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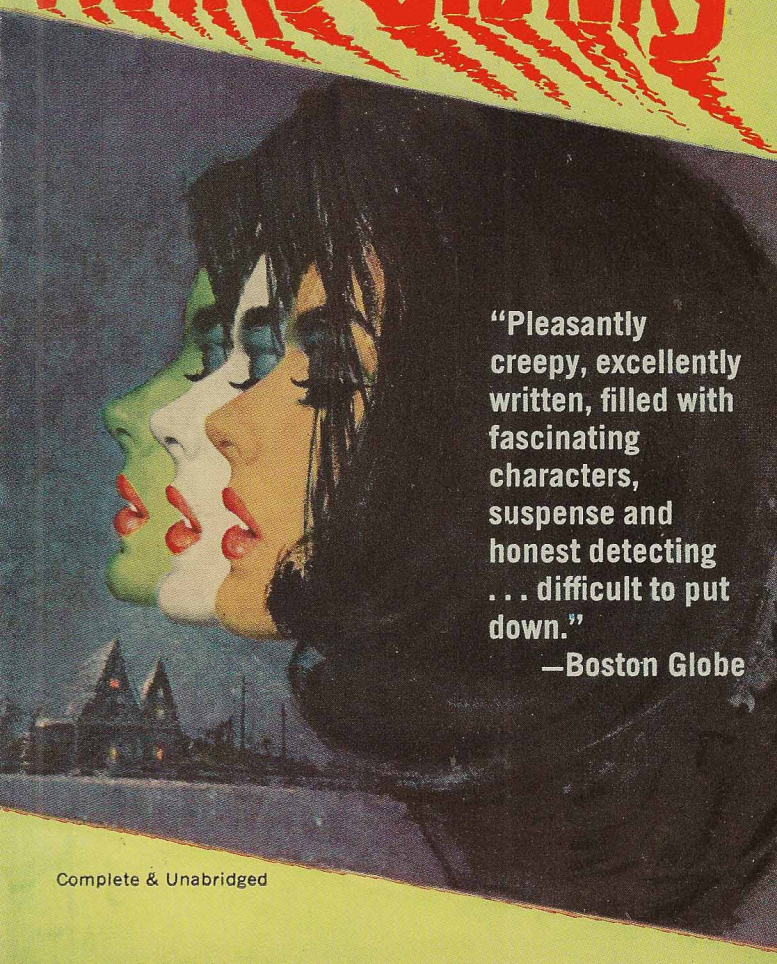
CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

THE CASE OF THE WEIRD SISTERS



"Pleasantly creepy, excellently written, filled with fascinating characters, suspense and honest detecting . . . difficult to put down."
—Boston Globe

Complete & Unabridged

abounded in the old Whitlock house—and stirred a witches' brew of panic in the strange group assembled there. Murder most foul was afoot—and it was highly uncertain who the next victim would be.

THE GUESTS feared for their lives:
Innes Whitlock, the petulant millionaire.
Alice Brennan, the ingenuous fortune-hunter.
MacDougal Duff, the professor turned detective.

THE HOSTESSES stayed ominously apart.
One could see no evil—Gertrude.
One could hear no evil—Maud.
One could act no evil—Isabel.

But it became more and more obvious that one of the three was a ruthless and pertinacious murderess.

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG, whose first book for Ace containing reprints of her novels THE UNSUSPECTED and INCIDENT AT A CORNER was an immediate hit with readers, says that she prefers "a slightly sinister personal obscurity" about herself. However, we think it would violate no confidences to say that she dwells in Glendale, California, and that in addition to her excellent novels, she has authored television scripts, Broadway plays, and short stories.

THE CASE OF THE WEIRD SISTERS, which was once produced as a motion picture, has never appeared before in a paperback edition.

THE CASE OF THE WEIRD SISTERS

by

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

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THE CASE OF THE WEIRD SISTERS

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Prologue

THE TRAIN that pulled into Ogaunee, Michigan, at 9:15 Friday morning was in no hurry. It settled to a stop and let go with deep metallic sighs, as if it would undo its iron stays and rest awhile.

A tall man in a gray overcoat swung aboard, went down the plushy day coach to a seat along about the middle, laid his coat in the rack, and sat down, settling back with such sudden ease that he seemed to have been there for some time, with the lazy dust rising and falling around him in parallel bands of spring sunshine.

A sticky face rose over the seat top ahead. Unblinking eyes looked at him with the insulting stare of a child. The tall man met the infant's eye rudely. In a moment the child's head fell toward its mother's ear and the tongue came out coyly to wrap itself around the edge of a lollypop in an ecstasy of embarrassment. MacDougal Duff relented and gave the baby the regulation adult smile. Only the youngest and most unspoiled could keep that look for long when met in kind. This one's clouds of glory were shredding thin already. And mine, thought Duff ruefully, are strictly synthetic.

He was bound for Pinebend, a few hours away, where there was an Oneida reservation. Duff was interested in Indians, this trip. He had been rambling through northern Wisconsin and in and out of the Upper Peninsula, collecting impressions for Duff's History of America, a most unorthodox work which would take him, he cheerfully hoped, the rest of

his life to write, between murder cases. Ogaunee was a central place to stay.

The train woke with a jerk. Movement on the platform caught his eye. On the dreary boards between him and the shabby little wooden depot with its gingerbread eaves stood a girl in a gray flannel suit with a green scarf at her throat and no hat on her dark hair. She seemed to be screaming his name.

Did he hear it or read her lips?

"Professor Duff! Oh, Professor Duff! Please! Mr. Duff!"

For a moment his stare was blank with surprise. Then he smiled and lifted his hand.

Whatever the girl was after, it was more than a friendly wave. Her face kept its trouble. She continued to implore him as the train began to move. She even ran along a few steps as if her urgency couldn't let it go. Then she gave up and stood still, and the train chugged around a sweep of track and wiped out Duff's view of her.

Queer.

She had been in one of his classes. So many had. History 2b. Some time ago. Front row. Therefore beginning with A, B, or C. Probably not A. Too far from the right. Nice ankles, he remembered. Hence the front row or he couldn't have remembered the ankles. Miss B., then. Or C. An intelligent face. He'd enjoyed lecturing to it. Responsive. Sense of humor. Irish in her, he'd thought. Not pretty, not quite, but with a flare of spirit that was just as good. Dark hair, blue eyes. Brody? Small chin, wide mouth. Brogan? Brannigan? Skin tight over the cheekbones. A neat foot. Neat round slim body.

Cassidy, was it? Corcoran?

Ah, well, when he remembered her name he would telephone back from Pinebend. Ask Susan. Perhaps the girl was broke and stranded. If so, Susan would take her in.

The train humped itself across a swamp. Inside, dust motes shifted in the dry air. Duff gave his ticket to be punched. The conductor put the pasteboard in Duff's hatband and gave the child a playful swipe with his hand. Duff looked out the window and played his game with the scenery. When those black stumps had been trees, the ground beneath sunless and spongy, a trail would have wound just there, through that little notch, skirted that water, been wary of that marshy margin. Wild birds would have come down

there, and the wild man hidden in those reeds. . . . The girl's name was Brennan.

Maybe she knew that MacDougal Duff had retired from teaching and had become, for his bread, a solver of murder cases.

Murder? Duff looked out at the little hills.

I

THE GIRL in a gray suit and a green felt hat came out on one of the stone stoops and closed the door gently behind her. She looked at her watch nervously. Caught without its humanity, at two minutes of six, Thursday morning, the South Side Chicago street looked clean and bare in the thin light of dawn.

At six, exactly, a big gray sedan nosed around the corner and came softly along. It was the last word in beautiful American cars. The last for a long time, thought the girl as she walked down the steps with her suitcase.

The chauffeur said, "Good morning, Miss Brennan. You're pretty prompt."

"So are you, Fred."

He put her suitcase in the back and let the door fall shut. "It'll be three-quarters of an hour before we pick up the boss. Want to sit up front?"

The chauffeur was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, rather short, thick-shouldered and stocky. He had muscular wrists and lean hands. It occurred to the girl that if the car had been a horse, he'd have been a centaur. They moved toward the lake and turned north on the outer drive. It was soft going.

Alice Brennan stuffed her fists into her jacket pockets and watched the whitecaps. The lake and the city seemed to suffer a diminution in size. They fell into place on a mental map that had to be smaller scale than usual, to include distance. She recognized the change, the familiar feeling called "getting an early start," the uprooting and relaxing of the mind and the projection of the mind's eye forward along a chosen route. "This is the last trip, I guess," she murmured.

"First and last for this baby," Fred said, patting the wheel. "Four hundred miles." This was score. "Well, I'll be glad to see her get a little dust on her tail, anyhow."

The girl smiled.

He took his chauffeur's cap off and laid it on the seat between them. "Wait'll you see the trail we got to take into the camp. Some fun for fifteen miles."

"Secluded, hm?"

"Pretty wild. But it's a nice place. You'll like it." His voice went off tone on that, just a little awkwardly. "Too bad he's got to close it up for the duration," he went on, "but I dunno how you'd get in there without a car."

"I'm supposed to help him make an inventory."

"Is that so?" Fred skipped the faint self-derision in her tone and was politely the recipient of news. "Well, I guess the caretaker's going to move all the way out, then."

"The caretaker's got a wife, hasn't he?" she said rather flatly.

"Oh, sure. She a nice old dame."

"Is she?"

Fred said softly, "Don't worry."

"Oh, I'm not worrying." She crossed her legs. "Have you got a match? Gosh, I'm sleepy."

"Go ahead, take a nap," he suggested. The car floated. The windows were closed against the morning chill. Soon they were above Evanston, sliding quietly between the varying walls and fences that hid rich men's houses from the thoroughfare. The morning was perfect. Their comfort was absolute. The car went like thought.

"She's running sweet," Fred said. "Aw, something's the matter with me." He thumped the wheel. "Why should I feel so sorry? What business have I got feeling sorry for Innes Whitlock?"

"It's not for him. It's for the car," the girl said softly. "It's so darned beautiful and American. It nearly made me cry."

For a second the car itself faltered, as if with emotion. Then Fred said, with an air of banter. "Kind of sentimental, aren't you?"

The girl's face hardened. "I haven't been sentimental," she said clearly, "since Saturday morning. What are you going to do when the tires fall off and you're out of a job? Enlist?"

Fred smiled, showing a gold tooth far back on the right.

The wrinkles radiating from the corners of his eyes looked weathered in. "I'd just as leave go in the Army," he said, with an air of being reasonable, "but I broke my foot a few years ago and the Army don't trust it."

"Broke your foot?"

"Yeah, playing football. But the funny thing is, Mother Nature has put in a bunch of new bone there, makes it twice as strong. Or that's what the doctor said."

Alice, by opening her eyes wide, knew how to look very innocent and baby-doll-like. "You mean the Army won't trust Mother Nature!"

"Well," said Fred, "the Army makes a pair of shoes the same size as each other."

Her eyes narrowed again with laughter. "What will you do, then?"

"I'm not worrying. I'll stick to Innes."

"Um-hum."

"He can get me a job if he wants to. A man with a million dollars has got a lot of contacts."

"How right," Alice said in a low voice. "How true! And you've got a contact with a million dollars. Hang onto your contacts. They matter. Three kinds of people, that's all. A few top people who've got something. A lot of other people, the smart ones, trying to make contacts with the top ones and get some of what they've got. And then a whole lot of dumb bunnies who don't know where the percentage lies. Do you know about percentage, too?"

"Huh?"

"Why, that's what you ask youself. Is there any percentage? That's the way you tell who your friends are, whom to speak to, whom to be nice to, whom to . . . You be smart, Fred. Always watch the percentage."

"Your philosophy of life?" Fred inquired politely.

"Yes."

"Since Saturday morning?"

"Never mind since when. But I learn fast. I'm quick," she said viciously.

Fred said nothing. They were close to Lake Forest, now, where Innes Whitlock lived; and he turned from the main thoroughfare into a winding road and let the big car loaf along, not hurrying.

Alice chewed on her lower lip. In a few minutes she said, "Excuse it, please, Fred."

"Yeah, but listen," he said, as if the argument were his, not hers, "it stands to reason you got to look around and see what goes on. So the whole world's full of chiselers. Chiseled themselves into a sweet mess and still chiseling. You can't get away from it. You look out for yourself and don't get fooled. That's what I say."

"Sure," she said, "that's what *I* say."

"Why stick your head in the sand and make out like virtue is rewarded when . . ."

She turned her head sharply. "Who said anything about virtue?"

"I used the wrong word," Fred said. "I didn't mean that." He stopped the car. "Look, kid, I don't want you to get me wrong. But I wanna ask you something."

"Go ahead." She looked him straight in the eye. "We're on common ground. We both know Innes has got a million dollars."

"Well, I just wanted to know. With the three of us going off on this trip today, do you want me to stick around? Or do you want me to disappear once in a while?" Her eyes fell. "I'll do what you want," Fred said. "You understand? I dunno what's in your mind. I thought if I asked, then I'd be able to do what you wanted."

She looked him full in the face again. "I don't think I get you wrong," she said. "You're just asking."

"That's right."

"Well, I'll tell you. Object matrimony."

"Uh-huh," he said. He slid back in his seat. He didn't look relieved.

"I know damn well he doesn't need his secretary to help him close that camp. I think he's working up to . . . what I . . . Well, if I'm wrong"—she shrugged—"heaven will protect the working girl."

"If you're wrong," Fred said, grinning at her, "maybe I could run a little interference for heaven, hm?"

"You think I'm wrong?"

"I dunno," he frowned. "Innes is no wolf. He's been sued for breach of promise twice already." Alice threw her head back and laughed. "Yeah, but . . ."

"Look," she said, good-humoredly, "I know . . ." She

couldn't explain the subtle basis for her certainty that in Innes Whitlock's mind she was not to be trifled with. "Call it woman's intuition," she said lightly. "I can always scream."

He looked at her. His hands were quiet on the wheel. He seemed merely thoughtful. "Thanks a lot, Fred," she said suddenly.

"That's all right. I hope you make it. Money's the only thing that can help you much in the world today. Maybe that won't be for long, but for a while— Say, if I knew a dame with a million dollars, I'd make the same play."

"Who wouldn't?" Alice murmured.

He touched the controls, delicately, and the big car slid on. In a moment or two it hesitated before a pillared gateway.

"Well, get dignified," Fred said, putting his hat on. "We're here."

Alice stiffened her back. "Look here," she said rapidly, "I shouldn't have said all that to you."

"That's right, you shouldn't," he said cheerfully. Then his face changed and his voice was wooden. "This is the house, Miss Brennan." The car stopped and he got out smartly, in one movement.

The broad white house door sprang open. A manservant appeared with luggage. Fred went briskly around the car and opened the tonneau door. A woman in a maid's uniform appeared with a thermos bottle. Innes Whitlock, a rug over his arm, burst out of the doorway.

"To the minute," he said, glancing gracefully at his wrist watch. "Good morning, Alice. How are you? Isn't this a day! I've got a picnic basket. Look here, you've got to ride with me."

The little mustache that tossed on his upper lip made him look as if he were pouting. Alice became animated and moved to the back seat. The servants bustled. They stowed things in the trunk. "Are you warm enough, Alice? Tuck in the rug, Fred, on that side. That's it." Fred tucked the rug around her with skillful hands.

Innes's rather short pink nose sniffed the morning. He seemed somehow to give it his blessing. His rather plump white hand made a tiny gesture. The adventure had his permission to begin.

2

THEY STOPPED to eat their picnic lunch before noon. A little after, Alice stood in the sun on a weedy margin of the country road. The lunch basket, all neatly packed again, was in her hand. Everything about her seemed particularly vivid: the pattern of old leaves and dead grasses, the green pushing through, the contour of the ground, higher behind her, going down to a weed-choked ditch between her feet and the car. It was just a roadside, unloved and untrodden. Even the broken fence above bounded a strip of land no one had cultivated. It was an undistinguished spot.

Fred was walking back along the road, kicking the dusty grass. He saw her and came quickly to take the basket. For a second his brown eyes asked her a sober yet impertinent question.

There was the tiniest flicker, a mere flame of reproach in her blue glance, and then she turned. Innes blundered out of the brush with three wood anemones in his hand. "Oh, Mr. Whitlock," gushed Alice, "aren't they sweet! What are they?"

That was an "if" moment. Every so often there is a point at which, if one looks back, the course of events can be seen to have taken a turn. Most moments are details between fixed points. This one was a point from which Alice's life branched off in a totally new direction. If Fred had not asked her that quick, impudent question with his eyes and if she had not, perversely, refused to answer it—partly, of course to punish him for the impudence—if she had not called out in that false voice, meant to deceive, "Oh, Mr. Whitlock . . ."

At that moment, she might just as easily have called him Innes because she had been engaged to marry him for fifteen minutes.

He'd waited no longer than after lunch. He'd put his enameled coffee cup down, reached for her hand, and said, "Alice, my dear, I want you to marry me." It was very simple and rather touching. She had been able to turn to him with real surprise and say, "Why, Innes! I'm glad you do." Innes had, thereupon, kissed her. It was a few minutes before she could say lightly, "Of course you know I'm marrying you for your money?" To this Innes had replied with a happy sigh, "Just so long as you marry me . . ."

Innes had come through it very well, Alice had felt. She was a little ashamed of telling the plain truth in so deceptive a manner. Therefore, it was perhaps the first stirring of a sense of loyalty to a new alliance that made her withdraw from even the shadow of a conspiracy with the chauffeur.

If marks an alternate trail, along which one can see no farther than the first corner.

"What's the matter with it?" asked Innes impatiently, some hours later.

"Nothing I can't fix in an hour," Fred said. "Sorry, sir. Shall I limp into the next town?"

"Will it limp?"

"Just about."

"Where are we?"

Fred reached for his map. "Sixty-five miles to camp yet. We're ten miles out of Ogaunee, sir."

"Oh, lord," Innes groaned. "Don't tell me."

"If you and Miss Brennan don't mind just sitting here I can get busy right away. I thought—"

"Yes, yes." Innes pasted his hand over his brow with artistic weariness. "Are you cold, Alice?"

"Chilly," she said. She felt exhausted, mentally and spiritually. The long afternoon drive had been a strain, she wasn't quite sure why. She thought perhaps their swift flight along the roads was too comfortable and oddly static. "I'm a little tired of riding. Can't we walk up and down while he fixes it?"

Innes said, "No, no. Better try to make it into Ogaunee, Fred. We'll get this girl warm. Stay for dinner if we're asked."

"Asked?" Alice said, startled.

"My sisters' house is in Ogaunee. We'll stop in there."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

"I have three sisters," Innes said. "They still live up here. It

was my father's house. My dear, I'll tell you a secret. I was born in Ogaunee, Michigan."

"Oh?" Alice invited more.

"I must confess I'd planned to skip by, this time," he went on uneasily. "They're another generation, really. Half-sisters, you see. My father was twice married."

Alice felt she ought not to say "oh" again, so she kept quiet.

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind? Of course not."

"It'll be more comfortable than sitting here," Innes said a little doubtfully, with an effect of gnawing on his mustache. Then he smiled. "We'll be some excitement for them." He patted her hand.

The big car crept forward, complaining. Alice knew nothing about the insides of a car. She looked at the back of Fred's neck and wondered if it hurt him, this humiliation of his Proud Beauty. She herself sat ridiculously tense, as if the car had pain.

"This isn't going to damage the engine?" demanded Innes, who evidently knew nothing about the insides of a car either.

"No, sir," Fred said stolidly.

For a long time no one spoke, as if the car's plight cast a spell of silence over them. Only Innes cleared his throat from time to time, but he never quite said anything. Alice thought it tactful to ask no questions. She simply sat, and slowly began to wonder what it was he felt he ought to say and couldn't.

It was a curious ten miles, full of reluctance. Not the nightmare quality of trying to get to a place and always failing, but an equally nightmarish feeling of taking much labor and some pain to get to a place where one didn't want to be. Ogaunee was a gash across the smooth face of their plans. Furthermore, it required bracing. One had to brace oneself. Alice felt that.

When at last they crawled past a house or two, Innes burst into speech. It was his home town, after all.

"This is iron-mining country, you see. This is the Menominee Range. What they do here is underground. Up on the Mesabi they strip off the earth and take the ore out of an open pit. Makes a mess. But it was pretty here when I was a kid. My father owned the land all around and brought in

Eastern capital in the old days. There's a shaft-house; see? That's Briar Hill."

The wounded car crept around a curve. Ahead, the road dipped and staggered over a kind of earthen bridge. On either side of the built-up causeway the ground fell precipitously into two great deep pits, down the far sides of which was scattered debris, as of shattered houses.

"Good heavens! It's fallen in!" cried Alice.

Innes said carelessly, "Well, you see, when they mine underground they honeycomb the place. Where the ore comes out, they prop up the roof with timber and go deeper, down to another level. Of course, later, when the ore's all gone, the timbers rot, I suppose, and collapse."

"And the earth falls in!" Alice said, awestricken. "The houses, too?"

"Some of them were over the mines."

"But how terrible!"

"Oh, no. Nobody gets hurt. It's not like an earthquake, you know. It's slow. It just sinks."

"I still think it's terrible. It isn't going to fall in any more?"

"No, no. Although they have to keep filling in this road." She looked at him, horrified. "Oh, it's all over now. Don't worry. These mines were played out long ago. This is what you might call a ghost town."

"Is it, really? Like the ones in the West?"

"Not so romantic," said Innes.

"Why do people stay here?"

"I do *not* know." Innes dropped his guidebook manner and was personally vehement. "*I* wouldn't." Then, with that curious reluctance, "Of course, my sisters . . ."

"I don't know if she'll take the hill, sir," Fred said over his shoulder, "but I'll try."

"Look," Innes said, pointing out his window and up. "That's the house. That's the back of it."

Alice leaned, almost lying across his lap.

"The house where you were born?"

"Yes." He supported her shoulders tenderly. "It was quite a place once, if you can believe it."

Alice saw a whitish structure above some rocks which rose out of the side of the pit and went up. She had good eyes. "What a queer place for a door," she said. "Why,

there's a door way up in the wall that just leads right out into space."

Innes looked, too. His mustache brushed her cheek. "There used to be a back porch. It was torn down years ago. Got pretty shaky. Lord, I'd almost forgotten. I must have been about ten."

She tried very hard to think of Innes as about ten, to see his much-shaven face soft and hairless, his smudged eyes fresh and naïve; to pare away in her imagination the central paunchiness of his figure, the settled and not unfeminine width of his hips; to take out of him the starch that thirty years had put into his body and mind, to see him lithe and free and about ten. It wasn't easy.

"You had a rocky backyard to play in," she said, with the best sympathy she had.

"No, it was a pine woods," Innes said dreamily. "All this land was higher than the road is now. It just sloped off, all trees. I used to know the paths. I used to lie on the ground and hear them blasting, deep under."

Alice squeezed his hands. For a moment she thought she understood why he was reluctant to revisit Ogaunee.

"You never grew up in a mining town. You never heard the steam shovels puffing and snorting all night long. Or lived by the whistles. Well it's dead now. I . . ."

They were across the pit and in the village. Almost immediately they turned sharply to the right and began to climb. Innes forgot his reminiscence. "Look here, Fred, we can get away right after dinner?" He spoke not to a servant, but to a man who knew the answer.

"Sure we will. Why wouldn't we?" Fred answered boldly, like a man who did know and could reassure another.

3

BACK OF them, to their left, and soon below, the town lay wholly exposed. A block of frame buildings leaned together with a gap here and there, like a tooth gone. Dwellings marched evenly in a few rows, then broke ranks and scattered. A few were lost in the hills. Across the far end, a line of railroad track made a clean edge between town and swamp.

Alice caught this maplike impression out of the corner of her eye. She had to help will the car up the hill when it shuddered and seemed to fail, when it took heart, then seemed to slip and hang on the brink of backward motion, then coughed and pushed weakly up with scrambling wheels, catching for a hold.

Once Fred said, "The cottage, sir?"

"No, no," Innes said, pushing on the floorboards with his suède-shod feet. "Go on, don't stop, go on."

Fred leaned forward and by sheer stubbornness seemed to call out a spurt of power that lifted the car up the last incline and rolled it, dying, to the level drive before the door.

Innes sighed. "O.K., Fred. Bring Miss Brennan's bag. She'll want to freshen up. Then you can get busy."

The house was of wood, long painted white. Its façade was like a face. It had eyes, nose, and mouth, if one happened to notice. Alice looked up and saw the upstairs window eyes seeming closed under raised brows and thought the expression on the face was haughty and self-satisfied.

As they stood on the porch after Innes had turned the metal handle of the old-fashioned bell, she could see through a window to her right the outline of a pair of shoulders, tremendously broad. It was no more than an outline, dim behind the lace; but she knew it wasn't a woman.

"Are your sisters married?" she asked Innes hastily, ready to revise an unwarranted impression.

He looked shocked. "No," he said. "Oh, no, none of them." His small mouth under the mustache remained rounded for

speech, but again he did not say what more was in his mind, though Alice waited. On this unfinished, even unbegun, communication between them, the door opened.

The woman who opened the door seemed, at first glance, pop-eyed with surprise. She was big-boned and rather thin, although her face was round and firm and her features melted into one another without any angles. She looked, thought Alice, like a Botticelli woman, but not so fat. There was a convex swelling under her throat, and the pop eyes were permanent. "Why, Mr. Innes!" she said.

"Hello, Josephine." Innes affected a great joviality, as if he were playing Santa Claus. "Alice, this is Josephine. The car's broken down, Josephine, so I guess we're here for dinner, if you can find anything for us to eat. Are my sisters . . . ?"

The woman nodded. She made a fumbling motion with her cotton dress as if she were drying her large bright-pink hands.

"Tell them, will you?" urged Innes. "Come in, Alice. Put the bag there, Fred." Innes asserted himself as if he needed to prove that he belonged here. The center hall lay between two arches. He led the way through the velvet-hung opening at the right. The house seemed quiet and deserted. A new-laid fire was burning in the grate, the kindling just caught. But there was no one there.

The room was warm and a little stuffy. It was full of furniture and knickknacks with rugs overlying other rugs on the floor. Every table had a velvet cover and a lace cover over that. The place had a stuffed and cluttered elegance. Everything in it was elegant of itself, to the point of absurdity. A Victorian room, Alice decided, and no imitation, either. Yet, because it was the real thing it impressed her. The conviction that these furnishings were still elegant was hard to resist. Someone so patently thought so.

"Sit down, my dear." Behind them, Fred had vanished. Josephine had gone upstairs. Alice loosened her jacket. "I'll . . . er . . . just fetch Gertrude," Innes made for a door in the wall opposite the front of the house. The curiosity that had occupied Alice until now was touched with panic.

"Do I look all right?" she said.

Innes turned, not his rather too bulky hips, but his head only. His eyes appealed to her as he looked backward over

his shoulder. "It doesn't matter," he said, and his reluctance broke like a crust. "My sister Gertrude is blind."

Alice sat still, feeling the shock ebb out of her nerves. Innes had left her. She was quite alone. She felt submerged in this unfamiliar house, drowned without an indentity. Her eyes went to the fire, which at least was familiar and alive.

Alone, she should be gloating, "Goody, goody, I'm going to marry a million dollars." No wonder she felt strange and out of herself. Nothing to worry about. No living to make. Living's all made. Quick work, Alice.

Only last Saturday morning Alice had sat in her office with no dowry, nothing to swap in the marriage market, no money, prestige, influence, nothing to bring to her wedding but the bride. Now, on Thursday, she'd swapped just that for a million dollars. Show him. Show Art Killeen. Two could play.

Quick work since Saturday morning when he'd come into her office and sat on her desk with his leg swinging and said, "I'm courting a North Side debutante these days, you know. I'm really working at it." Said it in laughter, given the message kindly, lightly, in laughter: "Better give it up, Alice. It will never be." She was ashamed to think he'd known she thought . . .

Oh, nonsense! Why shouldn't she have thought they were going to be married, she and Art Killeen? They were in love. She'd been so dumb she hadn't known. No percentage in love. A silly, unprofitable thing, so often an economic or political mistake. Leading, however, in her case to a million dollars. Had it not? Would she have come from New York to Chicago if Art Killeen hadn't thought it such a fine idea that he'd got her the job with his pet, his wealthiest client?

A woman sees her husband's lawyer sometimes.

"I am looking," Alice said to herself solemnly, "into what the French call an abyss!" Muscles at the corners of her mouth flattened involuntarily. Well, if she could smile she must be getting better. Or was it wild hope running like a weed to spring up though she'd cut it down?

She had heard no sound, but she lifted her eyes and saw a man in the room. He was enormous. His great fat thighs strained in a pair of filthy dark trousers. A green flannel shirt, torn at the armhole, was open at his bullish neck, showing a stretch of dirty underwear. His hair was lank, black, and

long enough to show below his ears. His skin was brown, and his face glistened as if it had been oiled. His eyes were a sharp black, without brown or yellow. He stood in the middle of the room, looking at her without much curiosity. She could have screamed.

Then she saw that he carried a hod of coal. She shrank back in her chair and said nothing. Soon he walked silently to the grate, knelt, and began to pour coal upon the fire. She saw the muscles of his broad shoulders working under the fat. He was not a Negro. His features were thick, but the mouth was firm, and there was a flaring line from his nostrils to the tip of his nose that was both foreign and familiar, though she couldn't name him. She couldn't tell what he was. He knelt not two feet from her, and she became gradually aware of an odor and was nearly sick. The man put forth a scent, like an animal.

In a moment he had finished with the fire. He rose and was gone as indifferently as he had come. But before he left, he poked his dirty fingers into a box of candy that lay among the many trifles on the mantel and casually took two.

Alice sat still, her heart pounding in her throat.

In a moment or two the door in the back wall opened, and Innes led forth a straw-colored lady. "Gertrude," he said with anxious social sweetness, a tone that poured soothing oil upon this meeting and begged them both to be kind for his sake, "this is Alice Brennan. Alice, this is my oldest sister."

"How do you do, Miss Whitlock," said Alice, rising.

The woman turned her face toward the voice. She was somewhere between fifty and sixty years old. Her hair was a pile of pale straw, severely drawn back from her thin, bloodless face. The eyes were as pale as the rest of her, and even her brows and lashes made no easily discernible marks, so that the face was blank, as if eyes had been left out of it altogether. Her lips, too, were unreddened by blood or anything else. Yet there was a certain haughtiness about her tall, stiff figure and the impact of a personality.

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, Miss Brennan," she said in a rather high voice that was however, not thin, but rich in flute tones. It held a deliberate sweetness, faintly affected. "Innes tells me you have had trouble with the car."

"Can you give us dinner, Gertrude?" Innes said with a

combination of humility and demand. "If not, I suppose we can . . ."

"Certainly, we shall be glad to give you dinner," Gertrude said proudly, almost as if she were offended. "Speak to Josephine."

"Well, I have, but I will again. . . ." Innes was awkward. This pale sister seemed to unbalance him, as if he saw himself in two lights, once as her young and somehow humbled brother, once as Innes Whitlock, the successful man, and he couldn't make the images blend.

Gertrude dismissed the domestic problem as if it didn't concern her. She moved forward to find a chair. Alice sent a questioning look to her fiancé.

Innes began to chuckle. "Gertrude is pretty marvelous," he said heartily. "Gertrude, I can see her wondering how on earth you find your way so well."

Alice, who had been wondering nothing of the sort, saw with surprise that the woman's thin lips smiled, almost triumphantly. "But I know my way perfectly in this house," she said. "Never worry about that." She seemed to unbend a little as if this topic were welcome. "I have been totally blind for many years, but I do not let my affliction prevent me from moving about this house with complete confidence."

"Why, that's wonderful!" breathed Alice. "I do think that's wonderful, Miss Whitlock."

Innes beamed. Alice knew she'd caught on quickly, that this was what she ought to be saying.

"I simply resolved," Gertrude said and Alice recognized a worn quality in the phrase, "that I would never be a burden. Nor have I been." The blind woman sat down in a chair near the fire. She picked up an elegant box lying close to her hand. "Do you smoke, Miss Brennan?" she said pleasantly, holding the box quite accurately in Alice's direction.

"I do, thank you." Alice reached out her hand. Then she saw with dismay that the box was empty. The blind woman was showing off, and she had made a mistake.

For the space of half a second, Alice hesitated. Then she fumbled in her jacket pocket with her left hand. "I don't like to take the last one," she said with an apologetic and rather timid laugh. She dipped her hand into the box, letting the woman feel its pressure.

Innes leaped forward with a match and lit the cigarette Alice had pulled from her own pocket. "Let me," he said gallantly. "Gertrude is marvelous, really, isn't she?" His eyes congratulated Alice and thanked her, too.

Alice leaned back with a little glow in her heart. She was pleased with herself for having thought so quickly how to save the blind woman's pride and still warn her not to make the same mistake again. Having done Gertrude a service, in a way, Alice felt warmer toward her.

But Gertrude said, rather petulantly, "It ought to be full. Josephine is not quite all there is to be desired in a servant. It is very difficult, you can imagine . . ."

"Yes, indeed," murmured Alice.

"The girls who are willing to go into domestic service are quite untrained," Gertrude went on, "and quite untrainable, I'm afraid."

Alice murmured again. The conversation seemed to her to have taken a queer turn. It was peculiar to sit here and discuss Gertrude's servant problem when the news of the moment was surely Innes's unexpected arrival and Alice's introduction to this house. But, she told herself, Gertrude Whitlock's world was dark and limited.

"Josephine does very well, Gertrude," Innes said soothingly. "The house looks well. Just as it always did."

Gertrude sighed. "Innes," she said, "I wish you would speak to Maud and Isabel. I do not understand it. I, alone, am maintaining the house again. I am perfectly willing to do so. You realize that."

"I know," Innes said angrily. "I know all about it." Faint pink came up under his skin and his eyes looked sullen.

"Yet I seem to have less and less," Gertrude went on, scarcely heeding; "and really, we cannot do without servants. Even if it would look well, which it would not."

"Good heavens, of course you can't do without servants," Innes cried. "Tell me—the same old thing, I suppose?"

"They say they cannot share," Gertrude shrugged. "I haven't doubted them. I don't care to discuss it, naturally."

"You haven't gone into your capital?"

"The bank will know. I know nothing about that sort of thing." Gertrude implied that no lady would.

Innes clicked his tongue.

"But how sordid," Gertrude said suddenly. "Forgive me,

Miss Brennan. This must come under the head of business and you do understand business, I suppose. I don't see Innes often. I must snatch a moment."

"I'm a bad boy," Innes said with his pout. He had a way of being whimsical about his own shortcomings.

The blind woman pursed her day lips. "Of course, Innes is Stephen's son but not Sophia's," she said, as if this explained something. "That is Sophia, hanging over the mantel."

Startled, Alice looked up. Sophia was, indeed, hanging on the wall but looking as if she had never been alive at all. A pale oval face, stiffly done by a bad artist, it had a kind of crookedness to it, as if the artist had lost control of what little skill he had and gotten the perspective wrong. One eye looked insolently at the beholder, as eyes do in such portraits, but the other rolled a little wildly, as if it looked elsewhere. No, not elsewhere, but inward, as if half the woman dreamed.

"An excellent likeness of my mother," Gertrude said complacently.

There was sound on the stairs of feet plopping flat on each step and a dumpy figure appeared in the arch. Innes stepped quickly forth, took the newcomer's hand and swung it, making a little bow at the same time. "My sister, Maud."

The dumpy one chuckled. "Surprise, eh, Innes?" she said in a rasping voice, a queerly masculine voice, harsh and unpleasant and toneless. "You don't drop in like this so often."

Alice thought immediately of the Duchess in *Through the Looking Glass*, or was it *Wonderland*? Her nose was an untidy pug. Her hair was a rat's nest. Alice found a moment to wonder how anyone could deliberately go to work and arrange a head of hair like that. It was snarled and twisted into a pagoda full of hairpins, and there was no logic in it. Maud's skin was gray and hung on her face in folds. She wore a black dress embellished with tags of lace as illogical and haphazard as the arrangement of her hair. Her fat ankles were bound into high white shoes which, Alice saw, not without shock, were dirty and yellowish. She came closer, and her lively little gray eyes peered curiously at the girl.

"How ja do?" said Maud and stuck out a slab of a hand. The puffy flesh ended in dirty fingernails. Alice winced. Her nostrils twitched, then she stopped breathing; for from sister Maud arose an odor, definitely an odor; and, although

fainter, it was the same rank animal smell she had noticed before.

"How do you do, Miss . . . Miss Maud," Alice floundered, looking desperately to Innes. "Is that proper?" She heard herself giving a very nervous little laugh. "I can't very well call you both Miss Whitlock. I . . ."

But Maud was looking at Innes, and her harsh, unlovely voice cut through Alice's sentence and stopped it.

"Who's the girl?" she said. "Where'd you find her?"

Blood rose in Alice's face. The blind woman said quietly, "My sister Maud is quite deaf, Miss Brennan. She doesn't hear you at all."

Alice had trouble to draw her breath smoothly. "Thank you," she panted. "I didn't know."

"She is really rather helpless," said Gertrude contemptuously.

Innes had been spelling on his fingers. Maud's little eyes turned to the girl. They were bright and peered from folds of her grayish flesh.

"Secretary, eh?" she said bluntly. She waddled over to the chair in which Alice had been sitting. She collapsed into it. Her fat little body simply melted its bones and fell down. She stretched her ugly legs out and looked up at the mantel. Innes reached for the candy box. He did this automatically and handed it down. Maud dipped her fingers in.

Have some candy?" she said to Alice, who shuddered "No." The woman stuffed three pieces into her mouth and grinned at the same time.

"Look here, Maud . . . Excuse me, Alice." Innes snatched a pad of paper from the incomprehensible folds of the woman's dress and produced a pencil. He scribbled.

"What's that?" Maud said, regarding what he had written without much interest. "Oh, financial, eh?" She grinned. "My financial position. Innes, you're a card."

He tapped the paper with his forefinger, impatiently. He was quite ready to dominate this sister.

"I've still got the two Liberty Bonds," Maud said. "Isabel hid them on me." She went into rusty laughter.

Innes pantomimed.

"Oh, I dunno," Maud said. "Spent it, I guess. Eh?" She took another chocolate. "It goes," she said slobbering and sucking in the overflow with a loud *slupp*. "Isabel's the one.

She never spent an easy cent in her life, and it goes just the same." Maud heaved with mirth. "Makes her pretty mad. Should think it would."

"This," said Gertrude with an air of confidence to Alice, "is extremely distasteful to me."

"And to me," Innes said, rather grimly. His gaze was fixed on the deaf woman. "I warned you the last time. I'll make up no more deficiencies. I'll expect all your papers and accounts within the week."

Gertrude stiffened. "I'd prefer to go on with the bank, as usual," she said icily.

"Don't know what you say," rumbled Maud. "Write it down."

Innes gnawed his mustache. "Later," he said with a worried glance at Alice. "Gertrude, you must see it's to protect you."

She lifted her pale chin. "I am no one's burden."

"Innes . . ."

The third sister stood in the archway. She was not as short as Maud nor as thin as Gertrude, but medium tall with a plump breast like a pigeon. Her hair was a little darker than straw and ballooned around her face like an inverted umbrella, then subsided in a round mound on top of her head. Her complexion was mottled, but she had a kind of meaty color. Her features were sharp, but because they were embedded in a round-jowled face, the effect was not sharp. Her eyes, Alice noticed with a shock, were like the eyes in the portrait. One watched and one dreamed.

"Isabel, how are you?" Innes was faintly hostile. "This is Alice Brennan, who's with me. My secretary. Alice, come meet my youngest sister."

