at Thornton to have killed him?"

"I don't know. But I had nothing to do with killing Thornton and didn't know he was dead until I reached his dressing room with Miss Manning."

"Which is exactly what everybody claims," snapped Marty.

The policeman escorted Weldon back to his comfortable, barred room. And when the door closed behind him, Marty Gallagher rubbed his hands.

"I've got a hunch," he declared, "that he's the baby who bumped Thornton off."

"Why so?" inquired Hanvey softly. "What has made you forget Mary Thornton so suddenly?"

"Just one thing," said Gallagher. "If it hadn't been for that wallop on the jaw I'd have been sure it was the wife. But looking at Weldon, it suddenly struck me that there was a baby big enough and mad enough to have poked Thornton good and hard. Sore, see? Zowie! Right on the button. Thornton goes down and hops up. Grabs the prop gun with its silencer and real bullets. Weldon wrestles it from him and—bango! he has killed Thornton." Marty beamed pridefully on the crowd. "Ain't that a reasonable hunch?"

"It's perfect," applauded Hanvey. "There's only one more thing to be explained."

"Yeh—killjoy! What's that?"

"I want to know what this young multi-millionaire did with the four hundred dollars he stole off Thornton's body after he had done the killing?"

The killing of Wylie Thornton would have been a nine-days' wonder in the community even without surrounding circumstances of drama, suspicion and romance; and naturally the city editors of the three local newspapers did what was technically described as "playing the story for all it was worth." Ken Johnston was in active reportorial charge, but Terry Mooney's name appeared every day over a feature story in the *Evening Record*. However, so far as results were concerned, the police seemed to have been stationary since the night of the killing. People were quizzed and counter-quizzed; theories were advanced and discarded; the usual fanatics wrote long letters signed *Pro Bono Publico* and on the second Sunday after the killing—eight days after Wylie Thornton's body had been found on the floor of his dressing room—Terry Mooney was permitted to sign his name to a most excellent summary of the case.

He reviewed the case from the beginning, and treated of the suspects one at a time. It was a creditable feature and he received many congratulations, although when Jim Hanvey complimented him that night when he, Mooney and Anice Garet were eating chow mein together in a Chinese restaurant, the youngster declared that it wasn't so much.

"It's this way, Jim," he explained. "I had to go awfully light, for many reasons. In the first place, we've got word to keep Doris Manning's name out of it unless the case comes to trial. Then John Norris: he's one of the biggest men in town, but he's never actually been charged with the murder and so we have to handle him with kid gloves. As a matter of fact, Jim, I don't believe either of them did it, do you?"

Anice leaned forward. "Gallagher thinks it was either Mrs. Thornton or Carey Weldon."

"Might have been, too. But I have a hunch that Weldon—or Manning either, for that matter—would have told the truth if they had done it."

"And so would Mary Thornton."

HANVEY'S eyes narrowed. "Have you tried putting yourself in her place, sister? Do you realize she was half crazy, that she didn't have a friend in the town? Don't you suppose she might have figured that she wouldn't stand a chance of a square deal if it was a question of her against somebody like Manning or Weldon or Norris?"

Anice nodded slowly. "I never thought of it just that way," she admitted, "but just the same I believe I would have told the truth if I had killed him."

"You wouldn't!" broke in Terry positively. "It would be just as Jim said. However, I don't think Mary Thornton killed her husband, and I know she didn't take that four hundred dollars, and it's a cinch she couldn't have inflicted that bruise on his jaw."

"Those are the things that have puzzled me," murmured Hanvey. "They don't seem to fit in anywhere. Now Marty Gallagher has found out that Pete McIntosh needed money and also that he hated Thornton."

"Mac never did it," said Anice positively. "He isn't that kind."

"Well, for that matter, who is?" Jim lighted a cigar. They left the restaurant and walked to Hanvey's hotel. "We're at a standstill," Jim told Terry. "If it was a game instead of a murder, we could call it a draw and go home. I almost wish something new would happen."

And, as though in answer to Jim Hanvey's wish, something did happen; something which jerked the Thornton case out of its feature position in the daily press and back to the news columns. Terry Mooney and Anice Garet escorted Jim to the lobby of his hotel, intending to bid him good night. They were greeted by the hotel manager who was obviously excited.

"Mr. Hanvey," said that dignitary, "Inspector Gallagher has been calling you for the last half hour. He says it's of tremendous importance and for you to call him immediately at headquarters."

"Good," and Jim started for the elevator, the others following. Three minutes later they were in his room. The manager had evidently given orders to the house operator because almost instantly Jim's telephone rang and Gallagher's voice barked through the receiver.

"There's hell to pay, Hanvey. Grab a taxi and beat it quick to the Raleigh Hotel. Mary Thornton has been assaulted. Strangled. She may be dying. We've called a doctor, but I left orders that nothing was to be touched until you got here. Now—step on it!"

VIII

PROTESTING brakes squealed as they brought the car to a halt outside the Raleigh. Jim dropped heavily to the curb, waved a fleshy paw at his young friends, who drove away. As he passed into the lobby Marty Gallagher yanked him behind a screen of potted palms.

Marty was even more excited than he had been the night of the murder.

"Can you beat it?" he gasped.

"I don't know," answered Jim. "Can you?"

"Hell, no. I can't even tie it. All the same, we're sittin' pretty, Jim—awful pretty."

"How so?"

"As soon as we get our hands on the man who strangled Mary Thornton, the case is finished. It's a cinch that he's the guy who killed her husband."

Jim's face was grave. "Is she dead?"

"No."

"Will she die?"

"I don't know that, either. The Doc just got here. He is to wait there until we come and he ain't to say a word to anybody. I've been half crazy trying to locate you."

"I was eating chop suey with that Mooney kid and his sweetie. I kinda like those two youngsters."

"Forget 'em for a while, will you? I've been on the job while I was waiting to get you. Sent out two of my best men to work under cover and find out just where Carey Weldon, Major Manning and John Norris were while this thing was happening to Mary Thornton."

"Didn't you forget Pete McIntosh?"

"I didn't think you suspected him."

"Maybe I don't. But if you're checking up alibis you might as well make a complete job of it."

"Kayo!" Marty stepped into a telephone booth and called tensely. Then he returned to Jim.

"They're after Pete now, to see where he was. Let's you and me get up to Room Six-twelve."

