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Bestseller Mystery

The Corpse with the Purple Thighs

BY

GEORGE BAGBY

"Moves rapidly through one fracas after another. Colorful."
SATURDAY REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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by

GEORGE BAGBY

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK

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CHAPTER ONE

YOU KNOW HOW it is at class-reunions. If you happen to be in the mood everything's fine. The old bunch, who by accident of birth and previous education happened to be ready for college the same year you were and therefore became your classmates, seem to be the best bunch in the world, peerless lads and every lad a prince. You feel like a boy again. The fact that the undergraduates who have usurped your place on the campus during the ten years since graduation look so much younger does not bother you at all. You do not stop to itemize the details of their youthful appearance, their stomachs as flat as yours once was, their hair as thick, their teeth as patently their own. You decide instead that these fresh-faced lads are obviously immature, far too young to be in college. "In our time," you say to yourself with a comfortable touch of superiority, "undergraduates were men, not mere boys like these."

And it works, if you happen to be in the mood. You feel young and carefree. The stories and reminiscences seem fresh and funny and heartwarming. You really believe that during the four years you were in college your bunch brought a special bloom to the old place, raising it to an eminence it had never known before. You further believe, vocally and even noisily, that it is still the best old place in the world, though naturally not what it was in your day. Among yourselves, in the privacy of reunion headquarters where around the bar you are in the bosom of the family so to speak, with a great show of fairness you admit that there has been a decline since your day, but you admit it without surprise, knowing in your heart that even such a solid institution as the old school must suffer some decline after its peak of greatness.

If you are in the mood, the whole delusion can be achieved on nothing more than beer, old faces, back slapping and the lusty singing that comes roaring out of the far corner of the firehouse your class secretary has been smart enough to rent as reunion headquarters. A firehouse, of course, is the inevitably perfect choice for the purpose. It is solid, reasonably indestructible. Spilled beer does not matter, noise echoes gratifyingly in its cavernous depth and sliding down a brass pole is capital fun when you are feeling boyish.

The mood, however, is not automatic. For me, at least, it is uncertain and its equilibrium is easily destroyed. I came down to reunion in high good spirits, and I must confess that things started auspiciously. They also started early, perhaps too early for me to go on feeling securely young all week end. They started with a few quick ones which slipped imperceptibly into several long and leisurely ones in the club car going down. There were enough of the old bunch in that club car to carry me through the first stage of reunion procedure, the recognition, filling-in-gaps and renewing-old-ties stage. It goes generally as follows:

"Hello, old man. How've you been? It seems to me I remember you went on

to medical school. A urologist? You don't say. Seen any good specimens lately?"

The second stage is reminiscence, and that can go on for the whole week end if things are just right. What with remembering Stinker's great run in the Yale game junior year, and the time somebody put a cow in the chapel gallery (when the entire college community learned that firmness and persuasion could make a cow walk upstairs, but nothing short of a sling around its belly and a piano mover's kit could get bossy downstairs), and the history-making drinking bouts in which you engaged, not to speak of the few you unaccountably missed — time flies on a substratospheric schedule.

By the time we got to reunion headquarters this mixture of whisky and reminiscence had me sufficiently mellowed to breeze easily over the first big hurdle, the reunion costume. If I can get into my reunion costume without feeling like a silly fool who should be old enough to know better, I should be ready for any foolishment the reunion might produce. It was pure accident that the mood didn't last, but if I hadn't lost it in the crap game Friday night I probably would not have found the corpse in the pirate suit. I don't know that it mattered much who found it. It was in the cards that I should not be able to stay in the spirit of things. Until that corpse turned up I might have succeeded in forgetting the years that had passed since my college days, the years of my association with Inspector Schmidt; but corpses are sobering, and even if I had only heard about it I expect it would have brought me back to the present pretty quick.

That, however, comes later, and I am getting ahead of my story. I had gotten as far as the reunion suit. Now in theory the reunion suit is eminently sensible. After you've been away from college for years you are not likely to remember each classmate at a glance. A uniform which will serve to distinguish your own special group from all others is a necessary thing. It supplies, however artificially, the cohesion and group spirit which once existed more or less naturally. By the uniform you can spot a classmate immediately, and it matters little if recognition follows comradeship or does not come at all. The important thing on these occasions is comradeship. Also there is no blinking the fact that reunions are messy parties. Much beer is spilled. Occasionally there is a chair or bench to sit on, but more often you'll be sitting on the floor or on the bare ground. Sooner or later there must be a crap game, and no crap game can amount to much without kneeling. Therefore a cheap uniform is an excellent device for saving wear and tear on a man's clothes.

It is, accordingly, the mission of any reunion suit to be as cheap as possible and as garishly distinctive as possible, and the result is inevitably a collection of garments which might have been designed with the sole and thoroughly malicious purpose of making a slightly middle-aged gent look ridiculous. We of the class of 1927 were pirates, and as pirates we wore bright yellow canvas slacks, short-sleeved cotton jerseys horizontally striped in red and yellow, bright blue sashes, bright blue little sleeveless jackets with our class numerals stenciled across the back in red, and flat

stiff-brimmed sailor hats made of some kind of black oilcloth. The hats were shiny and looked like patent leather until you happened to spill beer on them. Then they went dull and soft and gummy.

You see it is not enough that the costume as a whole should be distinctive. The ideal is to have each item distinctive. People are always losing some part of the suit or another, and before the week end is over many of the lads are likely to be down to their ordinary clothes worn in combination with the shiny black hat, or embellished only by the blue sash or jacket or the yellow pants or striped jersey. If the costume has been well-planned such losses matter little. Any one item will serve for identification. Although, as I have explained, there is a reason for it all, taken as a whole one of those suits is a good deal of a sock in any sober eye.

Furthermore these wildly colorful garments never fit. Hats are ordered to size, but the rest of the stuff comes in just three sizes, small, medium and large. Small, I suppose, is very small indeed and medium may be very medium. I, however, take a large, and I do know that the large ones are large in every conceivable way. They are built for an Herculean breadth of shoulder, a Falstaffian waistline, a Gargantuan thickness of thigh and precisely six feet of height. No one I have ever seen has been big enough for a large in more than one dimension. Lots of men are six feet tall, but even the biggest are not so grossly planned in shoulders, belly and buttocks as the designer of these suits imagines. His idea, of course, is to get them big enough for anyone to get into them. That most people get lost in them doesn't seem to bother him. As long as you can get them on they're all right. I happen to be rather on the lanky side, and though I must confess to just a hint of paunch it is nothing tremendous, more a matter of contour than of bulk. As a result my reunion suit flapped around me wildly. Most of the time its sleazy materials hung on me in limp discouragement, but when a wind sprang up the light thin stuff would unfurl and make me look like some cadaverously thin Central American patriot clutching around him his country's flag.

But the mood was so thoroughly upon me that I was able to array myself without a shudder in these monstrous garments and sally forth on Main Street in broad daylight, firehouse bound. When I passed anyone similarly attired, I greeted the fellow clown warmly. That is another effect of the reunion suit. It is not only a convenient uniform for identification to promote the revival of old fellowships. It also serves to promote a feeling of fellowship, puts the whole thing on a sympathetic basis of herd instinct. A lot of fellow sufferers, afflicted with the same feeling of foolishness, will naturally herd together enthusiastically.

That is precisely what we did in our firehouse. We herded and herded. Several of the boys who knew of my career as ghost writer for Inspector Schmidt of the New York police took the occasion to do some morbid probing into my experiences of the murderous underworld, but even as fascinating a subject as murder could not long postpone the inevitable crap game. It started in the afternoon, and since I didn't get into it until after dinner it was going strong when I hit it. Looking back at it over the

grim events that followed hard upon it, it was as enjoyable a contest of skill and chance as I have ever engaged in. For one thing, Bagby was hot that night, and a man who does not enjoy winning is no crapshooter. I could tell you of passes I made that night, but you wouldn't believe them. But I have too high a regard for your attention to risk it on anything so dull as an account of a crap game in which you had no money. Therefore I will go into no details. Generally, however, anyone who has handled a pair of dice knows that the spirit of a crap game is a delicate and volatile thing. Even the most amiable session in the world rests on some mysteriously hair-trigger, tricky balance and can fall suddenly into snarling fury. For an extraordinarily long time this game was amiable. There were enough Southerners in the game to give it that prayerful eloquence that is the pure lyric poetry of craps, and there was enough money in the game to give it drama.

I hadn't been in the game long when there was an untoward incident that threatened to break the spell of congeniality. At the time it passed off as a joke, and I probably would have forgotten it if it had not been so strange, and if subsequent events had not served so dramatically to call it to mind. One of the players was a chap in the class of 1926. I didn't know the man but I had him placed by his costume. The 1926 lads were dressed as sailors, dark blue pants, white jumpers and little white sailors' caps with their class numerals. After a bit, this sailor lad gave up his turn at the dice and hovered around making side bets. It was just a couple of rolls later that one of our 1927 boys had a fantastically successful run. All the time he was rolling, the sailor boy stood behind him betting with the dice. He rode this other guy's luck, shouting "Twenty bucks he makes it" all the time the man with the dice was waiting for somebody to fade him. As all runs do this one finally ran out. When the dice went around to the next man the sailor boy had a nice thick wad of bills he was stowing away in his wallet. That annoyed the lad who had made the run. Of course, he had made plenty on it himself — much more than the sailor boy got out of it — but some fellows are like that. I don't mind people making side bets on my roll, but there are those who think the practice parasitic, not quite in line with the ideals of the game perhaps. At any rate this lad seemed annoyed despite his luck. He looked up at the sailor boy and sneered. The sailor boy stared at him unperturbed.

"You did all right, letting me work for you," said the lad who had made the dice behave.

"Plenty all right," grinned the guy in the sailor suit.

There was something in the tone of his voice, however, that suggested more. He sounded as though he was quite ready to fight if anyone wanted to make anything of it. To that point it was ordinary enough, the kind of flare-up you can expect some time in every crap game, but sailor suit had more to say — and what he said made no apparent sense although it sounded plenty unpleasant.

"I suppose," he added, "it does take a thief to catch a thief."

As though that weren't strange enough, my classmate made it stranger by seeming

to know exactly what it meant and to think it very funny. He laughed and sailor boy, joining in the laugh, stowed away his wallet and wandered out of the game. The dice came to me soon after that, and I had more important things to think about than that odd little exchange. I did notice that shortly afterward the other man also left the game; but people were dropping in and out of it all the time, and I just thought he was quitting while he was ahead if I thought about it at all. I was doing too well to bother about anything but the game, and I stayed in for another hour or more, having a fine time.

Then suddenly the game did go sour. They were still running my way. It wasn't that my luck turned or anything like that, but a lot of new people drifted in and most of them were too drunk to keep track of their money and their bets. The inevitable arguments developed over who had faded whom and whose tenner it was out in the middle of the floor, and who was betting with and who against. All that stuff slows up the game and takes the fun out of it. Nobody likes to squat around with the dice going cold in his hand while a couple of drunken apes try to keep track of their money. Naturally tempers grew shorter and shorter, and finally there was a long session of bickering. One of the drunks insisted that another guy owed him ten dollars. The other guy tried to show the drunk where he was wrong, but the drunk insisted. The other guy, who was right all the time, tried to get the game moving again by giving the drunk the ten whether it was coming to him or not. That, however, didn't satisfy the drunk. He began babbling about his honor. He wanted the ten, but he didn't want it given to him just to shut him up. He wanted with it an admission that he had been right all the time, that the other guy had been trying to gyp him deliberately. Naturally he was not getting that, and for a moment it looked as though they might square off and really make a fight of it. But they didn't do anything as interesting as that. They just went on with their tawdry bickering until I got sick of it and pulled out.

Some of you who do not understand the game might think that all this is an elaborate excuse for leaving the game while I was a big winner, but any crapshooter will understand that no one willingly pulls out of a game when he's hot. I wanted to run it out, but I had no desire to stay there on my knees all night while they snarled at each other. I stuffed my money in my pocket and wandered over to the bar, and the mood had begun to go sour. At the bar I made an effort to hold it. I drank beer with a crowd of the boys, but they were reliving Stinker's big run in the Yale game junior year, and I had already relived that once on the train and once at this same bar in the firehouse before dinner. When they started on the cow in the chapel gallery, I had been through that three times and the mood was definitely gone. I let my mind wander and casually gave the whole crowd the once over. A lot of the boys, I noticed, were showing gray hairs and a lot more had a good start toward no hair at all. In their own clothes they would probably have looked younger, but in those incongruously gaudy and ill-fitting reunion suits they looked definitely middle-aged — reminded me

of old women garishly bedizened in an effort to look and feel younger than they are. Suddenly I began feeling rather older myself. I discovered that my knees ached a bit from kneeling on the concrete firehouse floor, and I was definitely chilly.

"No use catching cold," I thought, and I slipped away from the bar. Back at the hotel I had a sweater, and I decided to go down the street to pick it up and substitute it for the striped jersey which was too sleazy to be any protection against the evening breeze.

When I got out onto the street I remembered that there was a short cut to the hotel that I could have taken if I had gone out the back door of the firehouse. Heading for this short cut, I turned into the alley beside the firehouse. There usually is a light in the alley, but one of the standard entertainments at reunions is breaking light bulbs, and I guessed that the boys had already gotten to the one in the alley because it was black as pitch. That didn't bother me since I knew that it ran perfectly straight and narrow along the side of the firehouse. If I had been feeling my way, I probably would not have fallen, but I was stepping out vigorously with some idea of warming up, I guess. Be that as it may, my foot hit something moderately soft and yielding. I tripped and sprawled. It was an extraordinary feeling. While I was falling I had time enough to build up the expectancy that I would land on my face hard. When I didn't, it startled me much more than the fall itself. I landed on my chest, hard enough to knock the wind out of me for a split second, but I had not landed on cobblestones. It was something much softer. Immediately I had an idea of what had happened. I had tripped over a drunk and fallen right on top of him. As I scrambled to my feet I reproached myself for my stupidity. Even though it was still very early in the evening, I should have known that some of the boys would be passing out early. After all, I had been to enough reunions to know that almost from the first you find participants, who take it quick, passed out cold on lawns, in clumps of shrubbery, in gutters, on staircases and in all odd nooks and corners. Everyone knew that before the night was over this alley would be full of drunks sleeping it off, but I had forgotten.

I remember thinking that the one I fell on must be awfully drunk to have slept right through my kicking into him and landing on top of him hard. My first misgiving came with the thought that I might have hurt him, but in the back of my mind there hovered another idea more disturbing. I was fishing in the unfamiliar pockets of my reunion suit for my matches when suddenly this disquieting notion came into focus.

"Maybe," I thought, "this guy's dead."

While I hunted my matches I tried to laugh that thought off. I told myself that following Schmidty so much on his homicide investigations must have begun to tell on my nerves. But, even in that moment when I felt for my matches and tried to reassure myself, I suddenly knew why I had come down with the idea that the man might be dead. I suddenly remembered that, in the moment before I got up, I felt around instinctively for something to brace myself on to push myself up. My hand had landed on the man's chest. I knew that because I remembered feeling his ribs under my hand,

and I knew, too, that it was the left side of his chest. Only later I reconstructed the quick but complicated process of thought that told me it was the left side. When I had first landed on him my left elbow had hit something much softer than his chest. That would have to be the man's stomach. That way I knew in which direction he was lying, and I knew that I had laid my hand on the left side of his chest and had felt no heartbeat. Now that I think about it, that whole flash of intuition I had was very odd. What should have been more obvious to me was the simple fact that I had sprawled across a man's stomach and chest and had felt no motion of breathing. For some strange reason, I never thought of that. I just had persisting in my head the one idea: "I had my hand right over his heart and felt no heartbeat."

I don't know how long it took me to find my matches. It could hardly have been more than a few seconds, but it seemed like ages. I turned them up eventually. I had tucked them under my blue sash along with my pack of cigarettes. That pirate suit had far too few pockets. I bent over and struck the match. In the first flare I saw that he was wearing a pirate suit like my own. I felt again for the heartbeat and there was none. The match burned down short and scorched my fingers. Thoughtlessly I dropped it. It fell on the man's red-and-yellow striped jersey, and I caught the smell of burning cotton as I flicked it off. That the man was dead I was now certain, but I struck another match to look at his face. He was lying with his head dropped way back so that the light first fell on his neck and the underside of his chin. I noticed scratches on his neck. At least I remembered them afterward, without stopping to take notice of them at the moment. Immediately I moved the match to cast the light on his face. He looked familiar to me, as so many of the classmates I hadn't seen in ten years did, but I could not place him more definitely than as someone I had seen at some time or another.

I didn't even try shouting for help. It was too obviously useless. What with the singing and the clatter of beer mugs and general din in the firehouse, nobody could possibly have heard me. Later some of the boys thought it queer that I had not tried to carry the man indoors. The local police looked askance at that point in my behavior also, but I was able to tell them off in short order. Many a time Inspector Schmidt has told me that I have learned precious little from my years of close association with him in my capacity as his ghost writer, but this I have learned: it is dangerous to move an injured man before a doctor has seen him. If your injured man is conscious and he can move his fingers and his legs and his head, you can be pretty sure his neck and back have not been broken; but with an unconscious man you cannot be sure, and anything but expert handling might kill him. If your man is dead — and mine I was sure was all of that — the police like to have you leave him exactly as you found him. Many a valuable clue has been destroyed by pointless and well-meaning amateurs who tote dead bodies around because of nothing more than some notions of delicacy about just where it is suitable for a dead man to lie.

Dead or alive, my gent, I knew, could lie in no more suitable place than the

alley where I found him; that is, until I could get a doctor and the police.

I dashed back down the alley the way I had come. It was shorter than going on through to the back door of the firehouse. Fortunately our firehouse headquarters had a telephone booth, and it was not in use at the moment. I lost no time about putting in a call for the police, but the operator lost plenty of time in making the connection. While I waited for my call to go through, I opened the door of the booth and tried to make myself heard over the sounds of revelry.

"Is there a doctor in the house?" I shouted.

Several of the boys took it up, thinking it was a joke, and they made a chant of it. Before long half the people in the place were yelling "Is there a doctor in the house?" in unison. I was getting lots of noise but no results when my connection to the police station went through. I shut the door of the booth and let the doctor business slide until after I had notified the police. I tried to make my story to them clear, simple and coherent; but there were difficulties.

"I have just found a body in the alley alongside the firehouse," I said. "I am quite sure the man is dead. You better get over here as quick as you can."

"Who are you?" the man at the other end demanded.

"The name's Bagby," I answered. "I'll be waiting for you in the alley."

Much of the shouting and gaiety outside was leaking into the phone booth and the man at the police station must have heard it.

"Where are you calling from?" he asked.

"The firehouse," I explained, "1927 reunion headquarters."

"Oh," said the man at the other end. "Are you sure he's dead, or is he just drunk?"

"I haven't had a doctor look at him yet," I explained. "I'm trying to get one right now, but I felt for his heartbeat and couldn't find any. I'll be mighty surprised if he isn't dead."

"Are you drunk?" asked the man at the police station.

"No," I answered, realizing that under the circumstances it was a natural question.

"What are you doing in the firehouse then?" he demanded.

"I am a member of the class of 1927," I answered impatiently. "I am at my class reunion."

"Then why aren't you drunk?" he argued. "All the rest of you reunion guys are."

"Because," I answered huffily, "it's still pretty early, and it is a sobering experience to trip over a dead man in a dark alley. Are you coming over here? Or do you want me to call the mayor?"

"Keep your shirt on," the man at the station house answered wearily. "We'll be right over."

"That," I said, "is better."

I hung up. The boys had gone back to their drinking, singing and assorted merriment, and I realized that it was no use shouting for a doctor. No one would take it seriously. I hunted my doctor up the quieter way. I knew there must be several

medicos in the place because a lot of the boys had gone on to medical school after graduation. I looked around a bit, as I stepped out of the booth, and over by the bar, contributing a lusty but off-key baritone to a vociferous but disorganized quartet, loomed Red Sweeney, large as life and twice as medical. Red was a friend of mine. We had been pals at college and I had been seeing him frequently in New York. A more than usually handsome guy, Red was smart enough after a few years of general practice to become a gynecologist. He's a good one and dazzlingly successful. The women go to him because of his looks and, since he happens to be a good doctor, they get better treatment than they deserve. Half the women in New York are devoted to Red, and the only thing they have against him is that he cures them and discharges them. Most of them would prefer it if he kept them coming to him forever. Obviously a gynecologist was not exactly what was needed out in the alley, not even one with bright blue eyes and lustrous dark red curly hair; but faced with the necessity of going back to that alley and that corpse, I could think of no one I'd rather have with me than good old dependable Red Sweeney. He was a doctor and too good a one to have forgotten any of his general medicine, and I knew him to be a cool and levelheaded guy in a pinch.

I joined the group at the bar and tried to detach Red from his fellow warblers, but he was working up to some harmonic feat which he expected would be entrancingly beautiful, and he was not to be diverted. I didn't want to spread a general alarm. It would probably be better not to have the whole gang tramping out into the alley, I thought. I whispered in his ear.

"Hey, Red," I murmured. "I want you for a few minutes. One of the fellows is lying out in the alley. I think he's dead."

"He'll sleep it off, Baggy," Red answered.

"He may have been drunk," I insisted, "but I want you to look at him."

"O.K.," said Red and slipped away from his little choral society.

The boys, who were in a mood for music, protested; but Red ignored them and followed me out of the firehouse. I led him around the corner into the alley. I had my matches ready and struck one as soon as we turned into the darkness. Holding matches to light our way, I went down the alley with Red at my heels.

"Where was he?" Red asked.

"Right along here," I answered. "In fact, I didn't think he was this far down."

That, however, was an understatement. I was quite sure that I had gone well past the place where I had fallen over my dead man, but it is so easy to be mistaken about a thing like that. So I went on. With steadily increasing misgivings I led Red through the alley. When we came out at the back of the firehouse and had found no corpse, I was baffled.

"Well, keed," Red asked. "Where's your dead man?"

"That's funny," I murmured. "He was in the alley, nearer the front of the building than the back."

"He's not there now." Red laughed. "Come back inside and forget it. What you need is a drink."

"I could use a drink," I admitted. "But that guy was there, Red."

"Sure he was," Red answered. "You probably woke him up, stumbling over him. He just got up and reeled off to pass out someplace else. Drunks do that all the time."

"But, Red," I protested, "I can swear this guy was dead."

"I've seen plenty of drunks at these things," Red assured me, "that anyone'd take for dead. Forget it. He'll be all right. You know drunks have a way of landing on their feet."

"I'm going to get a flashlight," I announced. "Wait here for me. I won't be a minute."

"All right," Red sighed with a tone of resignation which made it quite clear that he hoped I realized how much sacrifice I was exacting in the name of friendship.

I remembered that one of the bartenders had a flashlight. I had noticed it when he dropped some coins while making change for me earlier in the evening. He had flashed it under the bar to look for his money. I dashed back into the firehouse through the rear door and asked the bartender to lend me his flashlight.

"Can't, buddy," he said, "I'll be needing it."

"I'll bring it right back," I promised.

"Naw," said the bartender, "you'll be forgetting."

"Look," I shouted, slapping a five-dollar bill on the bar. "If I don't return the light in perfect condition before five minutes is up, you don't return the fin."

That is an argument which will break down any bartender's affection for his flashlight. He pocketed the fiver and handed over the light. I hurried back to Red, and we went the length of the alley with our light. We saw more than we had with the matches, but all we saw was walls and pavement. My man was gone. That I had to admit.

"See, keed," said Red. "He's not here. He's just walked out on you."

"No," I insisted. "That guy couldn't walk, Red. I may have been mistaken about his being dead, though I'm sure I'm not wrong even about that. Someone else came along while I was inside and moved the body out of this alley."

"All right," Red humored me. "Have it your own way. There's nothing we can do about it. Now will you come back inside and have a drink?"

"I guess so," I mumbled. We headed back for the firehouse.

"A drink will fix you up fine." Red patted my shoulder.

"The police are not going to like his having been moved," I observed.

"Let the police worry about that," Red advised, "and the guys that moved him. It's no skin off your nose. Forget your murders, boy, you're on a holiday."

"It looks like a busman's holiday, Red," I sighed. "I called the police."

"Listen," Red held me a moment at the door to the firehouse. "You've got the

jitters. You fell over a drunk in the dark and imagined things. The cops get calls like that all the time during reunions. They won't bother you any. They'll just figure you're drunk, which you may be."

"I'm not, Red," I protested. "You're a doctor. You can see I'm sober."

"You look sober," he admitted, "but they'll think you're drunk, and you know how it is at reunions. The lid's off. They never bother drunks."

We went back into the firehouse and returned to Red's quartet. I gave the bartender his flashlight, and over a beer I tried to convince myself that Red was right: that I had just fallen over a drunk in the dark, and that my imagination had done the rest. I might have succeeded in putting the whole thing out of my head, for a while at least, if it had not been for Gilligan. Gilligan's attitude irritated me. Just because Gilligan had been the cop who caught me twelve years before when I tried to drive the dean's car up the library steps, he assumed that I was still a college boy given to playing childish pranks on the forces of law and order. Gilligan came bawling into headquarters, shouting my name.

"Run, boys, the place is raided," some wit roared; and another of my cute classmates, who had located the master switch, pulled it and threw the whole firehouse into darkness. Gilligan unfortunately had a flashlight with him and made himself conspicuous by flashing it about and yelling for lights. Suddenly, however, his little gleam disappeared, and his yelling became less coherent. I guessed that the boys had ganged up on him and felt that it was not precisely the moment for such buffoonery. As best I could in the dark I tried to work my way toward Gilligan. It was probably only a few moments that the place was sunk in darkness, but in those few moments I reached Gilligan's side. When the lights came on, as suddenly as they had gone out, they saved me by a hair from running smack into him. He grabbed my arm firmly and hung on.

"So it is the same Bagby," he howled. "Still up to your old tricks."

"I beg your pardon?" I murmured frigidly, making as much effort as dignity would permit to free my arm from his grip.

"Gimme my pants, Bagby," he demanded. "Fun's fun and I know it's reunion, but —"

With an eloquent gesture he indicated his bare and knobby knees. When the boys had ganged up on him in the dark they had done a quick and skillful job of removing Gilligan's trousers.

"Hello, Gilligan," I said. "I'm sorry about your pants. I should have waited for you outside. I didn't think —"

"Sure," said Gilligan. "I know it's a joke. Now let me have my pants, and we'll forget about the whole thing."

"But I haven't got them," I protested.

"No more have I," said Gilligan. "Look, Mr. Bagby, I need my pants. Give me a break. I always gave you a break. That time I caught you with the dean's car on the

library steps I should have pinched you. You told me yourself the next morning I should have pinched you."

"And so you should have, Gilligan," I agreed.

"But what did I do?" Gilligan continued his appeal to my better nature. "I drove the car back to the dean's house, and I took you to your room and put you to bed, and you slept it off and no one the wiser."

"You're right, Gilligan," I assured him. "You gave me a break. Let go my arm and I'll do my best to persuade the boys to give you back your breeches."

For a moment he surveyed me suspiciously, but he decided that his pants were worth the gamble. He let me go. I clambered up on to the bar and faced the gang who were gathered around in a laughing circle.

"Listen, fellows," I orated. "Give Gilligan back his pants. Gilligan is a good egg."

Good-natured but by no means encouraging shouts answered me.

"No cops at reunion," came a voice I couldn't identify.

"Teach him a lesson," added Red. Dr. Michael Sweeney seemed to think he was helping me by creating a diversion for a pal.

"Gilligan," I shouted, "has a right to be here. He's my guest. I invited him."