Isabel smiled with her lips together. Impulsively, on account of the smile, Alice held out her hand. Quick, but not quicker than the veiled dismay in the woman's eyes, Innes ran his arm through Alice's and drew hers down.

"I was saying, Isabel," he said sternly, "that I shall have to do what I threatened to do and take over all your business matters. I understand you are in a financial mess again."

He was ready to dominate this sister, also, but she was slippery. Isabel's eyes slid sidewise and down. She didn't answer. Instead she said, "You're always welcome, of course," in a kind of brisk whine; "but I do wish we had known, Innes . . ."

"We couldn't very well warn you," Innes defended himself haughtily. "The car went wrong. That wasn't our fault."

"Well, I do hope you won't mind having just what we were about to have ourselves." Her thin smile turned to Alice. "You see, I think dinner is actually ready. And it's so late, you know . . ."

"Please don't trouble about anything," said Alice a little coldly.

"Give us pot luck, Isabel," Innes said, "for heaven's sake."

Isabel's smile remained much the same. "Of course we are very glad to see you both." Her voice had no range. "Perhaps Miss Brennan would care to wash?" Isabel put her left hand, which was small and nervously strong, on Alice's arm. "Is this your bag? I'll call Mr. Johnson."

"Please don't trouble."

The nails on the hand were very long. The fingers tightened. Alice stood still in the woman's grasp. Her heart began to pound again.

Isabel let her go suddenly and turned away with a quick and somewhat crooked motion of the body.

Innes said, in a low voice, "Isabel's lost her right arm. I ought to have told you."

Then Alice saw the gray kid glove covering stiff artificial fingers on the hand that hung at Isabel's side as she moved crabwise across the hall.

"Yes, you ought to have told me," she said quietly. "You really ought. Why didn't you, Innes?"

He looked as if he would melt when she raised her reproachful eyes. Alice saw his lower lip push out. With sudden insight, she knew that in a moment he would feel the punishment to be greater than the crime. She looked at this petulant millionaire, the man she was going to marry, and she saw her cross of gold.

"Never mind," she said breathlessly. "I only hope I didn't offend her. Oh, Innes"—she made her eyes round—"do you think I have?"

"No, no, of course not," he said fondly. "Of course not, my dear."

It didn't matter much, Alice saw, if Isabel was offended, as long as Innes needn't feel uncomfortable about it.

4

"Will you take the young lady's bag upstairs, Mr. Johnson?" Isabel whined.

Mr. Johnson was the gross man in the dirty flannel shirt. He followed her into the hall and scooped up Alice's bag as if it had been a ping-pong ball. "Sure. Where do you want it?" His inflections were pure American. His teeth, some of them, were gold. His black eyes rested on Alice briefly.

"In the little guest room," Isabel said, in her tone of perpetual worry. "The heat's not on in Papa's room." She put her claw on Alice's arm again. "Mr. Johnson will show you."

Alice wanted to talk and scream like a frightened child. She did *not* want to go off upstairs with that outlandish creature named, of all incongruous names in the world, Mr. Johnson. Innes saved her.

"Wait a minute, Alice. Come in here, Isabel. For just a minute. I have something to tell you. All three of you. This is news, my dears, really news," Innes was being Santa Claus again, with the same loud, false, hearty good will with which he had entered this house. Gertrude cocked her pale head. Isabel drew within the room with her sidewise step; and Maud, as he tapped her shoulder, turned her shrewd eyes up at him.

"Alice and I are engaged to be married," he said. And then, without sound, he mouthed the words again for the deaf woman.

It seemed to Alice that sound disappeared from the world. The shattering stillness and Innes's mouth working silently seemed to prove that her own ears had failed her. Gertrude, sitting with her head cocked, did not move. Isabel put her left hand out and drew it back. Alice thought she must have cried out, yet because of her own sudden deafness, she had

not heard the cry. Not until the fire muttered was she sure it was a real silence that enclosed them.

Maud broke it. "Married?" she croaked. "You and her, eh? Is that so!"

"No, no." Isabel reached with frantic haste for the paper pad. "Not yet. Engaged." She said it furiously and she wrote it furiously, with her left hand, pressing hard. The smile on her face was a frozen thing.

"How very interesting." The blind woman's voice tinkled coolly. "Well, Innes, you have my best wishes, of course."

"It's pretty good for an old bachelor like me, isn't it?" Innes said, rocking on his heels. Alice bit her lip.

"Engaged, eh? High time." Maud was accidentally apropos. Her eyes had a light of lewd speculation in them. Alice looked away, anywhere, looked at Isabel.

"Such a surprise," said Isabel, still plaintive. "My dear, we have quite despaired of Innes. Now we shall have to call you Alice. Isn't that nice?"

Her ideas seemed disconnected, as if her mind were elsewhere. But her smile was blooming.

"Brennan," said Gertrude delicately, as if she tasted it. "B, r, e, double n?"

"A, n," finished Alice. It seemed absurd that her first and only remark should be two letters of the alphabet. But they fell from her lips, and nothing else came.

Maud said gratingly, "Innes, you old devil," and slapped her thigh.

"We think we're going to be very happy," said Innes, foolishly loud. "Don't we, darling?"

Alice's shoulders were stiff and unyielding under the curve of his arm. She could not meet that mood. Could not, and no graceful phrase would come.

"Beg your pardon." Fred, the chauffeur, spoke from the hall. He must have come through the back of the house. He touched his forehead to the sisters. "Thought I'd better tell you. I'm going to take her down the hill, sir, and have them put in a couple o' quarts of oil."

"You mean it's running!" cried Innes.

"I think she'll be all right now," Fred sait stolidly.

"Good work. That's fine. Fine."

Alice drew out of Innes's arm and found she was trembling.

"Tell your man," said Gertrude, "that Josephine will find him something to eat in the kitchen."

"Thank you, ma'am," Fred said. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He left the way he had come, not having looked at Alice even once.

Innes took her upstairs in rather a hurry, after that.

The servant, Josephine, came hesitantly to the parlor, looking backward and up toward their disappearing feet.

"Well, Josephine, what is it?" Isabel spied her.

"Excuse me," Josephine said in a hushed voice, "but there's veal in the meat loaf, Miss Isabel."

"Yes," she said, "yes . . ."

"And you know Mr. Innes. So I wondered."

"Oh, dear," Isabel said. "There's nothing else in the house. I really don't know . . . Perhaps he's outgrown . . ."

"Don't you think," Gertrude said gently, "it was always his imagination? I should venture to say that if one simply didn't mention . . ."

"There's very *little* veal," Isabel said. "It's nearly *all* beef."

Josephine looked from one to the other.

Maud roused herself. "Why don't we have dinner?" she shouted. "What are we waiting for?"

Josephine grimaced and pointed upstairs.

"Don't know what you mean," Maud said stubbornly. "Where's dinner? Why ain't it on the table? Write it down."

Alice closed the bathroom door upon herself with sagging relief. Innes had kissed her in the hall. "You're so pretty," he said. "We'll go on right after dinner. Right after dinner." He was in high spirits, but this was meant for comfort and as comfort she took it. Nevertheless, the bathroom was sanctuary. Here, for a few moments at least, she would be alone and away from any members of the Whitlock family. Perhaps she could get in touch with Alice Brennan, that independent young woman with such firm ideas of her own, who seemed to have evaporated, who seemed to have been for many hours a mere echo, an echoing mirror, a copy of something called a young lady.

As she splashed cold water on her face, she heard the whir of a starter, pulled the blind aside, and saw the big gray car slip around a segment of the drive visible from

this side window. It was running all right. The tail light winked at her.

Thank God, she thought, this is only for an hour or so more. Only for dinner. Right after dinner, Innes said, they'd be away. They would push on north. It would be dark, of course. She and Innes would sit side by side in the dark. They would come to the bad road in the dark and then at the end of it . . .

Alice leaned against the marble washbowl and looked at her fear in the glass. This was strange. Why must she tell herself these future steps, one by one? Because she could not see them. She couldn't imagine. Always, almost always, there persisted in her mind a view ahead, an outline of what was going to happen next. Vague, perhaps, but with clearly imagined spots in it. Arrival at a destination. Pieces of a plan. Pictures.

Only once before had she felt this blankness, this loss of the previewing sense, this chopping off of the antennae of her mind as they went forward into the future. That had been when she had been driving home from a dance with a gang, and she could not see herself getting home. The picture wasn't there. As now, she couldn't imagine it. It remained unimagined, an empty plan, without images, without faith.

That night the car had hit a tree and turned over.

Maybe I'm going to die, this time, she thought. Then, with a rush of her misery and her bitterness, "What the hell difference would it make?" she said aloud. And what difference would it make, indeed, when she was going to marry Innes Whitlock and not Art Killeen, ever?

In the long hall, on her way back, she met the chauffeur.

"Miss Brennan?"

"Yes." She kept her scrubbed face turned away.

"Congratulations." She turned her head angrily. His hand with the long thin fingers was held out to her.

"It's not proper to congratulate the girl," she said rudely. "Don't you know any better? Congratulate the man, but wish her happiness."

"Is that so?" he murmured mildly.

"Yes, of course," she said. It was not until she had closed the door of her room that she recognized his innocent mild-

ness for the sham it was, and what he had said and meant came back to her like an echo.

He had meant to congratulate her.

Alice set firm and defiant feet on the stairs, going down, but there was a carpet. She could hear their voices in the parlor.

Gertrude's flute: "Of course Innes is Susan's son so it can't matter as much, you know. And indeed, it's possible that quite nice girls go into business these modern days."

Isabel's monotone: "You know very little about it. She's very young. Much too young for Innes. Innes ought . . ."

Maud, crashing in: "Say, Innes'll have twins before the year is out. Little heirs. Little sons and heirs. I think she's pregnant." Maud's laughter.

Isabel said, "Oh, be quiet!"

Gertrude, a soft soprano ripple: "Someone is on the stairs."

Maud, harshly: "Getting touchy, Innes is. And you won't get any . . . Eh? What?"

Isabel, in the archway: "Come in, Miss Brennan. My dear, I meant to say Alice, of course. Come in, my dear. Dinner will be served in a few minutes now. As soon as Innes is down. Did you find what you needed?"

"Yes, indeed." Smiling, her head high, Alice walked into their parlor. They turned toward her. Their heads on their necks were three stalks in the same wind.

"And when do you plan to be married?" said Isabel.

"Yes," said Gertrude, "we are so interested. Have you set a day?"

"Say, Alice Brennan," said Maud, "that's your name, ain't it? When is the wedding? How soon, eh?"

"Oh, quite soon," said Alice carelessly. "There's no reason to wait." She took Maud's pad.

"Very soon," she wrote firmly.

5

About an hour after dinner, Alice pushed open the sliding doors of the second parlor, the room on the left of the hall, called the sitting room, and let herself through into the hall. Fred was just coming in by the front door.

"Fred . . ."

He touched his forehead. "If your bag's ready, Miss Brennan . . ."

"Wait," she said.

"Mr. Whitlock wants to start."

"He's not going to start," she said belligerently. "Do you know who's the doctor here?"

"No, I don't, Miss Brennan."

"I'm worried," Alice said. She appealed to him with a little smile. "I really am. I never saw anybody as sick as that, just over the wrong food. I don't think we ought to let him go on." Fred was listening respectfully. "Do you?" she demanded.

"I couldn't say, Miss Brennan."

Alice stamped her foot. "Oh, stop it?" she cried. "This is no time for revenge."

Fred grinned. He suddenly stopped being remote and stood at ease, althought he scarcely moved. "O.K." he said. "You put me in my place and now you want me to pop out again. Well, what's the matter?"

"Suppose we get him miles off in the car some place and then he collapses? I don't want the responsibility."

"Yeah, but he wants to go."

"He won't go if I make fuss enough. Look, I'm just not going to go off with him unless some doctor says it's all right. Have you ever seen him like this before?"

"Yeah, once."

"What happened?"

"That time he was in bed three days."

"Well, you see? Here he's with his own family and in a house with beds and all, and I . . ."

"You don't want the responsibility," he said. "Well, I don't blame you. How about the girls? Why don't you talk it over with them?"

"They've *said* he shouldn't go. Where are they?"

"Search me. They were right here ten minutes ago. I was asking Mr. Johnson about number six."

"What?"

"The road."

"What road?"

"Concentrate," said Fred. "You know when you drive a car? Well, you pick a road."

"I'm sorry." Alice went over to the telephone that stood on a little stand back in the portion of the hall below the stairs. "I don't suppose there's more than one doctor in a town like this, do you?"

"If there's one," said Fred, "they're lucky."

Alice picked up the phone. When the operator answered she said, "Operator, can you give me the name of a doctor in . . . in Ogaunee?"

"I beg your pardon," squeaked the operator.

"A doctor. I want the name of a doctor. I'm in Ogaunee."

"You mean Dr. Follett?" said the voice, suddenly human and sounding as if it were chewing gum.

"I guess I do," said Alice. "Can you connect me with his number?"

"Sure," the operator said.

"Miss Brennan," said Fred softly, "you are sticking your neck out, if I may be so bold."

They heard Innes calling, faintly, beyond the closed sliding doors.

A voice on the phone said, "Yes?" with a great patience.

"Dr. Follett? This is Alice Brennan speaking. I am at the Whitlock house."

The voice said, "Yes?" very cautiously.

Fred slipped into the sitting room, and Alice thanked him with her eyes.

"Mr. Innes Whitlock is here," she said crisply into the phone, "and he has been quite ill. I wonder if you could come and have a look at him?"

"Who is this speaking?"

"Alice Brennan. I am with Mr. Whitlock. I am his . . . secretary," Alice said desperately. "Please come if you can, Doctor. Because Mr. Whitlock wants to drive on to his camp, and I'm not sure he ought to try it."

"I see. You wish me to come there?"

"Yes, of course," she said impatiently. "Do you know where we are? The Whitlock house. It's on a hill."

Silence sung on the wire for a moment.

"Yes, I know," the voice said finally. "Very well."

"Thank you," Alice said with relief. She hung up the phone, looked at her watch. Eight o'clock. It might be sticking her neck out, as Fred has said; but she had a strong feeling that this was no time to be passive, that it would be dangerous to keep her mouth shut and swallow her own opinions. The sisters thought he ought not to go. It was only Innes who insisted. And if she, Alice, kept still and let him have his way, she could see very plainly how her acquiescence would be open to blame if anything happened.

Besides, she resented illness, in herself and in others. She was impatient with it, and she had no confidence in her ability to take care of Innes if he should become violently ill again on some lonely road. The whole situation annoyed her very much.

How, she wondered, could a little veal in a meat loaf make anybody as sick as that? And how could a man susceptible to such a reaction eat meat loaf without asking what was in it? And, for that matter, how could those who knew his idiosyncrasy have the bad judgment to feed him veal, ever? Alice did a little pacing up and down.

Presently the front door opened and Isabel came in, followed by a stranger, a dumpling of a little old woman, with pink cheeks and white hair, exactly like a character out of a book of fairy tales. She wore a shabby black coat over a cotton print dress and a velvet hat on the back of her head like a halo. She looked as if she had come in a hurry.

So did Isabel. "How's Innes?" She unwound her shawl with twisting shoulders.

"Better, I guess." Alice smiled uncertainly at the stranger.

"Well, Susan, you'd better see him and try to tell him he must stay here."

"I do agree with you, Miss Isabel," said Alice quickly.

The little old woman said in a matter-of-fact voice, "You must be Alice."

"Yes. I'm Alice Brennan." Isabel, with queer discourtesy, had gone back to the closet under the stairs to put her shawl away.

"I'm so glad to meet you. Especially if you're going to marry my son."

"Son!" Alice was so utterly astonished that she staggered.

Isabel said, "Susan was my father's second wife and Innes's mother, of course." She seemed aggrieved that there should be any surprise about it.

"I'm s-sorry," Alice stammered. "I really didn't know you lived here." Or anywhere, she might have added.

"I live in a cottage part way down," said Innes's mother placidly. She made no move to take her hat and coat off. She was quite obviously transient here, not at home in the Whitlock house. "I'm so happy that you thought to call me, Isabel. Not only because of Innes." She smiled at the girl.

Alice smiled back, with reservations. There seemed to be nothing wrong with Innes's mother. She was whole of limb. Her eyes were bright and intelligent. She had a sweet and vigorous voice. The extraordinary pink cheeks were real, not painted. She looked a thoroughly pleasant old lady, but Alice was a burnt child and she was wary. She said nothing.

Fred opened the sliding doors. "Miss Brennan . . ." Then his whole face warmed and glowed with smiling welcome. "Oh, hello, Mrs. Innes."

"Hello, Fred," said Susan. "How are you?"

"Fine. Just fine."

"And how's your mother?" she said, passing through the doors in front of him.

"She's fine, thank you," Fred said. "Just fine." The doors slid together.

Alice felt suddenly lonely and cold.

"Was that Susan Innes?" Gertrude's voice, lyrical with surprise, came to them from the back of the hall. The tall thin form moved with her swaying walk, toward them. She wore no coat but something cool and fresh that clung around her and reached Alice's senses, made her sure that Gertrude had been out of doors.

"Yes," said Isabel briefly. "I went to get her."

"Whatever for?" said Gertrude.

"Because Innes thinks he will drive to his camp, in his state, and he really must not," Isabel said. "He really must not."

"He certainly ought not," Gertrude said. "Susan, however . . . Miss Brennan, I really think you are the one best able to persuade him."

With a start, Alice realized that her presence was known to the blind woman. "I've tried," she said. "As a matter of fact, I've called the doctor."

"Doctor!" cried Isabel.

"Yes. Dr. Follett."

"Child," Gertrude said in a moment, "child, what have you done?"

"I've . . . called the doctor," Alice said in another moment. She kept her voice matter-of-fact, but she was getting angry.

"Oh, dear," said Isabel. "Oh, dear. Oh, dear."

"We do not call Dr. Follett," Gertrude said. "Never. You ought to have asked. He can't be coming. Not here."

"But he *is* coming," Alice maintained stoutly, "or so he said. And I'm sorry, but I do *not* understand."

"No. Of course, *you* couldn't," said Gertrude with surprising indulgence. "Nevertheless it is . . . well . . . Of course" —she drew herself up stiffer if possible—"*we* did not call."

"If he's coming," said Isabel, "we must warn Maud."

"Where is Maud?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Alice. "Nor have you the faintest idea how annoying all this mystery is to me." She spoke angrily. Then she held her breath for their reaction.

Isabel's eyes shifted. "My dear Alice," she complained, "it's so awkward. Of course you couldn't know, my dear. When Maud was younger she and Dr. Follett . . . Well, he was her suitor. . . ."

"Dr. Follett," said Gertrude in her cool tinkling voice, "went away on what we supposed was a vacation. He married another woman and brought her here to Ogaunee. Of course, we have had no communication with him since."

"I see," said Alice gravely, although she wanted to laugh. "How long ago was this, Miss Whitlock?"

"It was in 1917," Gertrude said, as if time stood still for her and this was just the other day.

"But what do you do for a doctor?"

"Oh, Dr. Gunderson is only eleven miles away," said Isabel. "Really, Alice, you ought to have asked. How dreadful for Maud, for all of us."

Maud was approaching through the dining room. That tread, at once quick and heavy, was the unmistakable concomitant of her waddling gait. She came through the door in a moment, shapeless in a dark cloak. She too, had been out of doors. Alice idly wondered where and why.

Isabel spoke to her on the swift fingers of her only hand. Alice watched the pale heavy face, waiting for news to seep through to whatever brain worked behind those little pig eyes that blinked once or twice, but remained fastened on the fingers. She saw the face change, grow sly. The loose lips fell open in a queer smile. The eyes sharpened. Surely the expression was that of anticipation and unholy joy.

Maud said, in her chest tones, "Is that so?"

Isabel's hand worked madly.

"Aw, let him come," said Maud.

"She must not see him," said Gertrude sharply. "She must go upstairs at once." Her voice rang with command. Maud looked planted there on her two thick stems. Gertrude struck her on the shoulder with her forefinger. Her blind face was imperious.

Then came the doorbell, and the three sisters scuttled out of the hall. Gertrude picked up her skirts and sailed through the parlor toward her own room, with majestic certainty and uncanny speed. Isabel climbed the stairs, pushing Maud before her. Maud, who went up with her face turned backward, reluctant, thoroughly uncoy, perfectly willing to risk an encounter with the man in her life. But she let Isabel hurry her past the table that stood just behind the railing on the edge of the stairwell, and around the corner of an upstairs wall.

They were gone. Alice stood alone, at the foot of the stairs, half exasperated, half relieved.

6

Dr. Follett was about sixty years old, she guessed, a dignified and rather portly fellow with a bald head and gold-rimmed eyeglasses. His face was pink and talcumed. His neat tan suit was smooth over his robinlike contours. He sent forth a faint clean aroma, antiseptic and comforting.

He acted as if he had resolved to do his duty precisely. He kept his eyes on her face and his head nodding while he listened to her account of the disaster that had overtaken Innes Whitlock. He said, when she had finished, "Thank you, Miss Brennan, that's very helpful. Now where is the patient?"

Alice knocked on the sliding doors and then began to draw them back. Someone helped from the other side. It was Fred.

Innes was still lying on the sofa, looking very pale, scarcely able to lift his head. His mother sat in a chair pulled up close, and she now rose to make room for the doctor.

"Ah," said Dr. Follett, "how are you, Susan?"

"Oh, I'm fine," she said. "Just fine. And you, doctor?"

Again Alice felt unreasonably lonely to be left out of a whole world of people who kept saying, "Fine. Just fine," to each other.

Fred had gone. "Would you rather I went away?" asked Alice.

"No, no," Innes said. "Doctor, this is Miss Brennan, my fiancée."

"Ah," said Dr. Follett, "she told me she was your secretary," In here, safe from the Whitlock girls, he was less businesslike. He looked benignly at Alice through the upper half of his glasses.

"The thing is that I must get along to my camp, doctor," Innes said fretfully. "The object of this whole trip. I never meant to stop here at all. But now Alice has got it into her head to worry about me." Alice wondered who had told him.

"Fred says she won't let me go until you've seen me. She's being very bossy." He used his little-boy voice and his pout, but she realized that he was much pleased. The role of an anxious sweetheart hadn't occurred to her, but here it was, ready and waiting.

"Naturally," said the doctor. "And quite right, too. Now . . ."

Susan Innes Whitlock drew Alice to a far corner of the room. They sat down with their backs to the men. "Innes has been telling me. I'm so happy about you. I've hoped he would find somebody. And I do think you were very wise to make him see the doctor."

"Thank you," said Alice, feeling a little ashamed. "But I've upset his sisters."

"Oh, dear me, I'd forgotten." Susan looked concerned. "But *I'm* glad," she said, "and I think you were *right*." She patted Alice's hand with a kind of indignant support.

"Why did Fred call you Mrs. Innes?" blurted Alice. "If I shouldn't ask, please just say so. But I'll go on making mistakes if I don't ask questions."

"Of course," said Susan sympathetically. "You must be wondering. It's only because *they* are the Misses Whitlock, you see, and after their father died and I moved into the cottage. . . . Well, it seemed better not to confuse everybody."

Alice shook her head as if to convince herself that this explained anything.

"It's hard for you to understand, I know," Susan said. "But they never thought I quite measured up to Sophia, you see."

"Why not?" said Alice bluntly.

"Because I was in service here."

"Oh."

Susan's eyes, that had been watching, relaxed into thoughtfulness. "Stephen always did exactly as he pleased, but I'm afraid it was pretty hard on the girls. They had just come back from Europe, too." She sighed. "Well, that was long ago."

"I wish Innes had taken me to your house," Alice said impulsively.

"I wish so, too. Perhaps he will, someday. Or, at least *you* must come."

There it was, something unsure, between Innes and his

mother. But Alice liked her. Her instinct was stubborn about that.

Now the doctor was helping Innes to his feet.

"He says," called Innes in a pleased voice, "that I will be just as uncomfortable in the car as anywhere else. So we'll go along."

"Is it really all right?" Alice was anxious.

"I think so," the doctor said. "He has gotten rid of whatever poisoned him. He will feel weak, of course. And he had better stick to liquids for a day or so. He tells me that he can be quite comfortable at this camp. And you will be with him, Miss Brennan."

"Yes," said Alice doubtfully. She felt unselfish devotion was being put upon her.

"Tell Fred, will you, dear?" Innes wobbled. "Good-by mother."

Alice watched them. Susan patted his sleeve, reaching out from a little distance, as if she dared not come closer. Innes was uncomfortable. Alice already knew him well enough to be sure of that. He was not at ease with his mother.

Alice went with the doctor out into the hall.

Fred was there. "You can put my bag in the car," she told him. "We're going ahead."

Her bag was already at his feet. Fred picked it up and went out.

The doctor said, "Good-by, Miss Brennan."

"I'm grateful to you for coming," Alice said, "and I must apologize if I've embarrassed you. I didn't know. But I'm very glad you came. And I do thank you."

The doctor's eyes showed an unexpected twinkle. "Quite all right, Miss Brennan. I'll send a bill." He looked slyly around the hall. The velvet curtains to the parlor had been drawn, covering the opening and shutting them in. "Where are they?" His lips barely moved.

Alice shrugged and felt her dimple surge into her cheek as it did when she suppressed a smile.

The doctor said, "Well, this has been an adventure. Now I think I'll just take Susan home."

Susan and Innes came through the sliding doors. He walked without her help, but he looked ghastly. "I think . . ." he said, ". . . excuse me."

He wobbled off down the hall. There was a bathroom

back there, across the far end of it, connecting both into the hall and to Gertrude's room, behind the parlor. Innes went in and closed the door.

"Good-by, Alice." Alice kissed her mother-in-law to be. The old lady's cheek was soft and fragrant. Dr. Follett gathered Susan under his wing and left.

Alice looked up the stairs. Beyond the railing, up there, she could see only the table and the big old-fashioned kerosene lamp with the flower-painted china shade that stood on it. No one was visible. The velvet curtains hung straight at her right. All was quiet. Dignified, haughty, withdrawn, invisible, the three Whitlock girls made no sign.

She picked up her hat from the hall table and turned to the mirror. She heard Fred outside; she heard the bathroom door open, and Innes's footsteps, sounding firmer. Then Fred was in at the front door. Still looking at herself in the glass, Alice knew quite well that Innes was part way down the hall to her left and that Fred was close to her, at the right. That the comings and goings were part of the rhythm of their departure. She felt no alarm, nothing.

But the hall exploded with sound and movement. She felt Fred move like a streak, heard him cry out, and then crash. She turned to see Innes huddled against the dining-room wall with Fred's body holding him there, and the ruins of the big kerosene lamp scattered on the floor. A broken piece of the china shade gyrated slowly toward her and settled down at her feet. For what seemed like minutes, they stood as if they were all paralyzed in their places. Then Alice ran, stumbling, toward the men.

"Hang onto him, will you?" Fred took the stairs two at a time. Alice put herself where Fred had been and heard Innes's breathing, loud and gasping and broken in rhythm.

"Are you hurt? Did it hurt you?"

He couldn't answer except by shaking his head ever so slightly.

Fred came pounding down. "Nobody up there. What the hell happened?"

"It fell," Alice said stupidly.

"I don't see how it could."

"But it fell."

"Did you hear anything?"

"I heard it fall."

"No. Afterward?"

Alice shook her head. "What do you mean?"

"I dunno," Fred said uneasily. "I thought . . . it was upstairs."

They were talking fast, almost in whispers. Now Innes stirred.

"Is everything in the car?" he said with sudden strength.

"You'd better rest," warned Alice. "Good heavens, that was an awful shock. I . . . I'm shaking."

Fred kicked the metal lamp base.

"Doctor," Alice said to him, aside, and he gave her a look and went swiftly away.

Alice wished afterward that she had not urged Innes back into the sitting room, but she did, and got him seated. She was afraid he might be sick again, but color had come back to his face and he looked somewhat better.

"What on earth"—Gertrude was holding her hand to her heart in the doorway—"crashed so? Innes, are you there?" She seemed to have lost her sure sense of her surroundings in the excitement.

"It was the lamp falling," Alice said. "It's all right. No one was hurt, Miss Whitlock."

"What a dreadful crash!" she said.

"The lamp's broken." Isabel stood beside her, edging, with her tendency to go sidewise, through ahead of her. Her complaining voice seemed to hold a little anger. "Mama's big lamp from the upstairs table. I was in the kitchen. Josephine has gone out!"—as if this were outrage. "What happened, Alice?"

"I really don't know, Miss Isabel," Alice said shortly.

"Innes . . .?"

Innes said, "It didn't hit me. So it's all right."

"What's going on?" Maud's masculine tones broke in upon them. "Say, who busted the lamp? It's all over the floor."

Everybody shrugged.

Maud looked at Innes with her sly little eyes. "You feeling better?" she said.

"I feel much better," Innes said vigorously, "A little shock like that seems to have been just what I needed. Where's Fred? I feel much stronger. We must go."

"He . . ." Alice began and stopped, for Fred was back;

and since he told her with a glance that he had missed the Doctor, she saw no reason to upset the Misses Whitlock again. "Here he is, now. But are you sure you're all right, Innes?"

"Yes," said Innes, "I'm all right."

Josephine came into view in the hall, wearing her coat, with a newspaper-wrapped package held across her body like a shield. She looked dazed.

"Where have you been?" wailed Isabel.

But Innes got jerkily up and blundered across the room. "Good-by, Gertrude, Maud, Isabel. Thanks for everything. I'll write you. But remember"—he spoke rapidly as if to get this said before his strength failed—"about the accounts. I meant that. I'll send a man up from the office. He'll go over everything with you. Mind you show him everything. And I must have your powers of attorney. Thanks, again. Good-by."

Alice said, "Good-by." She smiled valiantly at Isabel and Maud. Gertrude's hand she pressed briefly. It was a sketchy leave-taking on her part, and although she seemed caught up in Innes's fervor to get away and therefore rushed and pressed by his hurry, the brevity of her farewells was her own idea.

She felt she'd had enough of the Whitlock sisters.

7

THE WHITLOCK girls did not stand on the doorstep to wish their guests Godspeed. The tall front doors closed. The tall façade was a pale mask in the dark. Fred helped Innes into the tonneau and wrapped him well.

"The air in your face, sir?"

"Yes, that would be good."

Fred turned down the window. Alice felt rather useless. "Shall I sit in front?" she said, "You want to be quiet, don't you, Innes?"

Innes seemed too exhausted to do more than murmur consent. But it was consent. He seemed more himself, even in this collapsed state, than he had seemed at any time in his sisters' house. At least he was Innes Whitlock, who knew he didn't want to talk. There he had not been himself nor anything else, but a man looking for a role to act and not finding it.

The car moved away softly, a cradle on wheels for its master.

"She seems to be running sweet again," Alice said. "What was the matter with her, Fred?"

"You wouldn't know if I told you."

"No, I suppose I wouldn't." Her mind was somewhere else already. "Do you know, Fred, you moved awful fast in there. You were quite a hero."

"Nuts," he said.

"Maybe you saved his life."

"Look," he said, "if you see something's going to fall on somebody unless you push them, you push them. It's a reflex."

"A what?"

"What the hell?" Fred said. Alice wiggled herself back in the seat as they drifted gently down the hill.

"How do we go? Over that pit?"

"Yup. Have to, to get on number six."

"I hope we go over it faster than we came." Alice shivered.

The car answered her, picking up speed. Ogaunee street lights were few and far between, and dim at that. They turned left, away from Main Street, where they had never yet been. Innes was a limp bundle behind them. Alice felt a pricking of her nerves and a wish to get over the pit and on the highway. settled into their pace and done with Ogaunee. She scarcely saw what they were passing. She was listening for the hum of power, trying to recapture the mood for distance and the free feeling of being on the way to somewhere else.

Fred's arm went across in front of her like an iron bar.

"Watchit!" With his other hand he spun the wheel. The car's nose turned and tilted. They were headed for the

stars. The brakes screamed. Only Fred's arm kept Alice out of the windshield. The car stalled, shivered. Something hit Alice on the back of her head. She heard a crash, like an echo, without any sense of pressure. Then the night was still, for a moment.

People's voices. Feet running. Weight on her back. Fred was swearing monotonously. Alice realized that she wasn't hurt, that the weight on her back was Innes, flung like a sack over the back of the front seat. He had been lying limp, and the sudden stop had flung him forward like a stone out of a sling. Fred was lifting him away.

Somehow or other Alice found herself kneeling on the tilted floor of the tonneau, wiping a trickle of blood from Innes's chin. His eyes were open, but he didn't speak and seemed nearly unconscious. People had come out of the quiet town like worms out of the ground after a rain. They were milling around the car. Out of all their voices Alice heard one thread of talk, loud and clear, as if the audible equivalent of a spotlight were on it.

A man said, "How'd they miss the turn? Musta missed the turn, didn't they?"

"Say, you shouldn'ta come down here, driver. This road's been closed off."

Fred's angry voice: "Why in hell don't you put up a sign, then?"

"Whatdya mean? There's a sawhorse across the end."

"There is, eh?"

"Detour. That's what it says."

"Yeah?"

"This road goes off into the pit."

Fred said sarcastically, "That's why I stopped, bud."

"Good thing you stopped," somebody said.

"Show me that sign."

A woman said in Alice's ear, "Is he hurt, dear? Are you hurt, dear? The doctor's coming. How do you feel dear?" Alice shook her head. The voice receded.

Some man said in an excited way. "Say, the sawhorse ain't across the road now."

"Where is it?"

"It's across the main road!"

"What? What did he say?"

"Somebody moved the sign."

"The detour sign?"
"Yeah, moved it. Put it across the main road."
"For God's sake! Who done that?"
"Some fool kids . . ."
"Say, that's dangerous!"
"Who'd do a thing like that?"
"They mighta been killed!"
"Yessir, that's dangerous."
"Might have gone right over."
"He don't know the road."
"Pretty near did."
"Might have been killed!"
"Whoever done a thing like that?"
"What was they trying to do?" somebody said in a high indignant voice, "kill somebody?"

Alice looked up. Fred was standing silently beside the car. She felt as if she had a hundred things to say to him, and none of them were necessary. She smiled feebly. The world shook down, became a little less chaotic. Soon the doctor came.

Innes was damaged—three ribs. The car was not, except for a crumpled fender that had touched a fence. Fred maneuvered it away from the pit, on the brink of which it hung. And it went back up the hill to the Whitlock house, carrying Innes, carrying Alice, back again.

Inside, the Whitlock girls were sitting in the parlor. Josephine, who was sweeping up the last of the glass fragments from the hall, sent curious glances in their direction. It was not their custom to sit together in the evening. It was unusual to see all three of them sitting together like that, unless there was an argument or something. She guessed they were still thinking about Mr. Innes's being here and the doctor and all. Because they weren't talking. They never did talk much to each other. It took somebody from outside to start their tongues. Usually, the minute the outsider was gone, they fell apart, each sister into her own mind, kind of. They were apart now, but it was funny the way they kept on sitting in there, all three of them. Josephine felt puzzled and groped for what puzzled her.

When the two cars came, Dr. Follett's following, Gertrude heard them first.

She said, "Is that the car?" Her voice lilted. Josephine sat back on her haunches, turning her round eyes toward the door.

Isabel said, with quick, nervous attention, "That sounds like Innes!"

Maud's eyes ran from one to the other and then to Josephine's listening pose in the hall.

"What's the matter? Anything happen?" she said. Her tongue came out to touch her lower lip.

Josephine couldn't help feeling that something, somehow, had taken the edge off the surprise.

Fred and the doctor got Innes upstairs. The upper hall of the Whitlock house ran around two sides of the stair well, and another branch went toward the front of the house near the bathroom door. If you turned to the left at the top of the stairs, passed a door, then an old-fashioned mahogany chest of drawers against the wall, you came to a second door which led to a room over the kitchen wing, a large room with three sides to the weather, that had been Stephen Whitlock's own. Papa's room, they called it. It was furnished as it had been for him, full of enormous pieces. The big bed was mahogany, with solid ends. The curving headboard towered high. Here they put Innes. The room was chilly. Isabel sent Mr. Johnson to do something about the heat. She, herself, kicked open the register in the floor.

Dr. Follett paid no attention to the three sisters. Isabel was twittering, Gertrude stiff, Maud a solid lump in the door. He set to work on his patient. Alice found herself trembling in reaction. She asked if they shouldn't send for his mother.

Gertrude said, "Yes, of course. The telephone is in the hall, my dear. Tell me, Alice, does he look bad?"

"Yes. He looks dreadful," Alice said with a mean desire to shock her. The pale woman closed her colorless eyes. Alice passed Maud in the doorway. Maud was watching the doctor. Her gaze licked at his busy back. She was grinning.

Alice went down stairs, clinging to the railing. Josephine was on her way from the kitchen with a kettle and a basin. She told Alice one had only to ask the operator. So Alice asked. After she had spoken to Susan Innes, she sat down on the bottom step. What a mess! Fred passed her, coming down. He put his hand on her shoulder for a second.

"O.K.?"

"I'm shaking like a leaf," she said. "Where are you going?"

"Doc wants his bag."

"I guess we'll stay here, won't we?"

"Looks like it."

"It's funny," Alice said. "I had a premonition."

"Yeah. So did I."

Alice rested her head against the banister while he was briefly gone. She thought to herself that Innes, ill, belonged to his family. After all, she had contracted for an Innes in full health. It was annoying of him to keep getting hurt, one way or another. Innes was a nuisance. When Fred came in with the doctor's bag, the doctor's voice at the head of the stairs called down.

"Can you run down to my office and get a few things my wife will have ready?"

"Sure." Fred was cheerful and unshaken enough to run errands.

"Tell her the bottom drawer. Ask anybody where I live."

"I'll find it. You want this, don't you?"

"I'll take the bag up," Alice said crossly, dragging herself to her feet. She thought angrily: Well, if I have to be cheerful and a pillar of strength, O.K., O.K.

"Thanks," Fred said carelessly. He put the bag down and went off. *He* didn't see why she shouldn't be cheerful and strong. That was annoying, too. People of his class, Alice thought meanly, have no nerves.

Then Susan Innes came panting in. She was an old lady, and she'd climbed the hill too fast. Her face was pinker than ever. She was all hot and upset. She was an old darling, Alice thought, poor lamb, all hot and bothered. So Alice found herself saying soothing words and helping her upstairs. As the old lady's weight fell on her arm, Alice felt cool and strong. Well, I'm young, she thought, damn it.

They mounted into what seemed like a crowd, through which the doctor came directly to Susan. "He's going to be all right. Nothing to worry about. He's very nervous, of course. I'll soon strap him up and he'll have a little phenobarbital and go off to sleep. Be feeling much better by tomorrow. Now, Susan . . ."

Susan said, "Where is he, doctor?"

She went with him to her son.

Alice found herself facing the Whitlock girls, who stood

almost in a line. There was Isabel, fumbling at the neck of her dress with her sharp-nailed left hand. There was Gertrude, stiff and tall, locked in her colorless world of sound. There was Maud, fat ankles wide apart, her mad garment hanging every which way, her eyes shifting busily from Alice to her sisters. She looked as if thought were running in her head like a squirrel in its cage. Alice tossed her own head and marched into the bedroom. She crossed toward the big bed. Susan was bending there. Her voice murmured like a lullaby.

The doctor said, "My bag?"

"Oh, gosh," said Alice. "I forgot. I'll get it."

The house was confused. Alice was confused. Her mind seemed unable to seize upon and follow out a thread of action. Susan's coming had made her forget the bag. Now, as she went out of the room again, she forgot the sisters. They were gone. They had melted away like a chorus whose turn was over. But Alice forgot them.