"Got any dope on this thing, Marty?"

"No, except that when the maid went in to clean up she found Mary Thornton lying on the bed, apparently dead. She called the house dick and he called me. I phoned the Doc and came right up."

"Anybody known to have visited her this evening?"

"House manager says not. But the elevators are off in that L yonder. People go up all the time without the desk seeing 'em."

The elevator stopped at the sixth floor and Jim followed the Inspector to the room. The plain clothes man on duty saluted as Gallagher approached.

"Anything new?" asked Gallagher.

"Nothing, sir."

The room was in disorder, but the eyes of both men flashed to the bed where lay the unconscious figure of Mary Thornton. She wore a simple black dress. The doctor, working over her, had torn the waist open at the throat and was busily engaged in trying to restore normal respiration. Hanvey and Gallagher stepped close. They could see ugly black and blue marks on the delicate

white throat of the unfortunate woman.

"Is she going to die, Doc?" Gallagher asked.

The medical man answered without looking up.

"No," he said.

"Was she beaten up, or just strangled?"

"I can't find any marks except those on her throat."

"Was it a man?"

"Can't say positively, but it probably was."

Jim Hanvey seemed strangely uninterested in the conversation. He waddled heavily about the room, and finally his eye fell upon two pieces of paper which lay on the floor. He picked them up, fitted them together, grunted, and stuffed the two pieces of paper in his vest pocket.

Marty was talking to the doctor.

"Yeh, Doc," he was saying, "I know she's gotta go to the hospital right away, but can't you do something that'll bring her to for just a minute. I must ask her one question."

THE doctor bent to his task. Presently the eyelids fluttered and a sob escaped from Mary Thornton's purple lips.

The doctor nodded. Gallagher bent over and talked in a soothing, gentle voice. He begged her to fight for recollection—to give him the name of the person who had assaulted her.

It was plain that she understood. Finally with an almost superhuman effort, she uttered the name of the man who had attacked her. And the name she spoke was one that Jim Hanvey had never heard.

"Lovely Holmes!"

But the effect on Gallagher was galvanic. He jerked his head toward the doctor as he leaped for the telephone. "Take her out, Doc. And stick with her." Then he called a number. "That you, Newt? This is Gallagher. Get this, and get it straight: We want Lovely Holmes. . . . Yeh, that's right. . . . Send out every motorcycle scout on the force. And send out every loose man you've got to hunt him in the city. . . . Important? Great suffering tomcats! Man! he's the guy who killed Wylie Thornton!"

The ambulance stretcher bearers arrived and carried off the unconscious form of Mary Thornton. Jim Hanvey was standing by the window, eyed Marty speculatively.

"Funny name, Lovely Holmes. You seem to have heard it before."

"Sure I have."

"Who is he?"

"He's the man we've been needing in this case right from the beginning. He's the missing link, Jim, the man who makes everything clear as crystal. In fact, Jim, I'll tell you positively that if we get Lovely—and we will—we've got the guy who croaked Thornton."

"Interesting. But it still don't tell me who he is."

"He's the best-known hustler in this city. Crooked dice, crooked cards. . . . Besides that, he's big and bad. Only that I'm so dumb, I'd have thought of him, or somebody like him, long ago."

"Why?"

"Because, idiot, there's been two things that have worried us pink—the stealing of four hundred dollars and the wallop on Thornton's jaw. Lovely Holmes done both of those."

"When, Marty? Nobody saw him backstage."

"That don't prove he wasn't there, does it? Oh! it was Lovely Holmes all right. Though what the damn fool wanted to kill Mary Thornton for, unless she—"

"Have you got any idea, Marty, how Thornton might have been mixed up with this hustler?"

"Sure. Thornton was wild about gambling. Well, Lovely ran a crooked dice game in the McKeever Hotel—that old dump near the theater. Thornton used to play in that game regular and I always knew that they were trimming him heavy. Chances are that he found out he was being gypped and had a run-in with Lovely Holmes—and there's a baby, Jim, who wouldn't stop at murder."

Hanvey nodded. "It does look pretty strong."

"Strong? Holy smoke, it's perfect! The only thing we need is to nab that gimmick trying to get out of town."

The telephone rang sharply and Gallagher leaped for it. He spoke in brief staccato sentences and when he clicked the receiver on the hook his face was beaming.

"That," he announced, "settles it. Barker and Jones just telephoned in from Springdale. They nabbed Lovely

Holmes beating it away from town at fifty. They're taking him to headquarters."

They walked to headquarters together. At the door of Marty Gallagher's office they were greeted by Ken Johnston, Terry Mooney and Max Ross. All three of the reporters were clamoring loudly for news. Marty escorted them into his private room and made a statement.

"Boys!" he announced. "I've got a story for you as is a story. Tonight, in her room at the Raleigh Hotel, Mary Thornton was assaulted, strangled, and perhaps killed by Lovely Holmes. Maybe you've heard of him."

"Sure we have."

"She recovered consciousness long enough to mention his name in the presence of Jim Hanvey, Doc Kenworthy and myself. They've got her over at the General Hospital now. Hop to it, boys. You can shoot the works."

There was a howl of joy as three reporters leaped for the door, but Jim Hanvey stopped them.

"Just a minute," he said. "I'd like to talk to Marty alone before you turn loose on that story."

SOMEWHAT disgruntled, the reporters filed from the room. Gallagher whirled on his friend.

"What the devil is wrong now?" he demanded.

"Plenty," answered Jim calmly. "Now listen: When you and the Doc were trying to bring Mary Thornton around, I found two pieces of paper on the floor, Marty, and they like to have knocked me cold. They'll give you a shock, too, Marty, and maybe indicate that perhaps it wasn't Lovely Holmes who killed Wylie Thornton."

"How about Mary Thornton?"

"Oh! I guess Holmes attacked her all right. But this thing I found—well, it's the doggonedest clue we've run across yet."

"All right, Jim let's see your clue."

Very carefully Hanvey extracted two pieces of paper from his pocket. He placed these on the desk. The two pieces of paper, fitting perfectly, showed themselves to be a certified check in the amount of one hundred thousand dollars. The check, drawn on the Fourth National Bank, was dated September thirteenth—just five days before the killing of Wylie Thornton—and was made payable to the order of Wylie Thornton.