There were more shouts of "Bagby, the policeman's pal," "Where's Inspector Schmidt?" and similar witticisms. I motioned for silence, and I turned on all my powers of persuasion. I told them the old story of the dean's car and the library steps. I wrung their hearts with my description of how Gilligan with a fatherly tenderness had led me to my rooms, undressed me and put me to bed, how he had protected my youthful reputation from the blight of a prison record. That worked. They gave Gilligan a short cheer with three rahs — reunion equivalent of a Legion of Honor with three palms — and a hastily organized committee returned, with formal dignity and full protocol, Gilligan's pants. While Gilligan hastily concealed his unfamiliar pink legs in his familiar blue pants, Red Sweeney demanded a beer for Gilligan, and as a gesture of forgiveness Gilligan drank the beer. By that time it was the consensus of opinion that Gilligan should join the party, but he made his excuses and withdrew. I followed him out the door.

"I'm sorry about all this, Gilligan," I apologized. "I should have waited in the alley."

"That's all right, Mr. Bagby," Gilligan said forbearingly. "We'll just forget the whole thing."

"Thanks, Gilligan," I answered. "Now about the body. It's gone."

"I know," he said. "I looked the alley over before I went into the firehouse."

"Yes," I said. "After I phoned you, I went back out to the alley with Doctor Sweeney, but someone moved the body while I was telephoning."

"Sure," Gilligan murmured. "His friends probably took him home to bed."

"No," I thought aloud. "That's not likely unless they were awfully drunk. They've probably taken him around to the hospital or to a doctor. You'll be getting a report of the death from one of the doctors in town."

"Sure," Gilligan was not subtle about humoring me. "We'll get a report. Don't you worry about it, Mr. Bagby."

"Did you examine the alley thoroughly?" I asked.

"Enough to know there's no stiff there," Gilligan answered.

I might have left it at that, but I suppose I was concerned about my own reputation. After all I had been working with Inspector Schmidt in New York for years, and I obviously should know something about the proper procedure in such matters. The inspector would not be very proud of the man he chose to ghostwrite for him the accounts of the crimes he solves if I should let a wandering corpse slip out of mind so carelessly. Also I did have a kind of fondness for Gilligan. He had been mighty kind and thoughtful and considerate when I was a foolish and scatterbrained youth. By pursuing this matter conscientiously Gilligan, I felt, could do himself a lot of good. By neglecting it he could make for himself just as much trouble.

"Look, Gilligan," I said, "I have been working with Inspector Schmidt of the New York police for several years now. I'm not the crazy kid I used to be when I was down here at school. I'm not playing any funny tricks on you. You can't just let this slide without doing anything about it. We'd better look that alley over thoroughly. There may be important clues and, if we don't find them now, we might be too late."

"Just take it easy, Mr. Bagby," Gilligan said soothingly. "You've had a couple too many and you just imagined the whole thing. Remember that time with the dean's car. You were sure the dean was in the library and he'd asked you to drive in and get him."

"Yes," I admitted, "but this is different."

"Now," Gilligan philosophized. "Drink takes some one way and others other ways. It makes you imagine things, Mr. Bagby. You just imagined there was a guy lying out in the alley."

"Did I imagine that I struck matches to look at him?" I demanded. "Did I imagine that there were scratches on his throat and under his chin? Did I imagine that his heart wasn't beating?"

"I guess you did," Gilligan shrugged. "Look, Mr. Bagby, let me take you back to the hotel and put you to bed. You'll have a nice sleep, and in the morning you'll feel fine again."

"I can prove it," I shouted, having had a sudden flash of memory. "You've got your flashlight. Come back into the alley."

Gilligan humored me and by the light of his flash I led him back to the place where I had tripped over the body. There I found my proof. On the cobblestones were two matchsticks, blackened almost to the very end.

"See," I said triumphantly. "There are the matches I lit."

"So you lit matches," Gilligan conceded. "Better let me put you to bed."

"You report this, Gilligan," I insisted. "For your own good I advise you to. And you'll see when you find the body, there will be the mark of a burn on his shirt. I

dropped one of the matches on him, and his jersey was scorched before I could brush it off."

"All right," said Gilligan. "I'll report it, Mr. Bagby. I promise. Now let me put you to bed."

"No thanks, Gilligan," I refused. "I'll be all right."

Reluctantly he left me, and I went back into the firehouse. Although he had promised to report the missing body, there was something about the way he had made the promise, and about his solicitous farewells, that made me think that Gilligan had just been trying to hush me up for fear that I would run afoul of a less thoughtful and considerate cop. I felt sure that he was not going to do a thing about it, and it bothered me. When I got back to the bar Red Sweeney had been telling the boys about me and the body in the alley. It was a natural for them. They made so many cracks about Bagby the detective, who saw corpses in his cups, that they gave me the creeps. The more I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I became. It was no use trying to have a good time. I couldn't get out of my mind the picture of that dead man in the pirate suit I had seen in the flickering light of my matches. My hand tingled with the feel of that still, dead chest. After all a man had died — not just any man, a classmate, one of our own gang. Abruptly I came to a decision. I did what I should have done in the first place. I put a call through to New York and got Inspector Schmidt on the phone. Briefly, but as completely as I could, I told him what had happened.

"Where are you now?" he asked.

"The firehouse," I answered.

"What are you doing there?"

"That's our headquarters," I explained. "We're holding our reunion here."

"Oh, yeah?" said the inspector. "Where are the fire engines?"

"I don't know," I answered. "They put them away somewhere during reunions. What difference do they make?"

"Baggy," said the inspector, "you're drunk. Better go sleep it off."

"Listen, Schmidty," I snapped. "I'm tired of people telling me to go sleep it off. It's getting monotonous."

"Other people been telling you the same thing?"

"Nothing else but, for about an hour," I snarled. "Now get this, I'm not drunk. I'm cold sober."

"Now be reasonable, Baggy," Schmidty said patiently. "You went down to this reunion of yours with only one idea in your head. You told me yourself you were going down there to get good and drunk. O.K., so you did. You got so drunk you're seeing things."

I tried strategy.

"You're a friend of mine, Schmidty, aren't you?" I asked.

"Sure, I am, Baggy," he answered. "Go on now. Be a good boy. Get one of your pals to help you to bed."

"Listen, Schmidty," I continued. "Maybe you're right and maybe I am. Either way I need you. If there was a corpse in the alley, he was a friend of mine and I want to know what happened to him."

"How do you figure he was a friend of yours?" the inspector interrupted. "You didn't recognize him, did you?"

"No," I explained, "but he looked familiar and he was wearing a pirate suit."

"You are seeing things," Schmidty concluded.

"All right," I conceded, "if you say so. But you know what it means when you begin seeing things when you've been drinking."

"Get some sleep," Schmidty repeated.

"What does it mean when you see things?" I insisted.

"It means you've had too much," Schmidty answered hesitantly.

"It means delirium tremens, doesn't it?"

"Now," the inspector interrupted hastily, "don't you go getting ideas like that. You'll be all right."

"I'm not getting those ideas," I reasoned with him. "You are. Look, Schmidty, if I saw a dead man in that alley and it's gone now then I need you. If I didn't see a dead man in that alley I've got d.t.s and you'd better get right down here and take care of me. What about it? Are you coming down?"

"Where will I find you?" Schmidty asked.

"Ask for me at the firehouse. I'll wait for you there," I promised.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN I SAY that when Inspector Schmidt consented to come down to my class reunion he stepped into the most interesting case of our joint career, I must confess a certain prejudice. Looking back on it, I find that I have a special fondness for this case of the corpse with the purple thighs. My reasons for liking it are manifold but simple. Here was one case where I beat Inspector Schmidt to the body. This time I had gotten into it first, and all along the line I had an advantage; an advantage which neither I nor anyone else can expect to have over the inspector very frequently. But in this case I knew the town, I knew the college, the local customs, the traditions, the people. On this case I was a real help to Schmidty. I don't say that he could not have cracked it without me, but he would have had a tougher time dodging the red herrings that gummed up the trail.

If no more had happened in the interval between Schmidty's promise to come down and his arrival at the firehouse, he probably would have just packed me off to bed and watched over me until I sobered up; but when he arrived I had more to tell him. Gilligan, it seems, when he left the firehouse, had me on his mind. He did not let the matter

slip as I had expected he would. He reported it and watched the police reports for a pirate with a scorched jersey. As he told me later, he figured that if he could find a drunk around town with a scorched pirate suit, he could get me calmed down, get the idea of a dead man out of my head. That's why Gilligan rushed around to the firehouse to bring me the news as soon as he found the drunk he wanted. For a couple of minutes there he made me sorry that I had called Inspector Schmidt. He hunted me up in the firehouse to tell me that one of our boys had been found sleeping it off on the gravel walk near the memorial fountain. Of course the fountain is down by the railroad station, a good half hour's walk from the firehouse, but that isn't remarkable because the boys do wander all over town.

"I've got him outside in the police car," Gilligan added. "Want to see him?"

"Why tell me?" I asked. "I'm not taking care of the drunks."

At the time I was in the middle of a mumble-the-peg game, and Red Sweeney was beating me pretty badly. Doctors are so handy and deft with knives. I was trying to make a comeback and could see no reason why Gilligan should bother me with his irrelevant drunks.

"This drunk," said Gilligan, "has a burned shirt. I figured it was the guy you set fire to."

That was more interesting. As Red and I accompanied Gilligan out to his car, I explained that his description of what had happened was a gross exaggeration, that the match had just scorched the man's jersey slightly, that I had not set fire to him.

"That's it," Gilligan corrected himself. "Just a little brown spot. It burned only a tiny hole."

"Is he alive?" I asked.

"From the look of him," said Gilligan, "he'll be dead to the world for a couple of hours yet, but there's nothing the matter with him that he can't sleep off."

At that point I was ready to believe that I had been having a hallucination about the missing heartbeat, but the minute I saw Gilligan's drunk I knew down in the marrow of my bones that there was something sinister going on. For Gilligan's drunk was Zipper Tracy, known more formally as Zebulon B. Tracy. He was curled up in the car, sleeping like a babe, except that no babe would be guilty of such strident snoring.

"Look who's here," I said to Red.

"Sure," said he. "It's old Zipper. How come you didn't recognize him? You've seen him like this oftener than sober."

"That," I said, examining Zipper's reunion suit carefully, "is just the point. Zipper doesn't prove anything. I would have known him right away, but it is a coincidence that his jersey should be scorched just where that dead man's was."

"This guy a friend of yours?" Gilligan asked.

"Of course he is," I answered. "You ought to remember Zipper Tracy, Gilligan, he was in trouble all the time when we were down here at college."

"Don't remember him at all," said Gilligan.

"No," Red reminded me. "Gilligan wouldn't know Zipper. Don't you remember, Zipper always went into New York to get into trouble? It was the New York cops who knew Zipper."

"Well," I said, "that doesn't matter. This is not the man I saw in the alley, Gilligan."

"His shirt's burned," said Gilligan, reluctant to relinquish so easy a solution.

"Yes," I conceded that point, "but his throat isn't scratched. Furthermore, I would have known Zipper right away. He's an old pal of ours. The man I saw was just a familiar face, no one I really knew."

"Well," Gilligan shrugged. "I did try."

"Hey, wait a minute," I yelled. "Here's something else. It may not mean a thing, but then again it may be important. Zipper's got blue pants on."

They were not blue pants like Gilligan's or any that might go with a blue suit. They were made of the sleazy reunion-suit cotton, but they were not the canary yellow that the rest of us pirates had. He was wearing the blue sash, the red-and-yellow jersey and the blue jacket. His hat was gone, but hats are easily lost when a man gets to falling down. The pants, however, were something else again. Zipper was a pirate only down to his waist. What the rest of him was we were not to realize until later.

"Yes," Red murmured. "I wonder how he came to get his suit mixed up."

"What's more," I added, "I was sure that the guy I found in the alley was not Zipper; but this is another thing to clinch it. The guy in the alley had lost his hat too; all the boys do when they pass out. But I am sure he had yellow pants on. Except for the hat he was a complete pirate."

"All right," Gilligan sighed. "If I find another drunk with a burned shirt I'll let you know. What do you want me to do with this one?"

"Zipper?" said Red. "We'll take care of him."

Between us we hauled Zipper into headquarters. There was some motion left in him. When you got him on his feet, all you had to do was hold him upright and propel him in the right direction. He co-operated to the extent of shuffling more or less the way you wanted him to go. As we brought him into the firehouse, he did not actually regain consciousness, but he did have a moment or two of that in-between stage which runs to incoherent mumbling.

"Everybody pulls me around," he grumbled.

"Easy does it, Zipper, old boy," Red encouraged him. "You're among friends."

"'Sall right," mumbled the Zipper. "But don't you try to take my pants off again. I like these pants. I'll fight anybody who tries —"

He trailed off into silence.

"We don't want your pants, Zipper," I reassured him. "We're just taking you where you can lie down."

After depositing him on a bench, where he resumed his snoring, Red and I returned to the bar. It seemed to be time for another beer.

"Did you hear what the Zipper said?" I asked.

Red took his nose out of the suds.

"Sure," he grinned. "He's always like that, always comes up with a touch of persecution fixation when he's drunk. He thinks people are trying to push him around."

"Yes," I hesitated, "but it is just possible that somebody has been pushing him around. That business about leaving his pants alone may mean something."

"It might," said Red, "and then again it mightn't. Maybe Zipper was here when Gilligan lost his pants. If he passed out right after that the idea might have stuck."

There was no point in arguing the matter with Red. His theory was sound enough, except that it left out the fact that somewhere, somehow, Zipper had picked up the wrong pants to go with his pirate suit. I kept the point in mind because I wanted Inspector Schmidt's opinion on it. After all, I had persuaded him to come down by suggesting that I might be heading into a case of delirium tremens, but I did want to have a respectable puzzle to offer him when he did arrive. The delirium tremens suggestion had served its purpose. I hoped to disabuse him of any such notions without delay. As it happened, the inspector was ready to believe the worst of anything by the time he hit the firehouse. He made a quick trip down. Riding around in an official police car, as he does, he takes full advantage of his privileges and keeps his sock firmly planted on his padded accelerator. I should explain that Inspector Schmidt usually drives with his shoes off. In fact, he takes his shoes off whenever he can. In the prime of life and of consistently robust health, the inspector has never known pain or illness except for his feet. With those feet of his he should never have become a policeman. Fortunately for the cause of law and order in New York City, early recognition of his more than ordinary powers as a detective won him a quick promotion from pounding a beat. For Patrolman Schmidt walked in constant agony, and his feet never recovered from even that brief term of pavement pounding. Throughout his career he took his shoes off at every opportunity, and to this day he is happy only when unshod. For that reason he has the accelerator and brake and clutch pedals in his car comfortably padded and drives merrily along in his socks. This weakness of the inspector's is well known. *Herald Tribune* reporters refer to it as his Achilles' heel, an understatement since he has trouble not only with heels, but with toes and soles and arches and insteps as well. Tabloid reporters, notoriously of a less classical turn of mind, call him "Shoeless Schmidt, the super-sleuth," which he deplores, not because he objects to alliteration but for reasons of modesty.

Once in a while he has occasion to make a rapid dash out of his car, and then his shoelessness is an inconvenience. Such an occasion, it happened, arose to irk him on his drive down from New York that night. He told me about it as soon as he arrived. Red and I had been watching the door for him. We didn't want him to have any trouble getting into the firehouse, and trouble is always likely to develop for anyone who comes into any reunion headquarters without some reunion suit. Visiting between classes is common, and at every headquarters it is open house but not to outsiders.

You have to be dressed for the occasion, and unless you are a pirate or a sailor or a toreador or some such creature of the costume maker's fancy, at best you will be turned away at the door. At worst you may suffer Gilligan's fate or some similar indignity.

Inspector Schmidt, however, got in safely. He had met Red many times in New York, and he spoke his mind immediately.

"You know," he said, "you look like a couple of damn fools in those monkey suits."

"No!" said Red. "We thought they were very becoming. You need beer."

"I could do with some," Schmidty agreed.

Red proposed the toast.

"To crime," he said.

"And you have a fine place for it here, Doctor Sweeney," the inspector answered.

"You don't take any stock in this walking dead man, Inspector, do you?" Red asked.

"I don't know," Schmidty astonished me with his answer. "I've seen enough already to take stock in anything. There's guys around here that make the place unhealthy."

"Oh," said Red hastily, "these guys? They're all right. It's just the pirate suits that make them look wild. They're all respectable citizens like us: lawyers, stockbrokers, insurance agents, professors, doctors, big business men; in general, pillars of society, leaders of men, the usual run of successful dopes. This firehouse is full of guys who were born with silver spoons in their mouths and who developed lockjaw early enough to hang on to the precious hardware."

"Me," said Schmidty, "I don't trust disguises, but I didn't mean these guys. On my way into town I ran into a lad I've been missing around Broadway."

"You know, Schmidty," Red philosophized, "being a detective is something like being a doctor. You're likely to grow partial to your specialty. I know how it is. There's a colleague of mine who's a tonsil snatcher, does nothing else and he's good at it too. He can snip you a pair of tonsils faster and neater than you can snap a handcuff on a wrist, but he's enamored of his work. No matter what's wrong, from dandruff to ingrown toenails, his diagnosis is diseased tonsils and out they go. You go to him in perfect health, and he'll snatch your tonsils just for luck."

"What," Schmidty demanded, "has that got to do with me?"

"Well," said Red, "just as he specializes in tonsils, you, with the keed's able assistance, specialize in murderers. Whatever goes wrong you hunt a murderer, and if nothing goes wrong you hunt a murderer just in case."

"This one, Doctor Sweeney," the inspector said, "I didn't hunt, and I've never known for sure that he is a killer, though it's a good guess that he is. I really came down here to see what Baggy was up to, figuring that you might be too drunk to take care of him."

"Tsk, tsk," Red murmured reproachfully, "you don't trust me."

"Red," Schmidty declared, "I don't trust anyone, not when there's this kind of get-together of brother Elks. But, as I was saying, I came down here looking for Baggy and no one else. Oh, I did think that maybe while I was here I might have to get them to pump you out, too, but I wasn't looking to run into Stitch Johnson. College reunions, I could have sworn, would be one thing that wouldn't be in his line."

"And who," I asked, "is Stitch Johnson?"

"Stitch," Red murmured. "I know a surgeon named Duff. Everybody around the hospital calls him Stitch Duff, but that's because he's such a handy man with a suture."

"Johnson," said the inspector, "got his nickname another way. Sometime way back before I ever ran into him, he and another guy got into an argument. There was a knife involved, and Johnson got the sharp side of it right through his cheek. The other guy was probably after his eye and missed. Anyway, whoever it was sewed Johnson up was not such a handy guy with a suture. He got Johnson's cheek put together all wrong, made ruffles in it, kind of. It left Johnson with one hell of a scar. Since the sewing shows so much they call him Stitch."

"And a pretty piece of tact it is," Red laughed.

"Doctors," I sniffed, "are unfeeling ruffians."

"You didn't have a guy named Johnson with a crooked face in your class down here, did you?" the inspector asked.

"No," Red and I chorused.

"That's what I thought," Schmidty murmured. "Stitch isn't the college type."

"Where did you see him?" I asked.

"I was high-tailing it down here," Inspector Schmidt explained, "and a little more than a mile before I got here, the roads filled up with crazy guys trying to kill themselves or me or somebody."

"What?" I gasped.

"Oh," said Schmidty, "nothing fancy, just a lot of babies in all kinds of fancy suits driving while drunk. One drunk in a car can make the roads plenty dangerous. A couple of dozen in a couple of dozen cars are murder."

"It's like that down here this week end," I explained. "The lid's off."

"Yeah," said Inspector Schmidt, "I know and the cork's out. Well, I figured I'd get my bearings before the crazy men got any thicker. I didn't know just where this firehouse was so I pulled up at a roadhouse about a mile from here to ask. The place is called Stinker's Run. Ever hear of it?"

"It's called what?" Red demanded.

"Stinker's Run," Schmidty repeated.

"Sure," I said. "It's a new place, only been there a couple of years. Someone was telling me. It's a lousy dump."

"Does Stinker know?" Red asked.

"If a guy's got a roadhouse," Schmidty observed, "I should think he'd know about it. Who is Stinker?"

"Hey, Stinker," Red began yelling. "Stinker wanted over at the bar. Paging Stinker."

"Stinker," I explained, "is one of our boys. He doesn't own the roadhouse. It was just named after him or at least after his run."

"I don't get it." Schmidty shook his head.

"It's simple enough," I continued. "Stinker used to be a great halfback, the greatest of them all. In the Yale game in 1926 he intercepted a forward pass on our three-yard line and ran for a touchdown. It is the most famous and phenomenal run in the history of football and the great glory of our class. You say 1927 to anyone down here, and immediately they get a dreamy look in the eye and say 'Stinker's Run.'"

"Oh," said Schmidty.

Whatever further comment he had in mind was cut off by the arrival of Stinker, who had wandered over to the bar in response to Red's paging. Red performed the introductions.

"Schmidty," he said, "this is Tinker B. Smith, America's gift to the poured house. Stinker, this is Inspector Schmidty, the genius who slaps the gyves on all those murderers the keed here writes about."

I should explain that Stinker had claims to fame other than his football prowess. An architect of the modern persuasion, he had dotted the American countryside with super-efficient machines for living that the unenlightened persisted in calling dwelling houses. These were fabricated from concrete, glass and those mysterious plastics that modern industry tosses off as a by-product to the manufacture of breakfast foods or soap or something. Given the slightest encouragement, Stinker is likely to argue that it is stupid to lay bricks for a wall when it is so much easier to just pour out a wall of one of his newfangled materials. Hence Red's reference to the poured house.

"Have you heard?" I asked. "There's a dive down the road that's been named after you."

"Stinker's Run, you mean?" he asked. "An arrant cat's-meat shop with crepe-paper decorations."

"Then you know about it, Mr. Smith?" Schmidty asked.

"Call him Stinker," Red urged. "Politeness slows things up."

"A crowd of us went out to the dump awhile back," Stinker explained. "They sell something they call rye. It's not whisky, but it's an experience."

"Bad?" Schmidty asked.

"Now that, Inspector," Stinker considered, "would be a matter of taste. I don't care for it. In effect it's not unlike a kick in the groin, but the place keeps going so there must be some as like it."

"Maybe," Red suggested, "Stinker's Run has other attractions."

"There's a roulette setup in the back room," Stinker offered. "If the undergradu-

ates go out there to play that, they're dumber than they were in our day, and that's something I should never have thought possible."

"Crooked?" I asked.

"I tried it," said Stinker. "If that roulette table hasn't got four-wheel brakes, then I wasted my time along with my money the time I went broke at Monte Carlo."

"If Stitch runs it," said Schmidty with a strong inference that he thought we were prattling to no purpose, "it's got to be crooked."

"Who's Stitch?" Stinker asked.

"One of Schmidty's boys," Red explained. "He's a fugitive from New York, and the minute the inspector spotted him he figured we have an underworld down here."

"Would that be pucker-puss?" Stinker asked. "The guy with the asymmetrical face?"

"That's Stitch," Schmidty answered.

"Going to arrest him?" Stinker asked.

The inspector shrugged.

"Wish I could," he said. "But first of all I haven't got anything on him, nothing I can prove. Also, down here I'm just a visiting cop."

"Too bad," said Stinker dolefully. "I'm beginning to get sore at that bird Stitch. I don't like their using my name on that dump. Do you suppose I ought to sue them?"

"Names are nothing," Schmidty growled. "They made a good try at killing me."

"At Stinker's Run?" Red shouted. "Let's go down there and clean them up."

"Be your age, Red," Schmidty ordered curtly.

"That's right," Stinker added. "We're big boys now."

It took a bit of doing but I got them to shut up, and Inspector Schmidt told us his troubles. He went into Stinker's Run to ask his way to the firehouse, but when he saw Stitch behind the bar he began giving serious thought to my story of the corpse in the alley. They spent a few moments in guarded amenities, and Stitch told the inspector that Stinker's Run was his place and described it as just a quiet little roadhouse. Nonchalantly he asked Inspector Schmidt what he was doing away from town, and just as casually Schmidty told him that he had come down to see some friends. When Schmidty asked for directions to the firehouse, Stitch showed further curiosity.

"That where your friends hang out?" he asked.

"That," Schmidty told him, "is where I promised to meet them."

Stitch gave him the instructions he wanted, and Schmidty returned to his car, took off his shoes and set out to follow Stitch's directions. Less than a quarter of a mile down the road a car zipped out of the general maelstrom of drunken driving and made what looked like a deliberate effort to force Schmidty to swerve off the road. Fortunately the brakes on that police car he drives are kept constantly at the perfect peak of efficiency, and Schmidty managed a quick stop. He jumped for the other car which skidded into his left fender. Unfortunately he had his shoes off, and he fell afoul

of a little sharp stone on the road. That slowed him up seriously, not to speak of painfully, and the other car had time enough to back away from his fender and zip off before he could reach it or get a good look at its occupants. There was nothing for him to do but make a note of the car's number and hobble back to his own machine. At that point in the road, however, he took careful note of the nasty rock-strewn gully from which his excellent brakes had saved him.

"You know," Red mused, "the way some of the boys drive when they're drunk, it's a wonder people don't get killed in droves every reunion week end."

"The boy who tried to bump me into that gully," Schmidty observed, "wasn't drunk."

"How do you know he wasn't?" Stinker asked. "He certainly acted like it."

"No, he didn't," Schmidty insisted. "He didn't weave down the road or cut up. He came bearing down, and it looked like a deliberate attempt to force me off the road. Then when I jumped for his car he zipped out of there fast and straight. He was too much under control for a drunk."

"Hey," I interrupted. "You don't figure your friend Stitch?"

"I figure," Schmidty murmured, "that my friend Stitch was not glad to see me, that it was a good deal of a shock to him when I told him I was headed for this firehouse, and that he either followed me in that car or had me followed."

"You really think," Red gasped, "that he tried to kill you?"

"Well," Schmidty hesitated, "I don't say he had his heart set on killing me. He just wanted to get me out of town. If it had to be on a stretcher, that would be all right too. I mean it would be all right with Stitch. Then again maybe he just wanted to delay me some, didn't want me to get here too soon."

"There's nothing here," said Stinker. "I don't see —"

"There's the Zipper," I interrupted and explained our somnolent pal with the scorched jersey.

"If I ever thought," Red remarked, "that the Zipper's passing out could ever be a matter of the slightest note, you could fry me for a catfish."

"Me too," Stinker added. "In butter."

"It's not that the Zipper passed out," I protested. "I know that's just the usual thing with him, but he is wearing blue pants. He has got a scorched jersey, and he was mumbling about people pushing him around and trying to take his pants away from him."

"Where is he?" Schmidty demanded.

We led the inspector over to the other side of the firehouse. It took a bit of management. We had to skirt several of the gayer groups where conviviality had reached a pitch that tried to draw everything into its own orbit. We could have joined a dozen merry parties, but Schmidty and I had grimmer ideas, and Red and Stinker seemed to think that we gave promise of stronger excitement and more fun than any ordinary rollicking.

The Zipper was still on the bench where we had left him, but he had emerged from his stupor. I cannot say that he had emerged far, but he had achieved a muzzy kind of consciousness. As we pushed toward him I pointed him out to Schmidty.

"What's he doing?" the inspector asked. "Counting his fingers?"

I nodded. There seemed no point in going into any detail about the Zipper and his curious little ways. I knew the Zipper to be a remarkable lad. He is far and away the hardest drinker in our crowd. In our college days and in the years that had passed since commencement we had been about as good friends as the Zipper had, Red and myself. Stinker, since he was often away from New York on his house-pouring expeditions, had been seeing less of the Zipper, but the three of us probably knew more about the Zipper than anyone else in the world — at least we thought we did. We knew that the Zipper drank too much. There had been a time when we tried to make him taper off. In justice to ourselves, I should explain that it was not that we passed moral judgments on poor old Zipper. It was simply that it got to be a bore, his drinking so much. Now the rest of us, we could take it or leave it alone. We took it often enough, but not nearly as often or as hard as the Zipper. Every time we went on a party with him it was likely to develop into just another session of taking care of the Zipper. If he had been a happy drunk we should not have minded so much; but old Zipper when sober made grim and valiant, though obviously artificial, efforts to be gay; when drunk he was wholeheartedly despondent, unrestrainedly miserable. He had a curious ritual through which he went whenever he awoke from a drunken sleep, which in his case was almost the same thing as saying whenever he awoke. He would go through a kind of physical checkup, as though he were trying to make sure that he was still all there. When Schmidty saw him do something that looked as though he were counting his fingers, he was doing just that, counting them, reassuring himself that he still had ten. There had been one time when he counted eleven, and Stinker and I carted him off to a psychiatrist, but that is another story.