She paused to try to pull herself together. I might as well, she thought, for all the notice I get. Be cool. Be strong. Perhaps it was a question of doing one thing at a time. First, get the doctor's bag. Then ask what more she could do. Stop floating around like a fool. Stop being batted this way and that. Take stock. What happens next? She put one foot in front of the other, deliberately taking thought to do so. She started for the head of the stairs.

It was just at that moment that she heard the sound. The house was full of sound, of course. Behind her, in the sickroom, she could hear the doctor's voice and Susan's. From somewhere came the sound of running water. There was movement on the floor below, faint sounds of walking. Yet this one new sound seemed to echo alone in the isolated quiet of the hall in which she stood. It came from below, she thought.

An odd sound. A queer little chuckle in the throat. A little caw of excitement. It was a sound no one would make on purpose. She felt that it came directly from thought. Spontaneous. Unconscious. There was voice behind it, even though it was less a voice than a stirring in the throat. It was queer.

Alice came to the head of the stairs and started down. She found nobody there, in the downstairs hall. She picked up

the doctor's bag and took it back with her. One thing at a time.

Innes was talking. He must be in pain. His ribs hurt him. He had come out of that dazed state, and he was talking in a high-pitched, frantic voice. Alice closed the door with enough violence to make a noise, and the doctor and Susan looked around at her.

Innes said. "I mean it, doctor. I'm afraid. Alice. Is that Alice? Come here, dear. Don't leave me. Where's Fred?"

"I don't know," she said. "How do you feel now?"

"It's not so bad," he said. His face was wet, though. "I don't want to stay here. Tell him to let us go. Alice, tell him."

"Go!" Alice said, astonished. "Why, Innes, you can't go driving around the country with your ribs broken."

"I can't stay here. I'm afraid to. Don't you see?"

"But why?"

"Because I'm afraid," he said with shrill stubbornness. "All right, it's silly and they're women and I know all that. But I'm afraid and I don't care. I can't help it." His voice cracked and he looked at Alice desperately.

Susan said, "Could he be moved down to my house, doctor?"

"Oh, yes," said Alice. "Why didn't we think . . ."

"You haven't room," Innes said despairingly. "Don't be silly, mother. You know you haven't room."

"I could make room," Susan said stoutly. "You might have my bed, and my paying guest would just have to go somewhere else. I think he would, Innes. Then Alice could come too, after tomorrow."

The plan hung in the air and fell through. Alice knew, all of a sudden, that it wouldn't happen. How explain it? How could she stay here in this house one night, and Innes elsewhere? What about Fred? It seemed unreasonable to move Innes now. It *was* unreasonable. There was no reason for it, just a feeling. A feeling wasn't enough for such a reshuffling of people.

The doctor said quietly, "You had better stay right in that bed, Whitlock. I wouldn't advise anything else. You're nervous and no wonder. Here, get these down."

He made Innes swallow two pills and handed the small while pillbox to Alice. "Keep him warm. He may have a

chill. And give him two of these . . . oh . . . every three hours. Can you attend to that, Miss Brennan?"

"Of course," Alice said. "Do you mean in the night, too?"

"No, no; not if he sleeps. If he's awake and restless."

"I'll attend to it," she said.

Susan said, "Now, Innes, if you'd like me to stay here, I will. I can make myself comfortable right in that chair."

"No, thank you, mother."

Alice felt the slap as it went to Susan.

But Susan said cheerfully, "Well, I'm glad you're no worse. I'll get along then." She patted his hand and turned toward the door with the doctor.

Alice sat down in a straight chair beside the bed. She couldn't understand Innes and his mother when they were together. There was something sad and wrong about them.

"You won't leave me, Alice?"

He looked ridiculously boyish in his pajamas, like a little old boy with a mustache. He looked weak and scared. Thoroughly scared. He twitched with it.

"What is it, Innes? What makes you afraid?"

Innes swallowed. "It's Gertrude."

"Gertrude?"

"You don't know. And people forget. But she never forgot. Alice, it was my fault she went blind."

"Oh, no! What do you mean?"

"I was only about seven years old, and they told me to hold the horse. Well, I didn't. I was only a child. I didn't realize. Besides, how could anyone know what was going to happen? The horse ran with her in the buggy. Threw her. She was sick for a long time. After that, she was blind. She always blamed me. I knew that. Everybody did. Father tried to be kind, but he blamed me, too. I always felt that. Mother didn't. She thought I was too young to be blamed for anything, but, of course, she didn't count."

Why not? thought Alice.

"They all blamed me. Gertrude blames me to this day. Naturally. Her life was ruined. I suppose if I'd done what I was told it wouldn't have happened. I don't know. But I've always known she'd like to hurt me, Alice. I know that."

Alice felt his forehead. Surely he was feverish.

"Try to go to sleep," she said. "Is there anything you want?"

"No, no, the doctor isn't through with me. How can I sleep? I want Fred. Alice, you'll stay by me, won't you? You and Fred?"

"Of course," said Alice. "Don't worry about it, Innes. We'll be here."

"Don't let Gertrude come in," he whispered, and subsided into a silent drowsy state.

Alice sat still. She tried to think of Gertrude, the pale woman, as a young girl with eyes. But she couldn't. A long past, locked in Innes's memory. A long past she'd never understand, though now guilt, sown into Innes as a boy, had pushed forth from the old roots, bearing fear for its fruit.

When the doctor came back, Fred was with him, carrying things. The doctor preferred to manage alone, so they went to stand outside the door.

Alice said. "He wants you and me to stick around. He's scared."

"That so?" Fred lounged against the wall.

"You don't seem surprised."

"That's because I'm not," Fred said.

"Well, of course he's had the darnedest luck . . ."

"Yeah? Doc Follett told me he went over the pit road tonight just after dark. And the detour sign was in the right place then."

"It probably was," Alice said. "What about it?"

"Well, it's funny, don't you think? Also, what made that lamp fall? I don't know. Do you?"

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Alice.

A door opened at the end of the short branch of the hall. Isabel came out of her room and smiled her half-hoop of tight-lipped smile when she saw them. "Let me just show you where you are to sleep," she said. "Someone has to think of these things. Fred, you must put up with a cot here in the lumber room. Alice, my dear, the little guest room, of course. It's terrible, isn't it? Poor Innes. Poor boy."

Alice's flesh crawled.

"But so lucky," Isabel said. "So lucky you weren't all killed."

"Sure was, Miss Isabel," Fred said. "Dumb luck, that's all."

"I do hope you'll be comfortable," Isabel said with her odd way of running off the subject. "This is all so unexpected."

When Dr. Follett left his patient at last and was passing through the hall downstairs on his way home, Maud stopped him. She summoned him into the sitting room and spoke for some time. She hadn't finished when he came out, pale, with his lips compressed, and made for his car as if the furies pursued him.

8

By eleven o'clock the house was quiet. Innes slept. Alice came quietly away and closed his door. She sat down beside Fred on the top step of the backstairs that ran down just beyond the door to Papa's room, between that room and the one bathroom on that floor. He was just sitting there. Alice was very tired, spent, in fact. But not sleepy. She didn't relish the thought of sleep. The old house was uneasy, and she uneasy in it. It seemed very natural to drop down there beside him. He gave her a cigarette. They talked in whispers, keeping their heads turned, to listen down the hall.

"Gone bye-bye?"

"At last." Alice sighed.

"I wonder what goes on."

Alice moved her head closer. "I started to tell you. He says he's afraid of Gertrude. He says it's his fault she's blind. And she'd like to hurt him. That's what he said. It's crazy, isn't it?"

"Gertrude's a queer bird," he said, "and I wouldn't put anything past any of them. They've been holed up here too long."

Alice shivered. The old house was rotten. All around her she felt the atmosphere of decay. Not so much decay of the walls or the ceilings, which still held and would hold. But

decay in the air, accumulated rubbish in the minds, unaired, unsunned, unclean.

"You don't think he's right to be scared?"

"*I'm* scared," said Fred.

Alice felt warm gratitude "Well, thank God you're human." They laughed and she shoved her shoulder closer. "What are we so scared of?" she asked him.

Fred said slowly, "Innes has got a million bucks."

"Yes?"

"Well, the girls could use it."

"But for heaven's sake . . ."

"It's you," Fred said.

"Me!"

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"Oh, I see what you're thinking," Alice said slowly, "You think I'm a blow, is that it? Because if I marry Innes, then they won't get so much if he should die."

"Sure," said Fred. "And I betcha." He squashed his cigarette on the step with his heel. "How'd they take it? The news, I mean."

Alice looked back in time. "They asked me when."

"Uh huh. See?"

"Yes, but how do they know they'll ever get anything? Why should Innes die? He's younger than they are."

"Maybe they're going to fix that," Fred said carelessly.

"So that's what we're afraid of?" Alice smiled.

"Must be, I guess."

Alice looked at his face in the dim light. "You think they want him to die quick, before I get hold of the money?"

"They wouldn't *mind*."

"Maybe they wouldn't mind, but look, Fred, it's silly, because they haven't *done* anything. Innes is nervous. Well, he's had a tough time. But what makes you think they did anything at all? God knows I don't like them, I can't stand them, but you're talking about murder."

"Yeah, I guess so. The thing is, I been having a little chat with Josephine," he said easily. "In the first place, they know damn well he can't eat veal. They know that. They must. Say, even I know it, and I'm only the hired help. Also, they must have known there was veal in that meat loaf. That's right, isn't it?"

"I should think so."

"Well, let me tell you it's right, because Josephine knew it and she even told them."

"Oh?"

"She called it to their attention, see?"

"What did they say?"

"The kinda brushed the whole thing off. Except Maud. Of course, she didn't hear what Josephine said. Now, it looks to me as if they wanted Innes to get sick. Why would they want that?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't die from eating veal."

"No, but he'd have to stick around this house, maybe. Where they could get at him."

"Oh, lord . . . Fred!"

"They wanted him to stay, didn't they?"

"Well, of course, but . . ."

"I was just trying to figure . . . Another thing, Josephine was down the road tonight. She went down into town, right after dinner, a few minutes before eight, she says. She went around by the pit road. Where we were, you know?"

"When?"

"Must have been close to eight o'clock. Well, I asked her if she say anybody monkeying around that sawhorse. She says no, she couldn't see, wasn't specially looking, anyhow. But she heard something. She heard somebody cough. She couldn't describe it very well. Kind of a cough, she said. It made her nervous. Said she ran."

"Ran?"

"Yeah. When the doc went by about seven forty-five, the thing was O.K. Just where it ought to be. Josephine heard that . . . sound down there. By the time we got there, about nine fifteen, it had been moved."

"Sound," said Alice. "Kind of a cough? I wonder . . ."

"Yeah, so do I."

"Because I heard something, Fred."

"You did? I asked you and you said you didn't."

"What?"

"Right after the lamp fell. I asked you if you heard anything."

"But it wasn't then. It was later. After we got back here and had put Innes to bed. You were gone on that errand for the doctor. I was just coming downstairs to get the bag."

"That's funny. When I heard it was right after the lamp fell. It wasn't exactly a cough, though."

"No," Alice said, "it was a chuckle but not really a chuckle."

"A noise . . . like in the throat."

"Yes. That's it."

"Damn funny."

"Josephine says it was a cough?"

"That's what she said."

"It must have been a funny cough," said Alice, "if she ran." The house creaked. She knew that if she heard that little sound again now, she'd scream in spite of herself.

"Be that as it may," Fred went on, "how come the lamp fell? Answer me that. It's been standing there on that table for years. Tonight it falls off, Falls off and over the railing and nearly beans Brother Innes."

"Did you see anyone?"

"Nobody. I ran up here, remember? Well, I knocked on Maud's door. She's down at the end of the hall you're on. Other side of the stairs. Nobody answered. Naturally. She can't hear knocks. So I thought I'd better not open the door because she might be in there in her underwear or something and I dunno if I could stand it"—Alice bit her lip—"so I came around here and knocked on Isabel's door. No answer. So I opened that one. There was nobody in there."

"Then it couldn't have been Isabel."

"Sure it could," said Fred. "Why not? Doesn't prove anything. Not with these stairs so handy."

Alice was drawn into wondering. "Had they come upstairs? Yes, Isabel pushed Maud up when the doctor came. But it couldn't have been Gertrude."

"Why not? She could have sneaked around and up these stairs if she wanted to. Or go up the front, for that matter."

"But . . . I was there in the hall nearly the whole time."

"Not the whole time. You were in the sitting room with Innes and the doctor and his mother. Mrs. Innes, I mean."

"Yes, that's right. She could have been listening. The curtains were drawn across the parlor. Who drew those curtains, Fred?"

"She did, I guess."

"We don't know where they were." Alice shrugged. "They might have been running up and down stairs, all

three of them. But anyhow, it wasn't Susan and it wasn't the doctor."

"Why should it be Susan?"

"I don't know."

"She's all right," said Fred. "Innes don't like her much. He's ashamed of her. And she don't get mad at him for it, and that makes him more ashamed than ever. Of himself, I mean."

Alice looked at him curiously. "Is that it?"

"Sure."

Alice said, "You're quite a psychologist."

"Nuts," Fred said.

"Well, then, how are we doing? If anyone tipped over the lamp on purpose, it was one of the sisters or . . . Josephine?"

"No, it wasn't either Josephine. She was out then. She got back right after it fell. She told me. You saw her, didn't you?"

"Yes, I saw her, but if you believe what everybody says . . ."

"That's where we are," said Fred with sudden grimness. "If somebody's trying to murder the boss, we don't want to believe what people say."

"Fred, we aren't talking about murder. Not really."

"No? Well, say we're kidding. Anyhow, we know it wasn't you and it wasn't me."

"I'm glad," said Alice solemnly.

"So am I."

They sat silent for a few minutes. It was oddly companionable.

Then Alice said, "Fred, couldn't you see in any windows? I mean, you were out at the car, just before the lamp fell. Was there a light in the rooms upstairs?"

"Sure. The whole house, I think. I did see somebody in the parlor."

"Who?"

"One of the girls."

"I dunno. Her face was hidden."

Alice sighed. "Another funny thing," Fred said, "they were all gone somewhere just before that, remember? When we were talking about calling the doctor. Where were they?"

"I don't know. But outdoors."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I think so. Isabel was. She went down to get Mrs. Innes." Alice bit her finger. "Fred, why did she have to go to get her? Mrs. Innes has a telephone. I know, because I called her myself,"

"Funny," drawled Fred.

"And Gertrude had been outdoors. I could tell. And Maud came in with her cloak on."

"Come into the garden, Maud," Fred said. "Now, where'd they all go to? Not down the road a piece to move that sawhorse, do you suppose?"

"But, Fred, how could they plan such a thing? How could they know it would do *us* any harm?"

"Well, for one thing, I asked Mr. Johnson which route to take right in front of all three of them," Fred said. "And that pit road's not the main road. The main road out of Ogaunee is number ten, that goes by along the railroad tracks. Traffic light's over the pit. Also, probably everybody else around here knows the place where the pit road goes off better than I do. The sawhorse wasn't right across the right road, you know. A driver who was familiar with it would go by without thinking, if he were going from this end, keeping to the right. Only a guy like me, who isn't too sure of his way, especially at night . . . That pit sure yawned," said Fred.

"You must have felt something wrong, or we'd have gone right over."

"Maybe I did," said Fred, without any false modesty. "I can't tell now. But we sure weren't going very fast, or I couldn't have stopped her."

Alice thought a moment. "There's only one thing wrong with the idea that they all knew which road we'd take."

"What's that?"

"Maud's deaf."

"By gosh, that's right. Could she read our lips?"

"I don't know. But look, Fred, another thing: If she were up here, waiting to push over the lamp, how did she know when to push? It must have been done by sound. And she couldn't have heard Innes come out of the bathroom under the stairs. Not if she's deaf."

"And she couldn't have seen him. That's right," Fred said. "Say, there's more in this than you'd think. Listen, Gertrude's blind. Well, could she read a detour sign? Would she know what it was or what it means, even? How did she know there

was one there? She lost her sight years ago, before there were many cars on the roads around here. I bet she never heard of a detour sign. Or knows how traffic works or the rules of the road. All that is new since she last saw. How could she even guess you could be fooled in the dark? No, Gertrude couldn't have moved that sawhorse."

"Could Isabel, with only one arm?"

"It was dragged," said Fred. "I'd say she could if she wanted to bad enough."

"Then it was Isabel," said Alice.

"Look"—Fred turned a wrinkled brow—"suppose old Maud thought it was the doctor coming out of the bathroom. Maybe she's got it in for the doctor."

"How could she think that? She couldn't hear him any better than she could have heard Innes. She wouldn't know *anyone* was coming."

"But Gertrude could have dumped the lamp."

"Could have ain't did," Alice said wryly. "You know, we're making this up."

"Well, it's been fun," Fred said, grinning.

Alice looked down at his feet. "Where did you play football, Fred?"

"University of Michigan."

"What's your last name?"

"Bitoski."

"Oh," said Alice, "so that's who you are."

"Football's a great game," Fred said, stretching. "Got me two gold teeth and a college education. Better get some sleep, eh?" He helped her up.

9

ALICE LAY a long time on the hard bed in the little guest room with her eyes open in the dark. In Ogaunee night was untroubled by the lights of man. It came down dark and tight around the house, and for all Alice kept telling herself there was no menace in it, she was a long time going to sleep.

In the morning she dragged herself up early. After all, she was a nurse now. She had to look after Innes. "It looks," she said to her cross and sleepy face in the mirror, "as if I'm damned well going to earn my million dollars."

She found Innes awake and fretful, and Fred with him.

Fred said, "Good morning, Miss Brennan."

"Alice, my dear," said Innes. He held his brow up to be kissed, and Alice kissed it, feeling like a fool. Innes was full of agitation. His face was busy and sly with worries. "Alice, Fred has been pointing out something I hadn't considered. Is the door tight? See, will you? Josephine's gone for my breakfast. I don't want her to overhear."

"The door's tight. What's the matter?"

"Fred says they're upset because of our engagement."

"Oh, dear," said Alice. "Fred, you shouldn't have talked about that. Innes, I don't think you ought to brood, really I don't. We had an accident. That's all."

"Maybe." Innes began to speak rapidly, spilling out his words. "But you don't realize what happened last night. You don't see the significance. But my sisters do. Look, dear, when my father died he divided his money, which was rather a lot, evenly among the four of us. With a little to my mother, of course. Anyway, the girls elected to stay here and maintain the house just as it had always been, and I went off with mine to Chicago. I was twenty-one then and anxious to get away. After all, there was nothing for me to do here. I did . . . pretty well in Chicago. But the girls, of course, just used the money they had. Gertrude lets the bank manage hers. She scrapes along on the income. It's not bad, you

know. But of course she never increases her capital. Never has.

"Maud is a fool with money. She simply spends it. And Isabel manages to lose a great deal because she always hangs onto everything she buys, and she will not take her losses. She never gives up. Anybody with a business mind knows there's no use hanging on when the investment goes bad. But Isabel hangs on. And because she doesn't know how to cut her losses, she gets into trouble. Well, what happens is that sooner or later they are all living on Gertrude's income. And I have to step in and straighten them out again.

"I've done it and done it. And I've threatened to stop. I mean it, too. There's no reason for the same thing to happen again and again. It's ridiculous." Alice sensed a cold, thin thread of shrewdness in Innes when he spoke about money. "I have no more patience with it. I intend to stop stepping in and taking all their losses myself. If they are incompetent to manage, I must manage for them. You heard me speak of it. But you don't realize that they know I meant it."

Innes raised his silly chin. "I've made threats before. This time I think they sensed my determination."

"What of it?" murmured Alice, with balloon-pricking impulses.

"What of it! Don't you see? I'm not a source of income to them, alive, any more."

"Innes, that's horrible!" she said. "You shouldn't think of your sisters so . . . why should you?"

"I can't help it. I do," he said childishly. Then his voice went an octave down. "I think of Gertrude. If it isn't the money, then she's . . . she's determined I shan't be happy. Why should I pretend, Alice? Their mother was odd. They're odd. I'm afraid."

His hand reached out, but Alice folded her arms. "All right. You're afraid. We'll go on from there."

His eyes fell. "You despise me," he murmured.

Alice said clearly, "Not necessarily. If we're not going to pretend, I'm afraid of them myself. I don't like your sisters, Innes."

He looked merely grateful. "Neither do I," he whispered.

Fred moved away.

"Well, what shall we do about it?" Alice said.

"I want you to wire Killeen."

Blood rushed into her face. She could feel it. She was startled and dismayed.

"I want you to take the car while Fred stays here and run down to the telegraph office. It's in the railroad station. Wire Killeen. I'll give you his address."

"I know his address," said Alice with stiff lips.

"Tell him to hop a train and come right up here. Right away."

"But, Innes, why?" He mustn't come, she was thinking.

"I want to change my will," Innes said, pursing his lips stubbornly. "I want to leave my money to you, Alice."

"But—"

"So I can live long enough to marry you," he said savagely.

"Very well," she said. "Just as you wish, Innes." She marched out of the bedroom.

Fred was after her. "Here are the keys," he said. "She's got no gear shift, you know."

"I know," Alice said. Her eyes were full of angry tears. She felt abused and sorry for herself.

"I'd go," Fred said, "but he wants me to stay here, I guess I'm promoted to bodyguard." Alice took the keys. "Look," Fred said.

"You better go back to your bodyguarding."

She wanted to strike out and hurt somebody. Fred would do. Fred and his sympathy.

A little later she drove the big car down the hill, handling it delicately, because she was unused to it. The town of Ogaunee was depressing—shiftless, she thought; shabby and patched and peeling. A broken trestle to the east spoke of its past. There wasn't much to be said for its present. She drove the length of the main street and found the drab little depot with its old-fashioned eaves, and the telegraph station tucked inside.

"Mr. Arthur Killeen," she printed. Art Killeen. Oh, God, why did he have to come up here? She didn't want to see him. Or him to see her in this mess. Or him to draw the document that would guarantee her wages for this time and trouble. He must hear about her engagement, of course, but not the way it was going to be if he came up here. Not seeing her like a rat in a trap, playing nurse, being a phony tower

of strength, being Innes's beloved. Oh, Art, don't come, because I can't stand all this and seeing you, too.

The man reached for the blank, and she let it go out of her fingers despairingly. A train pulled in. She wished she had the nerve to drop everything and climb on board. It was headed south. Maybe it went back to Chicago. What difference where it went? But she hadn't enough money. Trapped, she thought.

She paid the man less than a dollar. The word would go out over the wires and reach Art Killeen, and he would come running. Of course he would. Wasn't Innes Whitlock his pet client? His wealthy patron? Wasn't there percentage in coming when Innes called? Now he'd know the bargain she'd made and see the short end of it. See Innes trembling and making this cowardly will and whining about murder.

Alice walked out onto the platform. It blurred in her sight. The town train-meeters watched her with curiosity. They probably knew exactly who she was. Let them. She kicked at the boards and raised her eyes to the train.

There! There in the window, a face she knew. A long, wise, sad face. Her heart jumped. She knew it well, knew every line. For a whole year she'd sat and watched that face, and she knew its whole repertoire of expressions. MacDougal Duff. A friend. A face she knew.

"Mr. Duff! Professor Duff!"

But she had to talk to him! Because he would know. He did know about murder. He was an expert. He could tell Innes and set them right. If only she could talk to him about it and bring him up to that house and let some sense in and clear up this stupid, maddening, suspicious, uncertain, upsetting situation!

"Mr. Duff . . . oh, please!"

She ran along. He saw her now and smiled. How sweet his smile was! He knew her. He remembered her. But he was just going through.

Just going through.

Alice stood still. Why should MacDougal Duff break his trip for her? The train bumbled along; its rear end swayed; it crawled off, heading for the little hills.

She dug her fists into her pockets, whipped around on her heel, and made for the car. Up across the town she could

see the peeling face of the Whitlock house. Damned jack-o-lantern, she thought.

A small boy, adoring eyes fixed on the big car while his body was paralyzed in utter admiration in a tricky pose on a baggage truck, fell off as she viciously slammed the door of the haughty beauty. She turned the crumpled fender and went roaring up the main street.

A dog ran from her angry horn, a typical Ogaunee dog, a miserable hound. She swept with speed and splendor up the hill.

Alien, she was. Alien in this ghastly town, this dead, this dying place. With a sick millionaire and his delusions on her hands, and no sympathy, not a scrap of it, for him in her heart.

Alice went down for lunch at one o'clock. Innes and she had spent a quiet morning. He read. She read. They were quite apart, but she was there in the room and that was all he seemed to want. The doctor had come and gone. Come directly from the front door, turning his eyes neither to the left nor the right, and gone out the same way. Alice reported a quiet night and only four of the pills taken. The doctor, viewing Innes thoughtfully, said they were to continue.

At one, she gave Innes another pill, called Fred to hover near by, and went down to her lunch.

The sisters were in the dining room. Gertrude sat at the head of the table, as befitted the oldest one. Today she wore a brown silk dress, particularly unbecoming to her colorless face. Alice watched her push food onto her fork with a dainty crust of bread. She managed very well. One would scarcely think she was blind. Except for the spots, old spots from old food, visible on the bosom of her dress. A gob of mayonnaise landed there, and helplessly Alice watched it slide. One did not say to Gertrude Whitlock, "Hey, there, you spilled something."

Maud, who could perfectly well see with those little sharp gray eyes, was even filthier. She gobbled, she slupped, she chewed with sound effects. Her teeth clicked. Her fingernails were banded in black. Alice kept her eyes averted from that quarter.

Isabel was rather dainty, though awkward with her left hand. She had to pursue bits around her plate. She had

no crust of bread to capture them. She kept the right hand in the kid glove resting primly in her lap. A fine crew! thought Alice. Dear lord, how long?

The food was good, although not too plentiful. Isabel savored every morsel as if it were her last. Isabel, Alice gathered, ran the house and did the ordering. It was beneath Gertrude, for some reason. And Maud was far too lazy to be bothered.

Talk was heavy going.

"Innes tells me," said Alice, "that there used to be a pine woods behind the house. How lovely it must have been!"

"Yes," said Gertrude, "there is a pine woods, of course."

So that was stopped. One didn't say to Gertrude Whitlock, "Oh no, Miss Whitlock, you've forgotten. There's only an ugly hole in the ground."

She tried again. "Innes tells me his father was the original owner of all this land."

"Certainly," said Gertrude.

"Papa," murmured Isabel. "Let's not speak of him, Alice, please. This is such a . . . a nervous day."

Alice stared.

"My father was killed in an automobile accident," Gertrude said piously. "Isabel was with him. It was a terrible experience."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"Well, how do you like the family?" boomed Maud, disconcertingly enough.

Alice smiled, opened her lips to speak, and smiled again.

"We're a bunch of old women," Maud said. "Ha ha. When's the doctor coming?"

"He's been," mouthed Alice.

"What? What did she say?"

Isabel ripped off the brief remark on her fingers.

"Oh, he's been, eh?" Maud looked disappointed. "Say, Isabel, Innes ought to have some wine."

"I have the keys," said Isabel.

Maud twisted her lips to dislodge something from a tooth. "If I had any sense I'd go to the dentist," she announced rather cheerfully.

Alice finished her meal and fled, excusing herself for nurse's duty. They were fantastic, she thought. Disjointed. Scattered. She went into the kitchen to search for some ice.

The kitchen was large and old. The linoleum on the floor had tracks in it, beaten bare. Josephine was washing dishes with her big hands pink and bright in the suds. She brought them out, dripping, and showed Alice the ice pick. No newfangled electric icebox here.

Alice was picking daintily away at a hunk of slippery ice when she felt herself surrounded by the aura of Mr. Johnson. He had on a stiff, clean new pair of cotton work pants, but the green shirt was the same. Also the underwear. The pick fell from her nerveless fingers, and he took it, aimed one vicious powerful blow that struck like lightning and shattered the whole side of the ice cake.

He grinned. His teeth were very bad. "O.K.?" he said.

"Thank you," said Alice and filled her dish, watching out of the corner of her eye as he sauntered over and picked an apple peel off a dirty dish to nibble on. She fled, wondering for the nineteenth time who and why was Mr. Johnson.

At the top of the stairs she looked back. He was sauntering into the sitting room. She heard Maud's voice. "Say, go on downtown and get me a box of chocolates."

"Where's the money?" said Mr. Johnson.

"You got money," Maud said. "Go on, be a sport."

Then there was silence. An ugly silence. Alice fled for the third time. Her imagination, she told herself with fervent hope, was too vivid.

Fred took the bowl of ice. "He's taking a nap."

"Oh. Well, then . . ."

"Want to give me the keys?" Fred said.

"Of course. I'm sorry. They're in my purse." She went off to her own room and in a moment he followed. He stepped inside the room and half closed the door.

"Is Innes all right?" she said automatically.

"Sure. I can hear. Nobody came near him all morning, did they?"

"No." She handed him the keys to the car.

"Who's this Killeen?" Fred asked abruptly.

"Oh. Why, he's a lawyer."

"You blush easy," said Fred.

"I'm afraid that's none of *your* business," she told him frigidly.

"I know it. Go ahead. Smack me down some more. Is he coming, though?"

"How would I know? I suppose so. He'll probably come." Her voice got bitter in spite of her.

Fred said, "Well, I was going to say . . . When will he get here, do you know?"

"Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock," Alice said promptly and blushed again. "I mean, naturally, that's the first train."

"Well look, if I were you I wouldn't . . . You didn't say anything about him downstairs?"

"No."

"Don't," said Fred.

"Why not?" she said carelessly.

He pushed the door a little tighter and came nearer. "Don't want to put a time limit on this thing," he said softly. "Can't you see?"

"No. What do you mean?" She wished he'd go.

"Well, look, if they think tomorrow's too late, there's still tonight."

"Oh, God," said Alice, "I can't keep thinking about that always. Things are bad enough without worrying about murder. Murder!" she repeated scornfully.

Fred considered her in silence for a moment. "Yeah, but look, just don't let it out."

"All right, I won't," she said. "Is that what you want? Then . . ." She wanted to say, "Let me alone."

"You know," Fred drawled, "if anything does happen to him, you'll be a million dollars out."

Alice felt shocked. "Why, yes," she said carefully, "though I hadn't quite thought of it that way."

"I thought you did think of it that way. I mean, I'm sorry, maybe I got you wrong after all. But I thought you wanted to marry him because of the money."

Alice stared at him. It all seemed long ago, somehow.

"I'm sorry," Fred said. "I mean if I'm wrong. I mean if you . . ."

"I told you so," said Alice boldly, "and it's true."

"That's what I thought."

"Look, Fred," Alice said desperately, "you've been a big help. Keep on being a big help, will you?"

"I'm on your side," Fred said. "I thought you knew that."

"Then why does it matter what I'm marrying him for? The thing is, now, to get out of this mess."

"We can't get out until he's well enough to go."

"I know."

"And all I meant was to warn you. A million dollars is an awful big stake. You've got to keep it in mind."

"I've got it in mind," Alice said.

"Relax," Fred said. "Gosh darn it. What do you want to get mad at me for?"

"I'm not."

"Well, good," he said.

She tried to smile. "Tell me again, what's this about not talking? Maybe I wasn't listening."

"All I say is, watch out they don't know the money's getting willed to you tomorrow. Because if they do know, and if they really are up to something, that would make tonight a bad night for the boss. Now do you see?"

"Yes, I see," said Alice.

Fred leaned back on the door. It swung closer to closing. He seized the knob and pushed it, using his strength. It wouldn't close.

"Oh, my God!" screamed Alice.

She saw the fingers in the crack. In the crack where the hinges were. Fingers being squeezed. She knew it must be excruciating pain.

Fred looked at her, startled. He didn't release the door, kept leaning his weight on it. But there was no sound. Weirdly, impossibly, there was no sound. The fingers were caught in the door, and it must hurt. It must hurt terribly, but no one cried out. There was no scream of pain.

Alice wrenched the knob from Fred's hand and pulled the door open. Isabel stood there.

"Oh, Miss Whitlock, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

Isabel freed her right hand from the crack. She used her left to do it. She lifted the stiff, unnatural gray kid fingers out of the crack and hung them at her side.

"It really doesn't matter," she said, with a brilliant smile. "I was just going by." She nodded and moved off.

Alice felt hysterical. "It couldn't hurt her," she said, "but I thought it was a real hand. I thought it was real."

"It's artificial, all right," Fred said thoughtfully. "I guess that proves it. So she's only got one arm."

Alice looked up in alarm.

"I was thinking, last night," he muttered, "how do we know?"

"How do we know what?"

"If they're really blind, or deaf, or crippled."

Alice said, "Do you feel all right?" sarcastically.

"I don't feel so good," Fred said, "and that's a fact. I wonder what she heard."

"You think she was listening?"

"Certainly I think she was listening. Am I a dope? Are you?"

"I guess she must have been listening," Alice said humbly. "Now what?"

"It means a hard night tonight and no rest for the weary," Fred said. "That's what it means. Like I said."

10

THEY HAD an argument about mentioning the incident to Innes. Fred said they ought not. Said it would scare the pants off him, and he was scared enough already. But Alice insisted that if a man was in special danger he had a right to know it. She said if Fred was really worried, then Innes must be told. Otherwise, she pointed out, it was taking too much responsibility.

"You don't like responsibility, do you?" grumbled Fred, giving up. "All right, we tell him."

"But not until tonight," Alice compromised.

Through the long weary afternoon, Alice drowsed in a chair beside the big bed where Innes lay. Fred came in and spelled her about three o'clock, and she slept on her bed for an hour. Nothing happened. The whole world seemed to be waiting for Innes to heal or for night to fall. The house was quiet. The sisters were invisible. It was too quiet. They were too retiring. One felt one hadn't an eye on them.

Susan came while Alice napped. She didn't stay long.

Innes begged for company at dinnertime, and Alice thankfully ate from a tray in his room .

At about eight o'clock Gertrude rapped on the door. She came in with her somehow stately walk, steering herself a straight course across the room, avoiding furniture in her uncanny way.

"How are you feeling, Innes?"

"A little better." Innes forced a confident note into his voice, though he shrank in bed.

"Are they taking care of you?"

"Yes, oh, yes. They wash my face and they feed me pills." Innes was being brave and funny, but his fear blared like a trumpet to Alice's ears.

"I'm sorry," said Gertrude daintily, "that there is so little I can do for you. But if there is anything, please let me know."

"Of course. Of course, Gertrude."

"Then good night." She found the door herself. She made Alice think of a sailboat. Her progress went in geometrical designs, like tacking—as if she knew by memory how many paces to a fixed point and the angle there on which she must turn.

Innes swallowed, as if he gulped down the heart that had been in his throat, and he looked at Alice, but they said nothing.

Soon after Isabel came sidling in. Alice watched her eye. She seemed to be able to look at one straight with one eye while the other remained sly and shifty. Still, she wasn't cross-eyed. It was baffling and strange. It made Isabel elusive, not to be pinned down.

She said anxiously, "Innes, my dear, are you comfortable?"

"I guess so," said Innes.

"Have you much pain?"

Alice knew her anxiety was a habit. Isabel was always anxious about something. Just the same, she did seem more sympathetic than her sister Gertrude, whose precise good manners only made her more withdrawn and cold.

"The pain's not so bad," Innes admitted.

"I suppose the doctor gives him something?"

"Yes," said Alice.

"That's good," said Isabel. "I'm so glad you have no unnecessary pain."

"I'll be all right," said Innes. "And I know it's a nuisance for you, Isabel . . ."

With her usual whine, Isabel said, "After all, Innes, you are one of us." She put her claw on his brow. "Alice, dear, what a fine nurse you are. We are all so glad you're here." One eye smiled frankly, but the other had a secret.

"Thank you, Miss Isabel," said Alice. "Good night."

"Good night. Good night."

It was Maud's turn.

"Well, Innes!" Her bedside manner was a kind of raucous hilarity. "You got everything, eh? Even the pretty nurse." Innes started to say something, but Maud went right along. "Nothing to do but take it easy. How's the bed? Soft, eh? Papa liked good springs. Best spring in the house." She nudged the mattress with her knuckles.

"Don't, please."

"What's the doctor doing for you, eh? What's he say?"

Innes waggled his eyebrows.

Alice said, "Just rest."

"Eh?"

Innes tapped Maud's arm and acted it out. He folded his hands and closed his eyes.

"Sleep, eh? Does he give you dope?"

Innes shrugged. Alice smiled, uncertainly.

"Donald Follett is getting old," Maud said. "That's a good spring, that is." She punched the bed again, and Innes groaned.

"Well, sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite." Maud grinned and trundled off.

Innes sighed.

About ten o'clock Fred came in to do his turn as combination valet and male nurse. He'd taken upon himself the job of getting Innes ready for the night. Alice escaped. But when she was called back and Innes lay washed and smoothed out, she took her cue from Fred's eyebrow and began carefully.

"Innes, about tomorrow and Mr. Killeen coming . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, they know, I'm afraid."

"Know? What do you mean? Who knows?"

"Your sisters. They know he's coming and . . . and why, Innes. So Fred and I think we'll just keep an eye on everything all night tonight. Just so you won't have to worry."

Innes said angrily, "Who told them?"

"Isabel heard me talking to Fred. It was an accident."

"Accident, hell," said Fred.

"So we thought we'd watch," said Alice quickly, while Innes looked wildly from one to the other. "And I thought you ought to know." Detached, she could see his panic growing. "Would you like one of us to stay in here with you?"

Innes said nothing.

"I thought I'd just hang around outside the door, sir," Fred said. "I can sit on the backstairs and keep quiet."

At that Innes seemed to melt with relief. "You're being awfully good to me, both of you," he said weakly. "But you must get some sleep, Alice."

"It doesn't matter," she murmured.

"Would you leave us a moment, Fred, please? But come back."

Fred went out without a word.

Innes said loving things. He said he appreciated her devotion. He thought she was wonderful. She was beautiful and good. He was a lucky man. He adored her. Did she know that? He hadn't said a great deal, all day, but he knew. He knew she was there. Her loyalty made him love her even more. He knew now, said Innes, that she must care for him. And it made him very happy.

Alice listened miserably.

It made him very happy because once, long ago, he had thought he was in love and beloved in return. He had had a rude awakening.

"Oh, Innes, don't," she said. "Please go to sleep now."

What a charming tyrant she was, said Innes archly. He would be good if she'd kiss him nicely.

"Shall I call Fred now?" she begged.

When Fred came in, Innes changed. He was a frightened man. "I hate to let you sit up all night," he fretted. "It's a great deal to expect." Still, it was perfectly plain that he did expect it, because he went on to say that such devotion warranted a reward and Fred would find him unable to forget this.

Alice watched Fred squirm with malicious pleasure.

"Alice, my dear, do you think you could find another blanket? The doctor said . . . And I am chilly." Nerves, she thought. "In the closet, I think. On the shelf." His voice directed her shrilly.

Alive went in the closet. "I can't reach."

Fred came. The closet was fairly small for two people to stand in. Fred stretched his arms up for the blanket. He could barely reach and as he yanked it tumbled down, landing on her head.

"Oh, say. I'm sorry."

Alice let out a muffled giggle. The blanket slipped back of her. Fred reached to grab it, and all of a sudden they both realized that his arms were an oval and she stood inside. Her mussed-up hair brushed his chin. For a moment she couldn't breathe. Neither was he breathing. Then Fred dropped his hold on the blanket, and Alice felt it fall around her heels. He backed into the hangers. She stepped out into the room as Innes said, "Can't you find it?" querulously.

"We found it," said Alice, out of breath. "It fell on me." She smoothed her hair at the mirror, seeing Fred's reflection come forth with the blanket and stolidly proceed to drape it over the bed. He said, "Is that all, sir?" quietly, like a servant.

Innes said that was all, thank you, and good night Fred.

When Fred had gone, Alice looked at her watch. "It's just after eleven," she announced, "so I think . . ."