The check was signed "Carey Weldon." . . .

Jim Hanvey was apparently asleep when Lovely Holmes entered the room at headquarters, but his fishlike eyes missed no detail of the man or his manner.

Holmes was slender in a powerful, athletic way. He had a lean, saturnine face and cold blue eyes; his clothes were immaculate, excellently tailored. Hanvey sighed slightly. Here was the type of man he knew, the confidence man who lived by his wits in fine disregard of man-made and police-enforced laws.

Gallagher rose as Lovely entered. His voice was harsh.

"Siddown, Lovely. What've you got to say for yourself?"

Lovely seated himself. "Nothing."

"The hell you haven't!" thundered Gallagher. "Now listen here, you dirty rat, I brought you in here to make you talk, and I'm going to do it. Why did you attack Mary Thornton?"

"I have nothing to say."

"What were you doing up near Springdale?"

"Taking a ride."

"Do you know what we want you for?"

"Certainly not."

"Murder!" Gallagher was quite dramatic. "Mary Thornton is dead!"

Lovely Holmes leaned back in his chair. "Little boys shouldn't tell stories, Marty. Mary Thornton isn't dead—or going to die. Barker, one of the scouts who brought me in, told me."

Marty's face was distorted with fury. Jim Hanvey with difficulty restrained a visible show of mirth.

"Dead or not," continued Marty, "you're in a tough spot. Mary Thornton has told us that you are the man who attacked her, and it's ten years or so on that charge alone. And she's told us a lot more."

"Like what, for instance?"

"Plenty."

"Can't you be more specific? I'd love to know what you know."

"And I'm gonna know what you know."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Inspector Gallagher. Talking never was one of my weaknesses."

"It's gonna be—and right now."

Holmes shrugged. "Go to it, old top. You're sure due for a disappointment."

And Marty Gallagher went to it. He blustered, he threatened, roared and raved, but through it all, the crook sat impassively. And eventually, even Gallagher knew that he was beaten.

"Now, for the last time I ask you: Will you talk?"

"Sure I will," answered Lovely quietly. "To my lawyer."

"You've got a swell chance to see a lawyer, you have. Listen here, pretty boy, under the laws of this state I've got the right to hold you incom—incom—"

"Incommunicado?" suggested Lovely.

"Yeh. I can hold you that way for three days under the law. And believe me, mister, I'm gonna do that little thing."

Lovely rose and bowed. Then his eye flickered to Hanvey's face. "Who's your portly friend?"

"Him? That's Jim Hanvey."

Lovely stepped across the room with his hand extended.

"I've known of you for a long time Jim, and I've always wanted to meet you. We've got a lot of mutual friends. When's the last time you saw Dick Whalen?"

Jim beamed. "You know Dick?"

"Know him? Holy smoke, he and I were on the racket together for three years. And Tommy Norton?"

"Poor Tommy. He's in Joliet. Twenty years."

Gallagher broke in roughly: "Hey, Lovely, this ain't any pink tea." He called the orderly. "Take this bird to Number Seven and keep him there. He ain't to see anybody but me or Hanvey."

Holmes moved toward the door. "I'm honestly awfully glad to have met you, Jim," he called. "Drop in some time for a little chat." Then, with a significance which did not escape the ponderous detective: "After I've had a day or so to get my bearings, I might have a few words to say to you."

IX

EARLY Monday morning Jim Hanvey was aroused from a heavy sleep by the jangling of his telephone.

"Hey! elephant, this is Gallagher."

"Now what's up?"

"Plenty. Doc Kenworthy phoned me that Mary Thornton is waiting to talk."

"Nice," commented Jim. "We'll go right up."

They found Mary Thornton in a private room. On her slender throat were two or three ugly black and blue spots, and it was patent that her nerves had suffered severely.

The two detectives seated themselves at the bedside. "I'm not going to die," she said, "but I wish I was. I have only one reason now for living. I want to help catch the man who killed my husband."

"Yes, ma'am," Gallagher said. "We hoped you might tell us something about —about yesterday."

"I can do that all right. I guess I'd better start at the beginning, hadn't I?"

"Yes'm. That seems sensible."

She closed her eyes for a moment, then commenced speaking.

"From the first month we came to this town," she said slowly and distinctly, "my husband has been gambling with a crowd of professionals in the McKeever Hotel. I knew the sort of gang he was in with, because he mentioned the name of Lovely Holmes to me and I made inquiries. I begged Wylie to quit, but nobody could make him stop doing anything that he wanted to do. So, the gambling continued, and I figure that Wylie was losing fully half his salary to these crooks every week. Yesterday morning I received a telephone call from Lovely Holmes. He told me that he wanted to see me on an important matter connected with my husband. I told Holmes that he could see me and a few minutes later he arrived at the hotel. He did not telephone from the lobby, but came straight up to my room.

"He started off by sympathizing with me, and then shifted over to a discussion of my husband's gambling during the past five months. He said that on Thursday night, the sixteenth—that was two nights before the tragedy—there was a big dice game at the McKeever Hotel, and that Wylie insisted on joining. According to his story, Wylie won at the beginning of the session, then started to lose and when Wylie had lost all of his cash, he produced a certified check for one hundred thousand dollars—a check made out to Wylie's order by Carey Weldon. Mr. Weldon, you know, is engaged to Doris Manning."

Gallagher nodded. "Yes, we know that."

"Well—and all of this is Holmes's story—the other gamblers did not know Wylie or Carey Weldon and would not accept the check. So Holmes said that as he knew the check was good as gold, he allowed my husband to shoot against it, with the result that before the evening was over Wylie had lost the entire hundred thousand dollars. According to Holmes, he won most of it, and he paid the difference between his winnings and the face of the check to the other men in the game, so that it was his claim that Wylie owed him the one hundred thousand dollars.

"Holmes then told me that he took the check with him, intending to have Wylie cash it Monday, but that on Saturday night he read of the tragedy. There he was with the enormous check which was absolutely no good to him. Then he got the idea of having it listed by me as an asset, with the idea that I had discovered it among Wylie's things after his death. All I had to do, he said, was to list the check with the estate and it would be paid to me, and he wanted me to do this and divide the total amount with him.