When we descended on him and introduced Inspector Schmidt, the Zipper had come back far enough to recognize us and even to force a grin. Our interrogation, in which Schmidty of course took the lead, seemed a grievous burden to him and he rapidly abandoned even his pretense of gaiety. As we feared, Zipper knew only that he had passed out. His memory of where he had been or what he had done was more than faulty. It was virtually blank.

His story, as he laboriously reconstructed it for us, was about normal for the Zipper. He had been drinking with the boys in the firehouse until about dinnertime, but he could not remember having any dinner. That was normal too. When he gets off to a good drinking start, he always loses all interest in food. I had seen him around the firehouse in the afternoon, and Stinker and Red had been with him from time to time, but before dinner he had drifted off by himself.

"Where have you been since?" Schmidty asked.

"I don't know." Zipper shrugged. "Around, I guess."

"Gilligan picked you up on the walk down by the memorial fountain," I tried to jog his memory. "He brought you up here."

"Nice of him," said Zipper. "He shouldn't have bothered."

If Gilligan said he had been down by the fountain, he supposed he had. He didn't remember it.

"Where did you get those pants?" I asked.

"Same place you got yours," Zipper began, but he broke off abruptly and stared at his legs.

"Hey," he continued. "Where did I get these pants? I had yellow ones like the rest of you. I know I did."

There was no apparent reason for him to think it so tragic that his pants were blue instead of yellow, but the discovery seemed to hit him hard. I figured that it was a shock to him. Here for years he had been having this urge to check up on himself every time he woke up, to see if he was still all intact. Now finally he found himself not all intact. His pants had changed color. A small matter it was, to be sure, but to the Zipper strangely distressing.

"Baggy tells me," Schmidty suggested, "that you were mumbling something about not wanting anyone to take these pants away from you."

"Did I?" said the Zipper. "I must have swiped them from some other drunk then."

"It's a funny thing to do," Schmidty observed. "Have you ever gone around swapping pants before?"

"No," said the Zipper, "but I guess I was specially violent this time. I think I hurt myself."

He felt himself gingerly, running his hands over his chest and under his arms.

"Where?" Red asked.

"I don't know where," Zipper snapped. "I don't even know where I've been."

"I meant where does it hurt, you dope?" Red explained.

"Oh," said the Zipper, "my armpits."

Red looked grave.

"Take your shirt off," he said. "Let me see."

"Aw," Zipper protested. "I'll be all right. Leave me alone, Red."

"Take your shirt off," Red repeated.

"Leave me alone," Zipper sulked. "Stinker, make the big lug lay off me."

"Take your shirt off, Zip," Stinker answered. "You let Red have a look at you, or I'll beat the ears off you."

One has to be firm with the Zipper. As soon as he saw that he would have no allies he did as Red told him. He skinned out of the red-and-yellow jersey, and we all had a look. The rest of us waited for Red's judgment. He felt of Zipper's upper arms and shoulders and examined his armpits. Under Red's firm fingers, Zipper winced. Even to a layman's eye the marks were obvious and peculiar. They were small black-and-blue bruises on the shoulder just above the armpit. Strangely symmetrical, the marks

were identical on both shoulders. In front, each shoulder had three distinct bruises in a horizontal row over the armpit with a fourth much fainter than the other three, a little less than a half an inch lower down and on the inside where the shoulder muscle joins the chest. In the back, on each shoulder right above the armpit was a single bruise, slightly larger than any of those in front. All the bruises, front and back, were slightly longer than they were wide. Each of the big ones in front looked about an inch long and a little more than half as wide. The bruises in back were slightly wider, more nearly circular in shape. Red stepped back and scratched his head.

"Medically," he said, "these are just bruises, mild bruises and of no significance, but I thought I had seen everything."

"I must have taken a fall," Zipper muttered.

"No," Red shook his head. "When you fall you don't bruise in funny little spots like that."

We all looked to Schmidty for an explanation. I hoped for at least a theory, but Stinker and Red assumed that he would come right out with an infallible reconstruction of what had happened to the Zipper. In the light of his later conclusions, I am inclined to think that he could have delivered the goods on Zipper's bruises right then and there, but at that moment Gilligan butted in and turned our minds to other things. He came sprinting through the firehouse and plucked at my elbow.

"Mr. Bagby," he whispered. "I've got a stiff with scratches on his neck. You better come and look at him."

CHAPTER THREE

WE ALL WENT. Gilligan was feeling humbled and for the first time in his life was impressed with my sapience. Red and Stinker he knew, and I introduced Schmidty and the Zipper. For a moment I was afraid that there might be some difficulty about Schmidty. Small-town cops are likely to be touchy and the odds are that they should resent any intrusion of big-city cops into their affairs, but Gilligan astonished me. So far as I could make out, he felt that the ordinary troubles that fall to his lot in the course of a reunion week end were quite enough. A corpse was too much extra bother and he seemed genuinely grateful for any help Schmidty might give him. We piled into Gilligan's car, a two-seater that was pretty close quarters for Gilligan, Red and myself. Schmidty took Stinker and the Zipper in his own car and clung to our taillight as we drove through town. Some of the boys saw us start and were about to rescue us from the clutches of the police, but we all shouted that we had not been pinched, and we managed to get away without too much ado.

Gilligan drove us down the river road and pulled up at the boathouse. There were a couple of other cops on the boathouse dock and with them a boy and girl. The

boy I spotted immediately as an undergraduate. He had the look, and furthermore there was no mistaking his varsity sweater. The girl was a pretty little thing, just such a girl as you see in the stands at any big football game, except that this one was prettier and she looked unhappier than any girl could at a football game, even when the other side is winning. The body was laid out on the dock. My first quick glance was enough to convince me that this was the man I had seen by flickering match light in the alley. Red dropped to his knees beside the body, and one of the cops warned him not to touch it. Gilligan, however, explained that Red was a doctor, and he was permitted to make a quick examination. He went about it with expert efficiency, and I had time to look the corpse over in my own less practiced fashion. Naturally I looked for the things I wanted to find, and in the bright glare of Gilligan's flash I saw much that interested me. The corpse wore the bright yellow pants that went with our pirate suits. The rest of his uniform, however, was missing. Above the waist he wore only a white undershirt. His hair was soaking wet, and his head and shoulders lay in a spot of wetness as though they had been dripping on the boathouse planks. Right over his chest I saw a little brown mark on his undershirt, and on his throat were the scratches I remembered from my encounter with the corpse in the alley. Abruptly Red scrambled to his feet and dusted off the knees of his trousers.

"He's dead all right, Gilligan," he said.

Gilligan turned to me.

"Recognize him, Mr. Bagby?" he asked.

I nodded.

"He's the man I fell over in the alley."

"Are you sure?" Gilligan peered at me anxiously.

"Absolutely," I insisted. "There are the scratches on his neck. You remember I told you about them, and anyway I recognize him."

"Who is he?" One of the other cops spoke up.

I shrugged.

"I don't know," I said. "He's nobody I know."

"He's one of you fellows from the firehouse," Gilligan observed. "He's got the same yellow pants on."

"Do you know him?" I asked Red.

But neither Red nor Stinker could identify the dead man. The Zipper never remembers a face, so naturally he was no help. Stinker, however, had a suggestion.

"Brink's our man," he said. "Get Brink to look at him."

Although Red, the Zipper and I concurred in the idea immediately, it had to be explained to Inspector Schmidt and the representatives of the local law. Brink is Pete Brinkley, secretary of the class of 1927. A born politician, Brink memorized the faces and names of every man in our class. It was the first thing he did when we got to college, and by the third week of freshman year he was able to walk across the campus and greet every classmate by name. I thought it was a hard road to popularity, but

Brink took it, and his photographic memory had never failed him. Brink would be able to tell us our corpse's name the minute he saw him. There was no doubt about that. Red also suggested that the body be turned over to a doctor.

"You're a doctor and you've seen him," Gilligan objected.

"You should have an autopsy," Red explained. "Mine was just a surface examination."

"I know what happened," Gilligan announced. "This guy died in the alley where Mr. Bagby found him. Later some friends of his, probably drunk, picked him up and brought him down here. They must have figured that they'd dip him in the lake and bring him to. They dipped him, and then when they found out he was dead they got scared and left him here."

"Do they get that drunk down here?" Schmidty asked with the completely ingenuous air of a seeker after information. "Drunk enough to dunk an unconscious man head first in the lake?"

"Sure," chorused Gilligan and his fellow cops.

"But," interrupted our boy in the varsity sweater, "I found him with his head under water. His friends wouldn't just leave him that way, lying on the edge of the dock on his stomach with his head and neck hanging down into the water."

"Maybe," suggested one of Gilligan's fellow policemen, "he didn't die in the alley. Maybe he was just drunk when his friends brought him down here. If he had a bad heart or something he could have died when they dipped him in the water. Then they'd get scared and they'd leave him like that, like he'd fallen down with his head in the lake."

"Whatever it was," Gilligan said briskly, "we have to find the guys that brought him here."

"If," Schmidty interrupted, "you are going to believe that he wasn't dead until he got down here, you have to consider the possibility that he came to after Baggy left him in the alley, and maybe he wandered down here under his own power and fell in the lake all by himself."

"Yeah," said Gilligan slowly. "Is that what you think happened, Inspector Schmidt?"

"No," said Schmidty, "I don't. That's one of the things I'd say couldn't have possibly happened."

"Could you give us your line on it, Inspector?" Gilligan asked deferentially.

"Glad to," said Schmidty, "though I wouldn't call it a line on the case, not yet. But I have noticed a couple of little things that are worth keeping in mind."

"Yeah," Gilligan prompted him eagerly.

"First of all," Schmidty expounded, "there are the scratches on his neck. Baggy saw those in the alley. Doctor Sweeney is right about an autopsy. It will show a lot of things we ought to know. If it shows that this bird died of shock or heart failure, then we figure along those lines. If there's water in his lungs and he died of drowning, then

it's something else. But I think he died another way, and I want an autopsy to make sure."

"How do you think he died?" Gilligan was waiting for no autopsies.

"Strangulation," Red answered for Schmidty. "I'll wait for an autopsy before I swear for it, but if he wasn't choked to death, it wasn't because the guy who had his mitts around this lad's throat didn't try hard enough."

"Yep," Schmidty agreed. "It's a safe bet that a good job of choking had been done on him before Baggy found him in the alley by the firehouse. And that isn't all. He was all dressed up in a pirate suit when Baggy saw him, now he's got nothing left but the pants. Now often when people are trying to bring an unconscious guy around, they loosen his clothes, but those pirates' suits are loose enough to suit anybody."

Schmidty indicated the four examples at hand. The Zipper, thinner than I am, could have wound his red-and-yellow jersey around him twice, and even Red, who is big and husky, and Stinker, the biggest guy I know, had plenty of slack in their pirate suits. The corpse was biggish, but not nearly as big as either Red or Stinker.

"What does that mean?" Gilligan asked.

"It means that somebody did a lot of monkeying with this fellow between the time Baggy saw him in the alley and when he turned up here," Inspector Schmidt answered. "Somebody swiped his monkey jacket and his striped shirt and his sash. Now Mr. Tracy here, if my figuring is right, has the dead man's shirt."

"Me?" gasped the Zipper.

"It looks like it, Zip, old boy," I said softly. "Can't you remember anything?"

"Not a thing," he sighed. "I wish you guys wouldn't be so damn mysterious."

Schmidty pointed to the brown spot on the dead man's undershirt and it didn't take Zipper long to catch on. He took off his jersey and we tried it on the corpse. The little hole burned through the jersey fitted exactly over the scorched mark on the undershirt. Schmidty's explanation was virtually superfluous. The corpse, when I had dropped the lighted match on it in the alley, had been wearing the jersey. My match had burned through the jersey and had scorched his undershirt. Sometime after that the corpse had lost his jersey, and the Zipper got it.

"Hey," Zip interrupted, "I don't like this. I started out this afternoon with a jersey just like this. I got drunk. I'm not denying that. Maybe I lost my shirt while I was drunk. That can happen too, but even when I'm drunk I don't go around stealing clothes from corpses. You know I don't, Baggy."

"Of course you don't, Zip," I murmured. "Don't worry. We'll get to the bottom of this."

"Meanwhile," Zipper complained, "may I have my shirt back? I'm cold."

We started to strip the jersey off the corpse, since it had served its purpose for our experiment. When we lifted the body to pull the jersey up over its head, it flipped over on its side. The pretty girl clinging to the undergraduate in the varsity sweater let out a shrill yip.

"Oh," she shrilled. "He has purple legs."

We looked down, and I must admit that it was a startling sight. More accustomed to such things, I was not bothered by it, but it was natural that it should be a severe shock to the girl. The corpse's trousers had caught on a nail in the dock, and when we moved the body a large triangular rent spread through the sleazy yellow stuff, revealing a section of darkly discolored skin at the back of the dead man's thigh.

"That's nothing, Miss," I tried to reassure the poor girl. "That happens all the time. It's known as cyanosis."

I started to explain how the force of gravity in a dead body makes the blood settle in those portions of the body which are lowest, causing a dark discoloration; but I was interrupted by Red, who with Schmidty was showing the most particular interest in the purple thigh.

"This," he said, "is not like any cyanosis I've ever seen."

"Damnedest-looking thing," Schmidty muttered and reached for his handkerchief.

"Isn't it?" Red agreed.

"What's the matter with it?" I demanded.

Schmidty rubbed the corpse's thigh with his handkerchief. Then he held the handkerchief toward the light. There was a purplish stain on the handkerchief.

"This," said Red, "is the first time in my extensive medical experience that I've ever seen or heard of cyanosis that rubs off."

"Rubs off?" I gasped.

That rather took the wind out of my sails, and I felt a bit foolish. After all, I had been a bit smug with my scientific explanation of what happens to the blood after death. Cyanosis is like the discoloration of a bruise. It is not just a surface manifestation, and you can't rub its color off any more than you could wipe away a black eye.

"It's paint or dye," Schmidty explained, "something like that."

"I might steal a corpse's shirt away from him," the Zipper complained, "but I don't go around dyeing dead men purple. Even my best friends won't accuse me of that."

We caught the implied reproach, and Stinker, Red and I hastened to reassure him. We promised that no one suspected him of anything.

"Do you suppose," Stinker wondered aloud, "do you suppose he's that way all over? He might be banded like an Easter egg."

Gilligan, however, was not to be diverted by such flights of fancy. He turned to Inspector Schmidt, to whom he was evidently attributing powers at least oracular.

"Then you think it's murder?" he asked.

"For the present," said Schmidty, "we can call it that. We ought to have the autopsy as soon as possible, and before the autopsy it would be a good idea to get hold of this guy that knows everybody. It might help if we had an identification."

"We can probably pick Brink up at the firehouse," Stinker suggested.

"Yes," I added. "He pretty much runs things at reunions, and you're certain to find him on deck any time."

"Good," said Schmidty and turned to the undergraduate who now had his arm around his girl.

Naturally enough, the girl was not feeling very well.

"You," said Schmidty. "You found the body down here."

"Yes," said the boy. "We came down here. I took Peggy up to the boathouse porch, and before we even sat down I spotted the body on the edge of the dock. Peggy stayed on the porch, and I came down here to see what I could do."

"Why?" Schmidty interrupted.

"Why not?" the boy snapped. "He looked like a drunk, and I thought he was too close to the water. I didn't see until I got down here that his head was really in the water. I just thought I'd move him away from the edge where he'd be safer."

"When you saw that his head was under water," Schmidty continued his questioning, "what did you do?"

The boy explained that he hauled the body up on to the dock and tried artificial respiration. He called the girl while he worked and sent her to the nearest house to get help. As he described it, she was gone for several minutes while he worked on the corpse. When she returned, she had a policeman with her.

Schmidty switched to the girl.

"Why didn't you go for a doctor, Miss?" he asked. "Why a policeman?"

The girl flushed.

"I didn't go for anybody special," she faltered. "I just went for help. I was going to go to the first house down the road and tell them what happened. I hoped there'd be somebody there who'd know what to do."

With the assistance of one of Gilligan's colleagues she explained exactly what had happened. Quite by accident, a cop was coming along on a motorcycle just as she came out on the river road. She hailed him and told him her story. He left her waiting for him where the boathouse road joined the river road while he went back to a police patrol box and phoned headquarters. When he returned she led him to the boathouse, where her boy friend was still trying to pump air into the dead man.

"One other thing," she added. "While I was waiting for the policeman, a car came down the boathouse road, going awfully fast. It whizzed right past me and around the corner into the river road and went speeding toward town."

"You didn't tell us about any car, Miss," Gilligan reproached her.

"I didn't think that there was any point in mentioning it," she answered.

"Did you think there was any point in not mentioning it?" Schmidty asked silkily.

"No," answered the girl. "I didn't think about it at all."

"Hey, listen," the boy came to her rescue. "Why should Peggy think there was any point in mentioning a car she saw? We had no idea of anything like murder. We just thought this fellow was drunk and had wandered down here by himself and fell in. Of course, if Peggy had known that there would be any suspicions of murder or anything like that, she'd have told the police about the car right away."

"That's reasonable," Stinker remarked. "You've got to be fair, Inspector. As soon as the suggestion of murder came up, the young lady did tell you about this car. She didn't have to volunteer the information, you know."

"Gee," said the boy, "thanks, Mr. Smith."

"This kid a friend of yours?" Schmidty demanded of Stinker.

"Gee, no," the boy stammered. "He doesn't know me, but everybody knows him. He's famous."

"Only locally," Stinker grinned.

Schmidty grunted a vaguely impolite doubt and got back to business.

"What kind of a car was it, Miss?" he asked.

She described it as a large sedan driven by a man in a reunion suit. She thought that there was a second man in the car but said that it was just an impression she had. She couldn't be sure.

"One of these pirate suits?" Schmidty asked.

"I don't know," she answered. "I just remember that it was fancy, no ordinary clothes."

"Did you catch the car's license number?" Gilligan put his oar in.

"I never thought to look."

The girl, despite her confusion, spoke with what struck me as an engaging air of candor.

"You did think to look who was in the car, didn't you?" Schmidty shot the question at her.

"Yes," she answered, "I did. I thought maybe Bob had hailed the car when it passed the boathouse. After all, he might have been in the car with the — the dead man."

She cast a faltering glance at the corpse and looked hastily in the other direction.

"What made you think he'd be in the car?" Schmidty pressed her. "He had promised to wait for you to come back, hadn't he?"

"Yes," she murmured. "He said he'd be at the boathouse trying to revive the man. But it wasn't a date or anything like that. We were just trying to get help for the man. It would be natural for him to hail a car as it went by and rush the man to a hospital or something. After all, I could find my own way back to the hotel."

Even Schmidty's suspicions succumbed to the apparently ingenuous willingness of her answer. He left her and turned on the boy.

"Sure," he said, "that makes sense. Did you hail the car as it passed here?"

"No," the boy answered.

"Why not? You wanted help as quick as possible, didn't you?"

"Of course." The boy reddened. "I would have hailed the car if I'd seen it, but it didn't go by here."

"The young lady here says it came out of this road," Schmidty reminded him, and the girl nodded vigorously.

The boy shrugged.

"It must have passed here, Bob," the girl argued. "It came from this direction, and there was no car parked between here and the river road. I would have seen it sure. I was looking for anyone who could help us."

"Don't be scared, kid," said Stinker with gruff kindliness. "You're all right."

"Well," the boy gulped, "if Peggy says a car came by here, there must have been a car. But you see I was bent over this man here working on him, and I wasn't watching the road. I didn't see it pass and I guess I was so busy I didn't hear it."

"Where does this boathouse road go beyond here?" Schmidty directed the question at Gilligan. "Are there any houses or anything along it?"

"No," said Gilligan. "It doesn't go anywhere."

I was about to contradict him, thinking that he had misunderstood Schmidty's question. It was true that there were no houses on the boathouse road. It runs from the river road past the boathouse, about a half a mile to the state road. Before I could explain about the state road, however, Gilligan elaborated his statement.

"Ordinarily," he continued, "you can cut through from the river road to the state road on this road here, but we had a big storm down here two nights back and it blew down some big trees. They haven't been cleared away yet, and the road is blocked about halfway down from here. No car could get through."

That information changed the picture considerably though I could not see that the change was in any way important. Whether this car that the boy had failed to hail had come in from the river road and turned back when it found the road blocked, or if it had come through from the state road seemed minor and irrelevant. Schmidty, however, took great satisfaction in this information about the road.

In fact he showed an incomprehensible interest in the geography of the region at that point. He seemed to want to know all about the roads and asked particularly how generally known it was that the boathouse road was blocked. No one could tell him much about that. Gilligan explained that the road was little traveled because the river road turns and follows the far shore of the lake around to join up with the state road. The boathouse road is narrower and not nearly so well-surfaced, and since it parallels the route you follow if you take the river road all the way to the state road most traffic goes by the river road all the way. The boathouse road is not even a short-cut, although at first you would expect that it should be, since it follows the near shore of the lake. The trouble with it is that it twists and turns so much that it loses more mileage than you gain by the cutoff. For that reason it is never used much as a through road. Most of the cars that come in to it are headed for the boathouse.

"No one would know the road was blocked," Gilligan concluded, "unless they'd tried to get to the boathouse from the state road. I guess some have tried it and maybe they told some others, but I wouldn't know how many people might have heard about it."

In any event, Schmidty was finally satisfied that it was very likely that a person

who knew the local roads well could have not known that the boathouse road was blocked. I rather wished that he might pick some more comfortable place for all this talk about the roads. Although it was nice down by the lake, it was definitely chilly. I had never gotten that sweater I was after when I tripped over the corpse in the alley. It had slipped my mind until I felt the chilly breeze that blew off the lake. The Zipper, whose jersey Gilligan had attached as evidence, did not give a hoot how audible was the chattering of his teeth. The Zipper was very shaky and he made no secret of it. It was not the cold, however, that bothered me most. Under any circumstances, loitering around a corpse is not what I should call cozy or snug, but out there at night it was definitely in the category of eerie experiences. Clustered thick behind the boathouse were the woods, and they looked mighty dark and lonely and silent. By day, when there is no murder afoot, they are lovely woods, but at that time I felt a strong preference for something a lot chummier than all those big black trees that dripped dark shadows all around us. When I say all around us, I am not forgetting the lake. It is a very narrow lake. From where we were standing, over to the other bank is just a hoot without even the holler and both banks are thickly wooded. The trees across the lake looked so close that I felt as though I were almost standing in their shadow. As it turned out, I was not the only one in the group with a case of jumpy nerves.

Suddenly there was a loud splashing noise out in the lake and we all jumped — all, that is, except the corpse with the purple thighs.

"What was that?" Schmidty asked.

"A frog jumping into the lake," Red suggested.

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there were four or five more splashes. They didn't seem so loud because now we were looking out at the lake, and the element of surprise was gone. We could see the water spurting up around the dock.

"It looks," I remarked, "like a whole family of frogs jumping —"

I never got around to finishing that sentence because just then something went whizzing by my ear, and Stinker grunted angrily.

"Someone," he snorted, "is heaving rocks at us from across the lake."

It was not that Stinker was so much cleverer than the rest of us that made him tumble first to what was going on. It was simply that the stone I had felt whizzing by my ear had hit him in the shoulder. Three or four stones followed in rapid succession. They didn't hit any of us. But they landed on the dock where we were standing.

"Cut that out," Stinker bellowed, "or we'll come over there and beat the bejesus out of you."

One more stone fell on the dock. It gleamed white in the moonlight. Red picked it up. He had been gathering all the stones that landed on the dock and was heaving them back in the general direction of the other shore. Except for the first couple of splashes our adversary across the lake was showing himself a marksman. He had found the range, and every stone that came sailing across landed on the dock. But when Red

picked up the white stone he didn't throw it back.

"Hey," he said, "look at this one. It's wrapped in paper."

"Gimme," said Schmidty and grabbed for it.

"Nuts to that," Red refused. "I can peg it farther than you can."

"Don't throw that, you dope," Schmidty yowled. "Let me see it."

Red already had his arm back for the throw, but Stinker caught his hand in time. Schmidty took the stone and held it under the light. Wrapped around it was a piece of white paper, folded, and printed across the paper were the words "Flatfoot Schmidt."

"There they go," yelled one of the cops.

We looked across the lake and saw a car's headlights on the river road where all had been dark only a minute before when we had been peering right at the spot in an effort to see the guy who was throwing the stones at us. The cop had seen the lights flash on. Even as we looked up the lights began to move. They were pointed toward the state road.

"Stop," Schmidty shouted. "Stop or we'll shoot."

The car didn't stop. We could see the moving lights and they had begun picking up speed. Schmidty drew his gun and fired at the dubious target. I thought it was a valiant if hopeless effort, but I didn't realize that it was foolhardy as well. Looking back on it, I see now that I was quite right about the unlikelihood of hitting a moving car across the lake, when all you had to aim at were headlights that flickered on and off as they whizzed by the big trees. I didn't realize though that we, static and well lighted on the pier, were a much better target. That fact, however, was brought home to us forcibly and quickly. We heard the sounds of answering fire from across the lake. The car had stopped and doused its lights, when suddenly the Zipper went "Oooff" and crumpled. Red dropped to his side.

"They've hit old Zip," he shouted.

"Let's go after them," yelled Gilligan.

Schmidty slipped me his gun.

"Keep firing," he said quietly. "If they don't know we're coming around after them, you might be able to hold them there until we get there."

I sent my first shot into the light that hung over the pier. Although Red cursed me for it I was pretty proud of my quick thinking. If we were going to have an artillery duel across the lake, I didn't want to be an illuminated target shooting out into the darkness. Also I figured that Schmidty and Gilligan would have a better chance of sneaking up on the enemy if they didn't make a brightly lighted exit from the boathouse dock. My precaution, however, was not a complete success. You know how voices carry across water. When Gilligan had decided to go after the boys across the lake, he shouted his intention. It was a forgivable mistake, considering his excitement, but the enemy must have heard him because they fired only a few more shots, happily wild now that our light was out, and then there was silence.

The silence was punctuated by Red's grumbling. One of the cops stayed with us and he had a flashlight. Red made him train it on the Zipper, and by that hardly satisfactory light he went to work. There was a trickle of blood down the Zipper's arm. I saw that in the brief glance I threw over my shoulder, but I did not dare spare too much attention from our friends across the lake. I was hoping they'd show a light and let me have a good shot at them. They were too smart, however, for that; and their silence was worrying me. I couldn't figure what they might be doing.

"If those trees weren't down across the road," Stinker grumbled, "we could close in on them from this side too."

"I think they've lit out," I muttered.

"What the hell was the idea of shooting the light out?" Red snarled. "I can't see a damn thing."

"Is the Zipper hurt bad?" I asked.

"I don't think so," Red murmured. "I'd feel better about this if I could really see. Try to move your fingers, Zip, old keed. Can you?"

I heard Red say "good" a moment later and guessed that Zip had moved his fingers. After getting him to move his arm, and exploring as much as he could in a poor light with his bare hands, Red concluded that it was just a flesh wound and not serious.

The conclusion put Red in a better humor, and I explained why I had smashed the light. Grudgingly Red admitted that I had probably done the right thing. He commandeered all our handkerchiefs and ripped them into strips to improvise a bandage for the Zipper's arm.

"Hey," the Zipper said suddenly, "do you really think they could see us over here under the light?"

"Sure thing," I answered. "You don't get marksmanship as good as that when a guy is shooting by sound alone. It's only the boys in storybooks who can hit a mark by ear."