"Yes, do go to bed, dear. And sleep well."

"Your pill?"

"Perhaps I'd better."

"If you want me, you yell," said Alice with sudden vehemence. For the first time, she felt sorry for him. She seemed to know how he must feel, hurt and helpless and afraid. It wasn't necessary to admire him. One could feel sorry.

"I'll yell," promised Innes. Then faintly, "Good night, my darling."

Fred was sitting on the top step, smoking a cigarette. He didn't look up. "Good night," he said.

Alice looked down on his thick black hair. It had a wave. "I'm not going to sleep. It isn't fair. Let me take a watch or something, hm?"

"I'm the bodyguard," he said.

"Don't you want a pillow?"

"Say, you don't want to be too comfortable at a time like this."

"Well . . ." She hesitated.

"Go on, scram," sail Fred under his breath, irritably.

Alice went off to her room, feeling pleased. Feeling quite pleased, she realized. And that was queer. Certainly, looking forward to a night spent in a house full of queer women bent on murder was no time to feel pleased. Nevertheless, stubbornly, she continued to feel light of heart.

She put on a negligee and tripped to the bathroom and back. Fred was sitting with his back stiff against the wasll. He twisted his lips at her in a perfunctory smile, and she made a comradely little gesture with her toothbrush. Back in her room she did not quite close the door.

She opened the window a little crack. The room was small, and the dry heat pouring out of her register made her skin feel stiff and as if it might crack. The darkness held the threat of a storm. She thought she heard a mutter of thunder. Too early for thunder. Rain, though was beginning to beat down. She only half lay down on her hard bed. She truly meant to keep awake.

She woke with a start about twelve o'clock. She seemed to have been struggling with the mists of sleep for some time, as if whatever woke her had happened and been forgotten before she was awake enough to know what it was. She listened. She became aware of the storm in full blast. Rain slapped her window and spattered in. The wind shook her curtains, and they hissed along the floor. The old house complained as the wind and the rain drove against it. Surely, all she heard was the storm. But her heart beat fast, and she drew up the bed clothing carefully in order not to lose her listening check on the noisy night.

Then in a windless interval she heard a sound. A small sound. Quite near. A rusty clearing of a throat, was it? Or a cough? Or a chuckle? An odd little chuckle, almost a croon. The same queer little sound she'd heard once before. Whatever it was, it was surely the very same.

Alice strained her eyes toward her door. It was still slightly ajar. Just as she'd left it. Or was it? Did it swing? She listened, and her blood sang in her veins with fear.

Wind raged outside. Honest wind. How much more

sinister that strange little sound was, and what was it doing in the night?

What was it about to do?

Nothing happened. There was no more, except the dying drive of the rain. Whatever had passed her door was past. She felt released, so she knew it had gone. It had pased by.

A long, long time later, when the storm was over and the house wept rain water from its eaves and gutters, Alice put her feet cautiously to the floor and crept to look out into the hall. It was quiet. The tiny night light near the head of the stairs burned lonesomely. She couldn't see Fred nor the place where he should still be. Walls along the stairs cut off her view. She could see as far as the corner of the old mahogany chest and the picture that hung over it.

She could see, the other way, Maud's door, tight closed, imprenetrable. She could see a little way, through the railing, down the stairs, which descended into deep darkness. No one was there. Nobody. Nothing.

She crept back to bed, and her heart subsided. Slowly she coaxed it back to normal. Her feet grew not from its heavy work. Then slowly grew cold.

She lay, scarcely thinking, eyes fastened on the door, lest it move. She lay for hours. Perhaps she dozed. But not long and not often. The necessity for watching the door would force her lids up. So she lay and watched in the dark.

The house was chilly. It grew colder and colder. She shivered and pulled the covers closer. But it was cold.

Really cold.

She shivered and huddled there a long time before she thought to stir and feel of the register in her wall. It was cold. Strange. Last night hadn't been so cold. Was it going to snow? A freak snow? Or freeze?

What a miserable night. Miserable. Miserable.

She thought of Fred. He'd be stiff. He'd be frozen. She began to worry about it. The thought kept nagging at her, how cold he must be, sitting on the cold floor in that drafty hall. Suddenly she sat up and pulled her pillows together. She bundled them and all the bedclothes in her arms. She was going out there to sit with Fred. It would be better than this. Not any warmer, maybe, but better. They could whisper. Anyhow, she couldn't sleep.

She went slowly along her side of the hall and turned the

corner near the top of the stairs. Fred was still there. She could see him, motionless, his head still against the wall. Was he asleep? He sat so still. Perhaps he had fallen asleep. If so, it was a good thing she'd come.

He didn't move as she drew closer, but he shivered, "Hello." His eyes were open, after all. He had just been sitting still.

She dumped the bedding half upon him. "Aren't you cold?"

"Yeah," he said.

"I can't sleep. No use." She handed him a pillow and put the other on the floor to sit on, herself. "Anything?"

"Nope," he said. "You hear the storm?"

"It woke me."

"Too bad."

She forgot to mention the funny little sound. His hand touched hers, and they arranged the blankets.

"Why, you're icy," she said. "What makes this house so cold?"

"Betcha somebody let the furnace go out," he said sleepily. "Feels like it."

Alice's nostrils dilated.

"Fred"—she leaned closer and stared into his face—"you're dopey. What . . . ? Fred, don't you smell . . . !"

"Smell what?"

"Coal gas," she said. She jumped to her feet. In a moment, painfully, Fred unbent himself and stood up, too.

"Was I asleep?" he demanded.

"I don't know. Can't you smell it now?"

"Yeah, I smell it."

"Oh, my God," said Alice out loud. She flew to Innes' door.

The room was full of coal gas. The moment they opened the door it hit them and choked them. Fred blundered across the room to the windows. Alice flew to the bed. Innes was lying with his mouth open. He looked ghastly. She heard Fred kicking at the metal of the register in the floor.

"Pouring up from the furnace," he shouted. "Fan him." Alice grabbed a pillow and fanned. Fred had every window open, on three sides of the room. Night air began to reach her, and she dared breathe.

Innes lay with his mouth open. She didn't dare touch him.

Fred said in her ear, "I'm going down cellar. Keep fanning."

"Call the doctor," she choked. "Right away."

"O.K."

She heard doors open. Isabel appeared in a long-sleeved flannel gown, with the kid glove still on that inanimate hand.

"What's the matter?"

"Coal gas."

Gertrude's voice called distantly.

Alice thought frantically: His ribs are broken. You can't do artificial respiration. What can you do?

Somebody took the pillow out of her weakening hands and began to beat with it. It was Mr. Johnson, an apparition in his trousers and winter underwear.

Then Maud. "What's that smell?" she roared. "What's that smell?"

The rest of it was a nightmare, until the doctor came.

Alice leaned, shaking, against the window jamb and watched them mill around. Maud, in blue satin with lace, was a terrible sight. Gertrude came in, neat and thin in a tan wool bathrobe. The Whitlock sisters braided their hair at night. Their old faces looked raddled and horrible under the girlish pigtails. Mr. Johnson's tremendous chest was as brown as his face. Josephine in pink, came timidly along. Her bosom sagged.

And Innes lay with his mouth open.

But he wasn't dead. Dr. Follett, fully clothed, came briskly in and told them so. He dispersed them. He sent Josephine to make coffee and make it strong. He sent Alice for a warmer garment for herself. He sent Mr. Johnson to the cellar to fix the furnace and get heat up, if possible. He sent the sisters nowhere, but they went. Maud stood before him in her blue and lace, as if daring him to look, but he didn't look. He went about his business, and she went away.

But Innes was alive.

It was four in the morning by the time the confusion was over, the room quiet, and Innes able to smile at them weakly.

"If I were you," the doctor said to Alice, "I'd get to bed. And you too, young man." Fred frowned. "You needn't worry. I'll stay right here until eight o'clock. I want to watch him."

Alice staggered off and fell on her bed. It was stripped and

bare, but she didn't care. She had her coat on anyhow, and the doctor was here until eight o'clock. The responsibility was his until then. A load gone. Time to sigh and forget it. It didn't occur to her to wonder where, in the course of events, she had got that load, or why it belonged to her. It was enough to feel it gone. She could sleep. Someone came and put some blankets over her. She murmured gratefully.

Fred closed her door as softly as he could. He stood in the hall just outside, rubbing the back of his neck. Then he went along to his cot in the lumber room.

II

SUSAN INNES turned away from her telephone. "That was the doctor," she said.

Her paying guest looked up from his breakfast of ham and eggs.

"There's been more trouble up there." Her soft mouth was trying to be grim. "Do you know, I begin to think something *must* be wrong."

"How is Miss Brennan?" asked MacDougal Duff.

"Oh, dear, I didn't ask. But then, he didn't say, either. It seems that something went wrong with the furnace last night and filled Innes's room with coal gas, and he was nearly overcome. But Fred—that's the chauffeur, a real nice boy, too—Fred or Alice or both of them found out about it in time. So Innes is all right now. And Alice must be all right, too, or the doctor would have said."

Duff said, "I'll go up there with you, please."

"Oh, yes," she said. "Of course, you must. Besides, I told Isabel last night that I would bring you."

"Isabel is the crippled sister?"

"Yes, the youngest one. Oh, I ought to have insisted. But she said Alice was in bed and asleep and it was late. I hated to ask them to wake her."

"What time was it then?" Duff asked.

"Well, they didn't send your wire up from the station for hours. They're so careless that way. As soon as it came, I called. It must have been eleven o'clock!" Susan's awed tone indicated that eleven o'clock to her was very late indeed. "I spoke to Isabel. She said Alice was quite all right and sound asleep in bed. So, of course, I . . ."

"Don't worry about it," Duff said, smiling at her. "You did your duty."

"Did I? "said Susan. "I think I ought to have waited up for you, or left a note. The wire said, 'Please find Alice Brennan and ask if she needs help.' Well, of course, I had more or less found her, since I knew who she was, but . . ."

"Why didn't they telephone the message to you? Do they insist upon delivering telegrams here?"

"It's so stupid," Susan said. "They forgot I have a phone. I haven't had it for very long, you see, and people are so used to having to reach me by other means."

"From what you tell me," Duff said, "it's your son who seems to have had all the trouble."

Susan looked very grave. "Yes. Yes, he does. First the big lamp fell off the upstairs hall table and just missed his head. And then they had an accident in the car, and he was injured. And now . . . It is a lot of bad luck, isn't it?"

"I think I want to talk to Miss Brennan," Duff said. "So, as soon as you're ready . . ."

They walked up the hill together, Duff accommodating his long-legged stride to Susan's short one. They were a strange pair. The little old lady with the rosy face, in her dolman and old-fashioned hat, and the tall lean man whose clothes, in spite of their unstudied style, hung on his frame with a certain grace that marked him for a city guy.

"You will have to tell me more about the Whitlock family," Duff said. "The girls are your stepchildren?"

"Dear me," Susan said, "the girls are not much younger than I am. Gertrude's fifty-five. And Isabel must be fifty-one herself. They were young women when I married their father. Or, rather, when their father married me. Stephen was never passive about anything."

"What kind of young women?"

"Oh, very elegant and cultivated. They'd been abroad. They are the only people in this town who have ever been to Europe. I've been to Chicago. Stephen took me for a honeymoon."

Duff smiled. "Cultivated? Educated?"

"Well," Susan said, "girls didn't go to college in their day. But they had music lessons, and Gertrude used to paint china. They were . . . Well, if you understood a mining town . . ."

"Tell me," said Duff.

"Stephen was a rich man. He was like the Lord of the Manor. Don't laugh."

"No," said Duff. "These small towns have industrial dynasties. His three daughters were princesses, eh?"

"Oh, yes," Susan said. "Far too high up for the young men around here. There was only the young doctor, and sometimes visiting royalty from other towns. They were spoiled, I suppose. It wasn't their fault."

"Stephen spoiled them?"

Well being so high and mighty in a little town like this. They weren't very attractive," Susan said, "not really. None of them were pretty. I sometimes think if they had had to *try . . .*"

"For popularity?"

"Well, for attention."

"Born to the spotlight, eh? Did you live with them long after your husband died?"

"I didn't live with them at all. I moved away. You see, they didn't want me there. Heavens! Besides, I wouldn't have liked it. I wasn't anybody, Mr. Duff. Stephen just took a fancy to me, and I fell in love. Sometimes I think that if I had stopped to think . . ." She sighed.

"The girls were always hostile?"

"Hostile?" She examined the word.

"What word would you use?"

"Condescending, perhaps," said Susan. "Not that I blame them. I don't blame them a bit. Why, Mr. Duff, I was their mother's parlor maid. So how could I stay there and pretend to be Mrs. Whitlock when I was only Susan Innes, after Stephen was gone?"

"You were very wise," said Duff. "Your son didn't stay, either?"

"Oh, no, Innes went off to the city. He was very bright, you know, and ambitious. He's done very well. Innes is a richer man than his father was. It seems strange to think of that, but I do believe he is. Of course, times were different. Innes hasn't got Stephen's . . . well . . . force. Innes is bright and clever, but Stephen dominated. You know?"

"Go on," said Duff.

"Innes is more Whitlock than Innes, just the same. The girls are his family. You see, he . . ."

"Condescends, too?"

"Yes, he does," Susan said. "But it was all around him in the house when he was a little boy, and he couldn't help picking it up. I saw it happen. I don't mind, you know."

"You don't, do you?" said Duff with some surprise.

"No," said Susan. "I know exactly who I am and always was. It was just for a few years that Stephen rather forced me out of myself, to keep up with him. But there's no use pretending."

Duff looked down at her placid face.

"Have you been lonely?"

"Why, no. I have a lot of friends," said Susan complacently, "and I like to read."

"Innes never wanted you to come and live with him?" Duff watched her.

"My goodness, no. I'd make him very unhappy. Innes isn't easy with me. Mr. Duff. I don't know why. I try not to bother him."

"I know why," said MacDougal Duff. "You're a very irritating woman. The trouble with you, you are thoroughly humble and good, and nothing is so infuriating as that."

"Why, Mr. Duff!" said Susan. "Dear me, I never meant to be."

"Furthermore, the Whitlocks never impressed you one bit. You're a freak, my dear Mrs. Innes. You were probably born self-respecting, and you never got over it."

"You're jollying me."

Duff put his arm under hers and lifted her up the steps.

"I shouldn't have told you," he said, "because it's too late to change now. You're set in your ways. Just the same, if you

ever feel the need of your son's affection, be a little petty. A little mean. A little selfish."

"How you talk!" said Susan.

12

MR. JOHNSON let them in.

Dr. Follett, coming downstairs a few minutes later, observed Susan's companion carefully out of the corner of his eye. He saw a tall man with a lined face, a man who looked, in an indefinable way, competent, self-possessed, and used to thought, even though his hazel eyes were now clouded over and he stood as if he were in a trance, gazing with dreamy intensity at Mr. Johnson.

So lost was he in absorbed observation of that odd figure that Susan had to touch his arm to present him to the doctor. Duff's eyes awoke. The heavy lids changed shape. Dr. Follett felt with a shock the sudden power of Duff's concentrated attention.

"Innes is asleep," the doctor said, summoning his smoothest professional manner to cover the shrinkage in his soul. "He is all right, Susan. Fortunately, the young people got to him in good time. Another hour or two, and I shouldn't like to think about what might have happened."

"At what time were you called, doctor?" Duff made it the casual question of a more or less interested stranger.

"A little after two o'clock, sir." Dr. Follett could not imagine why he added that old-fashioned "sir."

"Poor Innes. I won't wake him, of course," said Susan. "Are the girls in the dining room?"

"They ain't up," said Mr. Johnson. He made a noise in his cheek as if he sucked a back tooth and walked away. His

bulk moved silently down the hall to the dining-room door.

"I don't believe they are about yet," the doctor said. "I haven't heard them. It's rather early. They had a bad night, you know."

Mr. Johnson disappeared without having looked back, and Duff swung back to the doctor. "Where is Miss Brennan?"

"Miss Brennan is asleep, too."

"Quite the enchanted castle, isn't it?" Duff said.

Upon the sound of a car, the front door opened to admit two men, both of them young. One, Duff saw, was dark and stocky and wore a chauffeur's uniform. The other was casually elegant in gray, a tall fair man with curly blond hair, good-looking, urbane. He presented himself to the company as one conscious of his own charm. But the sight of Duff surprised him.

Fred counted faces and said quickly, "Who's with Mr Whitlock?"

"He's asleep."

"Alone in the room?" Fred set down the suitcase he carried.

The doctor said, "Why, yes, I . . ."

"You shouldn't do that," Fred said severely and went upstairs fast.

"Am I seeing things?" said the good-looking boy, "or do I see Professor Duff?"

"You do," Duff said. "Killeen, isn't it? Five years ago."

"The famous academic memory for names and faces," Art Killeen said. "How are you, sir? It's good to see you. What are you doing in these parts?"

"Hunting the American Indian," said Duff pleasantly, and the blond boy laughed.

"No doubt you people are wondering what on earth I'm doing here," Killeen said. "I happen to be Mr. Whitlock's lawyer. I had a wire yesterday asking me to come up. He's here, isn't he?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "Yes, of course. But he had an unpleasant experience last night. I'm afraid he is asleep, Mr. Killeen, and I don't think he ought to be awakened

Curiosity shone in the lawyer's eye, but he suppressed it. "Isn't Miss Brennan here, too?" Killeen turned to Duff. "You remember Alice Brennan?"

"I do," said Duff. "I've come to see her myself. But this house is asleep. We must all wait. Meanwhile, doctor . . ."

Susan said, "Have you had breakfast, Mr. Killeen? I'm sure Josephine can find you a cup of coffee. I don't think they'll mind." She carried him off to the dining room.

The doctor looked uncertainly at Duff. He cleared his throat to make a remark, searching for a polite phrase.

Duff said, his quiet voice asking for the truth, "What actually happened?"

"I don't quite know," Dr. Follett said uncomfortably. "All I know is that something went wrong with the heating arrangements, and a considerable amount of coal gas poured into Mr. Whitlock's room by way of his register. The house has a hot-air system. I suppose . . ."

"Was it an accident?" No excitement or horrid speculation. Just a question.

The doctor squirmed. "I don't know. Perhaps it was. I really couldn't say."

"Has anyone been in the cellar?"

"Oh, yes, yes . . ."

"I'd like very much to see the cellar," Duff said.

The doctor stiffened. "I'm afraid only the Misses Whitlock can give you permission, and they are not awake yet. Are you a heating expert, Mr. Duff?"

"I am a detective," Duff said sweetly.

"Oh." The doctor's eyes fell, came sharply back to Duff's face, and fell again.

"I wonder"—Duff's voice was the voice of the tempter—"if I could find the cellar. Do you know where the stairs are?"

The doctor turned his palms up. "I am in a very awkward position in this house, Mr. Duff. I am Mr. Whitlock's doctor, but I do not attend his sisters. Nor have, for many years. I'm afraid I can't help you."

"I think perhaps you can help me," Duff said with his sudden appealing smile, "but not here and not now. Suppose I call on you in your office, sometime later?"

"Very happy," said Dr. Follett with relief. "Good. Do that. I must get along. I have a call to make, and I must sleep, myself. But I shall expect you. Yes, thank you. Good-by."

Dr. Follett went out. He was a man bursting with talk but muzzled, unable to say anything.

Duff slipped his eye around the hall, identified the exits and entrances, the two archways to the two front rooms, the

bathroom door under the stairs, and the dining-room at right angles to it. Through this he went.

Susan was chatting pleasantly with young Killeen.

"Everybody's asleep except the chauffeur," Duff said. "I'd like very much to talk to him, Mrs. Innes."

"Then I'll just go and sit with Innes myself," she said promptly and went briskly off.

Killeen said, "She's Innes's mother, she says. Amazing. Pleasant old soul, though."

"At least," said Duff gently. "Is Innes going to change his will?"

"I don't know. Maybe so. What's going on up here? For instance, you're not looking for Indians," Killeen challenged with an air of shrewdness, "in this house."

"I lead a double life," said Duff cheerfully. "Sometimes the two halves coincide."

"I've heard what the other half of your double life is, lately. Well, well . . ." Killeen was being the old pal, on the inside track, man-to-man stuff.

Duff's mild eye put him in his place. Art Killeen got ten years younger in as many seconds. "I suppose," he murmured to his coffee cup, "I had better just wait until Whitlock can see me."

"Yes. Just wait," Duff said indulgently.

When Fred appeared it was with respectful attention, a servant thoroughly in his place, and MacDougal Duff went gently to work to put him out of it.

"Susan Innes recommends you," he said, when they were alone in the sitting room, having left Killeen to his cooling coffee. "So I thought, as long as the house is asleep, I'd like to talk to you."

"You're a friend of Mrs. Innes?" Fred asked, a little more ready to relax.

"I'm her paying guest, that's all," Duff said. "I happen to know Killeen. I also know Miss Alice Brennan."

"I see," said Fred, who didn't.

"They were both students of mine, in the same class, now that I remember. I used to teach, you see."

Fred looked enlightened. "That wasn't in Chicago?"

"No. In New York."

Fred nodded.

"I don't teach history any more. I'm a detective. Anyhow,

I have investigated various murder cases with some success. Yesterday morning, at the railroad station, I saw Miss Brennan on the platform. She seemed to want to speak to me. That's why I'm here. I came to find out what it was she wanted to say."

"Does she know you're a detective now?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"She probably does," Fred said.

"Yes," Duff said, "I think so. Mrs. Innes has told me the sequence of events."

"Some sequence. Since last night, I'm pretty sure."

"Sure?"

"Sure that somebody's trying to do in my boss," Fred said. "What can a detective do in a case like that? Is trying to kill him a crime, even if they don't succeed?"

"Certainly," said Duff, "but a very difficult one to prove."

"Yeah," said Fred, "I dunno how you'd prove it."

"As I've been able to gather from Mrs. Innes, the things that have happened might have been accidents."

"Not what happened last night. That's why I'm pretty sure now."

"Could we go down cellar?" asked Duff softly.

Fred grinned. "Why not? I've been down there. I'd like to show you."

"It's so awkward to explain to your hostesses that you think they're up to a little murder and therefore you would like to see the cellar."

Fred grinned wider. "They're asleep, aren't they?"

He led Duff through the kitchen, where Josephine looked around at them without protest, and down the cellar stairs. It was a shallow, old-fashioned cellar, with stone walls that hadn't been whitewashed for a long time. Duff had to duck constantly, for the roof was crisscrossed with a large number of fat pipes, branching out of the big furnace like the tentacles of a deformed octopus. There was a coal fire. Fred looked in at it briefly.

"The fire was almost smothered with fresh coal last night," he said, "and closed up tight. Gas just pouring off."

"Who tends the furnace?"

"Mr. Johnson. The handyman around here."

"Ah, yes. Mr. Johnson." Duff lingered over the name. "Does he drink?"

"I don't know," said Fred, "but that's not the point. Look. Every one of these pipes has a damper. Well, Innes got the full dose. The other rooms were like ice. Because somebody had carefully gone around down here and turned all the dampers shut but one. That wasn't any accident."

Duff pursed his lips in a soundless whistle. He wandered among the pipes. "Which one goes to the room where Innes is?"

"This one."

"How do you know?"

"They've got labels scratched on them. See. 'Papa's room.' "

"Oh, yes."

"You'd never know otherwise," Fred said. "Gee, it's some contraption." He stood, feet apart, gazing contemptuously at the heating plant.

"It more or less heats a house," Duff said mildly. "You are of the new era. Too bad we can't get fingerprints. But I suppose not."

"Mine." Fred said. "Believe me, I had some fun scrambling around here trying to find all those cocks to turn."

"That one is certainly rather well hidden," Duff said thoughtfully. "Where does it lead, do you know?"

Fred looked at the scratches. "Kitchen."

Duff thrust his hand between two of the enormous pipes.

"Look out," said Fred, "they may be pretty hot."

"This one was turned, too? You're sure?"

"I'm sure," Fred said.

Duff pulled his hand away. "Filthy," he said. "Can you tell me how a hand and arm could reach in there and not come back smudged?"

"It comes back smudged," Fred said, "Greasy dirt. I got it on me."

"Where?"

"Where? On my arm."

"Your forearm?"

"Yeah."

"Did anyone, last night, have any smudges on any forearms?"

"No," said Fred. "Lord, I'd have been onto that. They were all in their nightclothes, and I took a look. But I don't know that it matters. They had plenty of time to wash."

"I believe Miss Isabel Whitlock has only one arm?"

"That's so."

"Which?"

"Her left one's the good one."

"Do you want to put your left hand on there, or shall I?"

"What's a little dirt on the hired help?" Fred said, grinning. He hauled up his sleeve, reached in, and touched the damper of the kitchen pipe. When he pulled his arm back there was a greasy smudge on it about six inches above the wrist, on the upper bone.

"Did you try to get dirty? Don't try."

"You can't help it," Fred said, "not if you go in all the way to the damper. Do it yourself. You simply can't help it."

"I see," said Duff thoughtfully. "What's your name?"

"Fred Bitoski. Call me Fred."

"Fred," said Duff, "how does a woman with one working arm and hand wash her only forearm?"

Fred stood still, turning his left hand on the wrist. "I don't know."

"Soaks it, does she? Lets water run over it? Rubs it on a soapy rag that's fastened somehow?"

Fred crooked his arm and twisted it. "She'd have to damn near stand on her head. That kind of dirt take scrubbing, too. But it doesn't mean so much, Mr. Duff. She wears long sleeves. Even her nightgown. All the time."

"Sleeves. Damned awkward to make a survey of the sleeves in this house."

"I've got a lot of respect for detective work," Fred said earnestly, having quite forgotten he was hired help by this time. "But honestly, I don't see what you can do. You can't prove anything. You can't make them tell you anything, or let you look around, even. What can you do?"

"As for proof, proof can wait," Duff murmured. "But I'd like to know. Wouldn't you?"

"Sure, but how can you know, and what good would it do? All I can see is, keep the boss alive and get him out of here. Heck, all three of them could be in on it, one one time and one another."

"Do you think they are working together? I take it we agree to suspect the Whitlock sisters."

"Yeah, and it's one of them, or two or three." Fred shrugged. "They don't even have to be working together. Just working on the same idea, separately. It's so darned vague."

"You interest me," said Duff. "Why should it occur to you that they're working at the same idea separately?"

"I dunno."

Duff stood with his tall head lost among the pipes. He seemed to be musing. In a little while he began to muse aloud.

"Yes, it's a disadvantage when the murder hasn't succeeded. One can't be as bossy as one would like. Nevertheless, it's the same problem. Just the same. Somewhere there must be a motive or a wish. There have been methods, even though they haven't worked. Times and opportunities and all that. Here, also, we have three women very peculiarly limited, each in her separate way. I would like very much to know which of them has tried murder, and how many of them—outside of making it a little easier to keep your boss alive, once we know. These three sisters, half-sisters of his, I understand. They aren't in triplicate? They're not all alike?"

"No," said Fred, "but there's not much choice."

"Still, they're different."

"Like different brands of poison," Fred said.

"What's the motive?"

"His money."

"And yet they're different," Duff said. "Do they all fit that motive?"

"In different ways."

"Is that so, indeed?" Duff's voice was warm and curious. "Do you know them well?"

"I don't know them very well at all," said Fred, "but it don't take long to learn not to love 'em."

"I shall have to learn," said Duff. "I think I'll stop over in the kitchen."

"Alice and I . . . I mean, Miss Brennan and I figured out a few things. We . . ."

"We'll talk about them," Duff promised. "But let me linger by the kitchen door now, before they wake."

13

MacDougal Duff set himself to charm Josephine. He begged her humbly for a cup of coffee and would permit no fuss. He would drink it here, he said. Beofre long it became apparent that Mr. Duff was very much interested in the problems of a general houseworker from a new and fascinating point of view. Chat got around to the types of mistresses one drew. It seemed that Duff, in a broad, almost scientific kind of way, had made a study. People were fascinating, anyway. And a houseworker's job was so bound up in human relations. So much life to be lived on the job. Her boss made more difference to her, her boss's foibles, her boss's character. Josephine, drinking all this in, expanded when she found Duff ready to hang on her words. Of course, her experience was great, he implied. She, Josephine, must know a great deal about women. A very great deal.

Well, Josephine had been on this job for fourteen years, except for one year when she'd gone off to Mrs. Dr. Follett. But she'd come back after one year of rebellion. That was all the jobs she'd had. Still, insisted Duff, with three mistresses at once, as it were, that made four women in all, each a type. Josephine must have observed them well.

Josephine bloomed under this mind-broadening discussion. Her latent self-pity lent emotional force to her observations. She didn't quite complain, but she began to talk.

Mrs. Dr. Follett, now, she was the kind who was all the time reading up about some fancy things to cook in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and she'd come out in the kitchen and mess around herself, and they never turned out good, never, just a lot of waste, mostly butter and sugar. Honest, it was a crime. And decorating the table. Mr. Duff wouldn't believe the crazy things she'd do. Have to stand up a banana in the hole of a piece of pineapple and stick a red cherry on top so it'd look like a candle! Dumb things like that.

As if it was going to taste like anything but a banana and a piece of pineapple. Besides, they had to knock the banana down to eat it, didn't they?

Duff sympathized. He understood the scorn of the professional for the enthusiastic amateur.

Of course, here it wasn't any easy job, she told him. Duff surmised shrewdly that there was prestige attached to being the Whitlock drudge, that somewhere in the village Josephine was thought of as one who moved among mysterious luxuries. Because, as became plain, Josephine was a drudge.

"They don't bother me wanting to do no cooking," said Josephine. "None of 'em ever wanted to go so far as to boil an egg, as far as I know."

How different people were from each other, murmured Duff, keeping the high impersonal plane.

That was right. Now, you take Miss Gertrude. She was the kind who hadda have everything just so. Oh, yes, even if she was blind, she could feel dust with her fingers. Kinda spooky, she was. Well, she wanted everything just so, you know, just so; but she never thought about the time you had to do it or how you was going to get it done, either. She didn't care, just so it was done. And done right.

Strict, suggested Duff. There were women like that. Fussy?

Well, no, she wasn't so awful *strict*. She'd tell you, that's all, and you'd have to try. But it was just that she . . . Well, now, for instance, she'd always think about how it was going to look if somebody came. You know, everything hadda always be ready for company. She didn't have so much company, for the land's sakes. But that's how she was. Always sitting so stiff and straight, just waiting like, for somebody to happen to come in and find her sitting nice and straight.

"A proud woman," said Duff. "Ah, yes."

A proud woman was right. Mr. Duff had got it exactly. She was the one that knew she was a Whitlock, she was. And a Whitlock hadda keep up to snuff. Hard on a girl, let Josephine tell you. Because the way she kept up to snuff was giving orders. It was funny how Miss Gertrude could take so much credit for wanting things just so when she wasn't ever the one who went to work and put them just so. Not her! Too proud to make her own bed, though she probably could if she wanted to. She could do a lot of things,

blind though she was. And awful proud of that, too. Josephine looked out the side of her eye at Duff and added quickly, "Poor lady."

Well, it was better than feeling sorry for herself, Duff suggested, and Josephine agreed glumgly.

With Miss Isabel handicapped, too, Duff went on, all the little chores must fall to Josephine. How hard that must be.

"Talking about fussy," said Josephine, "she's the one is always at me for something. She tries to help out, though. Land, she's always flying at some job I ain't had time to get around to, but I always have to do it all over, time I get there." Josephine wrung her dishrag out slowly. "You know, Mr. Duff, there's two ways of doing your work. You can get it done real fast and sit down and rest and have a little time to yourself. I used to do that with Mrs. Dr. Follett. But Miss Isabel can't stand it to see me sitting still. She'll think of something. Something gets to worrying her. So I kinda slow up."

"Of course," said Duff. "Naturally."

"Well, if I was to go rushing around here, I'd be doing twice as much," said Josephine, "and there's too much as it is. Now she can figure out ways . . . She don't like to spend money, Miss Isabel don't, so she'll figure I can do it the hard way and save a coupla pennies. Well, I go slow, that's all. There's just so many hours. You can't blame me."

"She wants your hours full," said Duff.

"She sure don't want to waste any of my time," cracked Josephine, and Duff risked a laugh.

Josephine took it properly. They were friends.

"It seems to me you do pretty well to keep this house going at all," said Duff. "How about Miss Maud? Is she fussy, too?"

"Oh, Miss Maud! If she was the only one, it'd be a cinch. She's easy-going. A little dust don't bother her."

"If it doesn't bother her, I don't suppose she helps with the dusting, does she?"

"Her?" Josephine laughed. "She's too lazy."

"Lazy," said Duff thoughtfully. "Is she, really?" He saw a qualm growing on Josephine's face and made a quick retreat to the field of psychological observation. "Tell me, would a girl rather work for a lazy mistress or for a fairly strict one?"

"Well, I'll tell you. In a way . . ." Josephine pondered. "I don't know," she confessed. "The thing is, if she's lazy and sloppy, you get so's you can't stand it yourself."

"I see. You feel the responsibility," Duff said. "Whereas, if you're told your duties strictly, you know where you are."

"Yeah," said Josephine gratefully, "that's what I mean. I don't know's I'd like it, working for Miss Maud alone. Even if she is lazy—say, she'd live in a pigsty—she wants plenty of service for herself, just the same. You know what she'll do? She'll yell for me when she's lying on her bed to come upstairs and hand her a pillow that's across the room. That's what she'll do."

"Tell me," said Duff, "suppose she yelled and no one came? Would she get it herself then?"

"I'll never know," Josephine said bitterly. "Boy, when she yells, she yells."

She fell into a moody silence. Duff said. "There's a handyman, isn't there? He does the heavy work?"

"Oh, sure." Josephine sloshed water lackadaisically in the sink.

"Where does he sleep?"

Josephine raised startled eyes. "In the barn," she said, her voice losing body. She turned her back then.

"I was just wondering if he came home drunk last night and went down and did things to the furnace."

"Nope," said Josephine. "My room's off the kitchen. The back door makes a racket if it's opened. I'd have heard him. Besides, he don't get drunk so much."

Josephine was being less communicative, even though she said words.

"You were up last night?" Duff asked.

"I never heard anything until Fred went pounding down the cellar stairs. That woke me. Then I got up." Josephine was nearly brief.

Duff rose. "I like to chat," he said, "and thanks for the coffee."

"You're welcome," said Josephine. Her eyes were uneasy. They fixed on Duff's with some appeal. She fingered the tiny gold cross that hung around her neck. "I been here fourteen years," she said huskily, "and I dunno where to go to get ancther job."

Was it apology? It seemed to be. For what? For being a doormat? For being a drudge?

Duff waited quietly, sending her his steady friendliness.

"Some things ain't right," Josephine said, and her eyes fell and her big pink hand clenched and covered the cross.

Duff saw, then, that the handyman was coming along the back of the house, outside. He would get no more from Josephine. He stepped quickly to the back door, relying on her essential meekness to watch him go without requiring an explanation.

When Mr. Johnson found Duff waiting on the narrow stoop, he stopped with one foot in a broken shoe resting on the bottom step and looked up. His unfathomable black eyes were as rudely without self-consciousness, as insulting in their complete lack of personal curiosity, as the child's had been on the train. Duff sent back his own synthetic innocence.

"You want to say something?" inquired Mr. Johnson without a flicker.

"About the furnace here," Duff purred. "Do you remember what time you banked the fire last night?"

"Ten o'clock, close to."

"It was all right then, was it?"

"Yeah." Mr. Johnson spat into the dust, but his eyes came back as boldly as ever.

Duff tried a quick carelessness. "Who closed all those dampers afterward?"

No surprise or pretense of surprise showed on the dark face. The big shoulders denied knowledge. Duff smiled his most enigmatical smile, but the black eyes continued to take him for a total enigma in which they were not much interested.

"I wonder, did you see the lamp fall a little earlier in the evening?" Duff said.

"Naw."

"You were out of the house, perhaps?"

"Sure."

"Downtown?"

"Naw."

"Where, then?"

"In the barn."

"Alone?"

"Sure."

"See the accident?" Duff surrendered to the staccato and tried sharpness.

"What accident?"

"To the car."

"Naw."

"Where were you then?"

"In the barn."

"Alone?"

"Sure."

"What were you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Alone?" Duff tried it softly.

Mr. Johnson spat.

Duff said a few words in a strange tongue. The black eyes betrayed no light, although they were not uncomprehending.

"What about it?" said Mr. Johnson.

MacDougal Duff said, "Thank you. I won't keep you," in a tinny voice and stood aside to let him by.

Mr. Johnson went by.

Duff stood on the back stoop for a few minutes, gnawing on his own thumbnail. After a while he took his thumb out of his mouth and looked at it, wiped it twice across his other sleeve, put his hands in his pockets, and commanded himself to stroll around the house toward the front door.

One who knew Duff well would have remarked that he seemed upset.

14

ALICE WOKE up with her cheek on the bare mattress, her tweed coat scratchy under her chin, sat up under the mass of muddled bedclothes, and looked at her watch. Ten o'clock,

Saturday. And the real significance of that was that Art Killeen must have been here in this house for nearly two hours.

She began to dress in a hurry, with a guilty sense of being late to a rendezvous. Her eyes, she saw in the glass, were puffy with weariness and her hair was wild. In her skirt and blouse, she snatched a towel and her make-up box and fled through the deserted hall to the bathroom.

When she came out, she was on the surface a self-possessed and fairly well-groomed young woman who might have taken the wild goings-on of the middle of the night in her stride. She'd made herself seem refreshed by sheer skill, and she had beaten down her excitement. She was ready when Innes's door opened and Art Killeen came out.

Ready or not, her heart jumped, and she choked it back when she saw with a little shock how fair he was, how white his skin, appreciated his well-washed look and the clean line of his nose and chin.

"Good morning!" he said with the surprised pleasure that was so familiar.

"Hello, Art," said Alice, and her own voice was tired.

He was tall, and she had to look up. He was smiling radiantly. He said in a hushed voice. "Innes has been telling me. My dear, I think it's swell! Just swell!"

Alice felt sick. She knew the word "swell" in his vocabulary. She knew his convention of wholehearted rejoicing in another's success. The code, the gentleman's law. But this radiance turned her a little sick

"Thanks, Art," she said wearily. She knew weariness didn't attract him. How was it that she sounded so tired and was so tired of the whole idea of marrying Innes? If this was triumph, if this was revenge, it had no taste to it. It was flat. The excitement she'd been struggling to conceal died of itself. It disappeared and left her weary.

He had a brief case under his arm, and he patted it.

"Where can I go to do a little work?" he asked, still smiling.

"I don't know," she said.

"You know what it is I have to do, don't you?" His voice was colorless, deliberately, but she knew there was secret congratulation behind it.

"Yes," she said.

"He's *very* fond of you, Alice."

His confidential air suddenly infuriated her. She put her hand on Innes's doorknob. "I've got to say good morning," she said over her shoulder. "Somebody will find you a corner if you go downstairs."

Her coolness didn't dim the radiance of his smile.

"Aw, please, you show me," he coaxed. "Whitlock's busy talking to Duff."

"Duff!"

"Professor MacDougal Duff, none other," said Art Killeen. "Oh, yes, he's here. Didn't you know?"

Alice said briskly, "I'm sorry, Art, but I've got to talk to Mr. Duff."

"Of course." He was quick to agree, in that charming way he had of deferring and resigning his claim on one's attention. "But I'll see you later?"

Alice tapped on the door. "Oh, yes," she said, more wistfully than she had intended.

Art Killeen was the kind of man who, when a girl said 'don't,' didn't. That's why they don't often say don't, thought Alice, with a shock, as if she saw through another of life's veils.