"All the time he was talking I had been thinking—and then I looked at the check and noticed that it wasn't endorsed. All of a sudden I got a hunch. I didn't know anything about the check or how it came into Wylie's possession—but it struck me that Lovely Holmes was lying. I got hysterical and accused Holmes of murdering my husband. I suppose I spoke mighty loud because he told me to shut up—and he told me very roughly. That excited me more than ever and I screamed. He jumped at me and grabbed my throat." Her eyes closed for a moment. "That's all I remember until I came to in my room, and you were asking me who it was that attacked me."

She ceased speaking. Gallagher rose, begged Mary Thornton not to repeat her story to anyone, thanked her for the information, and left the room with Jim Hanvey.

IN the taxi, headed downtown, the two detectives faced one another.

"What do you think, Marty?" asked Jim.

"I think she told the truth. And it's a cinch that if Mrs. Thornton told us the truth—then what Holmes told her was *not* the truth."

Gallagher's eyes narrowed. "What's your hunch, Jim?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call it a hunch, Marty. I've known hustlers all my life, and I know doggoned well that none of 'em would accept an unendorsed check. . . . And another thing—if he was that big a fool—Lovely Holmes would have been on Wylie Thornton's trail early the next morning to get the check cashed. So, Marty, I sort of believe that Lovely Holmes stole that check from Thornton."

"When?"

"Maybe the night Thornton was killed."

"Right-o." Gallagher smashed one fist into the palm of the other hand. "I've been thinking that right along but I wanted to hear you say it. Lovely knew about that check. He killed Wylie Thornton and took it. He took some other cash with it just because he was clever enough to want to make it look like robbery. It was Lovely who socked Thornton on the jaw, and all the stories these other birds have been telling about Thornton being dead when they went into the dressing room were true."

Jim's big head inclined slowly. "It all checks up nice, Marty, but there's a lot more to be learned about this case."

"What, for instance?" inquired Gallagher somewhat belligerently.

"Oh! a lot of things. . . . I wonder if you'd do me a favor, Marty?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"I wonder if you'd go to the jail with me and let me talk to Lovely Holmes? I want to talk to him easy and gentle and find out what's what."

"All right, Jim. Go to it. And when you get the truth out of him—"

"Then," remarked Jim, "there's at least one more thing we've got to learn before we can think about calling this case ended. And that is just why Carey Weldon presented Wylie Thornton with one hundred thousand dollars." . . .

Lovely Holmes rose courteously as they entered his cell. There was silence for a few moments as the men eyed one another. Gallagher edged his chair into a corner and became a mere spectator. Then Jim spoke, his drawly voice freighted with friendliness.

"I want to talk to you, Lovely," he said, "and I'm giving you my word that

I'm shooting square."

Holmes inclined his head. "You don't have to go any farther, Jim."

"That's fine. First I want to ask you a question: Do you realize that you're in for a stretch."

"For what?"

"Well, it's a cinch that you assaulted Mary Thornton. We're going to try you for that, and if you're convicted you'll get the limit. You'll be convicted, Lovely, just as sure as shooting."

Holmes's eyes were cold. "Do you believe I assaulted Mrs. Thornton?"

"Sure," answered Hanvey promptly. "I never doubted it for a minute. But that's neither here nor there. The point is that, barring a miracle, we'll get a conviction. We then immediately get an indictment against you for the murder of Wylie Thornton."

"You have no evidence against me in the Wylie Thornton case."

"Oh, yes, we have. That check. You know good and well, son, that you never took no unendorsed hundred-thousand-dollar check from any man."

"Can you prove it?"

"Sure. But I don't have to prove it."

"Why not?"

"Because, Lovely, it'll make the case against you stronger if I let that angle of it alone. What I'll bring out at the trial is this: That you did win the check from Thornton and that he did not then endorse it. That you went to him Friday and Saturday to make him endorse the thing, because, according to your own story of his losses, he owed you a hundred thousand dollars. Then, Lovely, we'll develop the fact that on Saturday evening you read the story in the *Record* and doped it out that Thornton was jumping his job in order to get away with that hundred thousand.

"Now listen, Lovely. You're supposed to be bad, and I guess you are. You won't stand for no double-cross any more than any self-respecting crook will. So what happens? Why, you go batty, that's all. You wait at the theater for Thornton and go into the dressing room with him. You try to make him sign that check, and he refuses. You get sore as a pup and hang one on his jaw. Then he gets up and starts to battle. Maybe he pulls the gun and you take it away from him and plug him. Either before or after the shooting you've grabbed a handful of cash out of his wallet. Then you beat it. . . . And Lovely, whether that story is true or not, there ain't any twelve men we could stick in a jury box that wouldn't convict you on it—especially if we had already convicted you of attacking Mrs. Thornton."

"I didn't kill Thornton," said Holmes shortly.

"Then tell the truth. If you tell the truth the chances are you'll get away with just a stretch for the Mary Thornton thing. If you hold out on us, you'll fry."

HOLMES'S jaw was set, and his eyes were focused on a little spot on the opposite wall. It was plain that he was doing some intensive thinking.

"Jim Hanvey," he said, "I'm going to come clean."

If Hanvey felt any triumph, he did not show it. "That's real sensible, Lovely. Shoot!"

"There isn't any use going into too much detail," said Holmes, "because you've got a good deal of it right anyway. I'll start by saying Wylie Thornton was one of the yellowest welshers I've ever run across. He cried every time he lost a dollar."

"He must have cried a lot."

Lovely smiled grimly. "He did. Plenty. I took him for about three hundred a week. And Saturday the tenth—the week before he was killed—he went in deeper than usual. He lost a thousand dollars: his salary and four hundred dollars more. He had a little money and he begged me to let him keep that to pay running expenses, and he said he'd pay me the four hundred the following Saturday. That was okay with me.

"On Saturday the seventeenth, I read in the paper that he was leaving for New York. Knowing he was a welsher, I knew he'd never pay me if he was leaving town anyway. So about dark I drifted down from the McKeever and loafed around the theater alley, and at about seven o'clock Wylie Thornton appeared. I asked him for my four hundred. He said he hadn't drawn his salary yet and he'd give it to me after the show. Then he went on up the alley and through the stage door."