"Yeah," Stinker added. "And before that, when they were tossing rocks at us, they certainly were seeing us well enough to keep them right in the groove."

"Then," said the Zipper, "I wonder."

"What, keed?" asked Red.

"I wonder if they were just returning Inspector Schmidt's fire when they pinked me," he answered. "I wonder if maybe they couldn't recognize me. Maybe it wasn't an accident that I was the one that got hit. Maybe it was an accident that the aim wasn't quite good enough to kill me."

"That's screwy," Stinker laughed. "Why should anyone want to shoot you?"

Even before the Zipper answered I felt the skin prickle at the back of my neck, and I shivered under a sudden chill.

"I don't know," the Zipper murmured. "I wish I did, but I'm in this up to the neck. We have this dead guy here and it turns out that I'm wearing his shirt. And before that — Why should anyone put this funny set of bruises on my shoulders?"

"That's right, Zip," Red agreed. "You better keep sober now and stick close to us. I don't like this, not any of it."

"O.K., Red," the Zipper chuckled. "I'll stay sober. I never knew a fellow could have so much fun sober. This is pretty exciting, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Stinker said dryly, "it's great, more fun than termites."

"Is it always like this, Baggy" — the Zipper turned to me to share his enthusiasm — "shooting and mystery and all that when you and the inspector solve these cases?"

"This one," I sighed, "isn't solved yet."

The boy and girl just sat there watching us wide-eyed. Poor kids, they looked plenty scared and they had every reason to be. He had his arm around her and was holding her close. She looked about as thrilled as she was frightened, but he looked worried and I thought a bit grim. The Zipper was sitting up and insisting that he felt well enough to stand when Schmidty and Gilligan returned empty-handed. Our adversaries who had taken pot shots at us across the lake had lit out for the state road long before Schmidty and Gilligan could get out to the river road and around to the other side of the lake. They had followed the trail all the way down to the state road, but gave it up there as hopeless. Traffic was heavy on the state road and, not knowing anything about the car they were looking for, it was no use.

"What was the paper tied around the stone?" I asked. "Was it a note?"

"Yeah," said Schmidty.

"Have you read it? What did it say?"

The questions came in chorus. Schmidty showed us the note. Printed on it was a simple message: "Beat it back to New York while you're still in one piece, flatfoot. You're out of your territory down here, and we don't like outsiders."

"How inhospitable," murmured Stinker.

"I call it plain bad manners," the Zipper added.

"I call it just plain silly," Schmidty growled. "Back in town murderers tend to their murdering. They don't bother with this kind of unnecessary storybook stuff. Notes tied to stones — it makes a man want to spit."

CHAPTER FOUR

I NEED NOT tell you that the note wrapped around the stone merely whetted Schmidty's appetite for the chase. Gilligan, I think, was so thoroughly awed by the inspector's fame and sapience that it never occurred to him to consider the note remarkable. Just as he believed that Inspector Schmidt knew all criminals, living and dead, he found it no more than natural that all criminals should know the inspector. Schmidty and I, of course, knew better. Several of the boys back in the firehouse had seen Schmidty, and a few of them had met him. They knew he was

in town. Otherwise we had to assume that no one else thereabouts knew him or knew he was on the case except Stitch Johnson of Stinker's Run.

"Do you think your old pal, Stitch, tossed that note at us?" I asked.

"Possible," Schmidty answered. "If it was Stitch, though, somebody's been teaching him how to spell."

Schmidty tucked the note in his pocket and turned his mind to several immediate matters. He gave Gilligan the license number of the car that had tried to run him off the road between Stinker's Run and the firehouse, and Gilligan promised to have the number checked against motor-vehicles bureau records. The local cops removed the body from the boathouse landing and hauled it off. As soon as arrangements had been made for an autopsy at the town hospital, I called the firehouse and got Pete Brinkley on the phone. I told him that one of our boys had been killed and was at the hospital unidentified. He promised to meet us there and make the identification. At the hospital Red really went to work on the Zipper's bullet wound. We got rid of the two kids who had found the body. Gilligan took their names and addresses, and they assured him that they would not leave town until they should hear from him that they would not be needed any more. The boy gave his name as Robert Larraby, senior class, and his dormitory address was 41 Turner Hall. Peggy turned out to be Margaret James, and she was staying at the hotel. It didn't take Red long to fix the Zipper up. The bullet had just grazed him and he required only the customary precautions against infection. Topping these off with a neat bandaging job made the Zipper ready for anything that might come up, and plenty came.

Brink made good time down to the hospital, but he ran into Zip before he saw the corpse. The Zipper, shirtless, was a sight to behold, and Brink took it all in at first glance: the strangely bruised shoulder and the fresh surgical dressing.

"Boy, oh boy," he murmured, "this must have been a man-sized brawl. One dead and Zip among the wounded."

Always true to form, Brink was ready to dash in with a job of fixing. He had it all figured out that Zip had been in a drunken fight and had killed a man. Before we even took him to see the corpse, he was busy figuring out ways to hush the whole thing up. Brink, you must know, is that kind of guy, full of the good name of the old school and the good name of the old class.

"We haven't the slightest idea what it was." I tried to explain. "Not yet."

"This chap that died," Brink asked, "was he in an accident or sick or something?"

It was obvious that he was voicing a last desperate flicker of hope that there might not necessarily be a scandal on which he would have to exercise his talents for suppression.

"We don't even know that for sure yet," I told him. "We have good reasons to think we've got a murder on our hands."

"The Zipper didn't do it, did he?" Brink exclaimed.

"Zip," I said, "is mixed up in it some way. Just how we've got to find out. He

doesn't remember anything, and we don't know. But I'm sure we'll be able to clear him. You know the Zipper. He wouldn't harm a fly."

Brink nodded but I knew what he was thinking. We felt sure that the Zipper wouldn't hurt anybody, that if he should ever do harm in this world it would be only to himself. When I say we, I mean Stinker, Red and myself. We knew the Zipper well, better than anyone else, and I think we understood him — at least as far as it has ever been possible to understand him. Brink, however, never liked the Zipper. Brink is a great one for respectability and doing the right thing in the right way. He is rather stiff-necked about excess, not probably for moral reasons but rather because he finds excess of any kind too florid, too likely to make a person conspicuous, almost certain to lift a man out of the quiet pattern of gentlemanly decorum which Brink holds dear, second only to his regard for his own personal popularity. In Brink's mind, the Zipper drank too much. I think he honestly hoped that poor old Zip had not already come to the bad end he foresaw for him, but mingled with this hope that Zip should turn out to be no murderer there was just that little natural touch of satisfaction that goes with seeing things working out as expected.

Whatever his speculations about the Zipper, however, they were tossed right out of Brink's head by his very first glance at the corpse. That dead man was a shock to Brink. Now I know from my own experience that there are very few people who can be rated as such old hands at viewing corpses that they can go through it as a routine without kicking up some ripple in the slick surface of their equanimity. Brink, I knew, was not one of those, but Brink — in addition to the usual emotions that turn up in the presence of death — had a set of reactions that were more peculiarly his own. I was watching him pretty closely because I had hoped that he would be startled out of his smugness, so I saw the whole show. There was the natural revulsion. You can read that on any man's face. Some men grow pale and some sweat a lot, but even the calmest and most beautifully controlled show that little flutter of the nostrils. I am sure you have all seen it. It is a futile quiver, just perceptible, as though for a moment a person might, forgetting that the nose has no sphincter muscle, think that he can make his nostrils pinch together unassisted and shut out the very smell of death.

With Brink, however, that moment of revulsion was just a moment, quickly superseded by a scowl of perplexity. We all stood around the table while Brink frowned over the corpse. So sure we had been that he would be able to put a name to the unknown body at a moment's notice, that we were caught holding our breaths. We had thought that he would come out with the name before there would be time for another breath, but he didn't. The silence was broken by no word. It seemed to me that we just all sighed at once.

"Well," said Schmidty after this choral exhalation, "who is he?"

Brink scratched his head.

"Damned," said he, "if I know."

"Well, fry me for a catfish," Red exclaimed.

"Me too," said Stinker, "in hawg drippin's."

"Oh, come now, Brink," the Zipper urged. "Agitate the old cranium. It'll come back to you. You know everybody in our class."

"I thought I did," Brink growled. "Damn it all, I do. I have never in my life forgotten a face or a name, but I don't know this man."

Schmidty, who had never had our experience of Brink's phenomenal memory, was less disappointed than the rest of us by this failure. Himself a man who never forgets a rogue's gallery face, he should have had greater faith in the man who knows everyone, but he treated it as a half-expected impasse.

"If we can't pick up someone who knows him," he shrugged, "we'll have to see if maybe we can tag him by his underwear and shoes."

We had already carried our investigation of the corpse far enough to find that the underwear he had on was new. Since it had never been laundered we had no laundry marks to aid in identification. The underwear, furthermore, was a very slender hope, since it was a nationally distributed brand and we could find on it no marks or labels to indicate the store, or even the city, in which it had been purchased. The shoes were a better possibility. They had the mark of a New York shop, but they were very ordinary black-and-white sports oxfords — the kind of shoes that any busy shop sells in large quantities in the spring of the year. We could not hope too much that the store would be able to give us much of a lead to the purchaser of so unremarkable a pair of shoes. Schmidty regarded the whole problem from the first as a tough nut to crack, but I had pinned my faith on Brink, and it was a blow when he failed us.

"The funny part of it is," I remarked, "that I find his face familiar. I was sure you'd know him right off, Brink."

"His face is familiar, all right," Brink agreed. "But it's no go, gentlemen. I just don't know him. I'm sorry."

At the time I had no thought to spare for Brink's feelings, but on thinking it over later, it occurred to me that it must have been a grim moment for him. He was genuinely unhappy. After all, when a man's chief claim to fame is a reputation for infallibility in remembering names and faces, he must find it at least disconcerting to fail in a pinch. Furthermore this was a rather public flop.

"Is there anyone else over to the firehouse who knows people?" the inspector asked, rubbing salt into poor Brink's wounds.

Brink, however, was a sport about it. I must confess that he took that inconsiderate question in very good part and even came up with a suggestion that was not without intelligence.

"I don't think," he said, "that there is anyone who knows as many of the boys in the class as I do."

"You can count on that, Schmidty," Stinker agreed. "If Brink doesn't know him then he's the man nobody knows."

"Oh," Brink blushed. "I wouldn't go that far. I guess I'm just slipping, fellows,

but this man must have had friends in the class. It's just a question of finding the men that know him."

"Could we maybe," the Zipper suggested rather idiotically, "haul him over to the firehouse and put him on exhibition over there? Then all the boys could have a try at identifying him."

Brink shuddered.

"I'm afraid," he demurred, "that would be likely to cast a pall over reunion."

"Not so good," Schmidty vetoed Zip's suggestion. "When we do get him identified, we'll have his relatives down on our necks. They'll think we didn't treat the corpse with proper dignity."

"What about parading all the boys down here?" Stinker suggested the alternative. "We could have them file past as respectfully as you like until somebody tags him."

"Of course" — Brink hesitated — "we could arrange that if necessary, but wouldn't this be quieter and easier? There is a copy of the 1927 senior yearbook in the library. We should be able to find him in that."

"How?" asked Schmidty, sensing a practical suggestion.

Brink explained that the senior yearbook contained pictures of everyone who had ever been a member of the class, old pictures to be sure, but pictures that should be sufficient for identification purposes. Since each picture is accompanied by a complete pedigree of the man up to date of graduation, the yearbook might well be almost as useful as a police-department file. Schmidty agreed that the yearbook was the best bet for our next move, and since there was no point in keeping Brink staring at the corpse any longer, since his famous memory was not sparking, we all pushed off when the local medico arrived to perform the autopsy. At Inspector Schmidt's request, Red stayed on at the hospital to observe the autopsy, and Brink went to the library to pick up the yearbook. The rest of us went back to the firehouse after Stinker and I promised Red that we'd keep an eye on the Zipper, see that he didn't pull the bandage off or do anything else foolish.

Back at the firehouse somebody had materialized a swing band, and the boys were making the musicians play all the old football songs. You could see that the blues blowers were finding it all rather dull stuff, but whenever they tried to slip in a couple of hot licks they met organized opposition to tampering with the traditional melodies and rhythms. On the whole they were pretty good-natured about it all, and they were doing the whole routine. You know — the "Victory" song, the "Touchdown" song, the "Beat Yale" song, "Alma Mater," and the local variations on "Mademoiselle from Armentières." The good, stout drinkers were keeping liquor consumption up to par; and the crap game, which had grown to Gargantuan proportions, was with the appearance of another pair of dice doing an amoeba-like split into two games. Flitting hither and yon through the firehouse, perching now on a precariously teetering bench, now leaping to the top of the bar for a good angle on the crap game, now crawling on his belly for a worm's-eye view of the band, went Jim Dale, focusing his

16 mm. movie camera on everything and everyone in sight. In brief, it was in every respect a complete reunion. On our way over to the firehouse we had stopped at the hotel and picked up a shirt for the Zipper and the sweater I had wanted all evening, and that small delay made us arrive almost simultaneously with Brink and the yearbook. We found ourselves a quiet corner under a light and went through the volume systematically. When I say that we studied the pictures of each of our 412 classmates, it sounds like a long and formidable undertaking, but with Brink on hand it went quickly. He flipped the pages and told us the works on each man without even pausing to read captions or type. Most of the pictures he not only identified but immediately matched up to one of the inmates of the firehouse. This one was right over there shooting craps at that very moment, another was singing second tenor in the quartet sitting on the edge of the bandstand, another was the lad over at the bar, the one who was trying to balance a beer mug on the tip of his nose. Brink was encyclopedic. He knew them all. But all the yearbook proved was that Brink still knew everybody. He took us right through the volume from Abbott, Alan, to Zwoller, William, and our corpse was not in the book.

"I should have known," Brink said complacently. "I couldn't be wrong."

"And that book" — Schmidty frowned — "has everybody in it. No exceptions?"

"No exceptions," Brink assured him. "Everybody's in it, dead or alive, even the fellow who quit college the second week of freshman year."

"Yeah," said the Zipper, "I remember him. He's the one whose secret marriage suddenly stopped being secret when his wife came down with twins right after college opened."

"That," said Brink snippily, "is beside the point."

"But interesting withal," Stinker murmured. "I can remember how it made all us freshmen feel like men, having a classmate who was the father of twins."

"You see" — Brink ignored such frivolity to explain to Schmidty — "we regard any man, who even for a minute was a member of the class officially, as being forever a member of the class socially. It's the custom."

"I see," said Schmidty, "so even if he was kicked out of college or anything like that, he'd still be in the book."

"Sure," I explained. "The class records are kept just the way you keep police records. If a guy breaks out of jail or is released or paroled or anything, you don't throw out his pictures and fingerprints."

"An unfortunate comparison," said Brink, "but in a rough way it's apt."

"But," I murmured, "that leaves us up a tree again. I guess you'll have to rely on the shoes and underwear after all, Schmidty."

"Yeah," said Schmidty inattentively. "Tell me something. Who's that guy taking pictures all the time?"

"Jim Dale," Brink answered.

"You've heard of Dale," I added. "He's the man who goes to China and takes all

those pictures of air raids and snipers prowling around in rice paddies."

"Yeah," said Schmidty, "I've heard of him. What's he doing here?"

"Oh," said Stinker, "he's one of our boys. He always takes movies of reunion. Does a swell job."

We explained to Schmidty about how Jim Dale never misses a reunion and prides himself on getting a movie record of the event that includes the face of every man that comes back.

"Do you know him?" Schmidty asked.

"Sure," we chorused.

"Could you get him over here?" Schmidty asked.

"Well, think of that," I chuckled. "You turning lion hunter on me. I never thought I'd see the day when Inspector Schmidt would be struck with a hankering to meet a celebrity."

Schmidty didn't even blush, and he usually goes crimson at the first suggestion of anyone kidding him. Stinker yelled above the din and got Jim's attention. We all beckoned, and he came over to join us.

"Jim," said I, performing the introductions, "Inspector Schmidt wanted to meet you. He's a fan of yours, I just discovered."

"And," said Jim prettily, shaking Schmidty's hand, "I am a fan of yours, Inspector."

Jim went on to say that he had read all my books about Schmidty's cases and explained that he had long wanted to meet the inspector. He had an idea that he might sometime follow a case with us and do a documentary film of the whole thing from the first call out of headquarters right through to the jury saying guilty, a kind of pictorial history of a case. I was enthusiastic about the idea and Schmidty took to it rather kindly.

"We'll have to do that some day," he said. "But now, Mr. Dale, I was wondering about those pictures you were just taking."

"Oh, these," said Jim. "I come down to reunion every year and take the whole works. I have a complete record for our class."

"The boys tell me," Schmidty murmured, "that you try to get everybody that's here into the pictures."

"Yes," said Jim. "I make a point of that. I take the stuff that's interesting or amusing, but I get every man in at least once."

"How," said Schmidty, "do you go about it?"

"Mostly," Jim explained, shooting a couple of quick feet of a guy falling on his face, "by taking pictures all the time. I take a terrific amount of footage and, when I get time, I edit it, leaving all the boys in and cutting just uninteresting or repetitious-seeming stuff."

"Uh-huh," said Schmidty, "but when a guy you haven't gotten yet walks in the door, how do you know that you've got to get him? Do you remember every man you point your camera at?"

"By and large," said Jim, "I do. I'm not like Brink here. I can't call all the boys by name. In fact I remember only a couple of them, particular friends of mine like these fellows here, but I rarely forget a face, no matter how many I see all at once."

"That," said Schmidty, "may be a big help."

While I regretted my hasty remarks about the inspector as a celebrity chaser, he explained rapidly to Jim about our corpse and our predicament.

"I thought," he concluded, "you might know him."

"I might remember his face," Jim said thoughtfully. "But if Brink doesn't know his name, the odds are I certainly won't."

"Would you mind looking at him though?" Schmidty asked.

"Sure," said Jim. "I'll look at him, but how come you don't know him, Brink?"

"I don't understand it," Brink sighed. "It seems he is in our class, but there's no record of him, and I can't remember him."

With Jim added to our party, we went back to the hospital. On the hospital steps, just coming out of the building, we ran into Red. He had been starting over to the firehouse to join us there.

"Autopsy finished?" Schmidty asked.

"Yep," said Red. "The official report is going to Gilligan, of course, but I've got all the dope for you. It's manual strangulation all right."

"Like we figured, eh?" Schmidty asked.

"Like we figured," Red agreed. "Except for one thing. The lad was choked to death by somebody's bare hands and he was dead before he got his head dipped in the lake."

"We figured all that," said Schmidty. "What's the one thing that's different?"

"Maybe," said Red, "you expected this, Schmidty, but I didn't. We checked very carefully for alcohol. This lad they have down here, by the way, does a very handsome autopsy — a technician to his finger tips. We found alcohol, but not enough to talk about. The lad was not drunk when he died. We figure he had a few beers maybe and that's all, nothing near enough to make him drunk, not even enough to indicate one average-size drink of whisky. Doesn't that surprise you?"

"Yes," Schmidty admitted, "it does. Though I don't really see why it should, except that there are so few guys down here who aren't drunk."

"What does it matter whether he was drunk or not?" the Zipper asked. "He's too dead now to mind being sober."

"It matters this much," said Schmidty bluntly. "It throws out the possibility that you and he got stinko together. It means you probably didn't kill him, anyway not in a drunken brawl."

"Thanks," said the Zipper. "It makes me feel just dandy to have you think that I took a drunken whim to pick on a guy who was cold sober and choke the life out of him with my bare hands."

"Easy, Zip old keed," said Red. "Schmidty's a very impersonal guy. Don't take anything he says personally."

"Look," Schmidty added, "you're in this up to the ears. Now you're a friend of Baggy's and of Red's. For their sake I'd like to clear you, but you can't clear anybody by just pretending he's not involved."

"Sure, Zip," I chimed in. "Schmidty will clear this thing up, and he'll give you a better out that way than we could with any kind of hush-hush. But you see he's got to find out where you come in before he can find the thing that lets you out."

"What's it to me?" growled the Zipper. "They let you have anything you want for your last meal. So long as they let me drink mine and I can go to the chair plastered, it's all right with me."

I started to protest, but Red silenced me with a gesture. He knows better than any of us how the Zipper should be handled. Schmidty had more questions to ask about the autopsy, and Red had all the answers. They found no marks on the body except the marks of strangling. There were none of the contusions or abrasions that might indicate a struggle.

"It looks," said Schmidty, "as though the man that killed him must have jumped right for his throat and hung on. That means it probably was no accident, nothing that happened unintentionally in the course of a fight."

With that we all paraded into the hospital and Jim had his look at the corpse. He studied the face for less than a minute, and when he spoke it was without any hesitation.

"I don't know him," he said, "but I've seen him around. He was over to the firehouse today."

"You saw him over there?" Schmidty asked eagerly.

"Yes," said Jim. "I saw him. I'm sure of that."

"Now," said Schmidty, "if you can remember who you saw him with, who he was talking to, we're all set."

"He might have been talking to anybody," Brink objected. "It wouldn't prove anything. Everybody talks to everybody else at reunions."

"Sure," said Schmidty, "but if we can find somebody who talked to him today, they'd be more likely to know who he is than somebody that just saw him around. What about it, Mr. Dale? Who was he with?"

"Hey, wait a minute." Jim grinned. "I'm no camera-eye wizard. All I can tell you is that I saw him, and that I made pictures of him."

"That's something," said Schmidty. "How long would it be before you could get the pictures developed and let us have a look at them?"

"How long ago did you find this guy in the alley?" Jim asked me.

I had lost track of time but it was getting on very close to midnight, and I figured that it had been at least three or four hours since I started to the hotel for that sweater.

"In that case," said Jim, "you can see right away any pictures that are likely to do you any good."

He explained that he had promised the reunion committee that he would show his Friday pictures at the class dinner in the firehouse Saturday night. With this in mind he had brought with him a man who took each reel as soon as it had been exposed and developed it.

"He must be ready with all my early stuff now," Jim offered. "Come on over to the hotel, and I'll give you a rush preview."

There was as handsome a break as we could have hoped for, and Schmidty jumped at Jim's offer.

"Come on, boys," he said. "Let's go look at those pictures."

"Goody, goody," gurgled Red. "Papa's taking us to the movies."

While Brink accompanied us in scowling disapproval of such levity, the whole gang of us drifted over to the hotel in rollicking good spirits. Jim's films are always fun, but under the circumstances they gave every indication of being heaven-sent. We stopped on the way at the town photographer's, where Jim's man was working in the darkroom. Jim picked up the films, and we pushed on to the hotel. In the lobby we ran into Bob Larraby and Peggy James, the kids who had been down at the boathouse and who found the corpse the second time it turned up. Young Larraby hailed us as we went by. He attached himself to Stinker and asked if there was any news.

"Not much," said Stinker and switched to fatherly advice. "Listen, son," he said, "don't you think you'd better get Miss James up to her room? The boys are all getting pretty tight, and it'll be messy for a girl around here for the rest of the night."

"Yes," the kid answered. "We were just saying good night, Mr. Smith."

Schmidty interrupted.

"If you'd like," he offered, "you can come upstairs with us. We are going to look at some pictures and try to identify that man you found. We know now that he was murdered."

"Do you think it would be all right, Mr. Smith?" young Larraby asked Stinker.

"Sure, if you want to," Stinker answered. "But don't call me Mr. Smith. Call me Stinker, everybody else does."

"Aw, gee," the boy stammered. "Thanks."

You must realize that there was nothing odd about young Larraby's turning to Stinker for advice. Even after all these years, Stinker is a great man on the campus. In fact, with every passing year his fame and the story of his great run take on more and more of the legendary proportions of heroic myth. It would be a great day in any boy's life to actually talk to the great Stinker Smith. To be invited to call him Stinker must, for a lad like this Larraby boy, have been a moment of pure ecstasy. The girl, furthermore, jumped at the chance to go with us. She made it very clear that she was frightened and did not want to be alone. Here was a chance to postpone that moment when she would be left to herself in a hotel room.

That cinched it, and they tagged along when we trooped up to Jim's room. Jim drew on his rich experience in improvising projection setups, and he worked with quick

efficiency. It took him scarcely any time at all to rip a sheet off the bed and tack it up on the wall to serve as a screen. Within a couple of moments he had the room darkened, and film was running through the projector. You have all seen his work in the movie theaters and I need not tell you that Jim Dale is a genius. He didn't miss a thing over at the firehouse. He had caught every chance for movement, color, comedy, and he had caught the Walpurgis Night spirit of reunion. There were the boys, all of them, gay, disheveled, milling about. He would pick up one man and follow him through the crowd, bringing other faces into focus as they passed. The men who mugged straight at his camera he had kept in focus only long enough to register them. The modest, elusive souls he had pursued with a relentless lens. He had a wonderful shot of Red singing. It was mostly open mouth, but Red had noticed that he was being photographed and gave Jim the chance to record a couple of feet of lavishly thumbed nose.

I noticed one man who appeared on the film full face for just an instant. You could see that flash in which he saw the camera and ducked his head. But Jim had pursued him. His face kept bobbing up, never again head-on but seen in profile or from a variety of oblique angles through the ever-shifting tangle of singing groups, drinking groups, laughing groups, talking groups that passed across the film's foreground. I guessed that Jim kept him in the picture so much because he offered such effective contrast. Dark and heavy-featured, he looked sulky, even angry. I couldn't spot his class. His uniform looked rather like a pirate outfit. At least he had a bandana tied around his head and a black patch over one eye. As far as you could tell in the pictures, he was wearing white duck pants and an ordinary white undershirt. He looked like a chap who had lost most of his uniform early in the game, but his bandana, black patch and slim black mustache were enough uniform, and again and again Jim had followed his scowl through the gay crowd.

There were other shy ones, the boys who tipped their flat shiny hats down over their faces when the camera turned on them, others who buried their faces in beer mugs, but Jim had them all. He had me lounging against the bar and blowing the collar off my beer. The next time I spotted myself I was in that crap game, and Jim's shots of me raking in the folding money drew murmurs of appreciative admiration from Inspector Schmidt. The boys were trying to guess how much money I had in that pile, when Schmidty suddenly interrupted.

"There he is!" he shouted.

Jim stopped the projector and rewound the film slowly. Infallible as usual, Schmidty had spotted our corpse. There was just a flash of his face peering down at the crap game over another man's shoulder. Promptly Brink identified all the other men in the picture, all but the corpse and the gypsy whose bandana was just visible in the corner of the frame.

"That's not much help," Schmidty grumbled. "He's just a guy watching a crap game. Nobody'll remember him from that."

"I've got a lot more film here," Jim suggested. "Suppose we run off the rest of it. I must have better pictures of him somewhere here. I wouldn't have remembered his face from just this chance shot. I remember getting real pictures of him."

CHAPTER FIVE

JIM GOT the projector going again, and he was as good as his word. Before long Schmidty sang out again, but this time there was no need to reel back. Jim just kept the film moving slowly.

"That's not the man," Brink objected.

"Looks exactly like him," said Schmidty.

"But that man's wearing a sailor suit," Brink insisted. "That's the 1926 uniform. The dead man was wearing our class uniform."

They were both right. The chap in the sailor suit was a dead ringer for our corpse, but that sailor suit was unmistakable. It was the reunion uniform of the class of 1926.

"The dead man," said Schmidty, "changed his clothes. This is our guy."

Then I had a brain wave. As I looked at that picture, it came home to me that the sailor suit made the lad look even more like someone I knew or had seen very recently. Then suddenly it clicked and I let out a yelp of excitement.

"Schmidty," I babbled, "I've got something. Our corpse called one of the lads in our gang a thief, and he called himself a thief. That's why he looked familiar when I ran into him out in the alley. I remember the whole thing now."