It was MacDougal Duff himself, all right, rising to say good morning, and his lean hand was warm and strong.

"Oh, Mr. Duff, you did come back! I'm so glad. Do you know Innes?"

"I do now," said Duff.

Innes, sitting up in bed, his face flushed with a little new color, said, "How are you, dear? You got some sleep, didn't you?"

"How are *you*, Innes?"

"Better," he said, "better. I've been taking to this friend of yours. As a matter of fact, I've been doing *all* the talking."

Duff smiled. "My method," he claimed. "I believe there was something you wanted to say to me, Miss Brennan, when we were so rudely separated yesterday by the train's departure."

"Oh," said Alice, "it was all this." She sat down, looking up. "I mean all the things that have happened to Innes. We were worried. Even then, we couldn't . . . Have you seen Fred? Has Innes told you about last night? Oh, what do you think?"

"My dear Alice, I've hired the man," said Innes compla-

cently. "He's going to find out what to think and tell all the rest of us."

"I'm so glad," said Alice. "It's just what I wanted." She wondered how on earth Duff had got around Innes so quickly. But she realized that Duff's perfect and selfless willingness to concern himself with Innes's troubles and devote all his talents to understanding them was Duff's convincing credential. "But how do you happen to be back here?" she asked.

"I'm studying the American Indian this spring," said Duff, "just for fun. Ogaunee is my headquarters at the moment. I'm Mrs. Innes's boarder, you know."

"Oh, *are* you?"

"Lucky, isn't it?" said Innes, as if he, himself, had just been very clever.

"Yes, it's lucky," said Alice. "Also, it's terribly good of you to drop your own work and help us instead."

"Two birds with one stone," said Duff, a trifle grimly. "Mr. Johnson, the handyman, is a full-blooded Oneida."

"I don't," said Alice in another moment, "understand Mr. Johnson."

"Of course he's an Indian," protested Innes. "Been here ever since I can remember. Tends the furnace, washes the windows, works in the yard. He used to keep the horses when we had them. He's always been *Mr.* Johnson, I don't know why. Suppose he always will be. He belongs out in the barn. I suppose my sisters pay him wages. He's an Indian, all right."

Duff said, "What's the matter, Miss Brennan?"

"I couldn't *place* him. I thought he was so foreign. He scared me."

"Mr. Johnson's nothing to scare you," Innes said with conviction. "He's not sneaky."

"You suggest," said Duff, "that if he wanted to murder anyone he'd be rather direct about it?"

"He *is* direct," said Innes, frowning. "That's what makes him so reliable. He does exactly what comes into his head. He . . ."

"But he's so mysterious?" insisted Alice.

Innes pouted. "He doesn't seem mysterious to me. I'm used to him."

Duff's eyes were dreamy. "I wonder. Is he mysterious?

Or isn't he? The Indian was, they say, fond of fancy speaking, of indirect, symbolic, image-full language. He was oratorical. Your Mr. Johnson upsets my conception. Perhaps he isn't typical. But if he is . . . How I would like to know the set of ideas he lives by! Or if he has any ideas." Duff shook his head slightly. He smiled at Alice. "I don't understand Mr. Johnson either," he admitted.

Innes stirred a little impatiently. "However"—Duff roused himself—"that's my hobby, not your trouble. Suppose we get Fred up here and pool what we know? I have been hired to find out what goes on, without unnecessarily offending anybody. A very ticklish job. One that will take some careful doing. Before I meet the Misses Whitlock—who are not yet visible, are they?"

Alice shrugged.

"—let's get the facts. Facts are good enough to start with," Duff said carelessly.

Alice ran downstairs. She saw Art Killeen working on a typewriter in the sitting room as she went by. Fred was in the kitchen. Alice said, "May I have a cup of coffee to take with me, Josephine? Fred, Mr. Duff wants you. Come on upstairs."

Fred came to attention. "The lawyer's here," he said, watching her face.

"Yes, I know," said Alice. "But come on, Duff wants us."

As the council went into session, Duff leaned back in a chair beside Innes's bed, quite as if he had all day. Innes reclined on his pillows. Alice sat on a hassock against the wall, following eagerly, and Fred sat in a straight chair at the other side of the bed, facing Duff, his ankle on his knee, looking extremely intelligent.

"This business of the veal in the meat loaf," said Duff, "seems to yield very little. It's quite possible that Miss Isabel, who seems most active in the running of the house, deceived herself into thinking it wouldn't matter. She is, I gather, rather set against unnecessary expense. Perhaps she didn't want to prepare another kind of meat, on account of the expense, or on account of the bother, and convinced herself, therefore, that there was no reason to do so. Do you think that's possible, or am I doing Miss Isabel an injustice?"

"You're right," said Innes wryly.

"Miss Gertrude is aloof from the details," Duff went on.

"Perhaps she felt it wasn't any concern of hers. And Maud didn't hear about it beforehand. Maud may have known, at the table, that she was eating veal. We do know she said nothing about it. But is Maud likely to have said anything about it?"

"No. You're right again. She wouldn't worry. You say you haven't met my sisters?"

"Not yet," said Duff, "but I've been gleaning, here and there. Now, you see, the veal-eating and Mr. Whitlock's consequent illness may have been the result of carelessness or of a simple mistake."

"In other words, an accident," said Fred, whom Duff had gently maneuvered into the position of a man with opinions to give, and who accepted that position simply.

"Yes. And since nothing was actively done, the dinner was served as originally planned, the only crime was neglecting to change it, I don't think the incident can tell us much."

"Things like that add up, though," said Alice.

"Oh, yes. Of course. Nevertheless, let's go on to the first attempt to do Mr. Whitlock harm. If it was an attempt and not still another accident. The lamp fell off the table upstairs. It might have fallen by itself. None of us can see how. But we can't say it couldn't have happened. The devil in the inanimate, you know. Still, if we assume that someone pushed it over, let's see who might have done so. You point out to me that Miss Maud, who is totally deaf— Is that true, Mr. Whitlock?"

"She never hears anything that I know of," said Innes.

"Well, being deaf, she couldn't, we say, have known that you were walking down the hall. You had opened the bathroom door, making a sound, of course, and your footsteps could have been heard. But you couldn't have been seen from upstairs? There is no glass in which you might have been reflected?"

"Lace curtain on the front door," said Fred promptly.

"No mirror?"

"It's on the side wall," Alice said. "I was standing in front of it. I couldn't see the top of the stairs in it."

"Could you see the mirror, Mr. Whitlock?"

"No, no, I'm sure I couldn't."

"Very well," said Duff. "This crime, if one, was done by

ear. The victim must have been heard approaching, and Maud can't hear. Exit Maud. What about Gertrude, who can't see?"

"She knows every inch of this house," said Innes. "She goes anywhere she pleases, upstairs or down. She knows exactly what's on every table. She knew that lamp was there. Nothing's ever changed around in this house. And her ears are sharp."

"All true," said Duff. "But tell me, when was that downstairs bathroom put in?"

"When? About . . . let me see . . ."

"Before or after Gertrude lost her sight?"

"Oh, after," said Innes. "Some years after."

"Yes," said Duff. "Well . . . I don't suppose Miss Isabel would have been prevented from pushing that lamp by the fact of her having one arm?"

"Not a bit. Isabel could have pushed the lamp," said Fred.

"Does anything about their opportunity help us at all? As far as we know, all three of them had the chance to be there in the upstairs hall at that time? Is that right?"

"Not all three," said Fred. "One wasn't. But I don't know which one."

"How is that?"

"When I came up on the front porch, on my way inside, I saw one of them through the window. She was in the parlor. The curtains were drawn across the arch so nobody would know that from the hall. But I saw her."

"What was she doing?"

"She was looking at the newspaper."

"Oh?" Duff seemed polite but incredulous. "The local paper?"

"I dunno. Just a newspaper. But that's why I couldn't see who it was."

"You could see her feet?"

"Just her skirt," said Fred. "It was dark. They all wore dark dresses yesterday."

Duff sat still a moment. "Please realize that I am just running lightly over the facts," he said at last. "Perhaps they aren't going to mean much. They sometimes don't. We shall have to get at the feelings. Have to know why. What drives each of them. Those are, to my mind, the important things and are more likely to tell us the truth about this. But we'll

clear away these times and opportunities and possibilities first. Let's leave the fallen lamp that so fortunately didn't hit you—"

"Thanks to Fred," said Innes graciously.

"—and go on to the second attempt or accident. The detour sign across the road at the bottom of the hill was moved. Now, you tell me that all three sisters were out of doors earlier that evening?"

"Yes."

"And Isabel, rather suspiciously, went in person to fetch a woman who has a telephone."

"Yes."

"Susan Innes says people do forget her new telephone. Isabel may have forgotten."

"Maybe," said Alice.

"But here we come upon the significance of Gertrude's blindness. This was a crime that was done by sight. Being blind, she wouldn't have known anything about that sign, its meaning; nor would she probably have been able to find it and place it in another more or less logical position. Not without eyes."

"The dark wouldn't bother her," murmured Fred.

Duff said, "No. But this was a deed that required some light. To read, to understand, to replace. However, Maud, too, puzzles us. She couldn't have overheard you speak of the route you were planning to take."

"Maybe somebody told her afterward," suggested Alice.

"Who heard? Mr. Johnson?"

"Sure. He was the one I asked about it."

"Um," said Duff. "You don't, I suppose, know whether they were together after that?"

"No."

"I didn't see hide nor hair of Mr. Johnson that evening," said Fred wonderingly. "After that."

"But Isabel could have done it?"

"I don't see why not, do you?" said Alice.

"No, I don't see why not," Duff agreed. "Then we have attempt number one, the lamp. Not Maud. Possibly Gertrude. Possibly Isabel. We have attempt number two, the detour sign. Not Gertrude. Possibly Maud. Possibly Isabel."

"Unless . . ." began Fred.

"Of course," Duff took up the unspoken doubt, "unless Maud's not deaf. Unless Gertrude can see."

"But for God's sake!" cried Innes.

"You realize we must be sure."

"But for years . . ."

"Your sisters may not be totally blind or totally deaf or even totally cripples," said Duff. "A little sight, a little hearing, a little use of the right arm, might damage these particular conclusions."

"Go on," said Innes. He leaned back, but he looked pale.

15

DUFF SAID thoughtfully, "It will be hard to be sure. But we must try. You see, sometimes you can get at a clear and true picture of what happened by the facts of physical possibilities, by logic, and by elimination. Sometimes you can get at the same truth by a careful reading of character and the facts of character, which are true facts, of course, and solid facts; but so difficult to demonstrate that the use of them nearly always passes for intuition. Sometimes you can get at the truth both ways, and the coincidence of two kinds of facts checks and double checks your conclusion. We are now trying to fish out of confusion a few physical facts that we can believe and use to go on. Please don't be discouraged if they show no pattern. We still have another whole class of facts to check them by.

"Let's look at attempt number three, the one made on your life last night."

"No accident," said Fred.

"I agree with you," said Duff. "This, at least, was really such an attempt. But we know almost nothing about it yet. How about opportunity? Where was everybody?"

Alice began, "Fred and I were in here with Innes, nearly all the time, until a few minutes after eleven. I got to bed about eleven ten. I must have slept for a while. About twelve, something woke me up. There was a storm, wind and rain."

"Let's find out the disposition of all of you until then," said Duff. "You went to sleep promptly, Mr. Whitlock?"

"Oh, yes. It was the pill, I guess. I was pretty much on edge, and I didn't think I'd sleep, but I did. I didn't wake at all until after the doctor was here. Everybody was in here by the time I woke up." Innes pouted as if he'd been left out of a party.

"Are these your pills?" Duff picked up the box.

"Yes."

"Well, Fred?"

"Sat on the backstairs, on guard. The storm came up around eleven fifteen. Started with a lot of wind. Rain coming down in buckets by twelve o'clock Maybe the storm woke you, Alice."

"Maybe," said Alice. None of them noticed that the chauffeur called her Alice.

"The Three Graces had all gone to bed by the time I took up my post," Fred went on. "I wouldn't know about Gertrude, though, come to think of it. She's downstairs. She could have been roaming around. But I saw hide nor hair of them from where I was. Isabel's door, which I could see, was closed all the time, and she didn't pass me."

Alice said slowly, "Just after I woke up I thought I heard a sound."

"Yes?" said Duff.

"A funny little sound. I heard it once before. When I was on my way downstairs I heard it as if it were down there. The evening Innes was hurt. The doctor was here. I was going down after his bag. It's a little sound in the throat. I can't describe it."

"You heard it again last night!" Fred said with excitement.

"When have you heard it?" Duff asked him. "Or haven't you?"

"I think I know what she means. I heard it right after the lamp fell. As if it were up here."

"The same sound, you think?"

"I think so," Fred said. "And Josephine tells me she heard

something like it, too, down at the foot of the hill, just before we left here in the car, just before our accident."

"Just before something happens, you hear noises," said Duff. "Three of you each heard at different times a small indescribable sound?"

"Nothing happened after I heard it the first time," Alice pointed out.

"How do we know?" Duff said.

"But . . ."

"No two of you heard it at the same time, I take it?"

"No, but something makes that sound. Doesn't it mean—What *can* it mean?"

"We must keep it in mind," said Duff, "although if the sounds weren't identical, you see, it needn't mean anything. Unless . . . Mr. Whitlock, do you know of any such sound? Has one of your sisters the habit of clearing her throat or coughing or anything of the sort?"

"I couldn't tell you," said Innes. "Not that I can remember. I'm so useless. I just don't know." He flung his palms up on the bedspread.

"Tell me," said Duff suddenly to Alice, "what was the feeling? How do you imagine the person felt who made that sound? Was there a feeling to it? If so, what was it? Don't say. You try to remember, too, Fred. What feeling does it suggest to you? Make up your minds before you hear each other's judgment. Don't analyze. Just try to remember your first quick impression."

"I think I know," said Alice in a moment.

"Me, too," said Fred. Duff nodded. "It was dirty," Fred said. "Something mean about it."

"I thought it was triumphant," said Alice, "and satisfied and excited, too."

"Thank you," said Duff. "Now, what happened after twelve o'clock?"

"I woke up," said Alice, "and I couldn't get to sleep. I began to feel cold. Finally I got to worrying about Fred's being cold because it was freezing, really. Besides, I couldn't sleep. So I got up and came out here. That was about two o'clock, I guess."

"Was the heat coming into your room as usual when you first went to bed? Do you remember?"

"Yes, it was. I'm quite sure."

"That's helpful," said Duff. "Because, of course, the heat stopped coming up through out the rest of the house after the deed was done. The heat was normal at eleven ten?"

"Oh, yes, I know it was."

"Then the deed was not done until after eleven ten. Fred, nobody moved in the upstairs hall after that hour?"

"Nobody," said Fred. "Nobody that I saw."

"Could anyone have come up the front stairs without your seeing them?"

"Maud might have," Fred admitted, "if she turned sharp at the very top step and went off the hall toward her own room. I can't see that part. I should think I would have heard her."

"I *did* hear her," said Alice in a low voice.

"But nobody came this way, to Isabel's room?"

"Nobody, until Alice came."

"And after that?"

"We smelled it. I mean Alice did. I'd been sitting there so long, I guess I wouldn't have noticed it for a while longer."

"Mr. Whitlock, you had fallen asleep with the help of a drug? And you smelled nothing?"

Innes plucked at his spread. His eyes went miserably to Alice. "Very few people know this," he said, "and it's fairly unimportant, but . . . I . . . I have no sense of smell. You see, we Whitlocks all lack something." He said it as if he hoped it would be a joke, but he was ashamed. He was afraid Alice would recoil from him. He would never in all his life have admitted this, she knew, had he not been forced to.

She tried to smile at him. "You're lucky," she said. "You got off the easiest." But, she thought, never any perfume of flowers or of good cooking or salt in the air. And she did recoil, invisibly.

"Who knows about this lack of yours?" Duff was asking.

"My family."

Alice, thinking of the advantages, began to laugh a little hysterically. "I wondered how you could get so close to her. Oh . . ." She choked.

"To whom?"

"Maud," said Alice. "Oh, Mr. Duff, she's dreadful!"

"I know what you mean," said Fred, with his nose wrinkled.

"What *do* you mean?" demanded Innes. "What are you talking about?"

"She smells . . . well . . . like an Indian," said Fred.

"Does she indeed?" Duff said.

Alice put her head in her hands. "I'm sorry, Innes. They're your sisters. Are we crazy, Mr. Duff? Is there something ugly and malign and wicked . . . or are we just cruel to think so because we are healthy and they are more or less . . . deformed?"

Duff said, "I've wondered. I think it is remarkably self-critical of you, Alice to be able to think of that."

Innes said, "Alice is sweet and good."

"I'm not."

He paid no attention. "But please don't think because they're my sisters that any of you have to guard your tongues with me. I never liked them, and they never loved me. Never. I was a little boy, and they were young ladies, and I never felt the slightest warmth from any of them. But they . . . they awe me." His voice sank. "When I get away from here I can make myself believe they don't matter very much. Put them in their place, you know. I can even feel sorry for them.

"But the minute I step back into this house, I believe again. They seem just as important as they think they are. And this house, kept up just as it used to be, and their reputations here, and the whole Whitlock background, sucks me back in. I can't help it. I . . . dislike them. They make me nervous."

Innes wound up with this understatement and looked defiantly at them all.

"They never loved you," said Duff. "Did they love their parents?"

"No. I don't know. Papa used to crack the whip. They'd hover around him like . . . like a chorus, you know. His three daughters. That's what they were. His. Like his coattails. And he got away with it."

"They resented him?"

"I don't know. But I don't think they loved him. If they loved anyone, it would have been their mother. She was dead before I was born, and Gertrude made her into a legend. But I don't know. I wasn't here. She was supposed to be something superfine, and my father was her worthy

consort. And my mother wasn't worthy of *him*. All I know is, they don't . . . aren't affectionate."

"Toward each other?"

"No," said Innes. "Toward anybody."

"You speak as if they were all alike?" Duff made this a question.

"No, no. It's Gertrude, really. Gertrude blames me, you know. She'll always blame me, and she's cold. Maud's not . . . well, you can get along with Maud. She's happy-go-lucky. She doesn't care if you know she doesn't care. So you don't mind so much. Isabel stays away because she's always got some worry of her own. It's Gertrude who t-terrifies me now."

Duff said, calmly, "We are getting into the realm of emotion, and very helpfully so; but have we come to the end of our other set of facts? Let's be sure. Does anything occur to any of you?"

"No. But what occurs to you?" Fred said boldly.

"Only this," Duff said. "These tremendous hot-air pipes that run through the walls magnify sound, don't they? Turning the dampers is not a perfectly silent operation. They were turned while Mr. Whitlock was asleep, and Alice was asleep. And while Fred was in the hall, rather far from any register. Unless any of you heard such a sound."

"There was the storm," Alice said. "It was so noisy."

"Yet you heard the little queer cough?"

"I know," she admitted, "but it came in a kind of lull, and it was near."

"It makes me wonder," said Duff, "whether the person who turned those dampers used the storm for cover. Synchronized sounds. Waited for a blast."

"Maybe," said Fred.

"Then was it Maud?"

"The deaf can feel a storm," Innes said.

"I believe you are right. But would the deaf expect the noise of a damper turning?"

"How could it be Gertrude?" said Fred. "How could she read those labels on the pipes? How could she find all those dampers? I don't think she could."

Duff shrugged. "And Isabel?"

"Isabel . . ."

"Couldn't have washed the greasy stain we know must

have been acquired, from her own one arm."

"She could have taken off a stained sleeve, though."

"We must find out whether she did."

"It would be her sleeve," insisted Fred, "Because, look, how could she roll up her sleeve? You try it?"

"She could slip out of it," Alice said, shaking one shoulder so that her dress fell low.

Innes said, "I don't follow."

"I do," said Fred. "The others could have washed their bare arms, so their clean sleeves wouldn't mean anything. Is that your point, Mr. Duff?"

"Of course that's the point," said Alice, "isn't it?"

"Ah, but wait," Duff said. "Would Gertrude know her arm or sleeve was dirty?"

"Hm."

"She wouldn't," said Alice, "unless she could feel grease on her bare skin. She certanly doesn't know about the spots on her vest. Oh, Innes, this is too bad."

"Well, they're a rum bunch," said Fred gloomily.

"Never mind that," said Innes tensely. "Now what, Mr. Duff? What's next?"

"May Fred run me down to the doctor's office?" Duff said. "And perhaps elsewhere? I shall return after lunch and give myself that pleasure of calling on your sisters. Alice, my dear, I shall want you to help me then."

"Good," said Innes.

"Meanwhile . . ."

"I shall sign a new will," Innes said, "in about fifteen minutes. After that, I think I shall be able to relax."

"I truly hope so," said MacDougal Duff gently.

16

WHEN THEY were alone, Alice tidied Innes's bedside table. She emptied his ash tray, brushed off crumbs. He watched her happily.

But Alice was not happy. She had realized for the first time what he was about to do and what it meant to her. Yesterday, she had thought only that it meant Killeen was coming. But now Killeen was here, and that meeting had happened. She began to see that if Innes made a will now, in her favor, she was committed to this engagement as she had not felt commited before. In a peculiar way, she felt it would bind her. And she knew that here and now the last decision must be made and the step taken or not taken. If she let him do as he planned she was bound, as her mere promise did not bind her. And Alice was unhappy.

She saw that the bitterness that had made her cynical about the whole thing was now less strong. Somehow, the excitements she had been through had weakened it. Or maybe it was just that time had passed. She was beginning to recover, not from the blow to her heart, but from the blow to her own balance. Being Innes's fiancée was not much fun in itself. Being Innes's wife wouldn't be much fun, either. A million dollars, prestige, and as much security as a million would buy in the suffering, changing world was worth a good deal. She was sensible of that. Her brain told her so still. But we do not live by brain alone, she thought, wistfully paraphrasing the old line.

It was worth a good deal to be Alice Brennan and the hell with it.

As she patted Innes's pillow, her mind raced to a decision. She would not feel right until she had put herself right. At the very least, Innes must know why she had promised to marry him. If he knew that clearly and believed it and still wanted her, well and good. She would still be Alice Brennan and could stand by herself. But he must know. It

wasn't a question of the morals involved or the ethics or whatever the word was. It was a question of being comfortable. She was uncomfortable in that lie. Very uncomfortable. In fact, it was unbearable. She couldn't help that, whatever the moral was. Maybe she was, if not sweet and good, at least dumb but honest. Well, if she was, then that's what she was. Damn it, thought Alice.

She stood below the footboard and met Innes's eyes. She said, "You mustn't sign that will, Innes."

"Don't be silly," he said.

"I told you I was marrying you for your money. Innes, I meant that."

"I don't understand," he said. "I'm making a new will because I want you to have that . . ."

"But you mustn't until . . . I mean, unless you realize just why . . ." Alice began to flounder "I never said I was in love with you, and, Innes, I'm not"

His face changed. Pink lines grew, and the flush spread. "But you . . ." He stopped.

"I know. I let you assume that," she said unhappily. "And I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. I wanted you to propose, Innes. And I wanted to marry you."

"Don't you still?" he said thickly.

"For your money," she said.

Innes looked stupid.

"I'm not sweet and good. I'm selfish as a cat," she cried. He looked at her. "So we'll call it off, shall we?" she added lightly and turned away.

"What's happened?" he said. "Who is it?"

"Who?"

"Yes, who? You did care for me, Alice. You can't tell me . . . Why, you . . . you've been . . ."

Alice shrugged. Then she said, more softly, "Innes, I don't dislike you. I like you quite well. It's only that I can't let you sign that will still thinking what isn't true."

Innes said, "I don't understand you."

"I'm sorry."

"Are you breaking our engagement?"

"You're to do that."

"But, Alice . . ."

"Oh, do it," she cried, "and get it over!"

She couldn't leave. Someone had to be with him. He was

in danger. She turned her back. She wished she'd waited to speak until Fred was available. Someone knocked on the door.

She opened it for Art Killeen.

Fred pulled the car up at the doctor's door, shoved his cap back on his head, and settled as if to wait.

"Want to come in?"

"Do I?" Fred jumped. "Say, thanks. Listen, I'd bust sitting out here. You've got me going, Mr. Duff. I want to know, myself."

"Curiosity is useful for us detectives," Duff said. "It makes us nibble away at impossible problems. We shall now poke around in the attic, as it were, of Dr. Follett's memory. Something might turn up, eh?"

"Come on," said Fred.

The doctor was in and waiting for them. He seemed to have recovered a normal reticence, and he hid behind a bland show of polite welcoming small talk. Duff outlasted these preliminaries by being perfectly reticent himself. The doctor was forced to say, at last, "Well, Mr. Duff, I wonder what I can do for you?"

"I think," said Duff, "you can tell me about the Whitlocks. Innes Whitlock has asked me to do what I can to find out whether or not his bad luck has been entirely accidental." The doctor looked uncomfortable. "And the present roots in the past," said Duff.

"I don't know what I can tell you. I haven't been in that house for twenty-five years, until the day before yesterday. I suppose you already know why not?"

"I understand that your marriage offended Miss Maud."

"It did. Yes, it did. But that was years ago, sir, and surely it can't have a thing to do with what's going on up there now."

"I don't suppose it has," Duff said. "But still, I'd like to hear your version of it."

"She thought I was courting her. Maybe I was. Although I thought not. I mean to say, my calls there may have made it seem that I was more interested in her than I actually was. I don't know. I don't know."

"Tell me," said Duff, "do they use the phrase 'going with' in Ogaunee?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Yes, they do."

"And if a young man is 'going with' a girl, it means he's serious?"

"It . . . yes, it does. But the Whitlock girls . . ."

"Go on."

"They ought not," said the doctor, "to have been so simple-minded."

"You mean you wouldn't have expected the village convention to hold in their case?"

"I wouldn't. And I didn't. You see, they were different."

"Tell me what they were like."

The doctor frowned. "I don't know how to tell you. They were important here. Their father was an important man. So a young doctor, wanting to get along, naturally went to call there. You see, they were traveled. They seemed elegant and . . . well . . . cosmopolitan. You can see how I missed supposing that frequent calls would mean that I was committing myself."

"Yes, I see," said Duff. "You called on Miss Maud?"

"I called at the house," the doctor said. "Somehow or other, I usually saw Maud. I came to know her better than the others. Of course, Isabel was just a bit young for me. A restless nervous youngster, flying in and out."

"And Gertrude?"

"Oh, Gertrude was the most elegant of the three. The least . . . er . . . approachable. I really don't know what used to become of Gertrude."

"She withdrew, perhaps?"

"Yes, she did, rather."

"It's so often the girls," said Duff, "who decide which sister's property the man is." The doctor looked a little startled. "Miss Maud was attractive?"

The doctor winced. "She was a little less . . . er . . . formidable. Of course one didn't, in those days, think whether the Whitlock girls were attractive or not. They were a kind of social institution. Their house was like court. I wonder if you understand. We used to have rather formal, rather stiff, good times up there. The young men were always awed and being above themselves." The doctor's eyes twinkled behind his spectacles. "Oh, my, how we used to throw in our French phrases. And polish our shoes."

Duff said, "They had prestige. Can you imagine them without it?"

"No," said the doctor, "I can't." He brooded a moment. "The attraction was purely their position, although Stephen," he added thoughtfully, "was jolly."

"And the mother?"

"A little bit queer. A moody woman. A lonely woman. By nature, I mean."

"I see. Is Gertrude totally blind?"

The doctor, surprised, took off his spectacles, glanced aslant their surfaces, and put them back. It was a way he had of countering the unexpected.

"Oh, yes," he said finally.

"How did that happen?"

"Her horse ran away with her and threw her from the buggy. Injured her head. Years ago. It was quite tragic. Young Innes was supposed to have been at fault. Everyone felt almost as sorry for him as they did for Gertrude. I know of few events that stirred the village more. Oh, yes, she's blind. What"—the doctor cleared his throat—"makes you ask?"

"Could her sight have returned, if perhaps only partially, in all this time?"

"I don't know. I didn't . . . wasn't capable of attending her. Stephen had specialists from Chicago. Big men. Three or four of them. But surely, if she's not blind, Mr. Duff, she herself would know it."

"Yes."

"But . . ." The doctor stared.

"Tell me, how did Gertrude react to her tragedy?"

"Oh, very nobly. Very nobly. She said she would be no burden. She learned to guide herself around the house. She has always been much admired for the way she took it."

"Ah, yes," said Duff. "She has been vain about that?"

The doctor took his glasses off again. "I suppose you are right," he said, and his voice lost its company manners. It was flat with plain speaking.

"A handicap," mused Duff, "can be a rather wonderful thing. It can dissipate all feelings of inferiority. Handicapped people have a beautiful excuse for failing. That's why so many of them are such great successes. It's not strange how often they go ahead and do the very thing one would say

they couldn't do. Why do you suppose a one-armed man will study the piano? I've even heard of a one-legged dancer. It's because they have no fear of failure. If *they* fail, everyone will understand. So they don't fail. That's the blessing of a handicap.

"But, of course, it doesn't always improve the character or, by removing fear, let loose the energies. Sometimes there is no original energy. Rather often, I'm afraid, the handicapped person is no saint, either. It depends entirely upon the elements of the character he has to start with. People with sour souls grow more sour. Weak people get listless. Or lazy. Sometimes there is vanity. Gertrude seems to have grown vain. That's why she might not care to reveal it if she could now see a little."

"That's a horrible idea," said the doctor distastefully.

But Fred said, "You're darned tooting right, Mr. Duff. If Gertrude could see just a little, she'd never let on. I'd bet on that."

"I'm terribly afraid," said Dr. Follett sadly, "that it's quite possible."

"When did Miss Isabel lose her arm?"

"Oh, that was not so long ago. When Stephen was killed. In 1925. He and his youngest girl had gone off to Marquette for some reason or other. Coming back, they hit a boulder almost head on. He must have been half asleep or he felt suddenly faint. It was a dreadful smash. The car turned over and he was crushed. So was Isabel's arm. She was terribly shocked, an invalid for months afterward."

"She used to go off alone with her father?"

"No, not especially. I don't know how she happened to be the only daughter along."

"Stephen was a drinking man?"

"No, not especially, either. But he had been very ill just before that trip. Seriously ill. We thought he wasn't as strong as he believed himself to be, and that's why it happened."

"His illness?"

"I didn't attend him. Intestinal, I think."

"He drove himself? They were alone?"

"Oh, yes, yes. In those days Stephen was an enthusiastic motorist."

"Miss Isabel has an artificial arm. Do you know anything about that?"

"Yes, I do know. I know the make. It's an old one. They do much better now."

"How much use is it to her?"

"None," said Dr. Follett. "It's for looks. Her arm is gone from the shoulder."

"You know that of your own knowledge?"

"Yes, I do."

Duff leaned back and looked dreamy. His long bones were folded in a low chair, and his knees came high. "Tell me, what difference did the father's death make to the Whitlock household?"

"A tremendous difference. He was the life of it. He held Susan Innes Whitlock and the boy there. When he died, they left. After that the three sisters became more and more isolated. It was Stephen who brought people into that house."

"Any financial difference?"

"Why, not much." The doctor looked surprised. "They were well off. Isabel had every care. Specialists and nurses, just as Gertrude had. There was no difference."

"But the girls had control. Was Stephen generous with them while he lived?"

"Oh, very. They had everything. He took them abroad. I know they had allowances."

"Was he strict about the allowances or were they unlimited, in effect?"

"I don't know. I remember the girls talked as if he were strict. We always thought it was a way of boasting."

"It may have been," said Duff. "Yes. Now tell me, when did Maud lose her hearing?"

"Gradually, I believe," the doctor said. "But that was long after I stopped going there, after my marriage."

"After her father's death?"

"I believe so. I'm sure it was gradual."

"No accident or sudden disease?"

"No. Just a gradual loss. I never attended her, of course."

"Then you can't tell me," said Duff, "whether she is totally deaf or simply more or less hard of hearing?"

"I can't," said the doctor.

"Has her voice changed?"

"No."

"It hasn't? I was under the impression that a deaf person's voice came to be a monotone. Because he can't hear himself."

"Her voice is pretty darned monotonous," Fred said. "She croaks."

"Yes, I know," said the doctor impatiently, "but Maud has a . . . er . . . defect. Trouble there, her vocal cords. Her voice has always been rather harsh and deep and monotonous, too."

"How very interesting," murmured Duff. "It's a real disability, is it?"

"Oh, yes. I used to try to help her."

"I see," said Duff. "I see."

"Does it run in the family?" asked Fred suddenly.

"Eh?"

"Because Isabel's voice is funny, too."

"Oh, yes, Isabel. A result of her nervous shock. So they say. A slight paralysis there."

"I thought so," said Fred. "She whines, kind of."

"Is there anything the matter with Gertrude's voice?" demanded Duff. He looked alert. He didn't move, but there was a glinting eagerness in his eye.

"Guess not," said Fred.

"Rather a pleasant voice, in fact," the doctor said with relief, as if it were good to be able to speak admiringly of a Whitlock. "Very pleasant. She used to sing a little. I don't suppose she sings any more."

"Never heard her sing out," said Fred, "but her voice is O.K."

Duff bowed his head in thought. He was limp in the chair, and his hands, resting palms down on either chair arm, grasped nothing and did not twitch. Concentration surrounded him like a cloud. He was gone from the doctor's sitting room. He was absent, and it was important not to bring him back. Fred and the doctor felt that. They dared not disturb him. His thinking was a presence in the room and kept them silent.

Finally he looked up and smiled. "I can see Gertrude," he said, "the eldest princess, with her drawing-room accomplishments, her china painting, her singing, her proper elegance. But what did Maud do?"

"Do?" said the doctor. "Why, I don't know that Maud

did any of those things. Maud was . . . well, rather more the hoyden. She had no accomplishments."

"Bet she had a hammock," Fred said.

The doctor looked at him queerly. "Yes," he said.

"And Isabel?"

"Let me see. Isabel was always busy. But I'm sure I can't tell you . . . She collected stamps at one time. It seems to me that she had quick enthusiasms that didn't last."

"Say," said Fred eagerly, "could I ask him something?"

Duff looked pleased and interested.

"I wondered if Maud's still mad at you," Fred said. "I had a kind of crazy idea that maybe she pushed that lamp over thinking it was you down below. I guess it's crazy, but I wondered, just the same."

The doctor looked distressed. His eyes rolled. "I don't think . . ." he began.

Duff said, "No, Fred, she isn't that mad at him. Not any more."

"How do you know?" said a startled Fred.

Duff's eyes were on the doctor's face. "I daresay she carries on the old antagonism, but not seriously, Fred. A woman isn't angry enough to murder the suitor who jilted her twenty-five years ago."

"Certainly not," said the doctor, gasping.

"Especially since she's . . . er . . . had . . ." Duff stopped.

The doctor said, "Who told you!"

"You did," Duff said, "or at least you confirm my suspicion. As a matter of fact, Fred and Alice told me. Also, Josephine."

The doctor took off his glasses and polished them frantically. "I tell you, Mr. Duff, she said things to me the other night that made me sick to my stomach. Terrible! A terrible woman. Lustful, horrible, disgusting. No moral starch in her."

"I don't care for Maud, myself," murmured Fred, "but for God's sake . . ."

"She taunted me!" the doctor said, "Dear God, as if I cared!"

"Josephine touched her cross," said Duff. "I wonder, do her sisters know?"

Fred looked illuminated, and then grim. "They can smell, can't they?" he said.

The doctor looked greenish-white.

"But I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Duff," said Fred. "What those two don't want to know, they don't let themselves know they know."

"I think," said Duff, "you've put your finger on it. Yes, I think you have."

"I have!" said Fred, amazed.

A man in the dark clothes of a minister came up the front walk from the gate.

"Here's Foster with a job for me, I suppose," said Dr. Follett. "The Methodist preacher, Mr. Duff. Our only Protestant Church. Wait. I'll . . . er . . . send him away."

Duff rose and stood quite still. "Do the Whitlock girls go to church?"

"No, no, but they're members. They used to be. Stephen . . ."

"How I would like to ask that man three rude and prying questions," Duff said, "and I can't."

He stood still, and the doctor bristled. "I think you can." He rose to the challenge in Duff's manner. "He's a friend of mine, and he doesn't gossip. Neither he nor I can afford it. Let me speak to him. I think I can guarantee you your answers."

The doctor bustled importantly to the door and spoke with an air of great confidence to the sad-eyed man in the black suit. Fred would have winked, but Duff was looking with mild pleasure at a flowering tree visible through the window.

"Dr. Follett tells me you have three questions," said the Reverend Mr. Foster. "Please feel free to ask them. Anything I can do. Of course, there are some secrets . . ."

The man of God braced himself.

Duff smiled his charming smile. "My questions aren't too shocking," he said. "This is the first one: Does Miss Gertrude Whitlock contribute generously to the upkeep of your church?"

The minister looked judicious. He smacked his lips. "She contributes regularly," he said, "a sum which seems to me quite proper. Certainly, I appreciate her faithful support, and . . ."

"A good answer," said Duff warmly. "Now, does Miss Maud Whitlock contribute generously, and so forth?"

"Miss Maud has been very generous on occasion," said Mr.

Foster, upon taking thought. "She does not contribute regularly, but I have at times mentioned a special need to her and known her to empty her purse. Yes. Why . . ."

"Thank you very much," said Duff with a gleam in his eye. "Does Miss Isabel Whitlock, and so forth, and so forth?"

The minister said stiffly, "She has not contributed since I have been in Ogaunee. Of course, I cannot say what she may or may not . . ."

"You are very kind," said Duff, "and I must keep my word and not keep you. Thank you, doctor, for your help. I am most grateful for it."

The doctor blushed with pleasure. Duff could give pleasure. His thanks were sincere. But the minister looked rather baffled and disappointed. His sad eyes followed them as they left.

"Mrs. Innes's house," Duff said, in the car.

Fred chuckled. "*He* coulda gone on."

Duff's eyelids crinkled. "And on," he said. "An articulate man in a small town full of inarticulate people. Poor fellow. Well, he interrupted us, but perhaps to some benefit. We haven't time to wait him out, Fred. We are hot on the trail."

"You don't say," said Fred with delight. "Of what?"

"Lunch," said Duff.

17

KILLEEN, entering Innes's bedroom, sensed crisis in the air, and he walked softly. "I'm ready now, Innes. Shall I come back later?"

"No," said Innes angrily, "come in now." He looked at Alice and spread a benign smile over his irritation. "Alice has got the colly-wobbles," he said.

Alice faced him with an indignant murmur.

"But I *know*," said Innes, holding up his hand in a traffic cop's stop gesture, "that no matter what she says, she is a friend of mine."

Alice said, "That's true, of course."

"So she'll do something for me," said Innes, keeping the third person, as if he were talking to a child, "she'll run down and fetch Josephine and Mr. Johnson."

"Of course I will," said Alice, "if you want them. Innes, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to sign my will," he snapped, "and they're going to witness it."

"You can't."

"On the contrary." Innes was cold and his mouth was thin. "You don't seem to realize that your girlish doubts are interfering with a plan for my safety."

"I have no doubts," said Alice, "girlish or otherwise."

"I don't care whether you have or not. I intend to stay alive."

Art Killeen was giving a good imitation of a deaf mute.

"You have my permission," said Alice dryly, "to stay alive."

"We mustn't quarrel," cried Innes, melting suddenly into panic. "Alice, don't you see! Here I am helpless, in bed! And you know what I'm afraid of. I had it all worked out, this scheme. To make it worth their while to protect me. And I'm going on with it. You shan't stop me. You have no right to stop me!"

"Please don't upset yourself," Alice said quietly. "I'm not stopping you."

"Helpless . . . helpless . . ." Innes tossed as much as he was able. "Now . . . now, when I need your support, when I need your loyalty . . . you choose this moment . . ."