Holmes paused for a minute. "A few minutes later, while I was still standing in the alley thinking things over, Mrs. Thornton appeared. She was walking fast, seemed excited, didn't even see me,

I guess. She was backstage perhaps ten minutes. Then she came out. She was walking even faster than when she went in and as she passed me, I saw that she was crying. I didn't like the looks of the whole thing, and I went backstage myself. I went straight to Thornton's dressing room and told him I knew he had drawn his salary that afternoon and I wanted my four hundred.

"Well, he fell for my bluff. He admitted he had drawn his salary, but he got nasty and said he wasn't ready to pay me. He said he had stood all he was going to stand from a lousy crook like me and that if I didn't get out of there he'd throw me out." A smile flickered across Holmes's thin lips.

"He started for me, Jim, and I hung one right on his button."

"With your fist?"

"Yeh. My right. You see, when I was younger I was a pretty good third-rate pug and I could always sock. I gave him everything I had and he went down good and hard. I knew he had finished battling for the night, so I dug into his hip pocket and took out his wallet. There was something over six hundred dollars in it. I took just exactly the four hundred that was coming to me. And then I saw the check."

"The Carey Weldon check?"

"Yes. Weldon's certified check to Wylie Thornton for one hundred thousand. Thornton was still on the floor—out cold. I took the check."

"Hmm. What did you expect to do with a check made out to another man?"

"I don't know. I didn't know then. The point is, I took it. I left the room before Thornton recovered consciousness. I went to my own room and started to figure what I'd do with a check. Then, almost before I knew what it was all about, a buddy came bustling into the room with an extra saying that Wylie Thornton had been murdered.

"As for the rest of it, Jim, there ain't much to tell. Thornton was dead. I went to see Mrs. Thornton at the hotel. I put it up to her that she was to list the check, say nothing about where she got it, and divide fifty-fifty with me. It seemed like an awful reasonable thing, but holy smoke, Jim, that hysterical female got the idea I had killed her husband and she started yelling about having me arrested for murder. Now get this: I didn't assault her—not the way you think. But I realized that I had to keep her quiet, just long enough for me to make a getaway. I did choke her, but it was just to save my own hide. As soon as she was quiet, I got away from the hotel and started north. I had a flat tire, which is the only reason your motorcycle scouts caught me at Springdale."

"The check was left on the floor of the room," said Jim.

"Why not? It wasn't any use to me then. I never wanted to see it or hear of it again."

Hanvey hoisted himself to his feet. "You've talked mighty straight, Lovely. I want to tell you that I'm inclined to believe everything you've said. Of course, you'll do time for the Mary Thornton thing, but not so much time as if you'd really tried to kill her."

Lovely extended his hand.

"Thanks, Jim Hanvey. You're a white man."

Back in Gallagher's office, the Inspector faced Hanvey. "Were you kidding Holmes or not?" he demanded.

"No, I wasn't kidding him, Marty. I think he told the truth."

"What makes you think so?"

"His story checked in every detail with all the other stories we got—especially Mary Thornton's."

"Yes," admitted Gallagher, "that's true."

"But there's one fact more important than that, Marty. He knew that Mary Thornton was a suspect. But by his own story he found Thornton alive *after* Mary Thornton had left the theater. Lovely Holmes's story automatically clears Mary Thornton. And another suspect wouldn't do that unless he was telling the truth."

X

GALLAGHER'S forehead wrinkled. "Hanvey," he announced, "we've complicated this case more than ever. Instead of finding the murderer of Wylie Thornton, we've cleared Lovely Holmes with Thornton's wife. I don't think either of us was ever very strong for the idea that Major Manning bumped him off, and it didn't seem quite reasonable that John Norris did, although, by gosh! it's a lot more understandable now that we don't have to tie up the murder with the wallop on the jaw and the stealing of money."

"Precisely," murmured Hanvey. "Before, we were up a tree because we couldn't understand any of our suspects robbing Thornton, and no one of them except Carey Weldon seemed of the proper physical strength to have hung that good one on his jaw. Now, Marty, we know that the assault and robbery had nothing to do with the killing—provided Lovely Holmes told us the truth—and so it *could* have been the Major or John Norris."

"Or Pete McIntosh. Or Lola Gresmer—"

"Or," interrupted Hanvey, "Carey Weldon. It's a leadpipe cinch, Marty, that our very next step is to have a long and serious talk with that young man."

They found Weldon in his office.

"It's about the Thornton case again, Mr. Weldon," started Hanvey. "How intimately did you know Wylie Thornton?"

"Not at all intimately."

"*Hmm.* Did you ever have any business dealings with Thornton?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Weldon rose somewhat angrily. "Now listen here, Mr. Hanvey, I can't see—"

"Siddown, son." Jim produced the two pieces of the check which had been found on the floor of Mary Thornton's room. "Look those over and tell me if you ever saw them before."

Weldon sat down abruptly. His eyes opened wide, his jaw drooped, and he spoke in a very unhappy tone.

"I was afraid of that coming to light," he admitted.

"*Mmm.* Then it *is* your check?"

"Yes, I regret to say."

Jim fiddled with the golden toothpick. His slow, friendly drawl came soothingly.

"Mr. Weldon, if you'll take my honest advice you'll give us the low-down."

The young man's face was white. "I understand—and I'll tell you the truth. The reason I haven't before was because the whole thing will place Miss Manning in a horrible position."

"We'll see that Miss Manning doesn't suffer," said Jim.

"Then I'll make it as brief as I can," said Carey. "You gentlemen know that

[*Turn page*]

I was engaged to Miss Manning. Well, for some time I had noticed that Doris—Miss Manning—had been infatuated with Wylie Thornton, and I was worried. I was terribly worried. I never thought that Miss Manning would do anything wrong, but I was afraid she would do something impulsive. I did not believe that Thornton was in love with Doris. I figured that he wanted her money. And when I started looking at the matter through Thornton's mercenary eyes, I found a solution which was based solely on dollars."

Weldon had risen and was looking down on the two detectives. Both men were impressed with his sincerity.

"I drew a check for one hundred thousand dollars to the order of Wylie Thornton, and had it certified. Four days before Thornton was killed I visited him. I showed him the check and offered it to him under the express conditions that he was to leave the city at the end of the week without telling Doris where he was going, and with the distinct understanding that he was not to communicate with her later. Thornton agreed instantly to my proposition. At that moment I was satisfied that I had done the right thing.