As you can see, that was neither very explicit or coherent. No one could expect Schmidty to make any sense out of it, but he was patient with me and I got around quickly to explaining the whole thing. As you may remember, I told you about that strange little exchange of compliments in the crap game when one of our 1927 boys had a longish streak of luck and a guy from 1926 picked up a lot of money by making side bets. It suddenly became a certainty in my mind. This man in the picture was the one who had said, "It takes a thief to catch a thief." If it hadn't been for all this confusion of reunion suits, I think I would have spotted him sooner. But in the crap game I had seen him in a blue-and-white sailor suit. In the alley he had been wearing a full pirate suit, and on the boat landing he had still been wearing the pirate pants, having then apparently lost his pirate shirt to the Zipper.

"Who was the guy he said it to?" Schmidty asked. Before I had time to answer, he added, "Now we're getting somewhere."

"I'm afraid not very far," I murmured. "I might be able to pick the guy out if I saw him, but he was no one I remembered."

"I've got more pictures of that crap game here," Jim suggested. "They come up just a little later on. You might be able to spot him in the pictures."

"I might," I agreed.

"You got the impression that the guys knew each other?" Schmidty asked.

"Definitely," I answered.

Jim had switched off the projector while I told my story. He reached for the light switch and was about to darken the room again when Schmidty stopped him.

"Just a minute," he said, "if you don't mind."

"Just tell me when you want it." Jim lit a cigarette.

Schmidty turned to the Zipper.

"Take your pants off," he ordered. "I want to see your thighs."

The little James girl gasped and young Larraby protested.

"Yes," said the Zipper. "There's a lady present, Schmidty. Don't forget that."

"You can retire to the bathroom," Jim solved the dilemma.

Leaving Miss James to her own devices, we all crowded into the bathroom to share Schmidty's inspection of the Zipper's thighs. As soon as he was safely out of the girl's sight, Zip docilely dropped his trousers.

"There you are," said Schmidty, "purple."

It was obvious beyond any chance of error. Zip's thighs and underwear showed a faintly purple stain. The color was not as pronounced as on the corpse's thighs, but it was there.

"Know what that is?" Schmidty asked.

The Zipper shook his head.

"Zip's wearing the dead man's pants," said I.

"Right you are, Baggy," said Schmidty. "There's the explanation of your removable cyanosis. The dye in those dark blue pants isn't fast. It comes off purplish on a man's skin."

Hastily the Zipper stepped out of the blue pants.

"Whatever I wear," he complained, "it turns out to be the dead man's. First I was wearing his pirate shirt, and now I'm wearing his sailor pants. Well, I don't want them, but what's the idea? Are you sleuths trying to put me through a strip tease?"

The Zipper, however, was mollified when Jim loaned him a pair of flannel slacks. Schmidty appropriated the blue sailor pants as evidence, and we returned to our films. With the lights out and the projector going again, we found that our corpse stayed right in the picture. Jim had followed him around the firehouse. We saw him drinking beer at the bar alone, and we saw him push through a crowd of singers and tap one of our pirates on the shoulder. The pirate turned and greeted him, and they talked together. They seemed to be talking with great earnestness and not a little heat. I found myself wishing that Jim's films were not silent.

"O.K.," said Schmidty. "Let's have the lights and hold it awhile. This will probably do."

What Schmidty meant was obvious, because the pirate to whom our sailor boy had been talking so earnestly, and who talked to our sailor boy with every evidence of

anger, was none other than Brink, the man who knew everyone but who — only a few hours after this picture was taken — had been unable to identify this same sailor boy. My first guess was that Brink had known who the man was all along, that he had also known, despite the yellow pirate pants, that our corpse was not a classmate, and that he had counted on that fact to provide him with an out on the identification.

"Well, Mr. Brinkley," said Schmidty. "Who is he?"

Brink was white as a sheet when the lights came up, and he had what can be described only as a hunted look. It would have astonished me not at all if he had tried to make a break for the door, but he chose instead to stick to his guns.

"Sorry," he stammered. "What makes you think I'd know him in a picture? I didn't know him in the flesh."

The inspector pointed out that obviously they had been having quite a conversation in the picture, enough conversation surely for Brink to have remembered the man.

"The boys can tell you," Brink explained, "that as class secretary I more or less run the reunion. People come up and talk to me all the time, people I don't know from Adam. You understand that I have to be polite."

"Of course," said Schmidty.

"Just because this man talked to me and I answered him," Brink continued, regaining his poise, "doesn't mean that I would remember him even five minutes later. I can't remember all the people who say something to me at a reunion. No one could expect that. No one could expect more than a courteous answer."

"If I read the pictures right," Schmidty interrupted, "this guy didn't even get what he had a right to expect. Looks to me like you were telling him to go to hell."

"That's right," Stinker added. "It's time you came off it, Brink. Not liking scandals and not wanting to be mixed up in one is all very well, but this guy has been murdered, a whole gang of us got shot at, and the Zipper's been nicked by a bullet. This thing's serious."

"Oh," said Brink, "if you want to know what we talked about, I can tell you that. When Jim took our pictures, the guy was telling me that the beer we were serving was lousy. Naturally, fellows from other classes are welcome to come into the firehouse as our guests any time. You all know that, but where does a guest get the right to criticize our hospitality? It's the best beer you can get in town, and everybody knows it. I told him that if he didn't like our beer, he could go back to the 1926 tent and drink his own."

"And then you just forgot him?" Schmidty asked. "So that when you saw his body a couple of hours later, he was just a familiar face? You didn't even remember telling him off about the beer?"

"Exactly," said Brink a touch defiantly. "I remembered him no more than Bagby did, and he was in a crap game with the guy."

That burned me up. First of all, I had not said that the corpse was in the crap game.

He had just been hovering around the edges of it. Furthermore, it was a pure accident that I had noticed him at all. If it hadn't been for that strange bit of conversation I overheard, I probably would not even have remembered him as a familiar face. Brink, on the other hand, had actually talked to him, and it wasn't just a couple of words. The pictures showed it up as an extensive argument, long enough and hot enough for anyone to remember it a good long time. It is not as though reunions for Brink were just one long round of quarrels. I have already told you that Brink was a professionally affable gent, and for him to drop that greeter's smile of his would be an event, even if the lad he scowled at had not gone out and died violently soon afterward. That, however, was his story and for the time he stuck to it. I did not believe it for a moment. I don't think any of us did. Schmidty, after all, has had long and varied experience with just such stories, and he is a hard man to fool. I don't know what the two kids thought, but the rest of us, knowing Brink as we did, could tell that the story he had whipped up for us was impossible.

In a situation like that, however, Schmidty bides his time. There is not much point in calling a man a liar. You say he is and he says he isn't, and things are just as they were except for an unproductive loss of amiability. It is better to wait and watch. In most cases, sooner or later there will be developments that make it possible to prove that a man's lying. Schmidty let the whole thing slide, and Brink was relieved when the lights were doused again for more of Jim's movies. I could have told him, though, that the inspector was granting him only a temporary reprieve. The time was bound to come when Schmidty would have a lever with which he could pry the truth loose, and when he gets such an instrument there is no one on whom he would refrain from using it.

The pictures unreeled, and Jim was as good as his word. There were additional shots of my crap game, and a change of reels brought new faces into the pictures. The next time a halt was called, I called it.

"Hold it, Jim," I shouted. "There's my man."

I had spotted the lad to whom the corpse had addressed his thief crack.

"Which one?" Schmidty asked, as we stared at the suddenly still picture.

"The lad with the dice," I answered.

"Mander," said Brink.

"Sure it is," Stinker added. "Humph Mander."

"Don't you remember old Humphrey?" Red asked.

"Now that you speak of it," I murmured. "I do remember him — vaguely."

"Of course you remember him," Stinker continued. "He's a crazy coot."

"He's the lunatic who was defendant in twenty-five simultaneous breach-of-promise suits the year after we graduated." Red chuckled. "The whole Follies chorus sued him. He was the most famous member of our class that year."

"Where do we find this Mander?" Schmidty interrupted the flow of reminiscence.

"Over at the firehouse probably," said Brink. "I should put in an appearance over

there anyway. I've been away too long. I'll send him up here if you want to talk to him."

"Thanks," said Schmidty, "but we've seen enough pictures for the present. We'll go over with you."

"The later it gets," Brink objected, "the noisier it will be over there. If you want to talk to Mander, it would be better here where it's quiet."

Quiet the hotel was only by comparison. The street outside was full of celebrants, singing, screaming, fighting and shooting off firecrackers. Frequently the gaiety overflowed into the hotel and we would hear men falling downstairs, or dropping bottles and tin trays down the stair well.

"First," said Schmidty, "I'll find Mr. Mander. Then I'll worry about finding a quiet place to talk to him."

"As you like." Brink shrugged.

Despite her nervous excitement little Peggy James had grown sleepy. Furthermore, it was obvious that we could not take her to the firehouse with us. A woman at reunion headquarters is unthinkable. Bob Larraby squired her to her room while we helped Jim pack his reels safely into their fireproof containers. He was about to stow them in the closet when Schmidty stopped him.

"We had better find a safer place for those pictures," he suggested.

As soon as young Larraby returned, therefore, we all loaded up with the cans of film and trooped down to the lobby. It was in its customary reunion-night state of disarray. A prudent hotel management had removed all small and throwable objects before the festivities started. Even the lighter pieces of furniture had been stowed away. Earlier in the evening the lobby had looked rather bare, stripped down to only its heaviest leather chairs and settees. When we came downstairs after our session with the cinema, it looked like flood; pillage and shipwreck. The floor was strewn with broken glass, splintered chairs and sodden paper sacks. One of the major joys of reunion involves filling paper sacks with cold water and dropping them off high places. The manager stood behind the desk with a stance that reminded me of a wary boxer. He weaved slightly as though he were ready to dodge anything. Such readiness he needed badly that night. He probably thought we were planning to fling the heavy cans of film at him, for he was obviously relieved when we made an orderly progress through the lobby and had nothing to ask of him but that he lock the cans of film away in the hotel safe.

Ordinarily it's just a quick hop and skip from the hotel to the firehouse, but you don't do anything ordinarily on a reunion Friday night. What with dodging flying bottles, the embraces of affectionate drunks and the automobiles driven by homicidal drunks, it takes a lot of backing and filling to make any progress at all along the street. When we ran into Gilligan outside the firehouse, his was the first sober face we had seen since leaving the hotel manager.

Gilligan hailed us as though we were a straw and he a drowning man. He had been

looking for us at the hospital and the firehouse and had begun to think that we had dropped out of sight permanently. In fact, he had been a little bit worried that perhaps he might finally come upon us all strangled to death in some odd corner.

"Hey!" he shouted. "I've been looking all over for you. That guy was murdered."

"I know," said Schmidty. "Red told us."

"Where've you been?" Gilligan asked.

"Looking at movies," Schmidty answered.

Gilligan's look indicated his suspicion that Schmidty might have succumbed to the reunion spirit, but Schmidty explained how very special these movies were.

"Oh," said Gilligan. "And I've got news for you."

"That corpse hasn't disappeared again?" Stinker asked.

"No," said Gilligan. "But we've traced that license number you gave us, Inspector Schmidt."

"Good," said Schmidty.

"It was Y-3245-W, wasn't it?" Gilligan asked.

"Oop," the Larraby kid gulped as though he had caught a medicine ball smack in the stomach.

"What's the matter with you?" Schmidty demanded.

"Uh, nothing," the kid stammered.

"Yeah," Schmidty turned back to Gilligan. "That's the car that tried to crowd me off the road. Whose is it?"

Young Larraby, who had been very pale the moment before, regained his naturally ruddy color and breathed what sounded very much like a sigh of relief. While Schmidty cast a questioning glance at the boy, Gilligan answered.

"It belongs to a guy named Johnson," he said. "He tends bar at a roadhouse here, name of Stinker's Run, begging your pardon, Mr. Smith."

"Never give it a thought, Gilligan," said Stinker magnanimously.

"I think this Johnson is part owner of the place," Gilligan continued.

"Yeah," said Schmidty. "I know him. Is he a friend of yours, Larraby?"

"A friend of mine?" the kid faltered. "No. I know him, of course. All the fellows know him. We go down to the Run sometimes at night for a beer or something."

I felt sorry for the lad. He seemed like a swell kid, but there was something about the way he behaved that bothered me. At his age, if I had stumbled into such a complex of murder and mystery, I should have been all a-dither with boyish excitement. And that is no peculiarity that is just my own. I could see that Stinker and Red and even the Zipper, although you might say they were all old enough to know better, seemed to be having the time of their lives. But this kid, who should by all rights have been bubbling over with thrill, just seemed scared and nervous and unhappy. I didn't like it. Stinker must have had something of the same feeling because he gave the boy's back a fatherly pat and took his arm.

"If you like beer," he said, "what about some now? I'm dry. I think we ought to

all go into the firehouse and have a seidel of Brink's brew on the class of 1927."

Schmidty took a quick look around.

"Where's Brinkley gone off to?" he demanded.

"He went inside a couple of minutes ago," said the Zipper.

Schmidty cursed himself for a dumb cop and charged for the door of the firehouse. We followed at his heels. For a moment or two it was impossible to spot Brink. The band was playing like mad, and the air in the firehouse was so heavy with cigarette smoke that it was almost blinding until the first flow of tears relieved the smart. About a hundred of the lads were celebrating something or other — Stinker's run all over again, I suspected, because that is a recurrent cause for celebration at all reunions. Whatever it was, they were snake dancing with solemn concentration through the firehouse. Only when the tail of the snake dance went flipping past us could we see down to the end of the bar. There was Brink, deep in earnest conversation with the man the fellows had identified on the film as Humphrey Mander. We started down the bar toward them, and when Brink spotted us he turned to talk to the bartender. By the time we came up to them he was deep in a discussion of how the beer was holding out.

"I thought you'd wait for us, Brinkley," said Schmidty.

"We're running short of beer, Inspector," Brink explained. "I've just been ordering some more."

"That all you've been doing?" growled Schmidty.

"No," Brink smiled. "I found Mander for you too."

"Thanks," said Schmidty.

Brink turned his back and told the bartender to set up beers for the lot of us. I had a rather tough time for a moment, trying to bend my ear in a couple of directions at once. It was hard enough to hear what you were meant to hear in the middle of all that din, but it was definitely no setup for eavesdropping. I did, however, catch Stinker murmuring to young Larraby. It sounded something like "You don't want to do anything foolish." The boy mumbled some sort of reply into his beer, but I didn't catch it. On the other side Schmidty was jumping right into things.

"What has Brinkley been telling you?" he asked Mander.

"It seems some bird in '26 dropped dead or something, and you think I might know him. Is that it?" Mander returned the question.

"Roughly," said Schmidty. "It's part of it."

"I'll be glad to help if I can," said Mander.

He sounded cautious. I was gradually recalling Mander and his history. From what I could remember of him, caution was definitely not one of his natural talents. A lad who can get himself sued for breach of promise by a whole Follies chorus is obviously not one of your stop-and-listen boys. You can draw your own conclusions. Mander was a lad who found hot water his natural element. He jumped right into it every time. At least a nickel richer than Croesus, he had rollicked his way through college,

and as far as I could tell had been rollicking his way through life ever since. One look at him and you could tell that he had always been a rich bum and always would be. He had never done a lick of work in his life. That in itself, of course, is nothing against him. There had always been too many million good negotiable reasons why he should not work, but he was full of energy. As a steel puddler or a stevedore, he might have worked hard enough to keep out of mischief. But he was a millionaire, and he worked at getting into mischief. Most of it, furthermore, was mean mischief.

Arrogant with the confidence that his money would buy him out of even the tightest places, Mander's normal expression was a sneer. "I am what I am," he always seemed to be saying, "and I have money enough to pay for doing just exactly what I please. So what are you going to do about it?" That, with Schmidty, he should be cautious and wary struck me as not being in character. It is true that sensible people do not trifle with Inspector Schmidt, but it had been my guess that Humphrey Mander thought he was too rich to have to bother about being a sensible person. I had the feeling that it was not the inspector, either as a person or as an official endowed with all the majesty and power of the law, that had impressed Mr. Mander. It occurred to me that he might rather have had the notion that he might be in a spot so much tighter than usual that he did not feel quite rich enough to beat it. Whatever his reasons, however, he was proceeding cautiously.

"Thank you," said Schmidty suavely. "It's just a little technicality, Mr. Mander. I am sure it will be no trouble to you."

"Don't hesitate to trouble me," Mander replied. "I am eager to do what I can."

One could hardly ask more. Gilligan arranged to have Mander go down to the hospital with one of the local cops to inspect and identify the corpse.

"Meanwhile," said Schmidty, "we'll go out to Stinker's Run and have a talk with my old friend Stitch."

The rest of us trooped toward the firehouse door, but Brink stayed behind at the bar.

"Come on, Brinkley," said Schmidty. "We're waiting for you."

"I don't know whether I really ought to go." Brink hesitated.

"I thought you'd want to stay with this thing to the finish," said Schmidty, quite as though he were merely conducting a rubberneck tour of the underworld.

"I don't know," Brink repeated. "What kind of a place is this Stinker's Run? Is it decent?"

"Decent," exclaimed Stinker, "and named after me! Why, Brink, it's more than decent. It's so dog-footed swank that they use Cointreau to flavor their Mickey Finns."

"I should stay around here." Brink hung back. "While we were over at the hotel the beer almost ran out, and no one could find me to order some more."

"Leave word that you can be reached at Stinker's Run," Schmidty turned suddenly peremptory. "Or would you rather get your messages care of Gilligan at the town jail?"

"Are you threatening me, Inspector Schmidt?" Brink asked.

"I am, Mr. Brinkley," Schmidty answered. "I am."

"And if you did arrest me, Inspector," Brink continued, "what would be the charge?"

"We could dream one up." Schmidty grinned. "This reunion you're running must stink with violations my friend Gilligan is overlooking."

"You have to make allowances for reunions, Inspector," Gilligan interrupted.

"Sure," said Schmidty. "I understand. But you don't have to make these allowances if it should become very much more convenient not to: for instance, if we should have to lock Mr. Brinkley up to keep him from tampering with possible witnesses."

That insinuation Brink angrily denied, but at length Schmidty won the argument, at least to the extent that Brink accompanied us to Stinker's Run. When Stinker described the roadhouse as "an arrant cat's-meat shop with crepe-paper decorations," he had done the joint excellent justice. From its neon sign, on which a football player outlined in red-lit tubing was ever in the act of catching a ball outlined in blue-lit tubing, all the way to Stitch Johnson's smile it was cheap, meretricious and ugly. We barged into the place and bellied up to the bar. The bartender was having a workout with a cocktail shaker, and I had a chance to look him over while he was busy with other customers. That it was Stitch Johnson I guessed immediately. Both Schmidty and Stinker had described the scar that gave him his nickname, and it was not one of those minor blemishes which you might or might not notice. If you saw Stich you saw the scar. I was, in fact, inclined to wonder whether you could ever see Stitch for the scar, if you know what I mean. It pulled the whole side of his face out of shape. The puckered skin of the cheek was bad enough, but what really hit me was the way it pulled the lower eyelid down so that it gaped slightly away from the eyeball. When he blinked, which he did frequently, the upper lid never dropped far enough to meet this withdrawn lower lid; and the effect of the narrow slit which showed eyeball even when the eye was shut was something strangely horrible. I couldn't tell you what color hair he had or whether he had hair at all. All I could see was that eye and, try as I might not to look, inevitably I'd catch myself staring at it.

Obviously Stitch was badly equipped for casting stealthy glances. He shot us a quick one when we came in. When he saw Schmidty, he shouted a greeting, but a moment later, when young Larraby came through the door, a quiver ran over his face. It set me wondering. While we waited I watched Stitch. To say he stole glances at us every few moments would not be quite accurate. He stole glances at Schmidty and at the kid. I could see why Schmidty's presence might make him nervous, but it seemed odd that he should seem to be so much more uneasy about young Larraby.

"You know," Red remarked cheerfully to those of us who were standing near him, "it's an interesting study, the criminal face." He spoke quietly and continued his discourse while we waited for Stitch to finish his cocktail mixing. "Take that face for instance," he continued. "It would be my guess that the owner of that café would have to be a person of unquestionable virtue and impeccable behavior. How can a man

with such an arresting face be a malefactor and expect to get away with it? He's too conspicuous, too memorable. What chance would he ever have? Any witness that saw him could describe him. No witness could fail to identify him. Every cop would remember him. He's a marked man. I think Schmidty's wrong about him. There, I should say, is a man to trust. He's too conspicuous to be anything but good."

"Maybe," suggested the Zipper, "he's no good at all. Maybe he went bad before he got that scar."

"Sure," Red agreed. "But even so the scar would reform him. My lads, I am about to promulgate Red's rule for human relations. Never trust an inconspicuous man. If you must give somebody your watch to hold for you don't pick a man with an honest face. Pick one who is too tall or too short, or too fat or too lean, or too ugly or too handsome. Pick a conspicuous man."

At that moment, the most conspicuous man in the place came down the bar toward us.

"Hello, Stitch," said the inspector. "You see I'm still here."

"Sure, Inspector," said Stitch. "The way these reunions go, you've only just come. They last all week end."

"For some guys," said Schmidty, "they're over quicker."

"Well, gents," said Stitch, giving the bar a professional smear of the bar rag, "what'll it be?"

His fingernails, which he wore much too long, scraped against the wood with a grating little sound.

"Talk, Stitch, just talk," said Schmidty. "How about coming over in the corner with us where it's quiet and we can talk?"

Inspector Schmidt indicated a couple of tables on the far side of the room. Most of the activity in the place seemed to be at the bar and through a door into the back room where the gambling equipment was set up. The door to this back room had been hastily shut when we came into the place. Gilligan, I guessed, was the cause of that precaution. While we had been waiting, the door had opened just enough for a man to slip through. He shut the door behind him and stood with his back to it, watching us. I didn't notice him especially, but when Schmidty suggested that Stitch leave the bar, the man sauntered away from the door and came down the bar toward us.

"I'll take the bar, Johnson," he said. "You go talk to your friends."

Stitch set down his bar rag and dried his hands. The other man, a dark, smooth-looking guy, paused beside young Larraby for a moment before going behind the bar.

"How're they running for you, Bob?" he said, flinging his arm around the boy's shoulder. "I thought you were all through your exams and had gone home."

"Oh no." Bob flushed and stammered: "I'll be staying around down here until Tuesday anyway. Graduation, you know."

"Expecting to graduate?" the man asked.

The boy was standing right beside me, and I saw the man's hand close over his shoulder. It was a big meaty hand with very short well-kept nails in contrast to Stitch's claws, and I thought I saw the kid wince under its pressure.

"I don't know," the boy answered. "Some of the exam marks aren't up yet."

Dropping his hand from the boy's shoulder, the man patted him on the back.

"I hope you make it all right," he said unsmilingly and stepped behind the bar.

"This is my partner here, Jack Benjamin," Stitch introduced him to Schmidty.

The introductions were acknowledged, and we wandered over toward the tables. Stitch stepped alongside Stinker.

"You're Smith," he said. "The guy we named this place after. Some of the fellows pointed you out to me when you were in here before."

Stinker nodded.

"How come?" Stitch asked with what I interpreted as an attempt at a friendly smile. "How come does a nice guy like you get stuck with a name like that?"

"That," said Stinker, "is a long story and sad."

We all sat down, with Stinker beside Stitch across the table from Schmidty and myself. The others took the next table.

"I've been wondering about that myself," said Schmidty.

"It was like this," said Stinker. "My parents were probably the only two English-speaking people of their generation who had not read *Peter Pan*. Everybody else had read it or had seen Maude Adams act it or something, but they hadn't. My mother's maiden name was Tinker, and my father's mother's had been Bell. Both sides of the family were just stuffed with family pride, so it seemed like the logical thing to do when I was born and they called me Tinker Bell Smith. In case maybe you'd forgotten, there was a character in *Peter Pan* called Tinker Bell, and Tinker Bell was a little fairy that helped Peter do magic stuff. There's one place in the story where Tinker Bell drinks a glass of poison and is about to die. On the stage that was the big moment. Maude Adams would come down to the footlights and appeal to the audience. 'Do you believe in fairies?' she'd ask, and the whole audience would clap to show that they believed in fairies. Then Tinker Bell would live because the audience believed in fairies.

"Well, I went to prep school, and I did all I could to keep it dark that my name was Tinker Bell. I called myself Tinker B. Smith and my nickname became T.B. I didn't mind that. But there came the time when my whole horrible secret became known. We played another school, a school that had a couple of boys from my home town. It was football, and on one play I had the wind knocked out of me. As I lay on the field I heard a horrible sound. The cheer leader for the other side was roaring through his megaphone. 'Poor Tinker Bell is hurt,' he shouted. 'Say you believe in fairies, please, say you believe in fairies.' I just lay there playing possum. They had to haul me off on a stretcher, and I think I am the only man who was ever carried off a field presumably unconscious and still blushing.

"I could never live that down. I just had to change to another school where nobody knew me. There, when the fellows asked what people called me, I said Stinker."

"Why Stinker?" Schmidty asked.

"Suffering makes a man wise, Schmidty," he said. "And I was prematurely wise. Stinker was close enough to Tinker to be logical, and I knew that I could escape Tinker Bell only if I gave myself a nickname that would be at least as juicy. So Stinker it was, and Stinker I have been ever since. It was the lesser of two evils."

"That," said Schmidty, "is a sad story."

Stitch just looked bewildered, but Schmidty did not give him much time to puzzle over Stinker's story of his past.

"What have you got against me, Stitch?" he asked suddenly.

Stitch gulped.

"Me?" he asked.

"Yes," said Schmidty. "You."

CHAPTER SIX

STITCH PROTESTED everything short of undying affection for Schmidty. To hear him tell it, he never thought of the inspector but with the most profound respect and admiration. He assured all of us that he never spoke of Inspector Schmidt but to praise him. He swore that he had only the friendliest feeling for Schmidty and for the law he represented.

"Even if I was a crook," he said, "which I ain't, I'd have to like you, Inspector. Everybody knows you're a square shooter, and I'm all for you and for your job. Me, I'm a businessman, and I know that if fellows like you ever let up on the racketeers and criminals, businessmen like me would just have to shut up shop."

With that declaration of his convictions as a law-abiding and upright citizen, Stitch sat back and waited for Schmidty to make the next move. It did seem to me, though, that he was staring at us rather balefully, but that might have just been the results of his unfortunate facial deformity and my own imagination.

"When I left here early in the evening," Schmidty stated his case calmly, "you followed me in your car and tried to run me off into the ditch."

"Me?" Stitch yowled in a tone of outraged innocence. "There were a dozen guys in here when you came in, and they can tell you that I never left the bar for a minute after you went out."

"I expected you to have an alibi," said Schmidty. "You've always had alibis, haven't you, Stitch?"

"It's never any secret where I go," Stitch answered. "But another thing. I could no more go after you in my car tonight than I could fly. My car's been stolen."

"Yeah." Schmidty grinned. "Why haven't you reported the loss to the police?"

"He did," said Gilligan from the other table.

For a moment that knocked the inspector off balance, but it was only a moment.

"When?" he demanded.

"Early this evening," Gilligan answered.

Inspector Schmidt questioned Stitch about the car. According to his story he had it parked in the back yard. He explained that, about an hour after Schmidty left Stinker's Run, he got a relief at the bar and thought he'd drive into town and see what the reunions looked like. When he went to get his car, it was gone. He reported the loss promptly.

"Ever seen this man before?" Schmidty made an abrupt shift of ground. He pointed at the Zipper as he asked the question.

"Not that I know of," said Stitch. "I may have seen him around. I wouldn't really know anybody but old customers, we've been doing so much business tonight."

"He's not an old customer then?" Schmidty asked.

"No," said Stitch. "I don't remember ever seeing him before."

"O.K.," said Schmidty. "What about this guy?"

This time he pointed at Brink, who flushed and scowled.

"Nope," said Stitch. "Him neither."

"Then you don't know any of these gentlemen?" Schmidty persisted.