Alice picked up the pillbox, shook one out, and put it, with a glass of water, in his hand.

"Don't stew," she said coldly. "It's not disloyal to tell the truth."

"Alice, don't leave me!"

"I think . . ." Killeen backed toward the door.

"Where are you going? You stay here," Innes commanded. He picked up briskness. "Alice, if you please, at least you can ask Josephine and Mr. Johnson to come up here.

If this distresses you so much, remember, I can change my will again."

"I can't stop you from making a will," she said. "Why can't you put another name in place of mine? Mr. Killeen's, for instance."

Killeen looked startled, and Innes looked stubborn. His hair was mussed, his little mustache out of order. But his eyes shot lightning at her.

"I shall do as I planned. We'll discuss the rest of it later. Please hurry. You've delayed this already."

Alice started to leave the room with what meek dignity she could, but she thought of something and turned back.

"You'll stay right here?" she said to Killeen.

All his bewilderment showed through his mask. "Yes of course."

"He mustn't be left alone."

"I see. I see."

"You'd better stay until Fred comes back," said Alice. "It seems *I'm* going to have the motive now."

She walked out, leaving their two faces blank with astonishment.

When Fred and Duff came in they found Alice roaming distractedly around the sitting room. "He's signed his will," she announced.

"Who's with him?"

"Art . . . Mr. Killeen."

"Do *they* know?"

"Not yet," Alice said. "Look, Fred, I'm sorry, but you're on duty, that is if there is any more guard duty. I can't be."

"Why not?"

"Well, *that*," she said, "Look at my big expensive motive. Besides, we had a fight. With a witness."

"Are you nuts?" Fred said.

"No. I broke my engagement." She dared him to wonder why.

"Broke the . . .?"

"May I say, congratulations?" said MacDougal Duff gently.

Fred said, without smiling. "I hope you'll be very happy."

He marched upstairs without looking back. Alice felt like a child who's been unjustly slapped. She looked around at Mac Duff, whose fine eyes were friendly.

"I've been misunderstood," he said. "It's *not* a re-rebound, is it?"

Her face cleared. "Oh, no." Then she said, "Oh." Then she blushed. Then she said. "Yes, but how . . . ?"

"My dear, I have the advantage of having been at school with the two of you, but that young man who drives for Mr. Whitlock is clever enough . . ."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" said Alice in a fluster.

"Of course not." Duff was being very placid. "I do that, you know. Speak in riddles every once in a while. It builds me up. Forgive me, Alice. Do you still want to know who tried to murder Innes?"

"Of course I do. Mr. Duff, why did you congratulate me?"

"Because I'm old-fashioned," said Duff. "Where are the girls?"

"I don't know." She moved beside him toward the hall. "Did you get any dope at the doctor's?"

"Some, about the past."

"Did it help?"

"It inclines me to wonder," said Duff evasively. "Where shall we find them?"

"In their own rooms, I guess."

"Then let us go to their own rooms. By all means. I want to see them in their lairs. You come along and introduce me. In fact, I want to see their lairs."

"But who are you?" said Alice. She felt suddenly gay.

"I hadn't thought," he said. "Who am I, after all?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. What on earth are you doing here?"

Duff shook his head.

"It won't do," she said.

"I am an historian."

Alice was quick. "Are you interested in old families, by any chance?"

"I dote on them. I'm a friend of yours, too."

"All right. It'll work on Gertrude."

"Well, then, where does Gertrude hole up?"

Alice giggled. "She looks as if she lives under a rock," she whispered. "In here. There's a door. I dare you to knock."

"Before we knock," said MacDougal Duff, "let us review our objectives. Now let me see. First, we should like to know

where Gertrude was last night and what she knows about where her sisters were. Also we are interested in her sleeves."

"Oh, dear."

"You try the sleeves. After all, she's supposed to be blind. Item two, *is* she blind? I think you'd better not be surprised at anything I do. Not out loud, anyway."

"I'll be careful."

"But most important, we want to know what Gertrude is. What, from her inside, might impel her to murder? Innes thinks she wants revenge. Fred thinks she wants his money. What does Gertrude want in this world, and how badly?"

"Oh, dear," said Alice.

"And watch the room. Notice. Look around. She lives there if she lives anywhere. It may tell us whether or not she can see, and other things.

"Look sharp, now," said Mac Duff, and he knocked on Gertrude's door.

"Come in," called Gertrude.

Alice opened the door. "Miss Gertrude, this is Alice Brennan. I've brought Mr. Duff to see you. He's a very old friend of mine, a professor of American History, from New York. Staying with Mrs. Innes," she wound up breathlessly. "And he's been so anxious to meet you."

"How do you do, Mr. Duff," said Gertrude in her cool soprano. She inclined her head.

"It's very good of you to see me," said Duff in his quiet voice. "Everywhere I go, I try to talk with members of old and important families. You can understand that, as an historian, I find them fascinating."

Gertrude's face showed a flash of animation.

"Please sit down," she said. "The armchair to the left of my bed, as you are standing. You'll find it comfortable."

Gertrude, herself, sat in an ancient rocker, upright, as usual. She wore gray silk, a grim plain pattern, vastly unbecoming and marred by a spot or two.

Her room was large and square, almost cubic, it seemed, so high was the ceiling. It was very bare and painfully in order. Her bed wore an old-fashioned white bedspread. The window curtains were white. There was very little color. Not a great deal of furniture. There were three tables in the big room, and Alice, conning the objects that stood on them, was surprised how few these were. The table near the bed had

no lamp. A jug for water and a glass. That was all. The table near the window in the bay had a low bowl with bulbs in it. Narcissus. The table against the wall held a small wooden frame with some yarn stretched across it, a device for weaving. It had scarcely been started. There was also a pack of playing cards.

The walls were perfectly bare. There were no pictures, but the conventional mirror was attached to the dresser. There were no books in the room. In the corner stood an old-fashioned phonograph with a crank. No radio. Alice wondered about that. But the radio was the voice of the brawling, tumultuous world; and this bare orderly room was Gertrude's, into which the tumult did not penetrate. Alice thought: I wonder if it gets into her mind. I wonder if she knows there is a war.

It was a sad room, somehow, and Alice looked with some pity at the woman's face.

That all-over straw-colored effect, she thought, would vanish with a little rouge and a lick or two with an eyebrow pencil. But of course not, although, peering closer, Alice thought she detected a streak of face powder. Straw-colored face powder, she supposed to herself, with an inner smile.

Gertrude was speaking, "My father's forebears came from New England. My mother was of old southern stock, although of a branch that migrated north and west."

She knew her stuff, thought Alice. The delicate disdain with which Gertrude skirted sheer boasting alienated her again.

Duff knew his stuff, too. He rounded out her picture with knowing murmurs. Through the room paraded the past, full of gallant and blue-blooded people.

Alice got up and tiptoed toward the closet door, which luckily stood open a crack. Gertrude's sightless face was toward her. She felt conspicuous and exposed. The door swung easily as she touched it. Gertrude's dresses hung in perfect order on a bar that ran across the closet. Surely, in no other closet did all the dresses face one way. All the left sleeves were toward her. She ran through them quickly. The right sleeves would be more difficult. She would have to burrow. And noiselessly.

Duff was saying, "I wonder if you can describe your father for me, Miss Gertrude? That type of man, the aristocratic

pioneer, I call him, seems to me to have made a great deal of our history."

"I can see that you are right," agreed Gertrude. "My father was a man of great vigor and ability." Two halves of a buckle clicked as the dresses swayed. Gertrude was immediately alert. "Alice . . .?" she said.

Alice caught her breath. How could she speak from behind Duff, where she shouldn't be? Desperately, she grabbed for the last sleeve to inspect it. She would do her job, anyhow.

Then she took two steps, swiftly, away from the closet. "I thought, perhaps an ash tray," she said.

Duff had a cigarette in his hand, like magic. "I believe I have automatically taken out a cigarette," he said apologetically, "Forgive me, Miss Gertrude? Do you mind smoke?"

"Not at all," said Gertrude graciously. "Alice, dear, you will find an ash tray on the window sill of the bay."

"That green dish?" said Duff.

"A small glass dish," said Gertrude.

"Oh, yes, I have it." Alice brought the dish, which was amber, to Duff, and he reached his hand for it.

"Thank you."

Then her heart jumped. Duff didn't move and he made no sound, but his face contorted with revulsion and horror and surprise. The glass dish in her hand was perfectly clean and empty. She could see that. There was nothing wrong with it. Unless invisible insects wriggled there. Or Duff could see something loathsome under her shaking fingers that were loosening, in spite of her. She nearly dropped it.

Duff's hand went under the dish. He said, and by a miracle of control, his voice reflected nothing that was in his face, "Do you smoke, Miss Gertrude?"

"Thank you, no," said Gertrude. There was no ripple in her. If she could see Duff's face at all, she, too, had miraculous control not to cry out," What's the matter?" But she said, "I don't smoke, Mr. Duff. I think, perhaps, because I am blind, you know."

Duff put the ash tray down on his knee and lit his cigarette. He leaned forward, bringing his face only a few feet from Gertrude Whitlock. "I'm glad you said that," he told her. "One never can be quite sure . . . I've known blind persons who seem offended if their misfortune is mentioned. Why is

that, Miss Gertrude? Because they wish to pretend . . .?"

Gertrude said in her superior way, "I am never offended. After all, to be blind is to be different from people who retain their sight." Her tone came close to suggesting that people often retained their sight through sheer vulgarity. "One can scarcely pretend. There are many difficulties, of course. But I simply resolved that I would not be a burden."

Duff's long face grew rounder in a wide clownish smile. He winked at Alice and made, with his forefinger, the time-honored circular gesture near the head that means "crazy."

Alice knew that if Gertrude could see, she would be driven wild with fury. But Gertrude was not furious. Gertrude went on speaking. "Fortunately," she said, with shrieking modesty, "I am a person of very simple tastes and requirements."

"This is an interesting house," said Duff, dropping his facial monkeyshines and leaning back. "Your father built it?"

"Yes, indeed. We have always lived here, on the hill." Gertrude proceeded to unroll a panoramic view of herself as she saw her. The Whitlocks who lived on the hill, apart, above. The eldest daughter, upon whom the mantle of distinction most surely fell. Now a woman of great sensitivity, fine and refined, bearing nobly and even triumphantly her tragic affliction.

Duff said, as if her words had decided him, "Miss Gertrude, I hadn't thought of asking you these questions. But now that I meet you, I feel that you may perhaps be the one best able to answer them for me. I had thought that, because you cannot see, you would not know. But I do believe your perceptions are far more alert and your intelligence more keen . . ." He appeared to stumble. "That is to say, of course, I haven't met your sisters. But . . ."

"What questions do you mean, Mr. Duff?" said Gertrude in a most friendly fashion.

"Well, you see, last night . . ."

Gertrude stiffened just a little.

"Young Alice, here, tells me she believes there was an intruder in this house."

"An intruder?" said Gertrude slowly.

"Yes, I do," said Alice truculently. One had to look sharp with this Duff. He gave you a role without warning. Duff's confident smile was sweet praise, though.

"My dear, whatever makes you think . . . ?"

"I had a feeling," Alice said. "I woke up and I felt just as if there was somebody in the hall."

"Where, my dear?"

"In the hall. Downstairs," faltered Alice.

"Your brother is rather concerned about it," Duff put in, "because, of course, that very queer accident with the furnace has made him quite uneasy, and he wonders if someone has a way of getting in here, if you are safe."

"Safe?" said Gertrude. "Of course we are safe. You must have misunderstood Innes, Mr. Duff. I doubt if my half-brother is thinking of *our* safety."

"Indeed?" murmured Duff.

"He has less family feeling than you think. I am afraid that he considers us three insignificant old women." She held her head higher, if possible. "That is quite natural, and I do understand it. Why, Mr. Duff, perhaps we are."

Somebody had to say, "Oh, no!" in a shocked voice, and somebody was Alice who found herself reacting as required. Gertrude smiled. "But an intruder, dear . . ."

"My dear Miss Gertrude," said Duff, "you fail to realize that if there is a thief in Ogaunee, this house would attract him." Gertrude seemed pleased. Her long narrow teeth showed in another smile. "Now, I am wondering if your very keen ears might not have noticed something."

Gertrude appeared to cast her mind back. "I retired to this room early. Quite early. Immediately after bidding Innes good night. I remember nothing out of the ordinary. I heard the telephone bell, of course, and Isabel answering it. She came in to me, right afterward."

"At what time was this, Miss Gertrude, do you know?"

"I really cannot tell you," said Gertrude. "My own watch is, unfortunately, out of order."

"Your own watch has no crystal," said Duff.

"I read it with my fingers," said Gertrude majestically. "Why do you wish to know the time, Mr. Duff? I believe it was raining. I believe we spoke of the storm."

"Had it been raining long?"

"I am very sensitive to a storm," said Gertrude. "I have learned to disregard them. I have taught myself a certain amount of inattention."

"How wise," Duff murmured. "You see, I was thinking

that no intruder could have been moving about the house while your sister was still . . . er . . . downstairs. But you heard nothing then. Or later?"

"Isabel went upstairs to her own room when she left me. I heard nothing after that. Nothing at all, that I remember, until people began to shout and bang."

"I wonder if Miss Isabel heard something *before* she went upstairs."

"She would have told me," said Gertrude a little petulantly.

"Not necessarily," said Duff gently. "I wondered if she did not look in to see if you were all right, not caring to worry you . . ."

"Isabel would find it very difficult to deceive me," said Gertrude haughtily. "If she had been worried about me, I should have known it. She came in because she wanted witch hazel on her . . . her injury."

"I don't understand," said Duff.

"My sister is rather helpless," said Gertrude. "She had bruised her . . . her limb."

"I don't understand," said Duff again, sounding lost in bewilderment.

"I applied the witch hazel," said Gertrude. "I have two hands. She came in with the bottle and the cotton, but she finds it very difficult to manage. So often other people have to do the simplest things for Isabel."

Duff said, "Miss Gertrude, I am afraid I am being utterly stupid, but I seem to have quite lost the thread of what you are saying. Your sister had hurt herself?"

"Yes, days ago."

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I see now. Your sister came to you for help. Of course. And you very kindly did help her. You dabbed the witchhazel on her arm."

"It was not her arm," said Gertrude severely. "Really, Mr. Duff. . ."

"Forgive me," said Duff quickly. "I am struggling with a reversal of feeling. You see, I had been thinking of your sister taking care of you. I find, instead, that you, in the goodness of your heart and the fortitude of your spirit, are, instead, the one to whom she appeals."

Gertrude never winced, though Alice did. It was so sticky and so thick. Gertrude said, "It was nothing." But she didn't mean it.

Duff bit his lip and cast a look at Alice. "Another question," he said humbly. "When you were out of doors, just before Mr. Whitlock and Miss Brennan and the chauffeur set forth in the car, do you remember . . . ?"

"Yes," said Gertrude. "I had stepped out for a breath of air."

"You heard no stranger?"

"No," she said, puzzled. "Why?"

"Perhaps there was no stranger," said Duff soothingly. "Your brother is unwell and nervous, of course." He rose. "I hope," he said, "that I may come in and chat with you another time."

"Please do," said Gertrude cordially.

Duff drifted across to the table where the weaving lay. "You are doing some charming work," he said.

"My weaving?"

"Yes. Lovely."

"If you will hand it to me, Alice dear, perhaps I shall do a little now."

Alice gave her the frame and the wool. They went away, leaving Gertrude upright in the rocker, her thin hands busy with the work, the very portrait of saintly patience.

Duff said, "Well? The sleeves?"

"They were all all right," said Alice.

"None recently washed?"

"They were all silk. And not wrinkled. And pretty clean."

"The only hope was that she might have stained her sleeve and not known it."

"It's no help, though, is it?"

"Is she blind, Alice?"

"There's only one thing," said Alice slowly.

"Yes?"

"Those playing cards."

"I managed to look. They are special cards with tiny raised dots in the corners. For the blind."

"Oh. Well, what about the flowers?"

"Narcissus," said Duff. "Very fragrant."

Alice sighed. "And the mirror?"

"There's always a mirror."

"Then you think she's blind?"

"It does seem so," said Duff. "That's a monstrous woman, Alice."

They were in the hall, and Art Killeen came down the stairs.

"I'm off to the post office," he said.

"With the new will?"

"Yes. Innes wants it safely away. He is going to announce what he's done, as soon as it's safe with Uncle Sam."

"I see," said Duff.

"Want to help me find the post office, Alice?"

"I can't," she said. "Mr. Duff and I . . ."

"I'd like to talk to you," said Art Killeen wistfully. "For just a minute. Do you mind if I keep her just a minute, Mr. Duff?"

Duff drifted down the hall as if something were drawing him toward the kitchen.

Alice said sharply, "I won't be long."

Duff flapped his hand at her and disappeared.

18

"I'M NOT going to the post office, Art. No, really. What did you want to say?"

He drew her into the sitting room with an arm across her shoulders. "I don't know how I'm going to say it, exactly," he confessed. He turned her so that she faced him. "Darling, you've put Innes in a state. I've tried to be helpful."

"What do you mean?" Alice felt choked and angry. She wanted to reject his help, whatever it was.

"You're going to marry him, aren't you?"

"That's up to him," she said bitterly.

"He'll be all right." Killeen spoke with a soft confidence.

Alice shook herself away from him. "I don't know why you think you've got to interfere."

"Interfere? Darling, I'm not. I'm helping."

"Helping *what?*"

"To clear up a misunderstanding," said Killeen, "between you and Innes." She was speechless, and he went on. "Really, darling, I think you ought to be less hostile. It's costing me something."

"Oh?" said Alice.

"I'm a little jealous," he said.

Alice felt as if firecrackers were going off in the black back of her eyes, but she managed to laugh.

"You may laugh," said Art Killeen, "but you're darned sweet, Alice. I told him he was a lucky man."

"What else did you tell him?" said Alice with an effort. She wasn't angry any more.

"I convinced him that you meant the opposite of what you said."

"That was clever." Her voice shook a little.

"You said you were after his dough, darling, but actions speak louder than words, as I pointed out."

"What actions?"

"You can't be after the dough, sweet Alice. You didn't want him to sign that will."

"But . . ."

"He sees that, now."

"Maybe I don't understand myself," said Alice. As a matter of fact, she did feel all confused.

"I understand you, darling."

Alice caught a glimpse of a scheme of things in which wheels went around within wheels, and one seemed mercenary for the purpose of seeming unmercenary, though on the next layer down . . .

"Besides that," said Killeen, "I had to convince him that you weren't in love with me."

"Did he think . . . I was?"

"I'm afraid he did there for a minute."

"Wasn't that bright of Innes?" she said flatly and openly.

He chose to take it for sarcasm. "Quite a brainstorm," he said.

"As if there was any percentage," Alice heard herself saying coolly, "in that."

His eye leaped to hers. She saw him come up to the very brink of an impulse, felt the surge of recklessness that

almost carried him away. She saw it fail, too, come to the brink and not go over.

"I wanted to tell you," he said lamely, "but now I'd better get down to the post office. Innes would have a fit if he could see me dawdling."

"Then don't dawdle," she said.

He came rather near. "I hope everything is going to be all right," he said, with warmth left out of the wish.

"Do you, by any chance, mean the opposite of what you say?" asked Alice.

Light leaped in his eye. He bent and kissed her and made his exit without a curtain line.

A curious numbness took hold of Alice. She didn't seem to be able to go over that little scene and analyze it. Her mind wanted to put it off. She had, besides, a sense of having been interrupted. There was something she had been in the middle of doing. Something absorbing. Mr. Duff.

It's that Indian! she thought. What's Duff saying to that Indian, I wonder.

Through the kitchen window she saw Duff and Mr. Johnson sitting on the back steps, side by side. Their eyes were fixed on the horizon. No duel this time. They gazed across the pit to the hills and distant trees. Mr. Johnson spat in the dust from time to time. Duff seemed to dream in the sun.

"I went down to the reservation yesterday," he said lazily.

Mr. Johnson grunted.

"Ever stay there?"

"Naw."

"What do you think of them?"

Mr. Johnson grinned and spat.

Duff said, "By the way, are you a Christian?"

"Sure," said Mr. Johnson. "You?"

"I am," said Duff, suppressing a sense of outrage. "Some of the Oneidas down there stick to the old religion, they tell me."

"The old man gimme a dollar."

"That so?" said Duff cautiously.

"Yeah." Mr. Johnson spat. "To get baptized."

"The old man. That would be Stephen?"

"He's dead."

The dialogue seemed to have come to a dead end.

"Go to school, did you?" ventured Duff.

"Sure."

"Where?"

"Here."

"How long?"

Mr. Johnson moved his shoulders. "The old man gimme a dollar to split half a cord of wood. So I quit."

"What," said Duff rather desperately, "did you want to be?"

"Huh?"

"I mean when you were a kid." No answer. "For instance, didn't you ever want to drive the engine?"

"The train engine?" Duff nodded. "Naw," said Mr. Johnson.

"I guess you'd just as soon have a lot of money," said Duff artfully.

"What for?"

"To spend."

"Naw. I mean what for?"

"Beg pardon?"

"Wadd'ya want me to do?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Thought you had a job," said Mr. Johnson.

"Would you kill somebody if I paid you for it?"

Mr. Johnson's dark face didn't change. "Who?"

"Anybody."

"Innes, hey?"

Duff looked at him. "What makes you say that?"

Mr. Johnson scratched himself. "That's whatcha want to know," he stated.

Duff admitted. "Yes. Well?"

"What's the matter with Innes?" said Mr. Johnson. "He gimme a dollar."

"Suppose somebody gave you more than that?"

Duff searched the brown face. It was expressionless. "Listen," said Mr. Johnson, "do it yourself."

Alice stifled a giggle. Duff turned and saw her. He got up and joined her in the kitchen.

"How's the poor Indian?" she whispered.

"Lo," said Duff ruefully, "now, I think he's kidding me."

They went toward the front of the house together. Alice looked up at Duff's face and caught him with the feathers of

his spirit ruffled. "Is he super-naïve or is he super-subtle? Alice, he's got the Indian sign on me."

"Well, I don't believe it," said Alice stoutly. "What shall we do now?"

"Shall we beard Maud?"

"One could," giggled Alice. "But I won't be able to search her closet right under her eyes."

"No. By the way, how does one communicate with her?"

"Can you talk on your fingers?"

"No."

"You must be my secretary."

"Are you going to try any tricks?"

"Oh, certainly."

"All right," said Alice. "Oh, don't tell me, let me guess. It's great sport, not knowing what you're going to do next."

"Did I give you an A?" asked Duff. "I should have. Forward."

Outside Maud's door, Alice said, "I don't know what we're supposed to do. She wouldn't hear a knock."

"Open it and look in," suggested Duff. "If she isn't decent, you can warn me and we'll go away."

Alice turned the knob and the door moved. She looked in almost fearfully. The room was empty.

"Nobody."

"Go ahead," said Duff. "Quick."

When they were inside Duff said, "Sit down and begin to write a note, explaining that we called, anything . . ."

Alice saw one of Maud's pads and found a pencil in her pocket. She could see, out of the corner of her eye, Duff in the closet.

"Dear Miss Maud: I brought Mr. Duff here to see you but you were out." How silly! "When you find this will you please . . ." Please what?

"She's coming!"

Duff seemed to conjure himself across the room, so quickly was he there, standing innocently and rather languidly at her side.

Maud came in pell-mell. The doorknob struck the wall as she flung the door open. She stopped when she saw them.

"Hello. What are you doing in here? Hey?"

Alice rose and smiled and handed her the unfinished note. She motioned toward Duff. Duff bowed. Alice felt she ought

to curtsy. It seemed a long time that they bowed and bobbed their heads, before Maud's eyes went down to the writing.

"Name's Duff, eh?" she said. "How ja do. Sit down if you want to. What's up?"

Duff said to Alice, "Write that I wanted to meet her because I am interested in the early history of Ogaunee."

Alice wrote.

Meanwhile, Maud said, "I know who you are now. You're the fella that's staying down at Susan's."

She plunged herself down in a low chair beside the fireplace, unfolded a paper napkin she had in her hand, revealing a pile of five or six pieces of Melba toast.

"Isabel says I've got to reduce," she cackled. "Can you tie that?"

Alice handed her the note.

"What do you mean, early history?" the woman demanded in a flash. "How old do you think I am?"

"I'm sorry," said Duff.

Maud guffawed. "I don't know anything about all that stuff. You ask Gert. She can talk."

"He did," wrote Alice.

"Talked your ear off, I'll bet," Maud said.

She crunched into the toast. Alice looked around the room for the first time. It was a mess. Things were piled around in a disorder so thorough as to seem mad. Cardboard boxes and paper-wrapped packages, some half-opened, stood on the seats of chairs. Three pairs of shoes and an uneven number of varicolored stockings lay helter skelter under the bed on a floor thick with dust. The bed itself wore its spread askew, and there were four pillows.

The mantel held three cracker boxes, unclosed, an empty Coca-Cola bottle and an unwashed glass. The grate was full of trash, including orange peel dry and stiff with age. The ruffled curtains at the windows were fairly clean, but the tie-back was gone from one of them and it sagged from the rod. Its ruffle drooped. A pint milk bottle stood on another sill, and the comic section of an old newspaper had been stuffed haphazardly in the crack at the side of the lower pane.

An apple core lay near a dirty hairbrush on the dresser, and hairpins mixed with face powder in the pin tray. Alice shuddered. Sound, she thought. Something to hear. She

looked for an alarm clock. There was a clock on the dresser, but it had no hand to set for any alarm. No phonograph here. A pile of magazines, three novels with a pair of lovers embracing each other on each jacket, pictures. A calendar print of "The Horsefair" with a mustache penciled on one of the horses! The mirror was smudged and streaked and reflected crookedly, as if the composition of the glass was muddled.

Meanwhile, Maud hooked with her toe a footstool with a tapestry cover that was frayed and soiled, and put her feet up on it. She was watching them rather maliciously. Alice bit her lip. The atmosphere in this room reeked of Maud.

"Write," said Duff, "that you thought you heard somebody in the house last night. Ask if there's room for me to stay here. Say you think there ought to be another man."

Alice wrote.

Maud spoke. She knew perfectly well that something was being prepared for her to consider, but she chose to speak and upset the order of communications. "What do you want to know about early history?"

Now Alice's note was irrelevant. "This is the devil of an interview," said Duff. "Show it to her."

"No room," croaked Maud, having read. "What do you mean, another man? There's three already. If you count Innes. Two and a half, say." She roared.

Alice looked helpless. Maud stopped laughing and took another piece of Melba toast.

"She won't take the bait, will she?" said Duff without moving his lips much, though his voice was clear and penetrating. "Stubborn old owl, I'd say."

Maud chewed on.

Duff's voice dropped to a near whisper. "Shall we tell her?"

"What?" whispered Alice.

Maud's finger investigated a tooth.

"About the telephone call in the night," Duff said very quietly.

Maud's light-colored eyes rested vacantly on the wall.

"I don't know." Alice tried to think up some embroidery of her own. "Do you think it's safe?"

Duff said, "Write and ask her if she knows anything about what happened last night."

Maud said, in the middle of his last word, "Say, nobody was in this house last night, were they?"

"Write, yes, you think so. Write that Innes thinks so."

Maud snorted as she read. "Innes is a fraidy cat, always was. Jump at his shadow."

Alice wrote, "Did you see or hear anything?"

"Well, I was reading a book. Didn't see anything. Can't hear, you know. Rained, though, didn't it? Lemme see. Isabel went through."

"Isabel!" Duff looked at a door in the far wall. "That communicates with Isabel's room?"

"It must, I guess," said Alice. "We didn't know that, did we?"

"I must have the time. Isabel was the last one to be out of her room. She answered the phone. Ask her the time."

"The time? But Gertrude says she went upstairs right after being in to see her, so we know the time, don't we?"

"Do we?" said Duff.

"Of course. If Susan knows what time she called up."

"She says she called about eleven."

"Well, then, Isabel came upstairs just after eleven. That would be just before Fred left Innes's room. Or just after. If she came through this way he wouldn't have seen her. It must have been about then."

"Ask Maud," said Duff.

"She won't know," said Alice. "Why should she care what time it is. Look at her."

Maud lay in her chair as if it were a hammock. Her feet fell sidewise balanced on their heels, the two of them looking like a flipper at the end of her legs. She was frankly appraising Alice's clothes and figure. Or seemed to be.

"But ask her," said Duff. "And ask her which way Isabel went through."

Maud sent them a suspicious glance before she read the newest note. "Say, what is all this? Isabel was coming up. She didn't want to go past the boy in the hall. She had her kimono on."

"What time?" said Duff with his lips. He tapped his wrist watch.

"Eh? What time, you mean? Oh, about eleven," said Maud sullenly.

Duff looked at the clock which stood behind Maud on the dresser. He compared it with his own watch. "Ask her how late she was awake. Did Isabel go through here again?"

"She did not," said Maud crossly. "Say, look, who told you to ask questions?"

Duff seized the pad and wrote himself. "Why were you outdoors about eight o'clock, night before last?"

Maud took the pad and grinned evilly. "Innes's puking all over the place nearly made me throw up myself. What of it? Listen, Innes has got some bee in his bonnet. What does he think I was doing outside? What the hell difference does it make what time Isabel went to bed last night or me or Gert, either? What's the matter with Innes? Does he think one of us is trying to murder him?"

Alice gasped.

Duff met Maud's bright eyes. He nodded his head. "Yes, he does," he said with his lips.

"What for?" said Maud. She looked interested. Her fat little body became more alert, less limp.

Duff took the pad. "It seems quite certain that someone did try," he wrote. And added, "Mr. Johnson?" with a big question mark.

Maud read it and began to laugh. "You're crazy," she said with rude conviction. "You go tell Innes he's crazy as a bedbug. Say, why should we kill the goose that lays the golden egg? Hey?"

"To get the golden egg," said Duff clearly.

Maud's eyes narrowed. "Aw, life's too short," she said. "You tell him."

She bit into her toast, and Isabel came in at the door without knocking.

19

"Oh, there you are," said Isabel.

Alice and Mr. Duff rose politely. "Miss Isabel, this is Professor Duff. He's an old friend of mine. He . . ."

"How do you do?" said Isabel. Her lips made a semicircle. Her sharp chin tilted. The eyes were arch.

Alice opened her mouth to explain further, but Isabel did the brushing-off trick. Her eyes wavered away from Duff as if her mind was too busy to consider him. "Innes wants us all to come to his room." She spoke on the fingers of her small left hand. Maud grunted and began to struggle in her chair.

"I can wait, perhaps," said Duff swiftly.

"Perhaps he means you, too," said Alice. She didn't know what Duff wanted.

"I really don't know," said Isabel, complaining of her own uncertainty. Her hand gathered her dress in folds at her bosom. She held her head sidewise, as if she had been interrupted in the act of tossing it. Her strange eyes watched Duff and yet did not watch him. "He mentioned Alice. But he did not mention you, Mr. Duff." Her manner was a bright rebuff.

"Fella's been asking questions," said Maud. "Say!"

The way Isabel's old-fashioned coiffure tilted as she moved her head, and her smile cut across her face, had a quality of Victorian gaiety or coquetry about it.

Duff said, "Yes, a question or two. What time did the telephone ring last night, Miss Isabel?"

Isabel said, "Why, really, I don't think I can tell you. Innes is ill, you know. Poor boy. We humor him. If you will excuse us?"

"I shall be happy to wait downstairs," Duff said. "But perhaps you will be kind enough to tell me where I can wash?"

The meaty color of Isabel's jowls brightened. Perhaps she

blushed. She turned, and they all went out into the hall. Alice showed Duff the bathroom door.

Alice said, "If Innes does want you, shall I call?"

"Please," he said. Something in the quality of his tone told her that he would just as soon be left out of this conference. She understood. He would be looking at Isabel's sleeves.

The fat was in the fire, anyway. Surely it wouldn't take Maud long to broadcast Innes's suspicions. But Maud waddled into Papa's room without any more talk.

Innes was enthroned on pillows. He looked around at his assembled audience. His three sisters in a row. His henchmen, Fred and Killeen, on either hand. Alice, seated docilely at his left.

"Take down what I say, please, Alice. You can type it out for Maud. Use Killeen's portable." Innes had an air of having thought of everything.

"Very well," said Alice.

"Now, Gertrude, Maud, Isabel, I want you to know that I have arranged to send each of you a certain amount of money every month." Innes looked terribly pompous. Someone had combed his hair, and his mustache was smooth again. He was full of confidence.

"What's he say?" said Maud. "Oh, she's writing it down, is she?" Maud picked her front teeth with her fingernail. But she kept her shrewd eyes on Innes's face. Lip reading? Alice wondered.

"I am doing this because I have changed my will, and I think it is therefore only fair to make it up to you while I am still alive." Innes was being wily. Smooth. How much of this was Killeen's touch? To seem, and not to seem . . . "I am leaving my estate to Alice, of course."

"What? All?" said Isabel. The two syllables came out without any inflection, abruptly. Gertrude's lips jerked, but she said nothing. Maud looked at the tip of her finger and put it back into her mouth.

"It may seem strange," Innes went on, "but it really isn't. She's young, you see. And I, myself, am younger than any of you. Therefore, your share in my estate is of pretty doubtful value to you, since it is likely that I shall survive you. But"—Innes waved his pudgy hand—"let's not speak of such unpleasant things." He smiled fatuously. "I do feel I've been

selfish. I have complained about straightening out your affairs from time to time. But after all, lying here, I began to say to myself that you are my family, and I do have a responsibility in your support and comfort. You are," said Innes sentimentally, "my sisters.

"Therefore, as I say I have arranged for these allowances. They are generous, I think. I am dividing ten thousand a year among you. With your own holdings, you will be well off."

Innes paused for applause. There was none. The sisters sat in stony silence.

"Let me tell you just what I have done in my will." Killeen handed Innes a document. "This is a copy," said Innes airily, but the warning was clear. "Mr. Killeen has mailed the signed original back to his office in the city. Now, of course, I have a few charities here. Erhem, the entire residue goes to Alice Brennan." He tossed a forgiving smile at Alice, hurried his eyes back to the paper and kept them there. "At my death, the allowances, I have fixed on you will naturally stop. But I have stated here in the will that Alice Brennan, designated herein as heiress to the bulk of my estate, is hereby earnestly requested to use her own judgment as to whether she wishes to continue them in whole, in part, or at all. Do you," said Innes, putting the paper down, "understand?"

"My dear Innes," said Gertrude, "isn't that rather peculiar? After all, while we hope to become better acquainted with your charming Alice . . ."

Isabel said, "I'm afraid I don't understand, either." Her forehead wore a frown, not so much of disapproval as of anxious stupidity.

"Surely you can see why I had to do that!" said Innes, raising his eyebrows. "My dears, who knows what is going to happen to my money? The whole world is aflame." Innes dramatized it. "Why, by the time I die, the estate may have shrunk to almost nothing."

Alice thought: He doesn't really believe it. He's too smug. Neither did Killeen believe it. He caught Alice's eye and smiled at her.

"Now," said Innes with false patience, "I can't obligate Alice to continue a rather large allowance regardless of what

proportion it turns out to be of her own income. So you see, it's merely fair."

He folded the paper and waited for the reaction.

Isabel's eyes slid sidewise in the evasive way she had. "Is that all, then, Innes?" she said, plaintively, as if it hadn't amounted to much. "I do have some things to attend to."

Bilked of a sensation, Innes said sulkily, "That's all."

Gertrude rose and said the proper thing, gracefully. "We do thank you, Innes. Of course. You are very good. We shall have no financial worries any more." Her affected voice was sweet. "I think you are very good to work this all out while you are so ill." Her voice faded. She moved away.

Maud grunted, heaving herself up. She waddled over and peered at Alice's notes over her shrinking shoulder. "Some hieroglyphics," she said cheerfully. "Don't make any sense to me."

"You'll understand . . ." began Alice.

Maud yawned. But her eyes glittered. She'd understood enough to be curious. Or she'd heard it all, and understood plenty.

MacDougal Duff, meanwhile, went quietly into Isabel's room. It, too was large, an oblong rather than a square, with a mantel corresponding to the one in the sitting room below. He did not make for the clothes closet immediately. He stood just within the door and looked around.

Isabel's room was crowded. Furniture lined the walls almost solidly. It looked more like a shop than a place to live. One had to thread one's way through aislelike spaces. There were also many shelves, and each shelf was full. Duff pulled at his chin. He opened a drawer. The drawer was full almost to overflowing. A search here would be quite a chore. There were quantities of things, all sorts of things, clothing, china, bric-a-brac, boxes, bottles, shawls, laces.

Duff shook his head and moved toward the closet. The door burst open. It was stuffed with clothes. He examined the sleeves of all the dresses hanging there, working rapidly. Nothing significant appeared. He hesitated over the dresser drawers, then glanced quickly into each, finding no outer garments, but heaps of silk lingerie, scarves, handkerchiefs, handbags, some of them well worn, and a box full of

keys. He pulled open the top of a cedar chest. It smelled violently of antimoth flakes. Woolens in there.

For all its multitude of things, this room had order. He saw that things were classified, not piled helter skelter. These shelves in the corner held vases and china boxes. The shelves beyond the mantel held books and magazines. The chest beside the bed was full of linens. The chest beneath the window was for blankets and blankets only. If a stained sleeve was in this room, it was hidden.

Duff sighed. He opened the door to the hall a crack. The conference was still in session. He went to work with furious and perfectly methodical speed, then. Every drawer, every cupboard, the bed, the mattress, got a lightning glance. With utter concentration and not one wasted second glance, he searched the room.

There was no garment with a stained sleeve. Nor any sleeve that seemed to have been secretly washed. No signs at all.

Duff finished. He paused for just a moment over the book shelves. Harold McGrath. George Barr McCutcheon, E. P. Roe. He ran his finger down the backs of a pile of magazines. The complete issues, dating from 1939.

Duff went out of Isabel's room and wandered downstairs.

Mr. Johnson, the Indian, was brushing the stair carpet with a whiskbroom. When Duff stopped a step above, he looked up.

Duff was out of tricks. He said rather humbly, "I want to ask another question."

"Sure," said Mr. Johnson pleasantly.

"Did you see anyone leave this house, evening before last, between, say a quarter of eight and a quarter of nine?"

"Just Josephine," said Mr. Johnson.

"You saw her?"

"I give a yell and she came out."

"To the barn?"

"Sure."

"Why?"

"I ripped my pants."

"Oh?"

Mr. Johnson began to wield the broom.

"Why did Josephine come out to the barn?" asked Duff patiently.

"I give a yell."

"Yes, but . . ."

"She hadda go down and get these here."

"What?" Duff clutched the banister. "Where?"

"To my brudder's."

"And you . . . stayed in the barn while she was gone?"

"Sure," said Mr. Johnson. "I didn't have no pants."

"She brought these back to you?"

"That's right."

"You were marooned in the barn, without your . . ."

"I was nekkid," said Mr. Johnson. "Got a hole in my underwear, too."

"Why didn't you tell me!"

"What do you care!" sand Mr. Johnson, as close as he ever came to astonishment.

"It makes a difference," fumed Duff. "Don't you see?"

"What the hell difference does it make, so long as I got a pair of pants on?"

"What?"

"I say, what's the difference if I gotta hole," shouted Mr. Johnson. "It's spring, ain't it? I'm gointa leave off my underwear in another month!"

Duff stared at him.

The Indian took up the whiskbroom and began to brush the steps, muttering.

Duff went down and sat beside the window in the sitting room and fell into brooding silence.

Alice came tripping in, carrying the portable typewriter. He lifted an eyebrow. "You wait," she said grimly. She began to type.