"But you can imagine what I felt like when on the evening Thornton was killed I learned from Major Manning that news of Thornton's departure and destination was plastered all over the front page of the *Evening Record* and that Miss Manning was eloping with him." He paused, then went on slowly. "The only reason I did not kill Thornton immediately was because—furious as I was—I retained just enough sanity to realize the scandal which would arise and in which Miss Manning would be involved."

"And so," asked Gallagher, "you did not kill him?"

"No."

THE Inspector looked at the young man with narrowed eyes.

"Suppose he had actually started on the train with Miss Manning—would you have killed him then?"

"I believe so. Yes, I am sure I would have killed him if he had actually started with her."

[*Turn page*]

"What happened, Weldon, when you visited Thornton's dressing room right after you returned from your ride with Miss Manning?"

"I didn't go to his dressing room except when Miss Manning went with me and found her father there."

"You went backstage, though, didn't you?"

"Yes. I wanted to speak with Major Manning."

"But you didn't speak to him."

"I didn't see him."

Marty Gallagher shook his head slowly. "I'm awful sorry, Weldon, but you'll have to consider yourself under arrest again, and this time you won't be let out on bond. I believe every word you told me about the check, but you've got to do a lot more arguing before you'll convince me that you didn't kill Thornton."

"I didn't kill Wylie Thornton."

"You mean you're gonna stick to that story?"

"I must. It is the truth."

"Hmph!" grunted Gallagher. "I hope so. But I'll be honest with you. I can't believe it."

* * * * *

"There comes a time in the lives of men," remarked the city editor of the *Evening Record* sadly, "when he gets doggone sick of printing every day a simple announcement that there are no further developments."

"The Thornton yarn, you mean?"

"Exactly. It was the greatest local story that ever broke in this burg and we played it to a million. Then when it began to die, Mary Thornton got her throat massaged. It slithered off again, and they sloughed Carey Weldon for the second time. Now, it just is defunct."

"Who's on it now?"

"Terry Mooney, the blond kid over yonder. Bright lad. I had Ken Johnston on it, but couldn't waste him any more."

The Sunday editor slammed his fist on the desk.

"I've got it!"

"What?"

"Bring Mooney over here. Lemme have him for a couple of days and both our problems will be solved."

"What you got in that bean of yours, Sandy?"

[*Turn page*]

"Just this. You say yourself that the yarn ain't fit for the news columns any more—it's worn out. All right, there's still one whamming good Sunday feature in it. Mooney knows the story and the theater and the people. Let's turn him loose on a Sunday feature. We'll give him a by-line and call him our murder expert. He can interview the dicks and even this Hanvey bimbo. It won't be news, but by golly! it'll be a corking good Sunday feature. What say?"

The city editor yelled for Terry Mooney and that young gentleman sped across the office. And then, in his own graphic manner, Sandy explained to Terry exactly what was wanted. "And say—how about getting an interview out of this Jim Hanvey?" he concluded. "Get him to tell you just what he thinks."

And at six-thirty Terry Mooney and Anice Garet knocked on the door of Jim Hanvey's room. Inside they found the ponderous detective and his dynamic friend, Marty Gallagher. A waiter was fixing a table for four, and after an excellent meal, Terry brought up the subject of the Thornton case.

"Jim, do you recall promising me early in this case that you'd give me a break?"

"Sort of."

"Well, now's your chance. I've been assigned to get an interview out of you—a story of your views and suspicions and ideas. A *resume* of the whole Thornton mystery."

MARTY GALLAGHER'S laugh reverberated through the room.

"Fat chance you've got, Terry. This big baby never tells nothin' to nobody no time."

"Aw, now, Marty. You're doing me wrong."

"Do you mean to tell me that you're ready to talk definitely for publication?"

"Sure."

"Great suffering tomatoes! Go to it, Jim! It'll be a relief to hear you make one positive statement, no matter how foolish it is."

Terry stared. "You're really going to give me a story—an interview on the whole case—and permission to print it? And you're going to give me the name

of the person you think killed Wylie Thornton?"

"Uh-huh. I sure am."

Anice Garet threw herself upon the portly detective.

"Jim Hanvey," she declared, "I could kiss you for this."

Jim turned his face ceilingward.

"Sister," said he, "that's all I was doing it for." . . .

Jim Hanvey ambled across the room and opened the door of his clothes closet. From the floor thereof he lifted what had once been a portable typewriter, and this he placed on the writing desk.

"Now here's what I'm gonna do, Terry," said the big detective. "I'm gonna dictate a whole lot of stuff and you take it all down just like I give it, see? Then, afterward, you can put it in the right shape to print in the newspaper. How's that?"

"Fine, Jim." The boy's face was beaming. "Gee, what a story!"

[*Turn page*]

"Ready, son?"

"Yes."

"Well, the first thing I want you to write down is 'By Terry Mooney.'"

The typebars kissed the platen.

"Now make a note saying that you had a long talk with Inspector Gallagher and Jim Hanvey, and say that they have solved the Thornton mystery."

"You really know the solution?" gasped Anice.

"Uh-huh. All set, Terry?"

"I've got it."

"Good. Now then, put down the story of the killing. You don't need to write it out now—you can compose that in the office when you revise this whole thing." The machine clicked briefly, then stopped. The only sound in the room for the moment was a sharp click as the blade of Jim's golden toothpick snapped open.

"Now, first of all, Major Manning. He had the motive and the chance to kill Wylie Thornton. But you can say that me and Marty don't believe the Major done it."

"Why?" asked Mooney.

"Just a hunch. I sort of feel these things, son. Now we come to Mary Thornton. She sure had me fooled for a while, but I guess we better say that she didn't do it, either." He explained about Lovely's evidence. "Next we come to Lola Gresmer. Wylie Thornton was always crabbing her stuff and she hated him, which seems to make it unanimous. But honest, we ain't got a real reason in the world for connecting her with the killing."

Mooney nodded. He was bent over the rickety machine, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Next on the list," continued Hanvey in his indifferent way, "is Pete McIntosh. Pete looked like a suspect when we couldn't understand the robbery feature, because he was the only person mixed up in the mess to whom it seemed the money could have been a heavy inducement. Also, by his own admission, McIntosh was the only one backstage when Thornton came in. And Pete knew about that gun with the silencer on it. Furthermore, Pete most likely knew that Thornton had drawn his salary that afternoon and of course he knew just how

much it was. We have every reason in the world for really suspecting Pete McIntosh—pretty near. But just the same, Terry, you can write down that I'm sure Pete McIntosh did not kill Wylie Thornton."