Stitch ran his tongue over his lips and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Mr. Smith," he said, indicating Stinker. "He was in here earlier tonight. And Mr. Larraby, he's an old customer."

"Anyone else?" Schmidty asked.

"Gilligan," said Stitch. "Of course, I know Gilligan."

"You're forgetting me," said the inspector dryly.

"Oh," said Stitch. "I don't have to tell you that we know each other, do I?"

"No, you don't," Inspector Schmidt grinned. "But you can tell me this: did you take your car out and lose it on purpose?"

Stitch's face turned purple, and he blinked that horrible blink of his several times rapidly. Then he exploded and things happened fast. He jumped to his feet and pushed against the table. It slid on the polished linoleum and smacked hard against Schmidty and me. Our chairs skidded back and fetched up against the wall. Stitch had us tightly pinned between the table and the wall. With the table edge jammed right into us we were neatly pinioned. I tried to rise, but found that I couldn't budge an inch. Vaguely I heard his partner yelling at him from the bar.

"Don't be a damn fool, Stitch," I think he said. At least it was something like that. What took more of my attention at the moment was the roundhouse swing Stitch was winding up and aiming at Schmidty. I shall never forget the man's face at that moment. His eyes were half-closed, and that bad eyelid seemed to gape more than ever. To say that he was actually drooling with rage is no exaggeration. The saliva

trickled out of the corners of his mouth as he mumbled curses. I tried to wriggle myself loose enough to slip under the table, in the hope that I could pull him down from below in the second I had before he would land on Schmidty, but he had me fixed. I could move neither up nor down. It was like one of those grim nightmares where something horrible is happening to you and you are ludicrously helpless to fight it off.

When the blow did fall, my first thought was that Stitch had missed Schmidty and had smacked me. As I folded up onto the table top, I wasn't thinking of anything but a pain in my middle. I must have come out of it pretty quickly though, because I remember a moment of entertaining bitter thoughts about what always happens to the innocent bystander. As I raised my head, however, I saw that Schmidty was unfolding beside me. I wondered how Stitch had managed to down both of us with a single haymaker, and just as I was about to cover up before the next blow landed it dawned on me that Stitch had disappeared. It was all very baffling until Schmidty spoke.

"Nice work, Stinker," he said, and we pushed the table out of our abdomens.

Of course, I had reckoned without Stinker and, as Stitch had learned, Stinker was a man to reckon with. When Stitch began that mighty swing of his, Stinker had gone into action simultaneously but more efficiently. He had cracked Stitch's jaw with a short hard one, and our host was only in the middle of his swing when he went down hard. It was just the table edge that got Schmidty and me. Jammed tight against us in the first place, it squeezed us like a vise suddenly tightened when Stitch's body was knocked against it. As soon as we got the table pushed away from us and slid out from behind it, we saw Stitch out cold on the floor. Over him stood Stinker, pensively contemplating a slightly abrased knuckle, and around him an admiring group. Our friends, after all, had been in a better position than ours for observing the punch. Benjamin hurried over from the bar and apologized for Stitch's behavior. He was extraordinarily pleasant about it, explaining that with the very heavy business of reunion week end, Stitch was tired and unduly irascible. We assured him that none of us had been hurt.

Red made a move to revive Stitch, but Benjamin stopped him.

"I'll take care of him," he said. "Don't bother."

Red had his hand under Stitch's head and withdrew it gently.

"He'll be all right," he said. "His jaw will swell some, but tell him to put some ice on it. That will help."

"Sure," said Benjamin, "I know. You can't run a bar without getting some experience with slaps in the jaw."

The phone rang and Benjamin stepped behind the bar to answer it. Stitch opened his eyes for a moment, groaned and closed them again. It occurred to me that he was playing possum and the thought amused me. After all, he had been stupid in trying to jump Schmidty when he was just about surrounded by Schmidty's friends. It was only natural that he should realize belatedly that he had made a false move and use

the same escape as Stinker had used when he heard the cry of "Say you believe in fairies" on the football field.

The call was for Schmidty and, while he was at the phone, Benjamin came back to the rest of us. The few customers we had found in the place had left, and Benjamin had time to discuss Stitch's lost car.

"I don't," he said, "like to say anything. I know fun's fun and fellows out for a good time, they don't mean any harm. But some of you guys are going too far."

"What do you mean?" Stinker bristled.

I guess he thought that Benjamin was referring to the poke he had taken at Stitch.

"Oh," said Benjamin hastily. "I don't mean you fellows exactly. I'm just talking general like, about these fellows at reunions. Me, I like a good binge myself once in a while, but a lot of this down here goes too far. It isn't safe. Take cars, for instance. Guys, when they're drinking a lot, should stay out of cars."

"That's true enough," Red agreed.

"You bet it is," Benjamin continued, grooming his thin black mustache with a well-manicured finger tip. "If a guy wants to kill himself or even cripple himself for life, that's all right with me. For myself I couldn't see it, but I believe in letting a guy do whatever he wants, so long as it's only himself he's hurting. But you put a drunk where he can drop his foot on an accelerator and anything can happen: maybe he'll kill himself, but there's a better chance that someone else is going to get hurt."

"Yes" — Stinker nodded — "cars are definitely bad stuff at reunions."

"Sure," said Benjamin. "Take Stitch's car for instance. I don't think it was stolen."

Stitch sat up suddenly.

"You know damn well it was stolen, Jack," he said thickly.

His lip was already showing an appreciable swelling as he sat on the floor, nursing his jaw with his hand.

"Oh, it was stolen all right," Benjamin corrected himself. "I mean it wasn't thieves took it. It's just some drunks are driving it around town. These drunks they'll lift anything they take a notion to."

One could not very well contradict him. Any tradesman in town will tell you the same thing about reunions. From long experience they have learned to guard against the gay kleptomania which is an inevitable accompaniment of reunion drunkenness. All the barber shops take in their red-and-white-striped poles, and I have already mentioned that the hotel had stripped its lobby for action. Prudent people do that every year. They either nail portable objects down tight or lock them away.

Schmidty returned from the telephone in a fine fury. I could tell by the way he bit his words off short between tight lips.

"How're you feeling, Stitch?" he asked.

"All right, I guess," Stitch mumbled from the floor.

"I've got things to do now," Schmidty announced. "I'll be back to talk to you later."

Brink and the Zipper had gone out to the can and Inspector Schmidt, impatient to be off, led us out to the cars, leaving Bob Larraby behind to wait for them. Since we waited for the others outside anyhow, I think Schmidty was just impatient to give Gilligan an earful. He had plenty to get off his chest. The call had been from the cop who had taken Humph Mander down to the hospital. He had called to report Mander's failure to identify the corpse. That annoyed Schmidty because, according to the cop, Mander had said that he had never seen the dead man before, a statement which obviously gibed neither with Jim's pictures or my story about the crap game. That, however, was just a minor irritation. What really had Inspector Schmidt burned though was the stupidity of Gilligan's cop.

"Why," he stormed, "did that dumb cop think I sent him with Mander? Know what the oaf's done?"

"What?" Gilligan asked.

"He takes Mander down to the hospital, lets him see the corpse, and then he lets him walk out of the hospital free as air," Schmidty spluttered. "He hasn't even sense enough to bring him back to me or at least to tail him."

"We probably can pick him up again," Gilligan suggested.

"Sure we can," Schmidty growled. "But meanwhile he's spreading the word around. Why couldn't he make the identification? Because Brinkley tipped him off not to. I bet he's doing the rounds now, tipping all of the guy's friends."

"But why?" said Stinker. "I know Brink's a stuffed penguin, all white shirt front and pomposity, and Humph Mander's a heel from way back and a dope who uses money where other guys use brains, but why should either one of them try to keep a dead man unidentified? It's too silly even for them."

"Nothing," said Red, "is too silly for those babies. They're probably trying to keep out of some kind of scandal."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Red," I interrupted. "But if they were afraid of nothing more than scandal all this seems rather too extreme."

"Sure," said Schmidty. "I know those two birds are your pals and all that ——"

"Not pals," I corrected him. "Just classmates."

"All right," he said. "Have it your own way. They're classmates. It's natural that you should be inclined to think that they wouldn't pull off anything like a murder. It's always hard to believe that anybody you actually know could be a murderer, but all your figuring is based on their having nothing to do with any of it. I have to figure that maybe they did."

No more was said on the subject at that time because just then Bob, Brink and the Zipper came out of Stinker's Run and joined us. We were already in the cars and they piled in. We made the best time we could back through town to police headquarters. There we picked up the cop who had incurred Schmidty's wrath by letting Humph Mander get away from him. He had nothing to add to what he had already told Schmidty on the telephone. Mander had not identified the body. He

had grown pretty pale when he saw it, but most people are just that way about corpses. A change of color doesn't prove a thing. As the cop put it, he didn't recognize the corpse any more than the corpse recognized him.

The poor cop got a good going over from both Gilligan and the inspector for not sticking with Mander after leaving the hospital but, however good that might have been for discipline, it did not further our case any. As far as I was concerned, I was just sitting back for developments. For the life of me I couldn't see what the next step could be, unless it would be to pick up Mander and really put the pressure on him and on Brink in the hope of breaking them down. Schmidty, however, had a better idea. When he got through taking that cop apart, he sprung it.

"Look," he said. "Our dead man had purple thighs. We can be pretty sure that the color was the dye from those dark blue sailor pants, because the color came off on Tracy here too."

"Yes, Gilligan," the Zipper boasted. "You didn't know it, but I've got purple thighs, too, just like the dead man. It's very significant."

Gilligan tried to look astute, as though he appreciated the significance.

"Now," Schmidty continued. "In the moving pictures the dead man turns up wearing one of those sailor suits. Somewhere in all this mess we can be pretty sure that he changed uniforms with Tracy. We know that Tracy started out with a pirate suit, so we can be sure that, at least before he started switching clothes with Tracy, the dead man wore a sailor suit."

"That," I agreed, "seems plain enough."

"All right," the inspector continued, easing himself out of his shoes. "It's possible that he did some clothes switching before he turned up in the firehouse, but it's also possible that the sailor suit really belonged to him. That would mean that he's in the class of 1926, wouldn't it?"

We nodded.

"Then," Schmidty went on, "don't they have in the class of 1926 some guy like Brinkley here, a know-it-all who can spot any man who ever was in the class?"

Brink bristled and made as if to speak, but Stinker beat him to it.

"A politician like Brink," he said, "comes once in a lifetime, but 1926 has a class secretary who may know a lot of their boys."

Brink sulked, but he said nothing. He had long since grown resigned to the kidding he took because of his political dexterity.

"Sure," Red chimed in. "Their class secretary is Harry Stedman, an all-right guy."

Red's judgment was immediately backed up by Stinker, the Zipper and myself. We all knew Harry well. If I had ever known that he was the secretary of his class, it had slipped my mind, but Harry is a scholar and a gentleman. Although he had been a class ahead of us at college, we've never held that against him. Many's the time that we've agreed that Harry should have been in the class of 1927. He was plenty good enough. When his class was graduated, Harry had stayed on at the old school to get

himself a Ph.D. We saw a lot of him our senior year when he was at the graduate school. After he took his degree he joined the faculty, first as a younger genius of the economics department, later as a full professor. He lived in town, and every time any of us came down for a game or reunion we made it a point to see old Harry.

"Stedman then," said Schmidty, "is our man. Where can we find him?"

"You're not going to bring Professor Stedman into this, are you?" gasped young Larraby.

"Why not?" Schmidty demanded. "Any objections?"

"No," the boy stammered. "Of course not. Only I thought —— "

"What did you think?" Schmidty pressed him to finish the answer he had allowed to trail off into silence.

"I just thought," the lad faltered, "that a professor in a thing like this —— You know, going around to reunions and out to Stinker's Run and places like that. It's sort of undignified."

Stinker hooted with laughter and cuffed the boy gently on the side of the head.

"So you think old Harry is too dignified and professorial to have anything to do with mugs like us," he laughed. "Do you know him?"

"I took Professor Stedman's course in 'Economic Corollaries to the Theory and Practice of Democracy,' " the kid answered.

"Yeah." Red grinned. "Harry was always the one for economic corollaries, but don't be fooled, keed. He may be an economist, but he's all right anyhow. What do you think he'd be doing right now? He's studying the economic corollaries of getting fried just like any other alumnus who hasn't a murder on his hands."

"I suppose so," said the boy without conviction. He did, however, continue to look worried, even as he offered to help Schmidty on with his shoes. The lad was definitely a polite youngster, full of deference for his elders and all that kind of thing. The old place breeds them that way and it's all right except that when undergraduates take to calling you sir it makes you feel your age. Schmidty refused his help and pushed his feet back into his shoes unassisted. As he tied the laces, he asked where we might find Harry Stedman.

"The best bet," I suggested, "would be 1926 headquarters. If he's not there, we can try his house."

The cop that had lost Mander had slunk out to the front room of the station house as soon as Schmidty and Gilligan had let up on him. Just as Schmidty finished lacing up his shoes he came back.

"About Mr. Mander," he said.

"You hunt the town for Mr. Mander," Schmidty ordered. "When you find him bring him here and hold him until we get back."

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Humph Mander, following the cop into the room. "I've been hunting the town for you."

Schmidty greeted our Mr. Mander like a long-lost brother. With this quarry in

his hands he made a slight change of plans. He suggested that Gilligan try to reach Harry Stedman by telephone.

"Just tell him that a man in his class was found dead, and that the police would appreciate it if he went to the hospital to try to identify him. Arrange for him to see the body and then come here to see us."

Those were Schmidty's instructions, and we waited while Gilligan carried them out. He got Harry almost as soon as he got through to 1926 headquarters, and Professor Stedman was glad to oblige.

"Won't old Harry split a gut when he gets over here?" The Zipper chuckled. "When he sees all of us here, he'll think we're running an extra-special exclusive reunion in the jailhouse."

"I hear" — Schmidty turned to Mander — "that you were unable to make an identification, Mr. Mander."

"Sorry," said Mander. "No dice."

"Ah, Mr. Mander," said Schmidty. "Speaking of dice, we happen to know that you were in a crap game with that man in the firehouse early this evening."

"Was I?" Mander asked. "I wouldn't know. It's perfectly possible. You know how crap games are, Inspector, democratic and informal? I am rarely likely to hold out for an introduction to a man before I let him join a crap game in which I might be engaged. Especially at reunion. All sorts of people drop in and out of these games. Half the time one may not even notice them."

"Exactly," said Schmidty, "but don't you notice a man when he calls you a thief?"

Mander flushed.

"Really, Inspector," he murmured. "You go too far."

"I'm not calling you a thief, Mr. Mander," Schmidty continued. "The man you say you can't identify did."

"How interesting." Mander sneered. "When was that? Before he died?"

"In the crap game." Schmidty ignored the sarcasm.

"I don't see why you're questioning me about that crap game." Mander smiled. "You seem to remember much more about it than I do. Were you in it?"

"No," said Schmidty, "but Bagby here was."

"Oh," said Mander. "Bagby."

He gave me one of those looks that starts with the head and takes in everything down to the feet, indicating as it goes that it is faintly astonished and amused by what it sees.

"Yes," said Schmidty. "Bagby saw you in that crap game. He saw you get mad when this man won a lot of money on your rolls, and he heard you say something to the guy about it. Then he heard the guy answer, 'It takes a thief to catch a thief.' "

"Oh," said Mander. "How astonishing."

"Are you calling me a liar?" I demanded.

My dearest wish at that moment was to take a poke at Humphrey Mander. It was

not the first time I had had the impulse. In fact, every time I saw him that week end I had the impulse, but this time it came on me in acute form.

"No," he answered. "Of course not. I remember the incident very well. I just didn't remember the person who made the very odd remark."

"You mean you took that crack from a total stranger without even knowing what he meant by it?" Schmidty asked.

"Yes," said Mander. "I did."

"Why?" Schmidty snapped.

"Because it was an obviously maudlin and drunken remark," said Mander. "And I know enough to humor drunks. Maybe that's why I am alive now."

"You mean you had some special reason to be afraid that this man you couldn't identify would kill you?" Schmidty pounced.

The pounce, however, was ineffective because Mander upset us all with a thoroughly unexpected answer.

"No," he said sweetly. "I wasn't thinking of that at all. I was merely thinking of the poor man Stinker killed."

We all gulped simultaneously on that one. Properly enough, Stinker got his voice back first.

"What," he demanded, "does that crack mean?"

"I hate to say it," said Mander with an insufferably virtuous air, "but really you don't know your own strength. You oughtn't drink at all if there's a chance of your knocking a man's brains out."

"Keep the moral judgments, Mander," Red growled. "And tell us what you're prattling about."

"I'm talking about the man Stinker killed," said Mander, calm as you like.

"If you have any charges to make," said Schmidty, "make them more definite. What man?"

"The man out at that place they call Stinker's Run," Mander answered. "The strange-looking one who wears one of his eyelids akimbo."

"Ooof," said Stinker and subsided into a chair, slowly as though his legs had gradually softened up. He turned a strange color that was more green than anything else, and he looked as though he needed to vomit. I grabbed him by the shoulder and he smiled up at me wanly. Red patted his other shoulder gently.

"Steady, old keed," he said.

"Stinker," Schmidty said indignantly, and I loved him for coming to the defense so promptly, "clipped that guy one on the jaw, and it was a slap he had coming to him. But that was all there was to it. Where did you get this exaggerated stuff about killing?"

"Out at the roadhouse," Mander explained. "When I left the hospital, I was looking for you. I went back to the firehouse, but none of you were there. The bartender said he heard you say something about going to Stinker's Run, so I went there

looking for you. You had already gone, but the other man, the one with the mustache, told me you had been there. I started to leave, and on my way out I noticed this man lying on the porch. I called the bartender. It was his partner, the one with the eyelid, and he was dead. He said Stinker had knocked him down, and that Red gave him a quick look and said he'd be all right, and that then you all made a quick getaway. He said the man with the eyelid hadn't been feeling well since."

"Did you get a good look at him?" Schmidty asked. He was looking pretty grim himself.

"The one Stinker killed?" Mander asked.

The Zipper's nerves cracked.

"Don't keep saying that," he yowled. I looked at young Larraby. He was blowing his nose violently, and he was looking at least as green as Stinker. Brink looked about ready to pass out and I didn't feel too good myself.

"Yes, I saw him," said Mander. "He looked quite dead to me. I asked the other man how it had happened, and he said that Stinker knocked him down and he must have hit his head when he fell because there he was on the porch dead."

"I want to see that body," Red spoke through stiff lips. "If anything went wrong I'm responsible."

"I hit him," Stinker murmured.

"But I said he'd be all right," Red growled. "I'm going out there."

"I'm going with you," said Stinker.

"We're all going," Schmidty announced, and off we raced back to Stinker's Run without a thought for Harry Stedman, whom Gilligan had told to come to the police station when he was through at the hospital. I tried to tell myself that we would find Stitch out at Stinker's Run as good as new, that he was not dead at all, that Mander had heard that Stinker knocked him cold and had just made up the rest of his story to create a diversion and gain a respite from Inspector Schmidt's questioning; but all the time I knew it was a vain hope. It was such a silly story for Mander to make up. I knew that he was a consummate ass with nary a shred of common decency, but still I could not convince myself that he didn't have more sense than that. And then I knew about Stinker's great strength. We had always been the best of friends, but friend or not, I'd as soon take a cannon ball on my chin as one of Stinker's hard and heavy fists. I knew just how hard Stitch had fallen because, when the weight of his fall hit the table, I had felt that table in my abdomen and, when it happened, I thought that table was going to come out at my back. I couldn't bear to look at Stinker and Red. They weren't angry. They were horrified and frightened. Anyone who did not know them as well as I did might have been surprised that two such hard-looking lads should be so much affected by a thing like this. I tried to tell myself that it was just an accident and that Stitch had started it, but somehow that made the whole thing no less horrible. I knew what the thought that he had killed a man was doing to Stinker. My memory raced back to something that had happened when we were all down at

college. In a football game Stinker tackled an opposing end, and the man took a bad fall and broke his leg. Everybody tried to convince Stinker that it was the hazard of the game, but he acted as though he had just taken the man's leg in his two hands and had deliberately snapped it. He nearly gave up football, and he hung around the infirmary in a sweat of remorse for hours. I remembered the coach saying that it was a good thing it happened in the next to the last game of his last football season. He would never have been the player he was again. I remembered the last game of the season. It was the worst game Stinker ever played. On offense he was his old self, that is when he was carrying the ball or throwing or catching passes, but his deadly tackling and blocking, his defensive play that everyone had come to take for granted, just was not there. He tackled like a timid schoolgirl, and it was obvious all through that game that his one fear was that he might hurt somebody. I could think of no one in the world who would take a thing like Stitch's death harder than Stinker. Illogically I wanted to take it out on Mander. I itched to push his smug face in even as I told myself that it was barbaric to hold bad news against the messenger who brought it.

We drew up at Stinker's Run and dashed into the place. Benjamin met us at the door.

"Where's Stitch?" Schmidty asked.

Jack Benjamin jerked his thumb in the direction of a little cottage back of the roadhouse.

"I've got him laid out on his bed," he said. "I'm trying to get the undertaker."

CHAPTER SEVEN

GILLIGAN SUGGESTED that a rush for the undertaker might be rather premature. He pointed out the necessity for a medical examination first. Benjamin objected that there was no question of the fact that Stitch was dead and insisted that it was too late for a doctor.

"Stitch," he said rather sentimentally, "never liked having a doctor fussing around him when he was alive. If he had gone to a doctor right away like he should've when his face was cut, he wouldn't have had such a bad scar, but Stitch was like that. If he knew what was happening to him, he wouldn't want any doctors messing around his body."

When Gilligan reminded him that it was not a matter of choice, that the need for a death certificate was a matter of law, he seemed genuinely astonished. Explaining that he had never had any experience of such things before, he asked whether things could not be kept as simple as possible.

"This guy here," he said, jerking his thumb toward Red, "is a doctor, isn't he? He saw Stitch when it happened. Suppose he gives us the death certificate."

"That," Red murmured, "will not be sufficient now, I'm afraid. But I should like to see the body."

"Sure," said Benjamin. "Anybody else like to come?"

"I would like to see the body," Stinker mumbled.

"Nah, Mr. Smith," Benjamin said almost kindly. "What for? It'll just make you feel bad."

"That's right, keed," Red whispered. "It won't help matters any."

Stinker shook his head stubbornly.

"I've got to see him," he insisted.

"I saw the body just a couple of minutes ago," said Mander. "It isn't bad."

Not at all encouraged by this almost cheerful advice, the Zipper and Brink begged off. Leaving one of Gilligan's cops to wait with them on the roadhouse porch, we started around the corner of the building, following Jack Benjamin toward the cottage. Suddenly Stinker spoke to young Larraby.

"Go back to the others and wait for us," he said.

"I'd rather go with you," the boy answered, but the tone of his voice turned the reply into a plea for permission.

"Don't want to miss any of the fun, I suppose," Stinker snarled. "Well this isn't an excursion for morbid children. Go on back there and wait for us."

The kid looked stricken, but he turned without a word and went back to the porch. It was cruel, although I could hardly blame Stinker. It had been obvious from the moment young Larraby first set eyes on us that he just oozed hero worship for Stinker. Of course, Stinker had recognized the symptoms from the first. He had encountered them often enough to know them, and although the kid's extravagant adulation embarrassed him, as that sort of thing always did, he had been kind to the boy, so kind that his sudden anger must have hurt the kid acutely. If he had been himself, he would never have done such a thing; but anyone could see that he was on the raw edge, that his outburst was just a luxurious moment of relaxation he allowed himself from his silent self-torture.

"Why don't you want the kid to come?" Schmidty asked.

"The less of this he sees," Stinker mumbled, "the better for him. He should have been back in his room in bed hours ago."

Benjamin took us into the cottage and led us through a jumbled living room into a bedroom. I got a quick vivid impression of that living room, a mess of empty beer cans, cigarette butts and assorted debris. I remember the curled dry edge of an abandoned remnant of ham sandwich and the table piled high with dirty dishes. It looked like a room where men live as sloppily as they please. I gathered that Stitch Johnson and Jack Benjamin had been living alone, doing their own housework, as far as any was done. Theirs apparently was the kind of housekeeping in which a coffee cup is washed only after all clean cups have been exhausted and then only in preparation for immediate use, if at all. That impression was verified by the bedroom. The bed

on which Stitch's body lay was rumpled and looked as though it had not been made since it had last been slept in. The second bed in the room was also unmade, and various articles of wearing apparel were strewn around the room. Trousers, socks, soiled shirts — all had been allowed to stay wherever they fell.

Red crossed to the bed and examined the body. He raised the head from the grimy pillow, and I felt a moment of nausea when I saw the smear of blood on the pillow slip where Stitch's head had touched it. Red turned the body on its side and studied the back of the head.

"He's dead, isn't he, Doc?" Benjamin asked.

"Yes," said Red, "he's dead."

"See," Benjamin murmured. "I told you."

"I didn't doubt your word," Red snapped.

"What happened to him?" Stinker faltered. "How did he die?"

"Can't quite tell." Red frowned.

"Was it ——" Stinker began. "Did I?"

"The crack on the jaw," Red said firmly, "didn't kill him. He hit his head, and I think that did it. What I can't understand ——"

"Benjamin," Schmidty spoke suddenly, interrupting Red before he could finish. "Suppose you tell us exactly what happened after we left."

"Sure," said Benjamin and told his story.

He said that after we left Stitch got on his feet. He seemed rather wobbly, so Benjamin let him sit down for a bit while he went back to tend bar. After a couple of minutes, when Stitch seemed no better, Benjamin suggested that he go back to the cottage and lie down. He told us that Stitch went, and the first he knew that he hadn't gotten back to the cottage at all was when Mander told him that there was a man lying on the porch and he went out and found Stitch.

When he tried to bring him to he realized that Stitch was dead.

"Never was so surprised in my life," he finished.

"Didn't you think," Gilligan asked, "that you should have let me know right away?"

"Sure," said Benjamin. "I knew you'd want to know. I ran back to the bar to telephone you, but this guy was there looking for you. He said he was going right down to find you anyway, so I told him to tell you."

"That's right," Mander agreed. "He said that I should tell you and save him a nickel."

"If it could be arranged," Red interrupted, "I should like to be present for the autopsy."

"Sure," said Gilligan.

"Thanks," said Red. "Come on, keed." He took Stinker's arm. "Let's get out of here."

"Hey, look," Benjamin stopped them. "Suppose we be sensible about this thing.

Stitch and I had a good thing here in this roadhouse. We were just getting going good and any stink now is likely to give the place a bad name. We all know what happened and it's too bad. Stitch was a dope in many ways but underneath he was all right. But I'm not defending him. He asked for it, and Mr. Smith here was right to bust him. Well, an accident happened, and it turned out worse than any of us thought. Sure, but there's no call to make a big fuss over it."

"Did he have any family?" Stinker asked. "Any dependents? Is there anything I can do?"

"Naw," said Benjamin. "Forget it. He had a dame once, but he slapped her around so much that she walked out on him a couple of years ago. Dames didn't go for him much anyhow. They didn't like his looks."

"I'd like to do something," Stinker insisted.

"Sure, I know," Benjamin murmured. "But it would be the best thing all round just to keep it quiet and between ourselves."

"Well," Gilligan hesitated, "I don't know."

I could see that his soft heart was about to get the better of him just the way it did that time years before when he caught me driving the dean's car up the library steps. Schmidty, however, stepped in firmly.

"Of course, we can't keep a thing like this quiet," he said. "The man's dead. There will have to be an autopsy."

"Look," Benjamin began, but Mander took up his argument before he could finish.

"Mr. Benjamin," Mander said, "is being very nice about it. I should think you'd have sense enough to take advantage of the break he's giving you. It's true that he stands to get something out of it. He's concerned about the good name of Stinker's Run, if he calls that a good name. But you fellows stand to lose much more than he possibly could."

"Don't be a fool, Mander." I tried to shut him up.