Isabel came in sidewise, in her diffident manner. "Oh, Mr. Duff," she said, "you are still here? How nice of you to wait." Was this a touch of malice? "Gertrude begs me to ask you for dinner. Will you stay?"

Duff smiled. "I should be very happy to stay," he said. "Thank you. Miss Gertrude has been very kind."

But Isabel looked anxious. "Alice . . . I beg your pardon, my dear. Do I interrupt?" She put her claw on Alice's shoulder, and Alice turned her face, her fingers still. "Alice, dear, has the doctor been here today?"

"Not since this morning."

"Is he coming?"

"I don't know."

"Innes worries me," said Isabel. "He does, really. Don't you think his manner is rather strange?"

"Mr. Whitlock has a nervous temperament," suggested Duff.

"Yes," said Isabel, "yes, he has."

"He thinks the house was entered last night," said Duff. "I wonder . . ."

Isabel said, "Tramps are on the decrease, don't you find? My mother often used to feed them at the kitchen door."

"Indeed?" Duff followed her willingly. "Your mother was both generous and unafraid, then?"

But Isabel was like a bird. You thought you had salt on her tail and she swooped away. "It does harm," she said. "Alice, dear, I think perhaps you are working too hard. The strain . . ."

Gertrude spoke from the arch. "Alice, dear," she echoed, "Innes is asking for you. He says it is time for his medicine. He seems very restless. Poor Innes."

"Oh, gosh," said Alice. The pillbox was in her pocket. "I'll be right up. In just a minute."

"I wonder," said Isabel, "whether we ought to have Dr. Gunderson? Or perhaps a nurse? What do you think, Gertrude?"

"It doesn't seem necessary," said Gertrude coldly.

Maud barged in behind her. "Alice, Innes wants to know what the heck you did with his pills."

"I have them," said Alice. "I'll be right there." She began to type again.

The three sisters stood in the room, oddly indecisive. Their presence irritated Alice.

"He can't have a pill, anyhow," she said over her shoulder. "The doctor changed the interval. It's too soon. I'll tell him."

Gertrude sighed. "Mr. Duff?" she said.

"Yes, Miss Gertrude."

"Shall we see you at dinner?"

"Yes, indeed. Thank you."

"That will be very pleasant," she said graciously, and withdrew, taking for the parlor.

Alice ripped out the sheet of paper, separated the copy, and handed the original to Maud.

Maud grinned. She held it carelessly and trundled off toward the kitchen.

Isabel said, "I think . . ." She hesitated. "Will you excuse me? I have some things to attend to." She swooped away.

Alice and Duff were alone. She handed him the carbon copy of her work.

"He's fixed it," she said, still grim. "You see if he hasn't."

20

AT FIVE O'CLOCK that afternoon, Fred pulled the big car up by the side of a dirt road, in a pleasant spot, where woods grew up a little slope at their right, and the road fell away before them down a hill and bent along the course of a brook. The silence was perfumed with pine and the smell of warm dust. There was no traffic. There was peace.

Alice leaned back on the cushions beside Duff and sighed, "I wish we'd brought a picnic."

Fred squirmed around to face them over the top of the front seat. "We've been gone nearly an hour. Is it all right to stay away so long?"

"He ought to be safe," said Duff cheerfully. "Killeen's there and Susan's there. The will's signed and the will's gone. And Alice is here with the pillbox."

"The pillbox," said Alice, wonderingly.

"We won't start with that," said Duff, "but we'll get to it." He passed cigarettes and stretched out his long legs. "Well, no soap on the telephone call. The telegraph office sent my wire up to Susan by somebody who happened to be going that way. He doesn't know, they don't know, what time it got to her. Late, says they. Susan, the source of our impression that the call was made around eleven, is frank

to say that she is by no means sure. It was raining, she thinks. The rain fell from eleven on. The telephone company doesn't take kindly to looking up their records, which rather leads me to believe that their records aren't so very complete. They say they'll try. But they can't tell me, right now, when that call was made. And you kids, right there in the house, never heard it at all."

"We can't help it," said Alice. "We just didn't."

"Why didn't you, I wonder?"

Fred said, "The only thing I can say is that the phone sounds pretty dim when you're in Innes's room with the door closed. And around eleven o'clock . . . uh . . . we were both in the closet, it so happens."

"That's right, we were," said Alice, very solemnly, because she wanted to smile.

"Another thing," Fred went on. "If the water is running in the bathroom right next to the backstairs there, I guess I couln't hear any bell. Well, it was running about eleven ten."

Alice said, "That was me."

"And then again, I was in there myself about twelve o'clock," said Fred, matter-of-fact.

"Thanks," said Duff. "It's a pleasure to listen to intelligent people. But do you know, I don't think we're going to find out exactly when that phone rang."

"Why does it matter so much?"

"Perhaps it doesn't," said Duff placidly. "After all, if we can't prove it rang at eleven o'clock or nearly, neither can we prove that it didn't. I mean, vice versa, of course."

Alice and Fred looked bewildered.

"So we'll build up what we know, doing without the one little fact it seems we can't have. Settle down, you kids, and breathe the nice fresh air. I'm going to talk for quite a while."

Having made this statement, he said nothing. The air was good. They were far, far away from the Whitlock house, and peace settled cozily around them. Alice relaxed. She was glad that Innes had insisted that Art Killeen stay at the house. It's better, she thought, with just us. Duff was the most peaceful man in the world, and one needn't strain oneself with Fred, of course. She smiled lazily at Fred, who took off his cap and put his feet up.

"If you're sure Innes is O.K.," he murmured.

"Oh, Innes has fixed that," said Alice sleepily.

"I'll be goldarned if I'd have bought them off," said Fred. "He let them get away with it. He appeased them, that's what he did."

"He didn't want to die."

"Nuts," said Fred. "So nobody wants to die." He muttered something under his breath.

"No isolationist, he," said Duff suddenly. He jerked his thumb at Fred, and Alice giggled. Fred ruffled up his hair with his fine hand and grinned sheepishly.

"This is a nasty murder," said Duff, "This murder that hasn't happened yet. Does it strike you that all these attempts have been singularly slipshod? A lamp falls over. It might hit the right victim. It might not. It didn't hit anyone, but it was a very careless business."

"Yeah," said Fred, half-kidding, "the murderess certainly shoulda been more careful."

"The detour sign moved," went on Duff. "What a haphazard device that was! How easy it would have been for a strange car, a car full of innocent, unknown people, to have gone over into that pit and been killed. How uncertain a method it was of getting the right parties."

"Which was us," Fred grimaced. "But I see what you mean."

"It's almost as if the murderer's right hand doesn't know what his left is doing," mused Duff. "Like the veal in the meat loaf. Less crime than carelessness. Criminal carelessness. One could say one hadn't thought. A kind of unconscious murder."

"The dampers turned wasn't so darned unconscious."

"Who can say?" said Duff. "A woman doesn't understand a furnace. Or so she tells herself. She will make it nice and warm for Innes. She will put plenty of coal on. She doesn't understand dampers and drafts. She closes it up, with the very best intentions."

"You mean that? You think it was a mistake?"

"It was no mistake," Duff said, "but a person skilled at deceiving herself could have done the murder and looked the other way."

"What's the bearing?" asked Fred.

"I'm being profound and psychological," said Duff sternly. "Be quiet. Now, we must say to ourselves, why?

What motive? You tell me it must be on account of money. Murder for money. It's not unheard of."

"Seems to me I've heard of it," said Fred, "Yeah."

"Who wants money that bad, and why?"

"Do you have to ask why?" said Alice in a timid voice.

"Money buys," said Duff, "but it buys a lot of different things. Take Gertrude. What does she want to buy?"

"Her clothes are terrible," said Alice.

"Be quiet," said Fred, "or else be profound, like us. She'd buy the status quo, eh, Mr. Duff?"

"Her prestige," said Duff. "Yes, I think so, don't you?"

"She's got to be the Whitlock in the Whitlock house on the hill." Fred nodded.

"But she's got her own money," objected Alice. "She's the one who's got some left."

"The regime was on the verge of a change, however," said Duff quietly. "Innes was balking. He was going to take over. The bank would know. Gertrude would no longer be mistress of her own fortune, in the bank's eyes. Therefore I suppose the town would know. Charity of their brother. The Whitlock girls."

"Oh," said Alice.

"Did Gertrude *like* the idea?"

"She didn't like it," said Alice. "I remember."

"Vanity is her poison," said Duff, in his gentlest voice. "But not hatred. Not revenge."

"No?"

"No, because Gertrude rather likes being blind. Don't gasp. She was an unattractive, a haughty, and a proud young girl, unlikely to marry. Unfitted to marry. Unapproachable. Maybe she knew that. Her excuse, you see, for being a spinster, lies in her blindness. A tragedy all her own, which she loves and cherishes, believe me."

"I *can't* believe . . ."

"However it may have been at the beginning, that's Gertrude now. But she must maintain her picture of herself. Her tragedy must be high class and take place in dignified economic circumstances. She wouldn't enjoy the picture of herself as blind and *poor*."

"No."

"Gertrude deceives herself easily, wouldn't you say so?"

"She swallowed an awful lot of terribly sticky flattery from you," said Alice.

"She lapped it up."

"Yeah, she would," said Fred.

"Yet, Gertrude's idea of keeping up to snuff, so Josephine tells me, is by giving orders. That's the one element in her character . . . Tell me, is it possible? Can you imagine, with any reality, Gertrude Whitlock, in person and not by deputy, knocking over a lamp and then forgetting it, rather? Gertrude wishing her brother dead so that she might keep her own fortune and have another and stay where she is, a tragic and a lovely legend in the town for the rest of her days?"

"Wishing, sure" said Fred.

"Wishing enough to do something about it? To take action?"

"Yes," said Alice, "yes, I suppose so. But . . . she's blind."

"Never mind that for now."

Fred said, "If she did it, she'd do it like you said, half-consciously."

"I thought so myself," said Duff. "Let's look at Maud."

"You look," said Fred. "Maud's my pet aversion." Every once in a while Fred let out a three-syllable word. His college education, thought Alice.

"What would Maud want to buy with money?" Duff demanded.

"Candy," said Alice.

"Peanuts," said Fred.

"That's it. Her little comforts," said Duff. "Maud's sensual and lazy."

"Maud's a pig, and she'd as soon kill anybody as squash a fly," said Fred, "for all she'd worry about it."

"Unmoral," said Duff, "yes. But for all that, Maud has a certain directness about her."

"She'd call a spade a God-damned shovel," said Fred. "Excuse me, Alice."

Alice said, "I know. She's terrible."

"There's another element in our Maud," Duff said, "and that's curiosity. For all her sloppiness and her happy-go-luckiness, as Innes says, and her sloth, she's curious. Also, she's intelligent."

"Who? Maud!"

"Comparatively speaking," said Duff. "Yes, I think so.

Because she doesn't deceive herself. Maud knows she's a slob. She doesn't give a damn, but she knows it."

"If she's intelligent, give me somebody who's dumb enough to take a bath," said Fred in disgust.

"Nevertheless," Duff said, "I don't think Maud fits the psychological pattern, the unconscious murderer."

"Sure she does," Fred insisted. "That's just her sloppiness. It's the same thing, same effect, I mean. Either she's half-fooling herself, or she's just sloppy."

"You may be right," said Duff thoughtfully. "I can be wrong. I can be baffled," he warned them.

"I think she knows more than she lets on," admitted Alice. "Her eyes are so bright, in that fat pasty face. . . ."

"But the trouble it takes," murmured Duff. "Life's too short, you know."

"Damned merry, for Maud, though," said Fred and stopped. "Well, what about Izzy?"

"Isabel," said Duff. "Well, now, what is Isabel? Grasping, eh? She'd buy things. What's more, she'd keep them. She's not only grasping, but I'd say she never lets go."

"That's what Innes said," Alice told him. "Innes says she never takes her losses."

"Yes," said Duff, "that fits in. She's got the *Woman's Home Companion* complete since 1939."

"What's her room like?"

"Her room is a hoard."

"Oh," said Alice, "the sleeves?"

Duff said, "Sleeves come later, but I'll tell you for now that nobody has any stained sleeve or any sleeve that looks as if it had been recently washed, nor has Josephine washed any."

"What does that mean?"

"A bare arm," said Duff. "Speaking of arms, I think we may take it that Isabel is still wearing her original artificial arm, since a new one would surely seem a waste of money to her. At least, she'd hoard the old one, and I found no extra limb lying about among her possessions. Close your mouth, Alice." Alice's jaws closed in a snap, while Duff went serenely on. "Isabel, then, is grasping. Isabel has energy, too. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes, nervous energy," said Alice. "She's awfully nervous. I hate the way she puts her hand on me."

"Can you imagine Isabel setting these traps for her brother's life?"

"Yes," said Alice, "I'm afraid I can. I loathe them all, but if *I* have a pet aversion, it's Isabel."

"Maud," said Fred.

"Isabel," said Alice.

"Yet why not all three," said Duff. "It could be, of course. Suppose one drops the lamp. Suppose another flies down the hill in the dark and tugs at the sawhorse. Suppose the third, seeing her sisters fail, as in a fairy tale, slips into the cellar and makes her rounds of the pipes. There isn't a thing to show that one and only one was guilty. And the motive holds for them all, just as you said, Fred, though I scarcely believed you then."

"Do you mean they have a conspiracy?" said Alice, troubled.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine that."

"Neither can I," said Fred. "They're so kinda separated."

"Disconnected," agreed Alice.

"I can't imagine a conspiracy, either," admitted Duff, "because I truly believe that neither Gertrude nor Isabel would admit to her sisters that she was a murderess. Not even to themselves," he said, "will they admit anything. So how admit a thing like that to anyone else?"

"Maud would, though," said Fred.

"Maud might."

"Well," said Alice, "maybe Maud could have done it all, with Mr. Johnson helping."

Fred's eyes flickered. Duff said, "Please don't bring up Mr. Johnson."

"He moves awful quiet," said Fred disobediently. "Maybe *he* sneaked up the back stairs and pushed the lamp."

"He didn't," groaned Duff. "He didn't move the detour sign either. He's got an alibi for attempts number one and two."

"What?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes. The most perfect alibi. He's only got one pair of pants in all the world and they . . ."

"Were torn!" cried Fred. "Say . . . ! He was hanging around the car, caught his pocket . . ."

"Don't," begged Duff, "mention it."

"All right, but why couldn't he have turned the dampers?" said Alice, bringing them back to their muttons.

"Josephine says not."

"Why not?"

"The back door makes a racket, even if he doesn't. And don't talk to me about the front door. I'll tell you right now that if he did it, I'm licked. Because I do not understand Mr. Johnson."

Fred grinned. "Look," he said, "the trouble with him is, there's nothing to understand. He's practically a blank page. He just says the first thing that comes into his head. He's a simple-minded guy. Not crazy, I don't mean that. But he just barges along from one minute to the next. He doesn't worry, he doesn't even think. He's simple. That's all."

Duff said, "I am too civilized. I have often suspected it."

"Most people are," said Fred generously. "Say, you've got to see that Indian two or three times before you can believe in him."

"Thank you," said Duff humbly. Alice opened her mouth again.

This Fred! she thought.

21

SHADOWS WERE longer across the road. Duff lit another cigarette. "Now, let us deal with the faking business. Are any of them faking? Can we tell? Do we know?"

"Isabel hasn't got a real right hand," said Fred. "We *know* that."

"Yes, we know that."

"About Gertrude," said Alice. "She *must* be blind."

"I see nothing to deny it," said Duff. "She didn't trip on

color. Remember, I miscalled the color of the ash tray? There's nothing in her room to indicate sight. If she can see, she is far more wily and devious and subtle and deliberately malicious than we think."

"Well, I think she probably is wilier than I think she is. I mean . . ." Alice began to flounder.

"Irish bull, Brennan," said Fred. "Get to Maud. Old happy-go-lucky."

"It's possible," said Duff, "that Maud is not deaf, or at least not as deaf as she makes out."

"But for heaven's sake," said Alive, "if she can hear, why go to all that trouble of making people write things down and learning finger talk and all the nuisance! Why would anybody do that? If Maud's so lazy, I should think . . ."

"Wait," said Duff. "Imagine Maud, years ago. Bring up the past. I'm used to it. You try. Remember, one sister is blind. As such, she gets special service, doesn't she? And she is exempt from duty. The other sister has only one arm. Special service again. Exemption from duties. Leaving the third sister, who is whole, in the position of the only one in the lot who might be expected to run errands, attend to small chores, deal with tradespeople, take responsibilities, be the general overseer. There are many small executive duties connected with the running of a house. Interruptions and nuisances. Do you imagine Maud taking kindly to them? On the contrary, I think Maud's laziness perfectly consistent with a gradual fake loss of hearing. Her sisters say, "You go, Maud"—"Maud had better"—"Maud, will you"; but pretty soon, Maud stops hearing these requests, stops being useful. Maud loafs.

"Maud develops a psychological deafness. By not attending, by a deep inner loafing, she really doesn't hear. Or, at the very least, she seems not to hear. But I really don't know how you are going to prove that she doesn't."

"Likewise," said Fred gloomily, "how are you going to prove that she does?"

Duff sighed. "We can go on guessing," he said. "Did you notice anything in her room, Alice?"

"I looked as hard as I could," she said. "There's no alarm on her clock, but then, Maud's not the type to have an alarm clock. I'll bet she doesn't care when she gets up. I must say, she didn't seem to hear you when you were being

mysterious about the telephone call. You were trying to trick her, weren't you?"

"I wonder if I didn't," said Duff.

Alice drew her brows together. "When?"

"When I dropped my voice and got, as you say, mysterious. She stopped chewing."

"But . . ."

"Ever eat Melba toast?"

"Certainly."

"It makes," said Duff, "a terrible racket in your own ears."

"Sure. Like celery, only worse," said Fred. "She stopped chewing, did she? Hm."

"Oh, go on. It could have been just a coincidence," said Alice.

"It could," said Duff. "But she did stop chewing on her Melba toast. If she can hear, then she arranged to be able to hear, when I appeared to be telling secrets. She's curious, you know. If she had gone on eating, I should have thought her truly deaf, or utterly indifferent. Alice is right, of course. It's no proof. Either way," he added wearily.

"So we're still guessing," Alice said.

Duff cleared his throat. "Did you notice a funny paper stuffed into her window, into the crack?"

"Yes."

"Why do you stuff a newspaper into a crack?"

"To stop a draft," said Alice promptly.

"In which case, you stuff it carefully all along the length of the crack, do you not?"

"I guess you do."

"But she didn't."

"No, she didn't."

"Then, do you think of another reason?"

"To stop a rattle," said Fred. "By gum!"

"That," said Duff, "is what occurred to me. A deaf woman?"

"Well, it makes you wonder," said Fred slowly, "doesn't it?"

"That's dreadful," said Alice, "to think of her hearing as well as anybody, and grinning to herself, and making all that fuss."

"I don't suppose there's much to make a fuss about, ordinarily," Duff reminded her. "The excitements of the last two days are rare. Ordinarily, being deaf would be more convenient than not being deaf. Isn't that so?"

"Do *you* think she can hear?"

"I find cause to wonder," Duff said, "that's all. Well, suppose we go over the attempts again. Let me see. The first one, the lamp falling. We had decided that it was not Maud, possibly Gertrude, possibly Isabel."

"We were wrong," said Fred.

"I did wonder how good Gertrude's perception is, in three dimensions," Duff said thoughtfully. "Especially since the bathroom off the lower hall was put there *since* her blindness. Could she know that a man emerging from that door would come, in just so many steps, exactly under the crossing edge of the upstairs hall? Judgment of distance, at least three-dimensional distance, depends so much on sight. Doesn't it strike you as difficult for a blind woman?

"She could hear," said Alice. "Maybe the sound changed. His footsteps would seem louder when he got out from under, into the open hall."

"Perhaps," said Duff. "Still, it would seem that such a change would warn her too late. She would have to touch the lamp just before he emerged."

"That's when it fell," said Fred, "Just before."

"Perhaps I am being too subtle," Duff admitted. "After all, we don't know how accurate the timing was, because you jumped first. Well, we'll say it's possible for Gertrude to have *tried* that. Even though her room is not upstairs and it meant, for her, planning to get up there. Being there, surely, before anyone could know that Innes would go into that bathroom at all."

"I see what you mean," Fred said, "but it couldn't have been *planned* by anybody. It was grabbing the chance. And she might have gone upstairs just for instance."

"Attempt number one, not Maud, possibly Gertrude, possibly Isabel."

"That's wrong. It could have been Maud. *If* she can hear."

"But not if Gertrude is blind."

"Why not?"

"Maud," said Duff, "was probably—and surely, if Gertrude is blind—downstairs at the time, in the parlor, behind the curtains, reading the newspapers."

"How do you know?"

"You couldn't see her face, could you?"

"No. That's what I told you."

"Why not?"

"Because she was holding the newspaper up."

"Was it a tabloid?"

"No."

"Then with how many hands was she holding it up?"

"With two hands," said Fred. "So, of course, it wasn't Isabel. I see."

"But . . ." Alice stopped herself.

"A blind woman, you know," Duff purred, "doesn't read the newspaper."

Alice and Fred looked at each other.

"Yes, but how did you know she was holding the thing spread out?"

"It must have been spread out, to hide her whole face and head. Try to hold a newspaper in one hand when it's spread out."

"One to you," said Fred. "O.K. Even if Gerty can see a little, she wouldn't be reading the newspaper. I give up. So it wasn't Maud." He leaned back, looking gloomy.

"Therefore, let us say in the case of attempt number one, *only Maud couldn't have done it.*"

"Go on," said Fred.

"Attempt number two, the accident to the car, the moving of the detour sign. Not Gertrude, was said."

"But possibly Maud."

"Expecially if she can hear. If she did hear you say which road you'd be taking."

"That's right."

"And possibly Isabel, of course. Then let us say of attempt number two, *only Gertrude couldn't have done it.*"

"Go on," said Alice.

"Attempt number three, the coal gas, the tampering with the furnace. What about that?"

"Not likely Gertrude," said Fred. "She couldn't see the signs on the pipes."

"She knows everything about that house," objected Alice. "She makes a point of it. Besides, all she'd really have to know is which one went to Papa's room, and turn off all the rest."

"I had wondered," Duff said, "whether Maud could have moved as quietly as would have been necessary, if she couldn't hear her own noise. With the storm to help her,

I had concluded that it was possible. But, of course, if she can hear . . ."

"Listen, old Maud could have managed that one. Gertrude's well . . . just a possibility. Barely.

"Barely," said Alice significantly, and looked at Duff.

"But now Isabel," said Duff. "Number three, *only Isabel couldn't have done it.*"

"Why couldn't she?"

"Whoever turned the dampers got a greasy stain on her arm when she reached for the pipe to the kitchen. No stained sleeves. Therefore a bare arm. Isabel can't scrub such a stain off her own left arm, with only her own left hand to do it."

"But Gertrude could have scrubbed it off for her," said Alice triumphantly, "with the witch hazel!"

Duff's eyes twinkled. "How true!" he said. "Gertrude denied it was her arm. Said it was her limb. A limb's a leg, isn't it? Could it possibly be anything else? However, what's to prevent Isabel from putting her hand into her bedroom slipper, shall we say. To a blind sister, her arm was her shin, or limb. Yes, it does look suspicious. especially if Gertrude is really blind. But alas, kids, Maud gives her an alibi.

"Maud says she came upstairs about eleven, when the heat was still pouring out of the registers, and that she did not go down later. At least not through Maud's room. Fred says she didn't go down by the only other route. Isabel has an alibi."

"We believe me," said Fred, "but do we believe Maud?"

"I don't know why we shouldn't," said Duff thoughtfully, "unless we believe in a conspiracy."

"We don't, though."

"What do we believe?" cried Alice. "It seems to me that we're all at sea."

"I know what I think," said Fred, darkly. "So Maud didn't dump over the lamp. I'll grant her that. But she caught on quick. I think Maud scooted down the hill in the dark and moved that sign. And when that didn't work, Maud went down cellar, between, say, eleven thirty and twelve, and monkeyed with those dampers."

"Maybe," said Alice. "But I think Isabel must have dumped the lamp. And I don't agree with you about the

next one. I think Isabel must have been the one who moved the sign down the road. I do think that was Isabel."

They turned eagerly to Duff for his vote. But Duff wasn't voting. He said quietly, "Who was it that tried to poison Innes? Which one was that?"

"Poison!"

Alice said, trembling, "You mean the pillbox. You mean the pills." She took the box out of her pocket and opened it with fumbling hands. "These aren't right!" she said. "They don't look . . . No! They aren't the same!"

"Oh," said Duff lightly, "those are aspirin."

"Aspirin!"

He was smiling. "I did that while we conferred this morning. I have the others here." He took out an aspirin bottle and dumped the round white pills into his hand. "These were in your box. One of them is a trifle larger than the rest. You can hardly tell which, can you? Here it is."

"*One* of them," said Fred, staring.

Alice couldn't stop shaking. "And I was giving them to him! Two every three hours. Then one every six hours. I would have been the murderess!"

"What is it?" said Fred.

"Strychnine, I think."

"But only one pill," Fred said. "They'd have had a long wait, maybe. Why only one, Mr. Duff? Why not half a dozen?"

"It's safer," said Duff. "There would be no others left over in the box to show where it came from, after he was dead. Oh, we should know it came from the pillbox, but not, perhaps, just what kind of dose and, therefore its original source. Poison was indicated, I thought. The flavor of these crimes, the haphazard methods, combined with perfect safety to the one who was arranging these accidents, and perfect indifference to the chance of getting an innocent victim, poison seemed terribly fitting in that pattern. When I thought of poison, I thought of his pills, of course. I took them on a chance. After all, aspirin couldn't hurt him. Well, the poison's there, I think."

"You mean," said Alice, half-hysterically, "one of them has been waiting all this time for him to get the poisoned pill and die? One of them has been checking up, sort of, after

every dose? Oh, Mr. Duff, I'm scared now, if I never was before! It's horrible!"

"Yeah," said Fred, "a good clean revolver shot would be decent compared to this kind of sneaky . . ."

"But not so safe," said Duff quietly.

"But, look," said Fred, "why the coal gas, then? Or were two of them operating at once, for God's sake!"

"There had arisen a time element," said Duff. "The lawyer was coming, and they knew it. At least, Isabel did. Do you suppose she told the others?"

"Yes," said Fred promptly, "if she's guilty she told them to help cover herself. If she isn't guilty, she told them because it's important news."

"He didn't die all day Friday," said Alice, shivering, "so they tried another way, during the night."

Duff was smiling. "It gives us a rather interesting situation," he said, "but let's first see whether we can figure out who put the poison pill in there and where she got it."

"I don't see how," said Alice. "I've been in the room every time they came, I'm sure. And most of the time I've carried the box around with me. And nobody's been in my room at night. . . . I've never slept well enough yet. The only time I did, the doctor was with Innes and so were the pills. Mr. Duff, it's impossible."

Fred said, "Would the girls have a thing like that lying around the house? Something to match the stuff the doctor was prescribing? Seems to me they must have rummaged around some place where they had a choice of poisons. How about the doctor's stuff?"

"We must stop in at Dr. Follett's," Duff said. "The minister interrupted us this morning. I did mean to ask. But, tell me, did the doctor say aloud or write down what drugs he was going to administer?"

"He *did* say. Of course he did. Right after we got Innes to bed," cried Alice. "They were all there, too. In a row, in the hall. Then they went away. Fred, the doctor left his bag in the car while he helped carry Innes up the stairs. And you were sent for it."

"Yeah, and I put it down in the hall. You said you'd take it up. When the doctor sent me to his office."

"Yes, and I didn't take it up right away because I helped Mrs. Innes. I went down for it later. It was down there alone.

And they were around. And . . . Oh, Mr. Duff, that's when I heard the funny little sound! You know. The cough-laugh."

"Ah, yes," Duff said. "When something happens, you hear noises. So we are exactly where we were, if this pill came out of the doctor's bag. They each had the chance."

"But Gertrude," objected Fred, "can hardly read the labels on pillboxes or bottles, can she?"

"She can smell?" suggested Duff.

"But nobody would know how strychnine smelled. Do you? Do I? *Does* it?"

"It doesn't," said Duff, his eyes twinkling. "No, we shall have to say it's beyond Gertrude, like everything else, unless she's a consummate actress with perfect control and a villainess of high degree."

"And Maud . . . ? Heck, it's the same damn thing!" Fred pounded the seat cushion. "If she can't hear, she wouldn't know what the doctor said he was going to give him, so she couldn't go down there and put the wrong pill in the *right* box. But if she can hear, then she could have done it. Isabel could manage, all right. She could open a pillbox with one hand. How about a bottle, though?"

"If her fingers are strong."

"Her fingers are strong," said Alice grimly.

Fred looked despairing."How are we going to stop this, Mr. Duff? How are we going to *know*?"

Duff chuckled. "It looks as if Innes has known how to stop it," he reminded them. "By appeasement. And don't you see? Somebody is going to have to unmurder Innes."

"Unmurder him?"

"Of course."

"What . . . ?"

"Somebody is going to have to make sure he doesn't take the poisoned pill, after all, now that things are different. Now that the advantage lies in keeping Innes alive."

"By golly," said Fred.

Alice began to laugh.

"So if we can't catch the murderer amurdering," said Duff, "we still have a chance to catch her in the act of unmurdering."

"It isn't a crime to unmurder anybody."

"No, but at least we'll know."

"How will we know? Shall Fred and I take turns watching the pillbox?"

"Maybe we can set a trap," said Duff. "We shall now visit the doctor and get ourselves some equipment. We'll have a try. But when we get back to the house we must act dumb. We never suspected poison. We aren't pill-conscious. Try to remember that."

Alice said, with horror in her eyes, "It's a good thing *you* were, though, Mr. Duff. I might have given him the wrong pill any time. It was just luck that I didn't. Can't we catch the one . . . ?"

"Or the two," said Fred.

"Or three," said Alice. "Can't we? It's so damned wicked!"

Duff said gently, "Once we know, perhaps something can be done. To the doctor's, Fred."

"Yes, *sir.*"

Dr. Follett took the biggest pill in his clean fingers. He smelled it and touched it to his tongue. His trembling left hand caught his glasses before they fell.

"My fault," he gasped. "I should never carry such a thing. Never. I never meant to. This is a dispensing pill. It . . . it's deadly. No drugstore in Ogaunee, Mr. Duff, you see? I do a great deal of my own prescription work. People have to go several miles. I . . . I . . . A doctor shouldn't carry a fatal dose, in one pill. I have no excuse."

"How the heck did she know it was deadly?" demanded Fred. "Who knows, offhand, how many grains it takes? For God's sake, did one of them ever study poisons?"

Duff said, with a gleam, "Who knows? Perhaps. Then again, perhaps she only hoped . . . This is a chancey murderess."

Alice took hold of her own hair, in the back, and pulled it, hard. The pain was steadying.

"How do you carry these?"

"In a bottle, sir."

"May I see?"

"Yes . . . yes."

"It's marked, of course?"

"Oh yes, plainly. And it's blue glass, not white. Besides that, the bottle—here it is—is ridged, you see. So that one can't make a mistake in the dark."

"Oh," said Alice. "Oh."

Duff took the bottle and pressed his fingers on the ridges. "The phenobarbital?"

"Another bottle." Duff took the smooth white glass bottle in his other hand and sniffed at the top.

The doctor was badly shaken. "I must have filled the pillbox and never noticed that odd one tumble in with the rest. Mr. Duff . . . I . . . I should have been ruined."

"What a chance *that* was to take," said Fred in awe. "That the bad pill would tumble in."

"It was on top," said Duff. "But she's chancey. Oh, she's chancey."

He looked down at the two bottles in his hands. His long face was grave and sad. "Not easy," he said. Then, "Doctor, I should like to make off with one or two things you can give me, if you will?"

The doctor was willing to do anything at all for Mr. Duff. Anything.

22

THE HAUGHTY face of the Whitlock house was indifferent to their return. Duff twisted the bell, and Josephine came to let them in. Alice walked through the open door first, with Duff behind her, and Fred last. They were all three still in single file, and Josephine still stood with her hand on the doorknob when they heard it.

An odd little sound, a scraping in the throat, the rusty unconscious stirring of a voice, a caw, a crow, of delighted malice, of secret rejoicing.

Alice turned swiftly around and looked up at Duff. Fred stepped closer and gripped Duff's arm. Josephine's round eyes rolled to and fro, with recognition and fear.

Duff read, in their three faces, confirmation that this was the sound. Were they going to catch her? Now? As easily as this?

In a body, the four of them moved opposite the arch. They looked past the velvet drapes into the parlor.

Gertrude sat in there, erect in her chair. Her face was calm, blank, secretive, and her hands were folded in her lap. Maud was there, too, with her heels on the fender. She was scratching among the wild strands of her fantastic coiffure with a big bent wire hairpin. Her fat face brooded. Isabel was also in the parlor, sitting on the edge of a small narrow sofa with her two feet flat on the floor, looking as if she were ready for flight, though she held a book in her lap.

Isabel held her page down with her left hand and looked at them with her quick, close-lipped smile. "Just in time for dinner. Alice, dear, Mr. Killeen is dining upstairs tonight. He is leaving, you know, on the ten o'clock train. Innes will have company, so you must join us and our guest. Won't you?"

Gertrude said, "Of course, Alice, dear. And will you show Mr. Duff where he may wash, my dear?"

"Say, I'm hungry!" boomed Maud. "Where you folks been?"

Alice couldn't say a word. Duff bowed. "I've been taken exploring," he said smoothly. "I'm sorry if we've been long. You must forgive the enthusiasm of a man who has a hobby."

The three of them, still in a body, moved past the arch, while Josephine went by toward the kitchen, almost running. Duff motioned them upstairs.

In the upper hall he called them close. His face was more disturbed than Alice had ever seen it. "That was the sound, of course," he said. "You're sure? It was the very same? No difference?"

"Oh, no," they said, "that was the same."

He let his head drop, as if it would fall off its stem, limp until his chin touched his chest. He stood, bowed and silent, thinking. Alice dared not move. She looked at Fred and caught a little comfort from his eye.

Duff raised his head finally and drew an old envelope and a pencil from his pocket. He began to make quick marks on it. Alice could see them. It looked like algebra. There was

a, b, c, d, and checks and symbols. Duff reviewed his problem. His face relaxed.

"Things equal to the same thing are equal to each other," he said. "So . . ."

"So what?" Alice and Fred spoke together, and he caught her hand so naturally that they stood, hands clasped, like a pair of children, and never knew it.

"Logic," said Duff, "is a wonderful thing, after all. Yes, I know."

"Who?"

"Only one of them," Duff said.

"Which one?"

"There's an 'if.' Two 'ifs.' If this and if that, why, then I know. Not only that our wicked one is only one, but which one. The two sets of facts check, 'if' and 'if.' But the logic's so clear. The 'ifs' are nearly answered. They have to fit. After all, probability's a law, too."

Killeen came out of Innes's door. "Hello."

Duff paid no attention. He put his hands on Alice's shoulders and looked searchingly into her face. "That funny little sound," he said. "Why do we hear it now! What's happened? What thought went through that brain and set it off? Something's happened, if only a thought. If only an idea. Look here, my dear, we forgot something. There's another chance. Suppose she doesn't bother to unmurder Innes? Suppose, instead, she murders *you*?"

"M-me?" said Alice.

"What is this?" said Killeen.

"Murders you first," said Duff. "Do you see? Then, let Innes get his pill. Let that plot proceed. You can't inherit while he's still alive. And you can't inherit once you're dead." He turned. "Mr. Killeen, if Alice dies and then, soon after, Innes dies, not having changed the will you've just drawn, what happens?"

"He'd be intestate, as far as the bulk of his fortune goes," said Killeen, looking white and shocked. "He directed that it be put in trust for Alice, and then for his children."

"But if there were no children?"

"To his kin," said Killeen.

"Not Alice's heirs?"

"No, no. Since she's not, herself, his natural heir. Not yet.

Not until they are married. No, it would go to his mother and sisters."

"Why didn't he set up a trust for them, here and now, to continue whether he lived or died?"

"I wanted him to," said Killeen. "But he was so bent on making it plain and clear that they'd better leave him alive."

"He overreached himself," said Duff. "You see? He should have made his life or death a matter of indifference to them."

"Listen," said Fred to Alice. "You've got to get out of here."

Killeen said, "Alice, take the train with me tonight."

"Yeah, go ahead," said Fred.

"We have to get down to dinner," she said. "We're late. We mustn't let them know what we think. Must we? Mr. Duff, you'll be here. Nothing will happen while you're here. Hadn't we better go down to dinner?"

Duff's face didn't lighten. "It may not be my departure, but Killeen's, she'll wait for. It may occur to her that, with Killeen handy, Innes could draw still another will."

"After I'm dead, you mean," said Alice, with strange calm.

Fred said, "You're not going to be dead. You're going to scram out of here."

"Why take a chance?" Killeen pleaded. "Alice, what's the percentage . . . ?"

"Ssh," she said. "We'll have till ten o'clock, maybe. We . . . we have to think."

Duff said, "Yes. Let's meet after dinner, in Innes's room. I'll go there now. Susan?"

"Still here," said Killeen. "Innes wants her to stay for dinner."

"You mean the trap?" said Fred. "You're going to tell her what to do? Are we going to go ahead with that?"

"May as well." Duff's face was grave and sad. "No harm. But this evil . . . How can we anticipate the works of a brain that words as this one does? Chancey, you know. How can we foresee what wild grab at the passing skirts of mere chance she'll make, and we'll have to guard against? Alice, my dear . . ."

"But you know who it is!" she said.

"Suppose I'm wrong?" said MacDougal Duff.

He went into Innes's room.

Fred said to Alice, steadily, "Nothing's going to happen to you."

She smiled. "Oh, I don't think so either," she said, as if it were she who did the reassuring.

Killeen put his arm around her. "I won't leave unless you do," he said. "Listen, darling, you've got to play it safe. Safe for you."

He looked very stern and noble.

Alice slipped out of his arm, and her voice shook. "I know. Don't worry. My goodness, so nobody wants to die!"

The bathroom door closed on her light and shaky laughter, and they stood outside, Killeen on guard, like a soldier, Fred gnawing his thumb in worried thought.

Dinner was pretty grim. Alice fiddled with her food. She couldn't help thinking of poison. She tried to taste only that which came from a common dish or what all three sisters were eating, and she tasted very little. Her throat was too full to swallow, anyway. She must be frightened, she thought. But the fright was so deep, she knew it scarcely showed. She was able to do her part in the trap setting, as they had planned it, when the moment came.

Duff and Gertrude bore the conversational burden between them, but Duff wasn't sugary with her any more. He was sterner now. He let his views of history be little sermons. Alice wondered which one he was trying to touch and convert. He spoke some of the sifting history did. He said that only long-term virtues stuck to people, after history got through with them. He said patience, and endurance, and selfishness, and all the least flashy and dullest attributes stuck out like rocks after the looser soil had been washed away in the tides of time. He said the good opinion of one's contemporaries was unreliable. He said a truly fine person must disregard it in favor of his own approval or the vague thing called integrity, which was, nevertheless, one of the most solid things in the world. He said that was a fact.

Again he spoke, and said the day of greed was passing. He said it was outworn. It had done its worst. It would have to be over. Because it had wound the world up to a climax and brought forth the ultimate consequences for all

to see. He said greed was in the process of committing suicide.

He said, again, apropos of nothing in particular, that to dodge one's responsibilities was to dodge life itself and die unsatisfied. He said that people's idea of heaven was a state of perfect ease. But, he said, we aren't built to endure that.