TERRY shrugged and typed for a moment.

"And now," Jim Hanvey announced, "we come to John Norris. Things look pretty dark for Mr. Norris. He was the sort of man who would never forgive an insult, especially the kind Thornton handed him the night before. And, we know that Norris went to the theater to kill Thornton if Thornton didn't apologize. We know that he lied to his wife when he came out of the theater and that he drove out into the country to establish an alibi. The only thing we have on his side is his unsupported statement that Wylie Thornton was already dead when he went into the dressing room. There's another angle, too. Norris is a little feller. He never would have tried to battle with Thornton any way except with a gun. So you see, there's a heap of reason to believe that John Norris did it. Ain't that true, Anice?"

"Yes."

"Good. So we'll just let this young man write down in his story that both Jim Hanvey and Marty Gallagher declared that he was innocent!"

The typewriter ceased to click and Mooney turned a flushed face to Hanvey.

"Innocent?"

"Exactly," chuckled Jim. "And now, Mr. Mooney, you can put a new sheet of paper in your machine. The baby I'm now going to discuss—for publication—is Carey Weldon."

Jim appeared to doze, and Terry fidgeted uncomfortably. "About Weldon, started Hanvey dreamily, "there ain't a question on earth that he had plenty of motive. Not only had Thornton done him out of his girl, but Weldon knew that he was a rotter, that he couldn't fail to make her miserable. He buys Wylie Thornton off with a hundred thousand smackers, and Thornton very calmly double-crosses him; or plans to. If we then admit that Weldon had enough mo-

[*Turn page*]

tive without the check episode, we certainly have to agree that he had more than enough with it."

"Exactly what I've been saying all along," broke in Gallagher triumphantly.

"Sure you have, Marty. Weldon had more motive than anybody, and we have to admit that he had the opportunity. So I guess I'm gonna surprise you when I say that I don't think he had a thing in the world to do with Thornton's death." He turned back to Mooney. "You ready to pound out some more stuff, son?"

Terry nodded and bent over the typewriter.

"Suppose we sort of start at the beginning of this case and track things right down to the hour of the killing," Jim said softly. "On the Monday before Thornton was killed, Carey Weldon comes to him with a certified check for one hundred thousand dollars which he pays him to leave town and not say anything about it to Doris. Naturally he believes Thornton is going to keep his part of the bargain. Okay?

"Well, now we have Thornton with several days to think things over. He's gonna beat it out of town all right, but he hates the idea of passing up Doris Manning's steady income of twenty-five thousand a year and also the kale she's certain to inherit; so he plans to double-cross Weldon by taking the hundred grand, and also Doris. He tells the folks here that he's gonna star in a New York production, because that story gives him a good out. Also it gives him the big thing he needs, which is an excuse that'll get Doris to go to New York with him. So I got in touch with New York and I learned definitely that Thornton lied when he said he had a big job there—which makes the Weldon story ring a lot truer."

"No job in New York?" questioned Marty. "You mean—?"

"Bluff, of course. I got a final report yesterday. Thornton wasn't signed to star in any show that's planning to open in two weeks or two years. Anyway, the real important point is that Thornton wanted to get away from here with Doris without anybody knowing he was doing such. Just remember that."

"We do remember." Anice Garet had

risen. "Please, Jim, tell us who you think it was."

Jim was silent for a moment.

"I may be all wrong, folks," he said quietly. "But unless I've made a lot of mistakes in my figuring, the name of the man who killed Wylie Thornton is Terry Mooney."

XI

FOR a moment there was stunned silence. Then Mooney slipped his arm around Anice's waist and it was she who spoke.

"Jim," she said, "are you accusing Terry of killing Wylie Thornton?"

His opaque eyes turned upon her.

"Gee, sister, I dunno. I'm just trying to give the kid a break, like I promised. Now just suppose I'm right. Can you imagine anything bigger than the accused himself writing an exclusive story for his paper under his own name?"

"I'm not thinking of that now, Jim. I'm afraid—"

"Well, you can take my word for it that there ain't nothing to be afraid of."

"You mean—"

"I mean just what I said, Anice. The only danger Terry is in, provided I'm right—is that you maybe won't marry him."

She tossed her head defiantly.

"I'd marry him if he were in prison."

"That's a safe promise, because he ain't gonna be in prison. The point is, will you marry him if he ain't there?"

"You know I will. Oh, Jim!"

"You siddown, Terry, and go on with your writing." Terry Mooney dropped into his chair. He was trembling violently as his fingers fumbled with the keyboard. "What started me thinking," Jim said softly, "was the thing which really resulted in Wylie Thornton's death. It wasn't the proposed elopement, and it wasn't the double-cross of Weldon, it was the publication of the story in the *Evening Record!*"

"Why, yes," Marty was almost too excited for speech. "I never thought—"

"You see," continued Jim, "nobody knew Thornton was leaving town except the theater management and they were pledged to keep it secret. Now it hap-

[*Turn page*]

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946, of Triple Detective, published quarterly at Springfield, Mass., for October 1, 1950. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Best Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, Harvey Burns, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing editor, None. Business manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Best Publications, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. H. L. Herbert. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1950. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, 1952.)

pens that in this town there lives a nifty kid by the name of Terry Mooney. He wants to make good in the theater and has started off pretty by getting engaged to a pip of a young actress named Anice Garet. Partly because he's nuts about her, and partly because he's studying the stage, he hangs around the stock company all the time; he's at the theater as per usual Saturday morning when they're rehearsing the new show which is to open Monday night. He happens to hear a conversation between the manager of the theater and Wylie Thornton in which most likely the manager is begging Thornton to come back to the company in case his show flops in New York. He knows good and well that if he asks permission to print that story, they'll refuse and then his hands will be tied. So he just slips away, beats it to the office and writes a whale of a yarn. It gets spread all over the first page—and believe me, ladies and gents, it starts plenty. But of all the folks in town who go crazy when they see that story, the one who goes craziest is Mr. Wylie Thornton.

"See what it means to him? He knows Major Manning will read it and maybe investigate Doris—which is just what happens. He realizes that Carey Weldon will learn about the double-cross. He knows that if John Norris was in earnest about wanting to kill him he'll pick that very night to do it. And he ain't so awful easy in his mind about his wife. In other words Thornton is plenty sore against that story and whoever wrote it.