"There's no sense in trying to pretend that you're not in a jam," he continued, ignoring me. "If the papers get hold of this, they'll have a field day. 'Athlete Architect Kills Man in Barroom Brawl.' That'll be a pretty headline. And that's the least of it. They can do a lot with the story of how Stinker killed his man with a single blow while local police and a visiting New York detective did nothing to stop the slaughter."

"Oh, shut up," Red growled.

"And," Mander continued unperturbed, "that wouldn't be all of it. Not by a long shot. There'd be nice juicy bits about the prominent society doctor who callously left the injured man to bleed to death."

"Gee, Red," Stinker groaned. "I didn't think of that. Look what I've gotten you into."

"For God's sake, keed," said Red, "don't be an idiot. If one of your houses collapsed and killed a man, you'd want an investigation. You'd want to know what you had

done. You wouldn't just want to hush it up. Well, I examined this man and I said he'd be all right. It's not a question of what anyone else thinks. It's for myself. I've got to know what happened to him."

"Sure, Red," Stinker sighed. "I know how you feel."

"I think you're both crazy," said Mander.

"You would," said I, and I admit that I said it with a good deal of sneer.

"Oh, come on." Benjamin returned to the argument. "We all know what happened. It was an accident. When Mr. Smith knocked him down, there was no way he could know Stitch would hit his head when he fell. Fellows get knocked down all the time and nothing like this happens."

There was more of the same, but with Stinker and Red determined to see the thing through, no matter what happened to them, and Schmidty regarding the whole idea of a hush-up as too silly to think about, nobody was persuaded to anything. Benjamin was instructed to hold everything, and Gilligan arranged to have one of his men stay with the body until it was removed for the autopsy. Before we left, however, Benjamin had the last word.

"If you guys want to be fools," he said, "I can't stop you, but get one thing straight. This whole thing is none of my affair. Whatever fight you had with Stitch was your business and his. I had no part of it. I make my living out of this roadhouse, and if you think you are going to pin anything on me you're mistaken. I'm not going to take the rap for this."

"Don't worry about that, Benjamin," Schmidty answered. "Nobody's denying that Smith hit him."

"Yeah," said Benjamin. "I wasn't born yesterday either. You'll try to make out that I'm running a clip joint here, and that Stitch started the fight. Just remember. If you pull anything like that I'll tell the papers something too. I'll tell them how you came in to gang up on Stitch. He was one man against at least seven of you."

"Sure," said Schmidty, "and a fool to start throwing punches against odds like that."

"Sure." Benjamin fired his parting shot. "We'll see if the papers believe that Stitch would have started anything in the middle of the gang you brought with you."

We were a gloomy crowd that headed back to the station house. Brink asked if Stitch was really dead and got a short answer from Schmidty. The rest of us just thought. As we drove along young Larraby laid his hand on Stinker's knee.

"Gee," he said. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right, kid." Stinker patted his hand. "I'm sorry I snarled at you back there. I was feeling rotten."

"I know," the boy said eagerly.

When we got back to headquarters, there was Harry Stedman waiting for us. Even in his silly 1926 sailor suit, he was the same old Harry and it was good to see him. With his familiar pipe stuck in that good, honest, homely face of his he looked steady

and solid and intelligent. Sunk as we felt, there was something reassuring in just seeing Harry. He waved his pipe at us as we came in.

"Quite a haul, Gilligan," he said. "Do I have to stand bail for all these bums?"

"Up to their old tricks, Professor Stedman," said Gilligan. "I'm glad to see that you seem to be behaving yourself this reunion."

I think Gilligan played up to Harry's joke in the vain hope of cheering us up a bit.

"And Larraby," Harry continued when he spotted the kid. "How did you get in this bad company?"

"Good evening, sir," the kid murmured, blushing right up into his hair.

"Morning," said Harry, "is more like it. It's nearer dawn than midnight."

Harry was introduced to Schmidty and to Mander, whom he did not know. Brink he had known slightly from college, and the rest of us were old friends. Schmidty explained briefly the difficulties we had been having about identification.

"Have you seen the body?" he asked.

"Yes," Harry answered. "Suicide, I suppose."

"Suicide, Professor Stedman?" Schmidty asked. "What made you think of suicide?"

Harry shrugged.

"When men find themselves in the spot he was in," he said, "they are likely to play with the idea of suicide more often than not. Some go through with it and kill themselves and some don't."

"Then you can identify him?" Schmidty interrupted. "You know him?"

"Yes, Inspector," Harry answered. "I can identify him. I never had more than a nodding acquaintance with the man but, if I can't tell you all that you want to know about him out of my own knowledge, I can probably find out much more for you."

"Fine," said Schmidty. "We should have asked you to help us earlier, Professor Stedman. Who is he?"

"His name's Bellringer," Harry announced. "Frederick Bellringer. He entered college with our class freshman year but he didn't graduate. Left college suddenly during junior year."

"Sure of it?" Schmidty asked.

"Quite," said Harry. "If you want to run out to my house, Inspector — it's only ten minutes out of town — I can show you the class records. They contain the usual pedigree on him and a picture."

"I suppose —— " Schmidty began.

"Also," Harry offered, "we can talk more comfortably at my place, and I'll tell you all I know about him: past history and more recent activities."

"Thanks, Professor," said Schmidty. "If you don't mind, I think you can help us a lot."

"Glad to," said Harry. "You're all invited out to the house, not that your hospitality isn't very nice, Gilligan, but our fellow alumni out in the street are pretty noisy

and your chairs are hard. Out in my neck of the woods the upholstery is softer and the night is quieter."

"Swell," said Schmidty. "Let's go."

"Thanks for asking me, Stedman" — Brink hung back — "but if the inspector doesn't mind, I really should be getting back to the firehouse. Now that you have your man identified, you don't need me any more, do you, Inspector?"

"Not for a while anyway," Schmidty conceded, "but you won't be leaving town, will you?"

"No," Brink said. "Why?"

"I don't know," said Schmidty. "But if we need witnesses to that business out at Stinker's Run, you'll have to be available."

"Oh," said Brink, "of course."

"What about me?" Mander asked. "I was having a pretty good time over at the firehouse before you picked me up. Do you need me any more?"

"No," said Schmidty, "not now. The same goes for you — like Mr. Brinkley. Sorry we spoiled your evening."

"Oh," said Mander grudgingly, "that's all right. But I wasn't a witness to what happened out at Stinker's Run."

"But you saw the body before the police got there," Schmidty explained. "We may need you."

"All right." Mander sighed. "I'll stay around all week end anyhow. Come on, Brink, I'll go back to the firehouse with you now."

The rest of us accepted Harry's invitation. Only Red hung back for a moment. He reminded Schmidty about the autopsy and suggested that possibly he had better go to the hospital to be on hand for it. Both Gilligan and the inspector, however, assured him that they could not get a doctor to do the autopsy at that hour, and that it would certainly wait until morning. With that settled we piled into the cars and threaded our way through the drunks till we got far enough out of town to have a clear road. But even then we proceeded cautiously. You never can tell how far afield an inebriate might stray, and we didn't want to hit anyone. Schmidty was driving his own car and Gilligan his. According to Schmidty's whispered instructions, I rode with Harry Stedman. He told me to see to it that neither I nor the Zipper, who rode in Harry's car also, told Harry anything about the case. I understood, of course, that Schmidty likes to get his information from people who have as few preconceived notions of a case as possible. I was prepared to keep Zip shut up if Harry asked any questions but, intent on his driving, Harry spoke only in monosyllables and those only in answer when we spoke to him.

As soon as we got out to his house, however, and he had distributed the lot of us comfortably around a bottle of Scotch, a siphon, a jug of ice and a tray of glasses, he began asking questions and he asked them in clusters. He noticed that the Zipper carried his arm stiffly and asked about that. He also asked whether Bellringer had

killed himself out at Stinker's Run and how all of us got mixed up with him.

"I thought," he said, "you boys were all too smart to be hooked on any stuff like this."

Schmidty explained that, at the moment, the most important thing was that we should know what he could tell us about Frederick Bellringer and promised him that we would answer all the questions we could later. Then Harry spilled his story and it was a honey. For the most part we heard him out in silence, but occasionally when a point clicked too obviously or a development was too astonishing he was interrupted briefly by grunts or ejaculations of surprise.

"You know," Harry began, "if you had asked me about this man Bellringer as recently as a week ago, I should have had to look him up in the records before I remembered him at all. But, oddly enough, just last week I heard an amazing story about him. It interested me so much that I looked up his record, and I was really watching for him at reunion today. I never thought that he would show up, but he did and I was amused that he should. People do such odd things under pressure."

"What pressure?" I demanded. "Don't be so professorially long-winded. We all know that you can make a good lecture-room effect if you want to."

Harry heaved a sofa cushion at me which I dodged.

"All right," he said. "Here it is. From time to time, friends of mine who work for the Securities and Exchange Commission ask for a bit of advice on untangling some of the more elaborately faked corporation setups. About a week ago, at one of these economic conferences they're having all the time these days, I ran into one of the SEC boys and he asked me if I knew a chap named Frederick Bellringer. The name sounded familiar, and I began remembering the man vaguely when my SEC friend told me that he was a classmate of mine. Bellringer, it seems, has been interesting the SEC greatly because the commission is just about ready to crack Fundamental Finance, Inc., wide open."

"What," said Schmidty, "is Fundamental Finance, Inc.?"

"Basically" — Harry spoke with a grimace of distaste — "Fundamental Finance, Inc., is Frederick Bellringer. If any of you lads has been fool enough to buy into it, just write it off as experience."

"On the rocks?" I asked.

"Not exactly," said Harry. "Bubbles don't land on the rocks. They just blow up until the man with the pin comes along. All the substance Fundamental Finance ever had outside of Bellringer's sales talk was in Bellringer's pocket. It's the old story. As I see it, he blew his bubble and as soon as he saw the man with the pin coming along — in this case the SEC — he committed suicide."

"Did your SEC friend have any dope on any of the guys Bellringer hooked with this phony of his?" Schmidty asked.

"Sure," said Harry. "That government crowd does a thorough job. As a matter of fact, he mentioned it to me because they are quite sure that Bellringer used his old

college connections for all they were worth in sucking the boys into Fundamental Finance. He gave me a list of people who put heavy money into it. As a sucker list compiled from the financial nitwits among our fellow alumni, it is a honey. Bellringer must have had a nose for the lads who are both rich and soft in the head. He crossed class lines to get them. That pompous ass, Brinkley, in your class was a juicy victim."

"That," said Schmidty in a fervor of esthetic appreciation, "is perfectly beautiful."

Harry continued his narrative. It was his idea that the SEC had proof that Bellringer was not merely one of those unskilled or foolish or even reckless financiers whose operations get out of hand and tumble them into ruin. They had Bellringer pegged as straight swindler, a lad who organized Fundamental Finance without ever having had the slightest legitimate intention.

"You mean," Schmidty asked, "that he was selling blue sky from the very first?"

"Yes," said Harry, "that was his specialty, selling blue sky from blueprints."

He went on to tell us that he had been sufficiently interested by the SEC dope on Bellringer to look the man up in the college records and make a few inquiries about him on the campus. From older members of the faculty and the college administration he learned that Bellringer's sudden disappearance during junior year had been by request. He had been caught cheating on an exam. That has always been a dismissal offense, but such things are managed with the most consummate tact by the college administration. The guilty man just drops out, and the other students are kept ignorant of the whole incident.

"You say Brinkley was one of his investors," Schmidty interrupted. "Do you remember any other names?"

"I have a list," Harry answered. "Want to see it?"

Schmidty nodded, and Harry went to his desk and rummaged in a drawer. It took him only a moment or two to find the paper he wanted. He handed it to Schmidty.

"Here you are, Inspector," he said. "That list is necessarily incomplete. As soon as the information becomes public that Fundamental Finance is a swindle flocks of investors will turn up with claims. They always do."

"Sure," said Schmidty and took the list. I looked at it with him.

"There's Brink's name," I murmured.

"Boy, oh boy." Schmidty chuckled. "Mander too."

"Where?" I asked, and Schmidty pointed to the name.

"Mander?" said Harry. "That fellow that was with you — the one who went back to the firehouse with Brinkley — his name was Mander, wasn't it?"

"It sure was," said Schmidty, happy as a lark. "It takes a thief to catch a thief. Nice, isn't it, Baggy?"

"Swell," I agreed. "But where does all this leave your friend, Stitch?"

"Just where he was," said Schmidty. "But we're making progress."

Stinker groaned and Red looked miserable. Harry stared at them incredulously.

"Not you two," he sighed. "So it was a meeting of victims. Mander and Brinkley

are just the type to get hooked, but I thought you had more sense. Just how bad is it? He got Stinker and Red. What about the rest of you?"

Harry looked us over, the Zipper, Jim and myself. He wore the expression of a man whose faith in his friends' acumen has just taken a body blow. Shaking his head dolefully, he turned to Bob Larraby.

"And you, Larraby," he said. "If you've been sinking your allowance in Fundamental Finance, you should be spanked and I have half a mind to do it myself."

"No sir," the kid gulped. "All I did was find Mr. Bellringer's body."

"Oh," said Harry. "The dean is going to have pups about this. I can just see him, all overcome with distress that an undergraduate should have such an experience. He worries a lot about the morbid tendencies of the young anyway."

"Yes, sir," said young Larraby apologetically.

Then we told Harry our story. Schmidty told most of it, and I provided the part that happened before Schmidty arrived. At first Harry seemed relieved that none of us would be caught in the Fundamental Finance crash, but when he began to appreciate the still vague but impressive proportions of the affair he grew less lighthearted about it. Naturally, the part of it that upset him most was the predicament in which it had landed Stinker and Red. That was a really grim situation; not that I mean to make light of the rest of it, but no man likes to see two of his good friends sunk in the mental agony that had swamped them. In comparison, the Zipper's flesh wound was a trifle, and his change of clothes little more than that. When Harry spoke, it was probably as much to try to divert the conversation from the grim business of Stitch's death as out of real interest.

"There is no question in your minds then," he asked, "that Bellringer was murdered?"

"Not the slightest question," said Red. "With the best reasons in the world for suicide, still a man does not choke himself to death with his own bare hands. You agree, don't you, Inspector? After my fumble out at Stinker's Run, I'm afraid to give a definite opinion on anything."

"Don't let it get you down," Schmidty said consolingly. "I want your opinion."

"Thanks," Red murmured wryly.

"I want your opinion about Stitch," Schmidty continued. "You were about to say something about him out at Stinker's Run when I interrupted you."

"Yes," said Red, "I was. But I thought you wanted to shut me up. After all you had every reason to be fed up with me."

"Don't" — Schmidty grinned — "be a dope. I thought, when you shut up, you caught on to what I had in mind. Mander was there, and I didn't believe Mander's story about the thief crack worth a damn. Until Mander and Brinkley are ready to talk, it's better that they know nothing they don't have to know. If you've got liars to handle, it's stupid to give them the advantage of knowing just how the land lies."

"Oh," said Red. "Well, this is the thing that has me bothered. Unless I'm crazy,

something happened to Stitch after Stinker cooled him. I don't pretend that I made a thorough examination at the time. You were all there and saw it, but I did put my hand under his head to lift him, and if he had been bleeding I would have known it. Did any of you see any blood?"

We all shook our heads.

"O.K.," said Red. "But there was blood on the pillow, and if the autopsy doesn't show a fractured skull I'll give up practicing medicine."

"And I," said Schmidty, "will go back to pounding a beat."

He looked at his feet. Harry had permitted him to take off his shoes long before and for Schmidty to promise to forego such shoeless ease was serious.

"Now," Red continued. "What do you make of that, Schmidty? If all of us are right, and his head wasn't bleeding after Stinker flattened him, what happened to him after we left?"

"Could it be," Stinker asked gloomily, "that the blood wouldn't show right away, that I did kill him with that punch?"

"Gosh." Red sighed. "I've got to admit that it is possible that you killed him. It is possible for a man to hit his head and do enough damage to his skull for it to kill him even though the scalp remains unbroken and there is no outside bleeding. When Mander first turned up and told us that Stitch was dead, I was afraid that we were going to find that something like that happened. But his head wasn't bleeding that first time I looked at him, and we can be sure that whatever happened to him when you knocked him down, it didn't cause any outside bleeding then. That means that it couldn't have caused any outside bleeding later, not without something else happening to his head afterward."

"Such as?" the Zipper asked.

"Well," Red answered. "He could have hit his head when he fell on the porch."

"And that would mean," Stinker concluded grimly, "that I really killed him. It would mean that, when I knocked him down, he hit his head, and that when he fell later on the porch, he was passing out."

"No," said Red. "He had none of the symptoms of a concussion or skull-fracture case when I looked at him."

"You mean," Schmidty asked, "that if there is a concussion or a fracture, he didn't get it when Stinker knocked him down?"

"But," Stinker argued, "you said yourself, Red, just a minute ago that he could have hurt his head when I knocked him down, fatally even."

"I said," Red explained, "that it was possible to injure a man's head fatally without drawing any blood, and it is possible. The thing is though that there are other symptoms, and I just can't believe that I overlooked them."

"Yeah," Stinker growled. "But what difference does it make? Suppose I just knocked him dizzy, dizzy enough so that it made him fall down later and hit his head and kill himself. It's still my fault."

"Oh, come now," Harry interrupted, "I don't pretend to any medical knowledge, but I don't think I'm especially deficient in moral sense. It seems to me that you are going out of the way to take the blame on yourself, Stinker."

"Another thing" — Red tried his hand at coaxing Stinker out of the gloom — "although I can't say it's impossible that a man should fall in a faint and hit his head hard enough to fracture his skull, the odds are always overwhelmingly against it. People just don't keel right over. They crumple. Their legs fold up under them. Most often, when a man passes out that way, he falls with just about as little force as you can have and call it a fall at all."

"Also," said Schmidty, "you have to remember that neither Red nor you saw him die. There are plenty of things that could have happened to him."

"As for instance?" Stinker asked.

"As for instance," said Schmidty, "Stitch was into something. I still think he tried to run me off the road with his car even though he reported it stolen. There are a lot of things I want to know about Stitch. You're forgetting that we haven't cleared up his connection with Bellringer."

"What makes you think there is a connection?"

Young Larraby, who had been silent for quite a while, tried to make his question sound casual, but there was a nervous tension in his voice that made me stare at him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE BOY LOOKED as though any answer Inspector Schmidt made to his question might mean a lot to him. I could not for the life of me see why the kid should act as though it meant so much to him. Obviously he admired Stinker with an awe that approached worship, and it would be natural under the circumstances that he should be feeling even very considerable concern about the whole thing as it affected his hero. Otherwise, however, I could have understood interest and boyish excitement over a murder case, but I could not understand this breathlessness with which he asked the question.

It was a breathlessness that sounded and looked too much akin to plain ordinary fear.

Schmidty, however, ignored the question. He preferred to ask a few of his own, and he started with the lad. As you may remember, when we left Stinker's Run, that first time we went out to the roadhouse, the kid stayed behind for a few minutes to wait for the Zipper and Brink while the rest of us went out to the cars. Schmidty wanted to know what happened in those few minutes.

"I waited for them," the boy said. "Mr. Benjamin went into the roulette room."

"Where?" Schmidty asked.

"The back room," Larraby explained. "They have a roulette wheel back there."

"I see," said Schmidty. "Then what?"

"That left me alone with Mr. Johnson," the boy explained. "He got up and stood for a bit holding on to the table with one hand while he sort of felt of his jaw with the other. Then he sat down on a chair and just sat. I didn't say anything and he didn't either."

"When he got up," Red asked, "did you notice any blood on the floor or on him? Was he bleeding?"

"No sir," the kid answered, without a moment's hesitation. "He had a pencil behind his ear — maybe you remember — when Stinker knocked him down."

"I didn't notice," Red murmured.

"I did," said the boy. "He always had a pencil behind his ear. He used it to figure out how much people owed."

"You seem to know his habits pretty well," Schmidty murmured.

"I'd been out there before, sir." The boy flushed. "A lot of us go out there for beer."

"And that roulette wheel, I warrant." Harry grinned. "The dean's been talking about complaining to the mayor about the gambling out there."

"About that pencil," the kid said abruptly. "When he got up I happened to notice that it had fallen to the floor. I picked it up for him. I would have seen the blood on the floor then if there had been any."

"I guess you would have," said Schmidty. "Then what happened?"

"Then Mr. Brinkley came out, and I went in to tell Mr. Tracy that you were waiting," Larraby answered.

Schmidty looked questioningly at the Zipper.

"That's right," Zip volunteered. "Larraby came in a moment or two after Brink left me."

"What were Brinkley and Stitch doing when the two of you came out?" Schmidty asked.

"Well," said the Zipper, "I came out first. Stitch was there, not doing anything, just sitting in a chair. But no Brink. I thought he had already gone out to join you, so I waited for Larraby. I asked Stitch if he felt any better and he nodded. While I was waiting though, Brink came out of the back room with that man Benjamin. Larraby joined us at the same time, and the three of us came out to the cars."

"Yes," Larraby added. "That's the way it was."

"H'm," said Schmidty. "I didn't know the three of you were so busy giving each other chances to be alone with Stitch."

"What," I asked, "do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much," the inspector answered. "I'm figuring with Red here that something happened to Stitch after we saw him. I've got to figure on the people who had a chance at him after we left. I don't mean a thing, but I've got to figure. Now look, if

there is a connection between Stitch and this Bellringer business — and I think there is — we have Brinkley as a Bellringer investor. Maybe it wasn't so good that he was alone with Stitch even for a minute."

"But I saw Stitch after Brink was alone with him," Zip objected.

"Sure," said Schmidty. "Now I don't mean any offense, but you turned up in Bellringer's pants and he turned up in your jersey, and then you had it again or something like that. I don't know yet just how you get into this thing, but you do some way."

"I see what you mean," the Zipper answered with a graceful lack of resentment.

"Then," Schmidty added, "there's Mander. How do I know Mander didn't get a chance at Stitch alone? He was out there. We know that."

"What about me while you're suspecting everybody?" Larraby asked, showing less grace than the Zipper had displayed.

"You found the body," Schmidty answered, preserving his detached, scientific manner. "I have only your word for it that you found it by accident."

"Mine," said Larraby, "and Peggy's."

"Sure," said Schmidty. "But you both admit that she left you alone with the body for a while."

"That's pretty slim," I objected. "I was alone with the body out in the alley. It doesn't mean anything."

"Not necessarily," Schmidty agreed, "but we have to watch every angle. Anyway, it's no use thinking too much about this part of it until we have the results of the post mortem on Stitch. We'll find out maybe that he had a bad heart all the time. These angles are just something to keep in mind. If somebody did something to him after we left, it was somebody who didn't have much time, and I am interested in anyone who had just a moment with him."

"Look," said Gilligan. "I don't like to say this, but here's another way of looking at it. As you said, Mr. Tracy is mixed up in the Bellringer killing some way, and Mr. Smith and Doctor Sweeney are Mr. Tracy's friends."

"So," Stinker shouted, "I killed Stitch purposely, and Red tried to cover me up. That's the nicest idea of all."

"Please, Mr. Smith" — Gilligan spoke with every evidence of acute unhappiness — "don't take it personally."

"Wait, all of you," Harry interrupted. "Let's be sensible. It's damn late and everybody's very tired. As I see it, there's nothing more that can be done till morning. Would it be unprofessional, Inspector, if we all got some sleep and postponed having horrid thoughts about the grandest guys we know, until you can really do some investigating?"

"That," said Schmidty, "is the best idea anybody's had in a long time."

Harry saw us out and we drove back to town. Things had quieted down a lot. After all, the boys who go it the strongest do pass out eventually, and it was late

enough for them all to be out cold. We heard occasional voices lifted in song and saw occasional drunks reeling along the street. A few of the lads were draped over doorsteps sleeping it off, but in general the night had gone down to the dregs and all but a few diehards had gone to bed. Schmidty had a few requests to make of Gilligan, and we stopped in front of the police station while he made them. He asked Gilligan to let him know if Stitch's car should be found, and he wanted a general inquiry on Bellringer, just in case he had a police record anywhere. Red reminded Gilligan about letting him know in time so that he could watch the post-mortem examination of Stitch's body and we started for the hotel.

On the way the question arose about a bed for Schmidty. We were all down to one car now — the inspector's — and it was quite a jam with Inspector Schmidty, Red, Stinker, the Zipper, Jim Dale, young Larraby and myself all in a not too large sedan.

"I guess," I said, "You'll have to share my bed. It will be less crowded than this."

We explained that the hotel is always booked solid months in advance for reunion week end, and Schmidty grumbled about it but resigned himself to sleeping double.

"You don't have to do that," young Larraby offered. "I have a perfectly good couch in my study. One of you can have my bed. I can sleep fine on the couch."

"I'll go with the kid," Stinker suggested. "I'm a great couch sleeper."

There was some argument about who'd take the bed and who the couch, with Schmidty objecting that he didn't want to put everybody out. It ended with the whole lot of us going over to the campus to have a look at Larraby's rooms and see whether that couch was really sleepable. In town it had been fairly silent but on the campus it was quiet as the grave. Turner Hall, where Bob roomed, is a long low rambling building with numerous wings running from a single central entrance. Bob's room was at the end of one of the wings. There is no need to bother you with floor plans of Turner Hall or any detailed descriptions of architectural layout. The campus is spacious and so much of the land adjacent to it is college owned that there has never been any need to be sparing of space. Long, low, sprawling buildings are the rule with two stories the standard building height. A few of the academic buildings are taller, running to three or four stories, but all the dormitories have been kept close to the ground. Turner Hall is typical in that it is two stories high. Less typical is its plan of sprawling in all directions from a single central entrance. Later dormitories were more sensibly designed with numerous entries, eliminating the tremendously long, twisting, narrow hallways which are characteristic of Turner.

Since Bob Larraby's ground-floor rooms were at the end of one of the wings, there was a great length of hallway to traverse from the building entrance to Room 41. Here, as in other parts of the campus and the town, almost every available electric bulb had been smashed early in the evening by bands of gay marauders, and throughout its tortuous length that hall leading to Larraby's room was dark, so dark that we had to feel our way down it. To make matters worse, the hall was full of trunks. You understand, of course, that reunions come at commencement time, at the end of the

academic year. Seniors are likely to be packing for the final departure and other students are going home for the summer. Virtually every student has his trunk brought up from the storerooms, and what seemed like millions of trunks were out in that hall. Larraby led the way because he was most familiar with the twists and turns of the corridor. When we started, we were all closely bunched behind him, warning each other of turns and trunks as we came to them. After fumbling our way about halfway down the hall, however, Jim Dale missed directions on one of the trunks and slammed into it hard. He was third in line right behind Larraby and Stinker. The Zipper was behind Jim, and when Jim tangled with the trunk Zip piled up on top of him, hurting his wounded arm. We got them untangled, and Schmidty and I held matches while Red tried to see whether any real damage had been done the Zipper. The bandage looked all right, so we started feeling our way down the hall again. Larraby and Stinker, however, who had been in the van all the time, had not waited for the rest of us. Later Larraby explained that they had hurried on to his rooms to pick up his flashlight with the idea of coming back for the rest of us.

At any rate, we were feeling our way down the hall when we heard the scuffling noises up ahead. Our first thought was that either Stinker or Larraby had fallen afoul of one of those parked trunks.

"All right up ahead?" Schmidty called.

We listened for an answer, but there was none — just the sound of labored breathing and scuffling and bumping noises.