The Whitlock girls were polite to him. Except Maud, of course, although even she forbore to interrupt him often with her hoarse irrelevancies. Gertrude listened as one superior being to another. Isabel listened, with her half-abstracted air. They agreed. Oh, yes, they agreed. His preaching struck off their surfaces. It got no deeper.

Alice tried to think ahead. Could she think through this night? Or was her intuition warning her, as it had twice before? Were her antennae cut off? She couldn't tell. She didn't have any subconscious promptings. She had too much fear in full consciousness.

One picture wouldn't seem real, the one about Alice and Art Killeen getting on the train together, riding away, leaving this mess behind them for somebody else to straighten out. Her mind wouldn't paint it or give it color. But that wasn't *sub*conscious. That was just deliberately *un*conscious.

Josephine came down at alast with the message from Susan, the one Susan had been told to send, the one that was part of their trap. Their silly little trap.

Said Josephine, "Miz Innes says she wants to know where are Mr. Innes's pills, Miss Brennan. It's time for him to have one."

"No, it isn't," said Alice, glancing coolly at her watch. She was sustained by the plan. This she knew how to do. "I gave him one when I came in. He can't have one now."

"But . . ." Josephine hesitated.

"I left them on the mantel," said Alice, loud with impatience. Then she leaned over to Maud and smilingly, with gestures, borrowed that one's pad and pencil.

On the page she wrote, forming her letters clear and large, "In the blue box. But don't give him one now." Maud was beside her. Alice felt her glance, as if her fingertips could feel it. She handed the slip of paper around the table. It went through Gertrude's hands to Duff, who took care to hand it to Isabel. Isabel gave it to the servant, with one of her abrupt

twists of the body by which she seemed to compensate for her onesidedness.

That was done.

Now. She who could hear, but not see, would think the pills were on the mantel. And there was a white box of pills on the mantel up there, easily found by questing fingers. She who could see, but not hear, would believe the pills were in a blue box. There was a blue box, a pillbox, conspicuous on the table beside Innes's bed. She who could both see and hear would look for a blue box on the mantel, and inside a blue china box, thereon, was a third pillbox. None of the pills in any of these boxes were dangerous. But they were different.

Very tricky, thought Alice. But perhaps it was too late for tricks. Her fork clattered on the dessert plate. She took hold of her nerves and commanded her fingers to be steadier.

When dinner came to an end at last, Mr. Duff excused himself. He said he would go up to talk to Innes for a little while, and then he really must go home to bed. Alice said she would go upstairs, too.

So far, nothing. So far, so good.

23

FRED WAS lurking in the upper hall and followed them into Innes's room, where the defenders gathered around his bed. Innes, all smiles, happily unconscious of their new forebodings, was just saying an affectionate good night to his mother.

She went beaming away, and they let her go.

"Sit down. Sit down," said Innes. "You know, my mother has been scolding me. Really. She complains that I'm doing

so much for the girls and nothing at all for her. So I've promised." He smiled tenderly. "Of course, it isn't that she needs it. Father left her very well off. It's just that she's jealous," he said.

Duff's eyes looked alive and a little sly with amusement. "It's a very human failing," he suggested.

"Of course it is," said Innes, all wise and magnanimous. "Only natural. Mother's getting old, you know. She needs me. Well . . . how did it go at dinner? You set the trap did you?"

"Mr. Whitlock"—Duff disposed his long bones in a chair, sorrowfully—"we smell danger. I'm sorry to have to point out that, unintentionally, of course, you have put Alice in a doubtful position."

As Duff talked, Innes began to disintegrate. His terror came back, all the worse for having been temporarily forgotten, and crept over him, drained his happy mood away, reduced him to a cowering, sweaty, pale, plump, middle-aged man in fear of his life.

"Yes, I see. Yes, I see." He touched his dry lips with his tongue. "Alice, dear, you must get away. If you go and they can't get at you, then I'm safe." Even in his state, he caught the ungallantry. "We're both safe," he amended. "That's so, isn't it, Mr. Duff? Alice, dear, you will have to go."

"And then what?" said Alice.

"What do you mean, dear? Then they won't . . . Mr. Duff, explain it to her."

But Duff said, "What were you going to say, Alice?"

"I only want to know what happens to our plans if I go away."

"Our plans, such as they are, proceed," said Duff. "At least we can see who is interested in which pillbox. For she will have to unmurder Innes, surely, once you've gone."

"I don't think much of that," said Alice.

"It's feeble," Duff agreed quickly. "But it may help."

"Here we are," she said, "three of you able-bodied men, and Innes, who's perfectly well able to yell, at least, and me, who am able-bodied and young and more or less bright. Do you mean to say that all of us are so scared of one handicapped old woman that we have to scatter and run?"

"Listen, don't be dumb," said Fred. "You . . ."

"I'm not dumb," said Alice hotly. "But what on earth's the use of fooling around with halfway measures? If you really want to play safe, Innes, why don't you make a big fuss? You can afford it. Get people in here, rouse the town, get the police. Or hire an ambulance and go somewhere else. Or hire a special train, for heaven's sake, and let's *all* run away!"

"Yeah, but we don't want to do that," said Fred. "Then we'd never know."

Alice ignored him. "Why don't you do that, Innes?"

"I . . . I . . ."

"You don't want to, do you?" she purred sweetly. "I know. Suppose we all run away and say we're safe, and she gets to thinking about murder . . . suppose she picks out one of her sisters . . . suppose she kills your mother, Innes . . . or Josephine? Goodness knows, she must be partly crazy. You can't just ignore this sort of thing and go away and say, 'I'm safe so what's the difference?' You couldn't do that, Innes, I know."

"No," he said, licking his lips nervously, "no, I . . ."

"Well, then," said Alice, "if we want to stop it and settle the whole thing . . ."

Killeen said, "You're swell, Alice! You're perfectly swell! but, don't you see, if it were anyone but you. . . . We can't let you be bait for this trap."

"Why not? I make pretty good bait, don't I?"

"Nuts, Brennan," said Fred softly.

"No . . . no . . ." said Innes. "The risk, my dear. The risk for you!"

Alice felt a wave of shame. She said, with sudden honesty, "I don't mean . . . Listen, I'm not so awful brave as all that. I only . . . I don't want to run away." Tears stung behind her lids.

Fred said, "We got the idea. Now you can run along. You'd better."

"Darling, it isn't safe . . ."

Alice was furious. "So who wants to be all the time safe!" she cried at them all. "I won't go. No, I won't. Not unless Innes goes, and I mean that."

Killeen said, "Very well. I won't go unless you do, and I mean that, too."

Duff said, "Fire, fire, burn stick, stick won't beat dog . . ."

Innes was all atremble. "But what shall we do? How . . . what's the best . . . ?"

"What can you do?" said Fred in disgust. "The lady wants to be a hero."

"I do not," snapped Alice. "I haven't the slightest intention . . . I only th-thought . . ." She was shocked to find the tears escaped and rolling down her face.

Duff said calmly, "We must do the best we can."

They all turned. "We are in your hands, after all," said Killeen, 'Lay on, Mac Duff, and damned be he who first cries . . .' "

MacDougal Duff looked pained. "The cross I bear," he said. "Yes, of course." His lids fell, hiding the eyes. "Let Killeen appear to leave. He can come back secretly. Let us rearrange ourselves, to be as safe as possible. Alice, my dear, we shall hide you somewhere. Mr. Whitlock must have a substitute, with sound ribs. Let us then lie low and wait and see." He looked very sad and tired. "Our best may not be good enough."

"Thank you," said Alice.

She went out of the room blindly, but Killeen was after her. "You mustn't be alone," he whispered. "Where are you going?"

"To get my handkerchief."

"Darling"—he put his arm lightly around her—"why don't you take the train with me?"

"I don't want to. I don't know."

His arm fell away, a little stiffly. "You're in love with Innes."

"Don't be silly."

Alice wept quietly before her mirror and then tidied her face, wondering what she was crying about. Nerves, she thought. When she came out into the hall, determined to be composed, she found Fred on guard beside her door. She looked at him hostilely.

"I wish you'd change your mind," he said mildly. "No kidding. It's dangerous."

"Why don't *you* leave," said Alice fiercely, "if you don't like it here?"

"Uh uh," he said. "I'm going to get into that bed and see if we can't fool them some. We're going to sneak Innes into my room. You and Killeen will stay with him."

"It's dangerous," she said.

He snatched at her wrist. "I think you're crazy! What do you want to stick around and risk your life for? Listen, for the love of Mike, will you get some sense and scram out of here?"

"No."

"Why not!"

"The same to you."

"It isn't the same to me. For God's sake, stop saying that."

"I suppose if the ceiling falls down on Innes's bed and you're in it, that's not dangerous? What do you want to risk your life for?"

"It's my life, and I happen to have been born stubborn. This is a rotten house, and the people are rotten, and I don't like them, and I want to see them put away where they belong, and it's no business of yours."

"My hero," said Alice.

"Shut up. What the hell's the matter with you? I can't leave him now."

"All right. I can't leave him either. Fred, it's a reflex. You said so yourself."

"Damn it. Listen, the only reason I give a damn . . . It's my fault you're here. I faked that breakdown with the car. I thought . . ."

"Oh, you did. What did you think?"

"I thought I'd help you out."

"Oh, you did?"

"Yeah, sure. Thought if he hadda drag you in to meet his family it'd put you on the right basis. You wanted to marry him, then, remember? I didn't know you'd hooked him already."

"Never mind," she said. "Just the same, how can I run away? This is bad and rotten."

"Go *on*," he said.

"You said so yourself. You *know* we have to see it through. And we have to help Mr. Duff, and we have to take the risk! Because we can't help it, either of us. Murder just happens to be against our principles."

"Principles!"

"We didn't think we had any," she said. "Isn't it funny?"

"It's a scream." Fred regarded her with level eyes, remote, speculative. "Why won't you go on that train with Killeen?"

Then, with anger breaking through, "You're in love with him, aren't you?"

Alice nipped around on her heel and started down the hall. He ran after her and turned her around. "You're bound and determined to risk your life in this madhouse?" He was watching her face. What he said lacked steam."

Alice raised her eyes, round and innocent. "Why, you will protect me, Fred," she said demurely.

"How do you know!" He was furious.

"I don't know how I know, but I do know," said Alice childishly.

"I sure as hell will," he said through his teeth. "I'll protect you, never fear." He put his hand on her shoulder and spun her around. "And if you don't spend the most uncomfortable night you ever spent in your life . . . Go on, get in there."

Alice let him shove her back into Innes's room. Why, she wondered for a fleeting second, does it make me happy when Fred gets angry?

Killeen came swiftly to her. "I've got to go in a minute. Alice, I'm coming back, you know. Don't be too frightened."

"I'm not afraid at all," she said, and saw Fred's scowl and felt delighted.

"I've been thinking, Mr. Duff." Alice looked at him sharply. He was so grave and quietly concerned and the well-bred servant, suddenly. "Miss Brennan will have to be in here with me. You see, I'm supposed to be Mr. Whitlock, and they ought to seem to be together. You know, because the whole point is to kill them off in succession, isn't it? She can get in there behind that headboard. She's skinny."

"Thanks," said Alice. "Don't you mean slender?"

"Then I can be sure she's not roaming around some place," Fred went on serenely. "She might get some crazy idea. Of course, It'll be more or less uncomfortable . . But don't you get my point, sir?"

"I do," said Duff, veiling his eyes and pulling his long upper lip down. "I see your point, I think."

Killeen looked about to protest. Innes looked startled. But Duff took charge.

"Mr. Killeen, you must leave this house now. Your train is nearly due. I shall leave at the same time. These arrange-

ments stand. Be very careful and very quiet about shifting around up here."

"Yes, sir," said Fred.

"Alice, is there a key in your door?"

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Lock it, then. Better if they can't discover too easily that you're not there."

"I see."

"Mr. Killeen will return by this window as soon as this room dims to a night light."

"Yes, sir."

"Mind the pillboxes. If they come in here. Watch. You know, they may decide to give it up and remove that dangerous pill and unmurder him, after all."

"I know. Sure."

"Keep an eye on Alice, always. Stay in here until Mr. Whitlock's normal bedtime."

"Yes, sir."

"*Then* dim these lights."

"What about me?" said Innes. "What about me? How can I get . . . ?"

"Oh, we'll carry you, sir. It'll be easy."

"Where will you be, Mr. Duff?" asked Innes. "Don't leave us. I . . . I'm very nervous."

"I shall be lying in ambush," said Duff, "with an eye on the noble red man. Of course, you realize that nothing at all may happen." Their faces looked grave and a little disappointed. "But if it does," he said, "it'll be something you don't expect, so expect that."

He put his hand on Fred's shoulder for a minute, smiled at Alice, and went away, taking Killeen with him.

After that, for an hour, Innes took out his nervousness in half-whispered chatter, while Alice said "yes," "no," and "of course not."

Nobody came to bid him good night.

The house was quiet. In time it became evident that the Whitlock girls had gone to bed.

Fred dimmed the light at eleven o'clock.

Nobody, so far, had bothered to unmurder Innes.

24

ALICE WAS sitting on a pillow on the floor. She had to keep her shoulders parallel to the wall and her legs stretched pretty tight, that it would be more than the work of a moment to get out of there. In fact, she was a prisoner. She thought: I might better be in a straight jacket. But she was hidden. That was her advantage. That and Fred.

After Killeen had come silently up a ladder, after Innes had been borne stealthily through the hall while Alice kept guard at the top of the stairs. Fred had herded her into this big silent room with its elephantine furniture and its ridiculous dignity. "Well, let me get into my nightcap," he'd said, and peeled off his coat and shirt and put on the top of Innes's pajamas. Alice helpfully stuffed his own things behind a cushion.

"Get your slender frame in there," he'd commanded, "and let me see how it works."

Obediently, she had tucked herself between the bed and the wall, under the giant curve of the towering headboard.

"Do I show?"

"Nope," he said. "I didn't think you would. Well . . ." he sounded a little contrite.

"Oh, get in," said Alice, wildly exhilarated. She'd wanted to scream with laughter. The bed springs creaked.

"Stick your hand around here." He'd fastened on her wrist. "I hope you get a stiff neck."

"Don't worry. I will," she'd said without rancor. "Better not talk."

He hadn't talked, after that.

She tried to relax and make herself better able to bear the awkward position in which she would have to remain for no one knew how long. She was able to draw her legs up a little, bending them slightly at the knee. Her wrist

was going to ache from stretching around the corner of the headboard. But she wouldn't withdraw it. Not yet.

She could see along the wall, not much, not a very large portion of the room. One window. Not the door. There was the night light burning on the table at the other side of the bed, so it wasn't dark. Dust rose in her nostrils. Don't sneeze, she thought. What if a mouse . . . Well, I must be brave, that's all.

Fred was lying very quietly. Alice thought: I'm safe, and if I'm safe he's safe. I wonder how Innes is bearing up? Art Killeen had given her a queer, intense look before he'd closed the lumber-room door. "If you call, I'll come running," he'd said. Jealousy, thought Alice, is a very human failing. She began to feel a little drowsy. Her right arm was getting numb.

The light went out.

Fred exclaimed under his breath and let go her wrist. She heard him click the switch and lean over the other side of the bed to examine the cord and the plug that went into the baseboard.

"What the hell?" she heard him whisper.

Their hands groped for each other. She could see nothing at all, now. The darkness was like a wall in front of her nose. The country darkness. No street light, no electric signs, outside, to send a glow or to outline the window frames. It was pitch dark. The darkness was so thick it seemed to have body and press down.

Alice felt her ears growing in the dark. They seemed to strain to stand out from her head. Her hand, in Fred's hand, was getting a little slippery, a little clammy, when they heard a distant whisper and creak of feet. On the stairs?

The door next, she thought. It's going to happen. But the door wasn't next.

Instead, there was a stealthy scraping, a bump or two. Someone was moving something, just outside, in the hall. A metallic sound. Then a hollow thump, like a soft tap on a muffled drum. Was the metallic sound a key turning? Were they locked in? Alice's fingers twitched and grabbed. And Fred's responded.

Soft whisper of feet on the carpet outside. But going away! Gone!

Fred moved with infinite care. His breath was in her face,

as he leaned around the headboard. "Gone," he whispered. The word was so slight a sound that it was like telepathy.

"Are . . . we . . . locked . . . in?" She breathed the question back.

He didn't know. The darkness and the silence answered her question as if he had shrugged his shoulders and she had felt the air disturbed and read the meaning.

"Shall . . . I . . . go . . . see?"

Her hand clutched at his, saying, don't go. "Wait." Lonesome, far away, for all it was her own breath, the word raised tiny echoes in the dust.

His hand said he would stay.

They waited. Alice thought, were they going to set the house on fire? Or would it be coal gas again? Innes couldn't smell. Couldn't smell smoke? She wondered. Her own nose felt keen and sharp as if her breath drew in and examined every least odor and searched the very air for danger. She thought: But Mr. Duff knows who it is. How does he know? How can he know? She, herself, couldn't separate them any more. The menace was "they." All three. Half-crazy, she thought, warped and out of the world and full of evil. Prowling the house, for all she knew. Gertrude walking in the dark. Maud's reckless grin. Isabel, nerve driven, creeping in the dark.

When at last they heard the footsteps coming, it was a relief. But not for long.

Now, the door *was* next. It wasn't locked at all. It was being gently opened. Fred, who could have seen the door, had there been light, could see nothing. It didn't even make a patch in the darkness. But a faint movement of air came through. It was open, and there was somebody there.

Somebody whispered, "Innes?"

There is no voice in a whisper. All whispers are gray in the dark, like cats, thought Alice.

Fred was directing his own breathing, making it slow as if he slept. Alice tried not to breathe at all. She found it easy. There seemed to be no breathable air, anyhow. How could they watch the pillboxes in the dark? she thought in dismay.

The steps crossed toward the bed. Alice felt Fred's fingers loosen. He would be bracing himself. The difference between Fred, awake and strong, and the man this silent creature thought was there, asleep and weak with broken bones

bound up and drugs in his brain—that was the difference that would save them. If she . . . If she . . .

What?

Fred felt a hand groping over his covered body. It found his arm and moved gently down to his wrist. Cold fingers pressed there. He couldn't control his heartbeats. But they were less fast than strong. He devoted himself to slow breathing. Maybe that would make the heart behave.

The fingers let him go. Air swirled in the wake of the figure as it moved away. Was this all? Was this all?

They heard a breath sharply drawn.

Then the silence exploded into a thousand pieces. She called out. Lifted up her voice and called into the dark and waiting house. Called, and shivers crawled on the skin at the alarm in it. The warning, the terror of the cry.

"Alice," she called. "Alice." And again . . . "Alice."

Fred's fingernails dug into the flesh of Alice's hand, and the pain was good. She kept quiet.

For the call was going down the silent hall, around the corner, like a hound hunting. It went down the hall to Alice's door.

"Alice."

Would Alice come? She, herself, stiff behind the bed, so close, seemed to lose her identity. Surely there was an Alice somewhere else to hear that calling. And to answer. It must be answered. It couldn't be denied.

"Alice." It grew a little sharper, that desperate cry. "Alice."

They heard a door, the faint click of the knob turning, the rustle of its opening. Half-fainting, Alice seemed to see her own ghost. Someone was opening the door of the room where she ought to be. Someone was coming to answer. Alice was coming. Alice. It must be Alice. But Alice was here. No, Alice was in the hall. One could hear her feet. Reluctant, those feet. Groping, naturally, in the thick darkness. Cautious feet. But coming, answering.

Alice would come, if one called her in the night like that. Of course she would.

The voice called no more. But the footsteps . . . *Not* Alice. Art Killeen. The world tumbled back to another balance as Alice wrenched herself around to a reasonable belief. He'd come, she told herself. He'd come, no matter what, for that name, that wailing Alice!

There! Did the door click? This door?

A door opened. The feet. . . . Alice's feet? No, no, Killeen's . . . the feet took a step in the dark.

It screamed. Alice's ghost, whatever it was. A strangling scream as if the throat closed with terror. Screamed, and the scream died away as if in the wind. Died away and was gone, and was out of the house. There was a terrible sound. Not very loud, but hideous, like the pulpy squash of a fly. Mingled with it, they thought they heard the little triumphant croak of evil victory.

Now the voice said, "Innes? Innes?" Urgently, anxiously, aloud, with a nervous whine.

Out in the hall another voice said, "What's the matter? What's the matter?"

"Gertrude? Is that you, Gertrude?"

"Isabel?"

Calling to each other, the two sisters. Isabel in here, Gertrude out there. Which of them had made that little horrible well-remembered sound?

Alice's heart gave a great bound and returned to its work with a swift pounding. She felt her face get hot. Fred's fingers moved on her hand.

Oh, God, someone was coming in the window! The sash was thrown up, violently, not stealthily at all. They braced themselves again. But Duff's voice came through the dark with quiet authority.

"Stay exactly where you are, everybody."

Isabel said, rapidly, as if her jaw was oscillating out of her control. "Oh, Mr. Duff, is it you? Mr. Duff, what's happened? The lights. Innes. Something's wrong, I think. I think . . ."

"Be quiet," said Duff.

Footsteps in the hall again. But this was Gertrude. This was her firm tread, her unhesitating feet. From the top of the stairs, turning to the left, coming toward the door of Papa's room.

They stopped. It seemed very abrupt. It seemed like an exclamation of surprise.

"Isabel," Gertrude's voice was aggrieved. "The chest of drawers has been moved. Isabel, Isabel . . ." They heard the woman's breath drawn. "The old porch door . . ."

"Miss Whitlock," said Duff curtly, "come along to this room, please."

Gertrude's feet came on. She stopped accurately where the door was. They could tell by the heightened sound. She stepped in.

Duff had moved near the bed, where Fred maintained his silence. "My flashlight has failed. I'm afraid Mr. Whitlock, here, has fainted . . ."

Gertrude was quivering. Even in the dark silence, they could tell. "Where is Innes?" she said. Her voice went higher, like a frightened child's." "Where is he?"

It became immediately plain where Innes was. A door burst open down the hall. They could hear his sobbing, his hysteria.

Duff said, "Perhaps some sedative. If I could make this light . . ."

Gertrude went across the room. "On the mantel," she said. They couldn't see her but they could hear her fingers as they went along the wood. "Mr. Duff . . ." she said as if she held something out to him.

"Wait a minute. I think . . . yes . . ." His flashlight sprang on. The beam leaped to Gertrude, as she stood beside the mantel with a while pillbox in her hand.

Isabel was stock still, her lips drawn back from her teeth in a kind of grisly surprise. She wheeled about, with her jerky manner. "Not those," she said. Her claw took the cover off the blue china box.

Duff took the box from Isabel.

Then Mr. Johnson was standing in the door. Duff sent the light glancing across the dark face. It was calm. "Innes wants you."

"Not now. Give him one or two of these, if you can." The light danced as Duff shook two pills out into his dirty hand.

Gertrude's tall body wavered as if she weren't quite steady on her feet. "I don't understand. Mr. Duff?" she said. Her voice began to trail as if she were losing at least a part of her consciousness. Her thumb moved on the pillbox in her hand. "What pills are these? Mr. Duff, is she dead?"

"Oh, yes," he said.

Mr. Johnson spoke. "Broken neck," he said, neither question nor answer. He moved out of the light, silently.

"My fault," said Isabel. Her face looked hollowed in the light coming from below. Her eyes seemed wild with sorrow.

"My fault, because I called her. I called her name. The lights . . . Innes . . . I thought something was wrong. Poor girl. Poor Alice."

Gertrude said, "Is there light? Mr. Duff, can you see?"

"I can see," he said.

"Then why don't you see . . ." Gertrude put out her hand gropingly, for the first time. "I am blind," she said weakly. "Who is in this room? Who is here?"

The Indian had gone to his master.

Duff said, "I am here, Miss Whitlock, and your sister Isabel, and . . ."

"And Fred," said Isabel rather tartly.

"Is there a chair?" said Gertrude piteously.

Fred let go of Alice's hand and sat up in bed as if he had been released. "What happened?" he demanded.

Duff's voice was dreaily cadenced. "I suppose she started down the hall in the dark. She came to the chest of drawers that always stood just before you reached this door. So she opened the door that was next to the chest of drawers and it led out to nowhere."

"Why wasn't it locked!"

"Because this is murder."

"That's impossible," said Gertrude. "I'm . . ."

"No, it isn't impossible. As a matter of fact, Miss Isabel arranged it."

Isabel had her lip caught in her teeth. Her queer eyes looked aslant.

"You killed her, Miss Isabel, just as much as if you'd shot her, you know. That's murder. The law will say so. Premeditated. Deliberate. Planned."

Isabel shook her head.

"You tried three times to kill your brother Innes. And failed. Then you tried to kill Alice Brennan."

She shook her head.

"After that," said Duff, "you tried a fourth time to kill your brother Innes. But he's safe."

He took the aspirin bottle from his pocket and shook it, lightly. "The poisoned pill's in here," he said. He put the bottle down on the bedside table.

Gertrude said, with a ghostly indignation, forceless, perfunctory, "Mr. Duff, you realize you are speaking of my sister?"

"Yes," said Duff, "to your sister, who is a murderess, Miss Whitlock. Because you are blind and Maud could hear. Therefore, I know. Understand, Miss Isabel? I am sure. Your sister Maud could hear. She heard and she was curious, and so she died."

Isabel said, "Maud! Maud!"

"Alice," said Duff quietly.

Alice found her voice a little one, weak, in the back of her throat. "I'm here," she said, sounding meek and childish. "I'm still here."

Isabel's one hand clutched the footboard, and she leaned on that arm.

"It really doesn't matter," Duff's voice went on, dreamy again. "No, it really doesn't matter that you got the wrong person. You killed her. You moved the chest and you put out the lights. Coming along the hall in the dark, one would grope for the door one knew came just beyond that chest. This door. But it wasn't this door. Oh yes, you are guilty.

"Why, Miss Isabel? Why did you do it? Because you couldn't let go? You thought you were going to get a quarter of a million, roughly. And you couldn't let it go. Not for enough to keep you in comfort for the rest of your life. Not for anything less. You never took your losses, did you? And your gains are no good, either. Because nothing is ever enough. There must be more and more, until you lose everything. Strange you couldn't see how inevitably you'd lose it all."

Isabel said, "I never meant anything. I never meant anything at all. I . . . Somebody else must have moved the chest . . ."

"No," said Duff.

"But I . . ."

"You had the key to the old porch door. You had a thousand keys."

"But I . . ."

"You kept things," said Duff.

"I only called Alice because I . . ."

"No," said Duff.

"I was worried about Innes."

"To be sure, you had to know that he hadn't got the poisoned pill yet."

"She felt my pulse," said Fred.

"Yes," said Duff. "You see?"

"But I . . ."

Alice, on the edge of the bed with Fred's arm around her, saw the queer eyes lick out, this way and that, for an opening. Saw her find it.

Gertrude was as white as death in her chair, and her sightless eyes were closed. She moaned. The sound called Duff. The light went with him, brightening that corner and letting shadow fall on the rest.

Isabel picked up the aspirin bottle.

Fred jumped, but Alice's dead weight followed him and entangled him.

The ghastliest sight she ever saw, thought Alice, was Isabel, in the half-dark, shaking the aspirin bottle into her open mouth with her only hand.

Fred said, "Well, she got it. It was poison, all right."

Duff looked down.

"What is justice?" he said, "I don't know, do you? Perhaps they'd call her mad."

"I guess this is justice," Fred said grimly, "or a facsimile of same."

Art Killeen came charging in. "Alice. Alice, I thought . . . I thought . . ."

"Did you think it was me?" she said without much emotion. "How funny! I thought it was you." He looked at her and shook his head, puzzled, without comprehension. "No percentage," said Alice.

"Look out," cried Fred. "Put her head down."

When Alice, lying on the bed, heard a woman scream, she felt scarcely able to take an interest. She turned her head, idly. Women were always screaming, and this was only Susan Innes, shocked, in the door.

"I saw the lights . . . I had come . . . Oh, Mr. Duff, what happened?"

But Gertrude answered. The straw-colored woman, brittle and shining and weak, like straw. Her voice was clear, and the bell tones were sad. She held herself stiffly, and the syllables tinkled mourning. "Poor Maud," she said, "Poor, poor Isabel. Oh, Susan, there has been a dreadful tragedy. Isabel moved the chest in the hall. And poor Maud was deceived in the dark. Maud fell out the old porch door. She's

dead. And Isabel"—Gertrude's face was frozen—"Isabel, in her remorse . . ." the voice was cool . . . "over the accident . . ." said Gertrude.

"Oh, my dear!"

"Yes. I shall be alone," said Gertrude. "Well, I shall never be a burden." She stood up and moved in her uncanny way. She went out the door and down the hall. She paused at the open outer door, the one that led to nothing.

But she went on. The feet found the stairs easily in the dark.

"So that's *her* version," muttered Fred.

"Forever," said Duff sadly.

Killeen was stroking Alice's hair. "Be quiet. Just rest."

"Where's everybody?"

"You're in your own room. They're . . . attending to things. Darling . . ."

"I wish you'd get over that," said Alice crossly. "Where's Mr. Duff? Where's Fred?" It was as if she'd said, "Where are my friends?"

Innes was calling, somewhere.

"Hadn't you better trot?" said Alice. "Don't you hear him calling you?"

He said, "Good-by, darling."

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"BUT SHE *is* blind," Fred said, later, "physically blind, I mean?"

It was nearly morning. The doctor was in the house. He had looked at the dead and comforted the living. He was with Gertrude now. Duff and Fred had come to Alice's room. They were all three sitting in a row on the bed.

"Yes, I'm sure of it," Duff said. "She knew you in the dark, Fred. When Isabel didn't. How do the blind recognize people? They do, you know. With all their other senses. Somehow, and we who can see are never sure quite how, they can tell one of us from another. The dark was no barrier to her. She knew you. And she knew Alice was there, too."

"She passed the pillbox test," said Alice.

"Yes. She did."

"But Maud was a fraud," Fred grinned. "Hey, that's a rhyme. Must I speak of the dead nothing but good?"

"Not these dead," said Alice grimly. "Go on. Maud was a fraud. But how did that prove it was Isabel?"

Duff drew his algebra problem out of his pocket. "A stands for attempt, b for blind, c for crippled, d for deaf. And things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Therefore, when three of you identified the same sound as the sound you'd each heard separately, it *was* the same sound, all along."

"And that told you Isabel did everything?"

"Say it confirmed me in my suspicion," said Duff. "Isabel fitted. Yes, it told me I was right. It checked. *If* Maud could hear, and *if* Gertrude was blind, then Isabel was the active murderess. Because if Gertrude was really blind she could have been fooled by the witch hazel and a bedroom slipper. And that's how the stain came off Isabel's arm. And if Maud could hear, why, she rested her alibi for Isabel on what she heard, of course. She really thought Isabel had gone through her room at about eleven. Why? Not necessarily because she had noticed the clock. Maud was never time-conscious."

"Just mealtimes," said Fred.

"But I had said to Alice that Susan put the time of her call at eleven. Maud heard me, do you see? And Maud heard the phone. Or, if she didn't, still she heard us *say* that Isabel had come upstairs immediately after the phone call, the phone call was at eleven . . . She rested her evidence on hearsay."

"When do you think the telephone really rang?"

"Close to twelve," said Duff. "When Fred was in the bathroom. Isabel had been downstairs the whole time. In the cellar at work, perhaps soon after eleven thirty. She answered the phone. She got Gertrude to wash her arm. She came upstairs, triumphant. She went through Maud's room

to avoid Fred. Maud would never notice the time, thought she. Anyhow, what did the time matter? Isabel didn't know that Alice knew or noticed heat still coming up at eleven fifteen. Isabel wasn't so very clever. After all, she never got her victim, though she tried four times. She never got her prize. She murdered the wrong person. And she had to die her way out of it."

"But I still . . . What does this mean?" Alice picked up the piece of paper.

"It told me that Isabel had made the first two attempts. Without doubt. It convinced me that she had also made the third. Therefore, it prepared me to believe that, whatever might be done tonight, Isabel would do it. And I was frightened for you, Alice. Because she, alone, of the three would rather kill you and Innes both than give up the fortune she had begun to think of as hers. Gertrude had enough with the allowance. She would have her particular brand of prestige, the thing she'd buy. Maud, too, had what she wanted. You can buy only so much candy, so many peanuts. The love of things, you see, is the root. Isabel loved things, just to possess them, and there are never enough things, as I told her." Duff fell silent.

"But how did it tell you?" insisted Alice.

"Look. Attempt number one. The falling lamp. Not Maud. That we knew. Maud was in the parlor whether she was deaf or not. Fortunately, we had that double check on Maud for attempt number one. Now, suppose Gertrude dropped the lamp and made the little sound. Then, when we come to number two, we see that it must also have been Gertrude, and it wasn't. Why must Gertrude have done both, if she did the first? Because Maud and Isabel both had something wrong with their voices. No range. No control. No flexibility. Neither could have imitated that sound. Either of them could have made it, understand, but not copied it from hearing Gertrude make it. So, if Gertrude dropped the lamp she also did everything else. But she couldn't have gone down the road and moved the detour sign. That leaves Isabel. Number one. Isabel. Clear?"

"O.K. Go ahead."

"Attempt number two, the sign moved. The car cracked up. Not Gertrude but—see, children—not Maud either. Because Maud didn't do number one, and therefore would have had

to imitate Isabel. And she couldn't. Therefore, attempt number two was made by Isabel."

"Just what I said," said Alice.

"Go on," said Fred.

"Attempt number X. The poisoned pill. Same as number two."

"Is it?"

"Exactly."

"But Gertrude could have felt those ridges on the blue bottle," said Alice.

"How could she tell which smooth bottle held the phenobarbital? It has no odor."

"Oh."

"Not Gertrude. Not Maud, because she still can't imitate."

"Yes, I see. Go on."

"Attempt number three. The coal gas and the dampers. Now, if one and two were done by Isabel, number three can't be Maud either. She still can't imitate that sound."

"Gertrude could."

"Yes, Gertrude could. Gertrude had a flexible voice. She had keen ears. She might have done so. The only trouble is," said Duff, "why would Gertrude, who sleeps on the first floor, come upstairs outside of Alice's door in the middle of the night, having done a criminal deed, having completed it, having nothing further to do up here that would lead to its success—why, I say, would she come up here and laugh? Just to laugh? Just to make the little sound? The imitated sound? Why? To incriminate Isabel? Did she know Alice was awake to hear it? If so, how? Did she know it had been heard before? If so, how? People don't often do things for no reason at all. There wasn't even a wrong reason.

"So I was convinced that it must have been Isabel, herself, going by your door soon after twelve. So, you see, I had to figure out why Maud gave her an alibi.

"It became plain that Maud could have done so, honestly, only if she could hear. If she heard our mistake. Her clock was accurate. Would Maud alibi her sister just for loyalty's sake?"

"No," said Fred.

"I thought not, myself. So I couldn't disregard Isabel's alibi as a plain lie by Maud. A good chance she was honest. How, then, could she have been mistaken? If she gave the

time by hearsay. She did give us the time by hearsay. Must have. You see now?" He crumpled up the paper.

"Yeah," said Fred slowly.

"You always thought it was Isabel by intuition. . . . I mean, by the other way?"

"Isabel scarcely let her right eye know what her left eye was doing," said Duff.

"Well, Gertrude survives. What's the moral?"

"The moral is," said Fred, "you can pick your friends, but you can't pick your relatives."

"The moral is . . . Never mind," said Alice. "It's all over."

Duff said with a light in his eye, "So it is. I am going down and talk to Mr. Johnson."

"Good morning, Alice." Innes smiled at her with sheepish cheer from his pillows in Papa's bed. He reached for her hand, and she let him have it. After all, he was still alive and deserved congratulations.

"My dear," he said, "you look lovely. You're such a lovely person, Alice. You never meant to break our engagement, did you? I thought over what you said. I think you were simply being terribly honest." His eyes appealed to her. "But now, when we've been through so much together, I feel I know you better than ever and need you more. And you wouldn't leave me. Alice . . ."

"No," said Alice kindly. "No, please. I'm sorry. You'd better change that awful will. Innes, I was going to marry you for your money, but now I don't want the money. Please change it, Innes. Because I'm not going to marry you. Really I'm not. I just don't want to."

Innes closed his eyes in pain. "I thought, when we'd been through so much . . . Alice, how can you leave me now?"

Because you're a whining, weak, silly man, thought Alice. "Oh," she said aloud, "you'll get over it, Innes. And I'd like to resign as your secretary, too."

He looked at her, incredulously, she thought. Or was it timidly? Or was it suspiciously? Was there a sly fear?

She marched to the door and flung it open. Somebody must hear this. There was only Fred, coming out of the bathroom with his hair wet and slicked down.

"Come in here, Fred."

Fred came in.

"I want you to be a witness," said Alice loudly. "I have just told Mr. Whitlock that I won't marry him. I am breaking the engagement. If I ever begin a suit for breach of promise, you can tell about this. Also, I quit my job. There."

"Alice," said Innes pitifully.

But she left the room.

"Anything you want, Mr. Whitlock?" said Fred, respectfully.

"Nothing," said Innes. "Nothing . . . nothing . . ." He blew a little breath through pursed lips, and it puffed his cheeks out. They collapsed with a sigh.

Alice heard Fred coming after her as she ran downstairs. He caught her at the bottom.

"What do you mean, you quit your job?" he said fiercely. "Are you nuts?"

"I guess so," she said.

He was very angry. "Are you going to get married? Is that it?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Alice, "but I'd like to."

Fred shook her. "To that Kileen? That's it, isn't it?"

"Uh uh," she said, shaking her head as if her tongue was tied.

"Then what's this about getting married?"

"You started it."

"Look," said Fred, "if they won't take me in the Army, I'm still a darned good mechanic. I can get a job . . ."

"You're wonderful," said Alice and closed her eyes.

"We're crazy," said Fred. Then furiously, "You don't want to marry me!"

"I do, too," said Alice.

Duff looked dreamily over the sunken pit.

"Your grandfather," he said, "was *he* a chief?"

Mr. Johnson spat.

"Or a medicine man?"

"Naw."

"What did he do?"

"Lived around here," said Mr. Johnson. "Then he died."

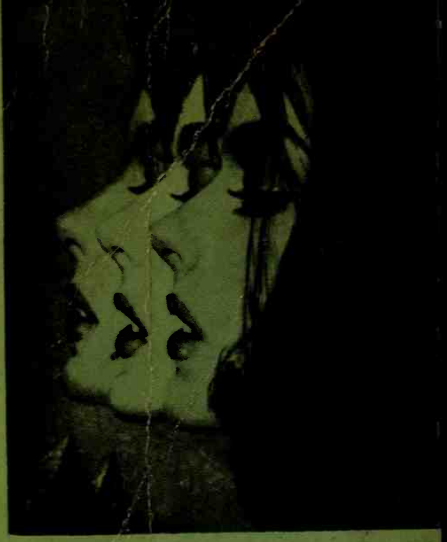
"Sums up most of us," Duff said provocatively.

"Sure," said Mr. Johnson.

Duff sighed. The mystery was as thick as ever.

CHARLOTTE ARMSTRONG

THE CASE OF THE WEIRD SISTERS



They were a strange trio, the three Whitlock sisters. There was Gertrude, with her imperial air. There was Maud, sloppy and loud. There was Isabel, querulous and bitter.

They seemed so apart, those three spinsters, yet their brother's fiancee was to discover the deep bond between them, the intangible link that held within it the very tangible reality of — murder.

Anthony Boucher calls Charlotte Armstrong "one of the few authentic spell-casting witches of modern times." Never before available in paperbacks, this novel bears further witness to her mystery-writing witchcraft.