"When he comes in from the theater his wife springs the story on him and it knocks him for a goal. They have an awful quarrel in the hotel and another one when she follows him to the theater. He's about ready to chew nails then—and at that opportune time, in walks Lovely Holmes, kind of mad himself at what he thinks is a double-cross, and Lovely demands his money or else.

"Thornton is crazy mad and tells Holmes where to go. Lovely gives him a good bust on the jaw. Then, while he's listening to the birdies sing, Lovely helps himself to the four hundred dollars Thornton owes him, and also to Carey Weldon's certified check. And

then, folks, after Lovely has gone and Thornton has picked himself up off the floor, who should come breezing into that dressing room but the very man who caused all the trouble! Yes sir, Terry comes waltzing in, all hopped up over the swell publicity he's given the departing actor. He thinks Thornton is gonna do everything but kiss him. Am I right, son?"

"Yes." Terry's voice was dry.

JIM HANVEY lifted his hand for a moment, and then allowed it to fall.

"Naturally, Terry hasn't the faintest idea what he has started by printing that story, but he finds out pretty soon. Thornton starts raving. And please remember that he is better than six feet tall and weighs more than two hundred pounds. Mooney weighs—how much, kid?"

"One hundred and twenty-eight."

"See how much physical difference there is, Marty? Also don't forget that Thornton isn't merely angry. He's murderous." Jim turned his moonlike countenance toward the pallid face of the young man. "Suppose you go on from there, son."

Mooney's eyes burned into the sleepy ones of the portly detective.

"I'll try," he said slowly. "Everything Hanvey has said is right—up to that point. Then Thornton cursed me. He said he was going to beat me to death for the trouble I had caused. He grabbed me around the throat and started choking me. I fought the best I could, but I felt myself getting weaker and weaker. I kicked him. I guess my foot must have landed on his shin or his knee because it seemed to hurt a lot. He let me go suddenly and I sort of fell against the trunk. He said: 'I'll kill you for that.' He came at me again, and I looked around for a weapon to protect myself with. And right there was the revolver. I didn't think about what I was doing. Anyway, I raised the gun and pulled the trigger. And then—"

Terry paused and shook his head as though to dispel the grisly memory.

"It was queer. There wasn't a sound: just a sort of a little crack like a cheap air rifle would make. And I remember

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that Thornton stopped short and a funny look came over his face and then he started to sag—I didn't know he was dead. I didn't really know what had happened. I ran out of the dressing room and up the corridor. I didn't see anybody. I left the theater through the scene door—not for any particular reason, but because it was the nearest exit. And that's the truth, Mr. Hanvey—the whole truth, just as I remember it."

Jim nodded approvingly. "And just about the clearest, cleanest case of self-defense I ever heard of, son. What say, Marty?"

"Surest thing you know," Gallagher agreed. "But why the devil didn't the kid come and give himself up? He'd have been sitting pretty."

"He still is," insisted Hanvey. "But suppose you tell us what happened after you ran out of the theater, Terry."

Anice was standing beside the young man, her arm about his shoulders. He patted her hand and then continued his narrative.

"Almost before I realized what had happened I was out on the street. I started walking. I don't know how far I walked, but gradually I started feeling a little more normal and I tried to think. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to give myself up, but I didn't know whether that would be best or not. I wanted to talk it over with someone who could give sane and friendly advice. And so I went to the only friends I have in the city—the boys on the newspaper. Of course, most of my friends work on the evening paper, but I have a few buddies on the morning edition. Anyway, I went up there."

Jim Hanvey grinned.

"You know, I always wondered how you happened to be in that office at that particular time. Keep going son."

"I will." Terry was talking more easily. "I went into the *Morning Record* office expecting to find the usual conditions prevailing. But instead of that, I walked into a bedlam. It seemed like everybody had gone crazy. I remember one of the other reporters told me—something like this: 'Somebody just bumped off Wylie Thornton, and the town's gone dotty. Looks like Major Manning or John Norris did the job,

and believe me, either one of them will go for a ride if they can pin it on him.' I—I think those are almost his exact words, Mr. Hanvey—almost the exact way he told it to me.

"My brain worked fast enough then. I had come up there to tell that I had shot Thornton. This was the first I knew of his being dead. That scared me all over again. But what scared me worst was this: If the two most prominent men in the city—Major David Manning and John Norris—were in real danger; if with all their wealth and political influence there was a chance that they could be convicted, then it struck me that I would get the electric chair. Can't you see how I figured? I was just a kid. I had no friends and no influence. I had no evidence to support my word. Oh! I know now I should have told, but right then I was frightened into keeping my mouth shut. I guess the temptation was too great anyway, because don't forget that I knew if they were suspecting Manning and Norris, they certainly did *not* suspect me. So I kept my mouth shut. I suppose it was a mistake, but I think the average man would have done just the same thing."

GALLAGHER shot a quick glance at Mooney, and then turned back to Hanvey.

"He would," seconded Marty.

"Then the city editor saw me in the office and sent me out with Ken Johnston because he knew I was familiar with the theater and the company. They were talking about convicting big men like Norris and Manning. And as the case went on I got more and more scared, because it seemed that it would look doubly bad for me because I hadn't told my story when the thing first happened. But honest, Jim"—and Terry's voice trembled—"honest, I would have told if they had convicted anyone else."

Jim chuckled. "I know you would, son. And when you write your story for the

[*Turn page*]

paper, I want you to be sure and say that you surrendered voluntarily to me and Marty Gallagher and that it was you who gave us the whole story. And you can also quote us both as saying that we know it was self-defense and that there ain't a chance in the world for you to be convicted. What about it, Marty?"

"Absolutely," Gallagher boomed.

Then—and not until then—Anice Garet broke down. Terry took her in his arms and the two detectives turned away.

Gallagher spoke softly.

"Jim," he said generously, "you're a marvel. But tell me—where the devil did you get your hunch?"

Hanvey shook his head.

"Just luck, Marty, and a little knowledge of human nature."

Marty peeped over his shoulder. "My gosh, Jim, ain't love a grand thing? Just look at them two."

"I ain't got the heart, Marty. Happiness like theirs makes me lonely."

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