"Come on!" Schmidty shouted, and started charging toward these inexplicable noises. It wasn't a bit funny at the time, although it is hard to tell about it without making it sound like something out of the funny papers. It had been tough enough getting through that hall when we had been feeling our way slowly. Now, of course, with the lot of us charging ahead, we took at least a dozen falls in as many yards. We ran into trunks, bumped into blank walls, tripped over ourselves and each other. In general, we raised the most unholy din, making more noise than progress. In one way, however, the noise did help. It woke several of the boys in the rooms along the corridor, and two or three opened their doors and stuck their heads out. Some of them had turned on the lights in their rooms, and the light filtering through opened doors and transoms helped past the last couple of turns and over the last few trunks. It seemed as though hundreds of people were yelling "Pipe down" at us all at once, and the few who had bothered to get up and open their doors were asking what went on. We didn't bother to answer any of them, but made straight for the door at the end of the corridor. We had enough light now to see the open door and a man lying across the threshold. All we could see was his legs. Schmidty got there first, and he reached around inside the door fumbling for a light switch. We were huddled right behind him when he found the switch and the light went on in Larraby's study. What it revealed was about as baffling a scene as anyone could expect. Lying flat on his face across the threshold was Bob Larraby. In the middle of the room beside an

overturned chair stood Stinker with his hands palm up in front of him. He wasn't doing anything, just stood there blinking at his hands.

Carefully we stepped over Larraby's inert body. We had had plenty of practice with the trunks.

"Now," said Schmidty, when we had hurdled the obstacle of Larraby and had gotten into the room. "What's all this?"

Stinker turned his hands slowly and looked at them as though he had never seen them before.

"Huh?" he said.

Schmidty grabbed his shoulder and shook him. Red and Jim turned Larraby over, and Red went to work to bring him around. The Zipper nursed his bad arm and stared around the room. There was nothing much to see. The curtains blew gently in the night breeze and one was torn and hung over the sill. There was the overturned chair and Larraby and Stinker. Otherwise the room looked ordinary enough.

"What happened?" Schmidty shouted, shaking Stinker.

"I could have killed him," Stinker mumbled. "If I hadn't remembered, I would have killed him."

Naturally I assumed that he meant Larraby, and I wondered what the boy could have possibly said or done to bring Stinker down on him that way. After all, one thing I did know was that Stinker is as amiable as he is big, and I was quite sure that he had taken a liking to the kid. It was all quite beyond me, but Schmidty's wits were nimbler and he dashed to the window. There was a sliver of moon that night, and although it had started clouding over, it was not a very dark night. The lawn outside Turner Hall is studded with clumps of trees, and under the trees the ground was darkly shadowed.

"Come on, Baggy," Schmidty ordered, and went out the window.

I followed him over the sill and we stood outside the window, peering into the tree shadows. After looking around for a few mintues, Schmidty sighed.

"I guess," he said, "this is no use. He got away."

"Who?" I asked.

"I don't know," Schmidty shrugged. "Whoever it was Stinker didn't kill."

We climbed back in through the window. The Zipper had righted the overturned chair and Stinker was sitting in it, his face buried in his hands. Jim and Red had lain Larraby on the sofa, and Red was working on him. The boy had a nasty abrasion behind his ear and another on his forehead.

Those combined with a trickle of blood from his nose made him look as though he were in a bad way.

"Hurt bad?" Schmidty asked.

The kid managed a grin. He mumbled something that sounded like no, but the word got tangled up on the way out because Red at that moment was wiping the blood away from his upper lip.

"It's nothing," Red answered for him. "He has a bloody nose and some scrapes and bruises. Also he was knocked silly for a minute."

Stinker raised his head from his hands. "Did he get you, kid?" he asked.

"I don't think so," said Larraby. "As I remember it, he just tripped me up and then everybody jumped up and down on me."

"Are you sure he's all right, Red?" Stinker asked anxiously, coming over to the couch. Looking down at the boy, he finished scowling. "He doesn't look right to me."

Red stared at Stinker for a moment and, shaking his head, he examined Larraby all over again. We watched until he had finished. The kid's nose stopped bleeding, and Red cleaned up his bruises and cuts. That left him looking as though somebody had knocked the stuffing out of him, but anyone could see that it was nothing serious. He just looked like a boy who had been in a fight.

"Now," said Schmidty, "suppose you drag yourself together and tell me exactly what happened."

Larraby sat up on the sofa and tossed his bloody handkerchief at the wastepaper basket across the room. Although Schmidty's question had been addressed to Stinker, the boy answered.

"There was somebody waiting in here," he said, "laying for me, I guess."

"Who was it?" Schmidty asked.

"I don't know," Larraby answered. "I unlocked the door and reached in for the light switch. You probably know better than I do what happened after that. Whoever it was in here tripped me up."

"I tripped you," Stinker interrupted.

"You tripped me?" The kid looked puzzled. "Why?"

"I had to," said Stinker.

"Is this a gag or something?" The kid addressed the question to all of us. "We come to the door and Stinker trips me up, and then you all trample on me. I don't get it."

"It was all over when we got here," I began but Schmidty interrupted me.

"What happened, Stinker?" he said.

"I'm not too sure myself," Stinker murmured. "When the kid opened the door, it seemed as dark in here as out in the hall. The only thing was I could see the window across the room lighter than the rest. I was right behind the kid and, just as he leaned in to get the light switch, I saw a hand come up over his head. I couldn't see it very clearly — just what I could make out silhouetted between me and the window across the room — but it looked like a hand holding something. Maybe it was a hammer or a stick. Whatever it was, it was all set to bash the kid on the top of the head."

"So there was somebody in here laying for me!" Larraby exclaimed.

"Of course there was," Stinker answered. "That's why I tripped you. It was too close to do anything else. The only chance to save the kid from having his skull cracked was to knock him out of the way of that hammer or whatever. I kicked hard against the back of his knees and grabbed his shoulders and hauled him down at the

same time. You see, I figured that if I couldn't make the hammer miss Larraby entirely at least I could knock and pull him far enough out of range so that he'd get only a glancing blow."

"Good stuff," Jim Dale applauded.

"I did what I could," Stinker groaned. "I must have caught you off balance, Bob, because you went right down flat under my feet. Whoever it was in here must have put all his weight behind that crack on the head he was aiming at you, because when I hauled you out from under it I saw a man's head and shoulders come catapulting forward. At the moment I thought he was trying to jump you while you were down, but I guess it wasn't that. I guess, when his hammer didn't hit anything, it was like a fighter taking a big swing and missing and flooring himself by his own momentum. Anyhow I made a grab for him and got him around the neck."

"Who was it?" Schmidty asked. "Couldn't you see?"

"No," said Stinker. "All I could see was the shape of a man's head between me and the window. I grabbed and held on."

"O.K.," said Schmidty. "Then what happened?"

"Then," Stinker faltered. "Then I let go."

"As simple as that," Schmidty growled. "Then you just let go."

Stinker nodded.

"Now, listen, Schmidty," Red interrupted. "Don't blame Stinker. You can see how it was. It was pitch-dark. He had Bob here under his feet, and he and this other man are struggling and walking all over the kid. Suppose Stinker did relax a second to get a better grip and the guy got away from him. The conditions weren't ideal."

"I didn't relax to get a better grip," Stinker said suddenly. "I let go deliberately."

"Why?" Red sputtered.

"Because I felt the man's throat under my hands and suddenly it came over me that I was choking him, that if I didn't stop I would kill him." Stinker shuddered. "It was horrible. I just let go. For a moment I could see him there against the window right in front of me. My hands felt numb as though they were suddenly paralyzed. Then he made a dive for the window and he was gone."

"Didn't you even try to chase him, to follow him?" Schmidty asked. "All right, you didn't want to grab him around the throat again, but you could have tackled him or something."

"I just didn't want to touch him again," Stinker mumbled. "I wanted him to get away, out of my sight. I wanted to forget that I ever had my hands on him."

"But why?" Schmidty asked. He sounded thoroughly exasperated.

"Because," said Stinker, "I came that close to killing him."

The light had dawned for me because I knew Stinker so much better than Schmidty did. For the Zipper and Red and Jim Dale and myself it was just history repeating itself. We could remember Stinker's last football game, the week after he tackled that end and broke his leg. Stinker had been no good in that game. He had been afraid to

touch anybody for fear he'd do it again. He had been scared that he'd injure somebody. Well, here it was again. He had socked Stitch out at Stinker's Run, and Stitch had died. Suddenly the old feeling came over him. It was perfectly understandable. He found himself with his hands around a man's throat, found himself practically choking a man to death. What could be more natural than that he should let go, forget everything but that he had killed a man that night, and now not many hours later had been within a hairbreadth of killing another?

"Well," Schmidty sighed. "It's too bad he got away, but that can't be helped any more. If you had killed him it would have been no more than he had coming to him."

"Yeah," Stinker groaned. "If he had landed with that hammer or whatever it was, he probably would have killed the kid. It certainly looked as though that was what he was trying to do, and a guy who tries to kill deserves to be killed I guess, but I don't want to be anyone's executioner. I haven't the appetite for it."

"Uh-huh," said Schmidty. "I know how you feel."

"Hey," Larraby exploded out of a clear sky. "Peggy!"

"What about Peggy?" Schmidty was immediately alert.

"I'm going to get Peggy out of that hotel right away." The kid started for the door.

"Why?" asked Schmidty. "What's the matter with the hotel?"

"It isn't safe," Larraby answered. "Gee! I hope we're not too late."

He hesitated at the door a moment and then turned to the open window.

"Come on," he shouted. "Let's go this way. It's quicker."

He climbed through the open window, leaving the rest of us speechless in his room. Schmidty came out of it first.

"Come on," he said. "We better follow him."

So we all flocked out through the window. We could see the kid loping along across the lawn toward the roadway where Schmidty had his car parked.

"Hey, wait for us," Red shouted as we started after him.

"If he's planning to take my car," said Schmidty, "he'll wait. It's locked and I have the key."

Larraby, however, tried the door of the sedan and, finding it locked, ran on down the road. We, when we got to the car, piled in, and Schmidty started after him. We overtook him quickly, and Schmidty slowed down beside him. The kid jumped on the running board and hung on.

"Step on it," he pleaded.

He was trembling so violently that I could hear his teeth chatter.

"Why the sudden panic?" I asked.

"I should have thought sooner," he gabbled. "One of us should have thought. Peggy saw that car come out of the boathouse road. The man that left Bellringer's body down at the boathouse must have seen us down there. He doesn't know that I didn't see him, and he doesn't know that when Peggy saw the car she didn't see the face of the man driving it. For all he knows we may be witnesses against him. That's

why he was laying for me in my room there. I hope he didn't go for Peggy first."

"What do you think of all that?" I asked Schmidty.

"Some sense to it," he answered. "It won't hurt to be too careful."

We pulled up at the hotel and tumbled into the lobby. The night clerk heard us coming and was all set in an attitude of defense by the time we got to his desk. I could just read from his face what was passing through his mind. "More drunks," he was thinking. "I thought I had put all of them to bed already."

"Did anyone go up to Miss James' room tonight?" Bob panted. "Is Miss James in her room?"

The clerk stared at him.

"Everything has been quiet around here for hours," he said stiffly. "Miss James, I suppose, is asleep."

"Ring her room," Larraby ordered. "Quick."

"Look," said the clerk. "It's very late. Hadn't you better wait till morning?"

"Do as he says," Schmidty said quietly. "We're not drunk, and this is important."

The clerk shrugged and picked up the phone. He handed the instrument to Larraby and plugged a cord in the switchboard. The kid held the receiver to his ear and sweated visibly while the clerk was ringing the girl's room. Suddenly his face lighted up all over and he grinned happily.

"Peggy," he shouted into the phone. "Are you all right? Has anybody been around bothering you?"

She must have been startled out of her sleep by the telephone bell because apparently her first question was what time it was.

"Oh," Larraby said. "It's very late. You're sure nobody has tried to get into your room or anything?"

"Really," murmured the clerk indignantly.

"Toss something on," Larraby continued on the phone. "We're coming right up."

He slammed the receiver on the hook and started for the stairs.

"She's all right so far," he shouted. "He hasn't been here yet. Come on."

When he started to take the steps two at a time, we followed him. The clerk came sputtering after us. He was full of protests and expostulations, but Schmidty sent him dithering back to his desk.

"Two men have been killed in this town tonight," he said. "You better go back to your desk and keep quiet."

Of course, Schmidty didn't mean it as a threat, but that was evidently the way the clerk took it. He turned tail and ran back to his desk. We went upstairs. At Peggy James's door we stopped while Bob Larraby knocked. When she opened that door, I knew that here was one of those rare women: a girl so genuinely pretty that she looked lovely without any make-up, with one cheek all reddened where she had been lying too heavily on it, with her hair in a disordered jumble of little curls. She had a dark blue robe gathered close around her and the trouser bottoms of a pair of pale blue

silk pajamas just showed around her ankles. She took one look at the boy and gasped.

"Bob!" she shrieked discreetly in the silence of the sleeping hotel. "What happened to you? Your face?"

"Oh, that," he murmured. "That's nothing. I fell down."

He had to persuade her that his injuries looked worse than they were, and that he was really not hurt at all, before she was ready to listen to what he had to say. When he did get his opening he put it very simply.

"We've decided," he said, "that it isn't safe for you to be here alone."

"Nobody's bothered me at all," she demurred. "Oh, I heard men singing and things like that before I fell asleep, but that was all."

"That's fine." The kid grinned at her. "But it's no use taking the risk. Maybe the man in that car coming out of the boathouse road saw you. We don't know."

"All right," she said, "but I can't ask you in, and I have to get into some clothes."

"Sure," Larraby agreed. "You go back in and dress as quick as you can. If anything bothers you, just yell. We'll be right here outside the door."

"What could bother me with you people watching the door?" She laughed.

"Somebody might come in by the window," Bob suggested.

"Oh," said the girl.

"Yes, miss," said Schmidty. "You leave this door ajar just about an inch, so's we can hear anything. It'll be safer."

The girl gasped and grew pale.

"It's all right, Miss James." Jim Dale smiled at her. "I won't let any of them peek."

She left her door open a crack as instructed, and she went back into her room to dress. We stayed clustered around her door, and Schmidty began questioning Bob Larraby.

"You're sure," he asked, "that you can't think of anybody at all who might have been laying for you?"

"Not a soul," said Larraby.

"No reason in the world why anybody should be out to get you?"

"Of course not, Schmidty," Red answered for the kid. "After all, he's just a kid in college. What reason could there be?"

"I can't think of any," Larraby added. "Except, as I told you, if the man who brought Bellringer down to the boathouse was around there when we came. If it was the man who killed Bellringer that was driving the car Peggy saw, he might be after me because he might think that I saw him and could identify him when you catch him."

"He might," Schmidty agreed rather grudgingly. "He might at that."

Jim Dale fished around in his pocket and brought out a cigarette lighter. He held it out to Stinker.

"You dropped this," he said.

"Me?" said Stinker, looking at the lighter. "No. I've never owned one."

"Then," said Jim, turning to Larraby, "it must be yours."

Larraby brought a lighter out of his pocket, pigskin covered and bearing his class numerals.

"Not mine," he said. "I have mine."

"That's funny," said Dale.

"What made you think it belonged to one of us?" Larraby asked.

"I found it," Jim explained, "just inside the door of your room. I was about to give it to you or Stinker when you dashed off here to the rescue. This was the first chance I've had to mention it."

"Some of the fellows in my class were in for beer this afternoon," Larraby said. "I guess one of them dropped it. I'll take it and ask the boys."

He made a snatch for the lighter.

"Let's see that."

Schmidty beat him to it. He held it in the flat of his palm, and we all gathered around, looking at it.

"When we picked Bob up and put him on the sofa," Jim explained, "I caught the glint of it on the floor. Then we got busy bringing him around and you were all talking. I went back to see what it was and it was this lighter. You see it was on the floor under Bob, so I thought he or Stinker must have dropped it in the melee."

Schmidty stared at the lighter's shiny surface. It was gold and had a smooth expensive look. He flipped it over in his hand. On the other side it was engraved with neat block letters.

The letters were HM.

CHAPTER NINE

WE WERE ALL so intent on those initials that a little thing like voices at the end of the hall didn't bother us. The first any of us realized that there was anybody out for us was when we were collared.

"All right," said Gilligan. "Break it up. Get away from that door."

It was well that Gilligan spoke when he did because we were all in just that state of nerves that we would have tried making a fight for it without even looking to see who had grabbed us. We were in the hands of the local cops and our pal Gilligan, who must have been acting as rear guard with the hotel clerk, came hurrying toward us.

"Hello, Gilligan," said Schmidty, "what's up?"

Gilligan laughed. He laughed hard enough to rock the old hotel on its ancient foundations.

"Shh," cautioned the clerk. "Our guests are asleep."

"Are these the guys who came up here after the girl?" Gilligan spluttered.

"Yes," said the clerk.

"They," Gilligan gasped between peals of laughter, "threatened to kill you?"

"Yes," said the clerk.

"All right, boys," Gilligan chuckled. "Let them go."

"I demand that you arrest them," said the clerk.

There were explanations all around and a couple of apologies. Gilligan suggested that we all go to bed. Obviously he hoped that if he could get the lot of us to sleep things might stop happening. That hope, however, faded when Peggy James came out of her room fully dressed. We told Gilligan about our trouble in Turner Hall, and the lot of us trooped down to the lobby to hold a council of war. The first question was what to do with Peggy. Larraby was all for staying up all night and keeping her with him wherever he went, but Schmidty vetoed the idea.

"I hope," he said, "to have this case cracked pretty soon, but it may take days or even weeks. You two kids can't just stay awake indefinitely."

"We can try," Peggy James offered brightly. "I'm not a bit tired or sleepy now really. Why not just stay up until we are really tired and then we can worry about where to go?"

"No," said Schmidty. "Maybe you're not tired, but the rest of us are. We all need sleep."

"Then you go to sleep" — Peggy laughed — "and I'll watch over you."

I don't know what Schmidty would have answered to that had I not had one of my brain waves. Suddenly I knew just the place for Peggy — Harry Stedman's house. When I suggested it, Larraby looked doubtful.

"We can't go waking up Mrs. Stedman and the professor now," he objected.

"I can," I declared and picked up the phone.

It was, of course, the easiest thing in the world to arrange. The Stedmans were all for turning their whole house upside down for us. They thought it would be a swell idea for the lot of us to come out there to sleep, and they started adding up beds and sofas like mad. Naturally that was not necessary, but we did fix it up for Peggy and young Larraby to stay the rest of the night with the Stedmans. Gilligan suggested giving the house a police guard, and Schmidty promptly accepted the suggestion over Harry's protests.

We sent the kids off to the Stedmans in one of the police cars, and I was about to thank Harry and hang up when he asked to speak to Schmidty. Schmidty, however, had gone outside to see the kids into the car and to give the cops some instructions about watching them, so I took the message for him. Harry had been thinking about Bellringer and Fundamental Finance, and after we had left his place he had had an idea which he thought might prove helpful. One of the suckers on the Fundamental Finance list was a classmate of his, a chap named Daggett Nelson. This Nelson, he said, had been listed as one of the officers of the corporation. Harry had looked him

up in the class records after we left and had discovered that Nelson had been Bellringer's roommate at college.

"He's on my reunion list," Harry explained. "That means that — unless after he sent in his acceptance and his reunion fee he changed his mind — he should be in town now. I don't know how the inspector would go about finding him, but if you can't turn him up sooner, I can point him out to you in the parade. He should know more about Bellringer than anyone else here."

"He couldn't have known very much about him," I observed, "if Bellringer could hook him on the Fundamental Finance fraud."

"I don't know," said Harry. "He might have known his roomie was a crook, and he could have figured that Bellringer was letting him in on some easy pickings. He might easily have thought that Bellringer wouldn't cheat his old roomie."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I see what you mean. I'll tell Schmidty."

Schmidty returned to the lobby almost immediately after that, and I told him about this new lead Harry had given us. Schmidty beamed.

"Your friend, the professor," he said, "is a smart man. You should pal around with him more, Baggy."

"Instead of with a bunch of drunken bums like us, he means," said the Zipper.

"Yeah," said Schmidty jovially, "I mean something like that."

He went to the desk and asked the clerk whether he had a Daggett Nelson registered in the hotel.

"You're not going to disturb anybody else at this hour, are you, sir?" the clerk asked aghast.

"Nothing" — Schmidty grinned — "I'd like better."

The clerk consulted his register sadly.

"Yes," he sighed. "He's registered."

"All right," said the inspector. "Ring him up for me."

The clerk was consulting the letter file behind the desk.

"But," he continued, "he hasn't come in tonight."

"How do you know?" Schmidty demanded. "Do you know him when you see him?"

"No," said the clerk. "But he hasn't picked up his keys. They're in his box. He couldn't possibly have gotten into his room without his keys, could he?"

"If," said Gilligan, "it's a ground-floor room he probably did. Fellows have been pouring in and out of the windows all evening."

That bit of news spread a look of distress over the clerk's face. He was evidently a young man who liked to know what was going on in his hotel, and who felt about the things that were going on that night that he liked none of them.

"Maybe," he said, "but Mr. Nelson's room is on the third floor."

Schmidty shrugged.

"So that," he said, "is that."

"Damn," said Gilligan.

"That," the inspector philosophized, "is the way it goes in a case like this. Just the guy you want is off some place sleeping in a gutter."

"If," I said gloomily, "he's not doing something worse."

"This business," said the Zipper, "is giving you a suspicious nature. It's even making a misanthrope of you."

"I don't know," I murmured. "A guy's old roommate turns out to be a crook. The guy is in on the fraud with him, maybe as a victim, maybe in cahoots. Then roommate turns up murdered, and the guy doesn't turn up at all. It gives a man to think."

"All right," said Schmidty. "You think. I'm going to bed."

He instructed the night clerk to call us if Daggett Nelson should come in. Then we said good night to Gilligan and went upstairs. Of course, there still was the question of where Schmidty was to sleep. I suggested that I might go back to Turner Hall and use Bob Larraby's room, but Red insisted on giving his bed to the inspector.

"I'll move in with Stinker," he said.

We were about to protest, but he winked at us and we shut up. He came into his room with us to show Inspector Schmidt the way and to snag his own things for the night.

That gave him an opportunity to explain.

"It's just as well," he said, "not to leave Stinker alone tonight. He's in a bad way."

"Why?" Schmidty asked.

"The keed will explain," Red answered and dashed off to Stinker's room.

Before I retired to my own room, I told the inspector the whole story of Stinker's great fear that some time inadvertently he might misuse his great strength and injure someone seriously. I tried to make it clear that this was no ordinary feeling of wanting to do no harm, that it was a real fear, a terror of committing some horrible act of violence.

"I've known plenty of strong guys in my day," said the inspector. "Most of them kind of enjoyed beating fellows up."

"Stinker's not like that," I insisted.

"You mean he's so strong he's scared of himself?" Schmidty asked.

"Just about that," said I.

"Well," said Inspector Schmidt, "I hope you're right about him because he seems like a nice guy, and he is a friend of yours. I suppose you and Red would be no end cut up if it turned out ——"

"Turned out how?" I interrupted. "You're not suspecting Stinker of anything?"

"Nothing special," Schmidty murmured. "I was just thinking out loud. I'm wondering whether maybe your friend knows more about that roadhouse than he lets on. After all, the place was named after him."

"Sure," I said. "Just as the Martha Washington Hotel was named after her, and everybody knows she never even saw the place."

"Yeah," Inspector Schmidt answered, "but still. Tracy seems to be in this thing up to his neck, and your friend Stinker is a great pal of Tracy's."

"So am I and so is Red," I reminded him indignantly. "We've all been friends of the Zipper's for years. You might just as well start suspecting us or Jim Dale or Harry Stedman: we're all friends."

"Sure," Schmidty conceded. "But it was Stinker who socked Stitch, maybe harder than he had to, and it was Stinker who knocked young Larraby down and walked all over him. We haven't anybody's word for it — except Stinker's — that there was anyone in Larraby's room. The kid didn't see anyone."

"What about the cigarette lighter Jim found?" I asked. "HM — that would be Humphrey Mander."

"Maybe Mander was there" — Inspector Schmidt went on thinking aloud — "and maybe somebody dropped the cigarette lighter there on purpose. And I wonder why the kid was so anxious to get his mitts on it the minute he heard Dale found it in his room."

"Now look," I reasoned with him. "That would mean that Stinker knocked the kid down and climbed all over him. It would also mean that he lifted the kid's body up to stick Mander's cigarette lighter under Larraby. Also he'd have to go over to the window and tear the curtain. He'd have to do all that before we caught up with him and what for? What would it accomplish?"

"It sounds screwy as hell," Schmidty admitted, "but I can see where there might — just might — be some point to it. I'm not too sure about the kid in the first place, and there's something going on between the kid and your friend Stinker."

"Nonsense," I snorted. "The kid just has the ordinary undergraduate hero worship for the great Stinker Smith."

"Maybe," said Schmidty. "But the kid is taking all this very hard. I don't like it. He acts like it means too much to him. Suppose he and Stinker wanted to make me suspect Mander. They could have staged that business in Larraby's room easy enough."

"Do you really think that the kid would have deliberately taken the beating he did just to give you a false lead?" I demanded.

"He might not have figured that Stinker would land on him so hard." Schmidty grinned. "It happens in the fight game all the time. I've known many a fighter who agreed to take a dive and found himself taking a harder one than he counted on. It takes nice figuring to know just how much there has to be to make a beating look real and not to turn on just a little too much."

"That would mean," I summed up, "that Stinker and the Zipper are in this some way together. And then I suppose you'd suspect Red of trying to cover Stinker on killing Stitch."

"I'd have to consider that too," Schmidty answered.

"In other words," I groaned, "you're figuring that the best friends I have in the

world have turned into a lot of common murderers. Why do you suppose they left me out of the plot?"

"Because," said Schmidty, "everybody knows you work with me. Would you, if you were planning a murder, take into your confidence even your best friend if you knew he was working with the cops?"

"I think you're crazy," I sighed.

"Maybe." Schmidty smiled. "But anyway, I'm sleepy. You better turn in and think about your friends some. Maybe Professor Stedman is helping the boys along by putting the finger on Mander. None of you like him."

"What about Brink?" I sneered. "Don't forget him."

"Stedman put the finger on him, too, for that matter," Schmidty snapped. "Then there's Dale. He's a good friend to all of you too. He did a good job of getting Brinkley into the pictures with Bellringer."

"You don't believe all this?" I gasped. "Not seriously."

"I don't believe anything." He yawned. "I'm just thinking. Go on to bed."

I went back to my own room but not to sleep. My head ached with the suspicions Schmidty had planted in my mind. I knew Inspector Schmidt too well to take even his lightest word lightly. The inspector, in his way, is an artist. He has an uncanny instinct for pattern and design. His special talent runs to taking the assorted clues and hints that any case may present and fitting them together into a picture. I have worked on many a case with him, and I have discussed them later in the greatest detail when in my capacity as the inspector's ghost writer I have to present coherent explanations of his solutions. I know his foibles and his weaknesses, but I also know his strength. I know that his powers of reasoning are as strong as his feet are weak. I know that though he may be caught any time with his shoes off, he is never caught when his mind is not ready for action.

As I tossed on that hotel bed, I thought of what he had been saying. I tried to support my own feeling with the assurance that I knew these men better than he, that I understood them as he could not possibly understand a group of men, most of whom he had just met that night. I told myself that all of us, in fancy dress, refusing to act our age, must seem to him capable of any folly. But I knew that, true as all that was, there was also something to the picture Inspector Schmidt had sketched. I remembered other things, things that he did not even know. I remembered, for example, how long it took me to get Red to go out to the alley with me, how much explanation I had to offer before I could separate him from his group of harmony singers. Could Red have been playing for time? Could Red have been giving somebody the opportunity to drag Bellringer's body out of the alley? Could I be sure, I asked myself, that none of the boys had been hooked on Bellringer's phony financial setup? They were my friends, and I liked to think that they were too smart for it, just as I liked to think that it was just such a scheme as Brink and Mander would fall for. But still Harry Stedman had jumped to the conclusion that we might all have been victims of

Bellringer's scheme. Then I started thinking about Harry. Was there anywhere, I asked myself, another man more honest than Harry Stedman? I thought of Stinker, of Red, of the Zipper, of Jim. Every one of them I knew to be a man I'd trust to the last ditch. Of course, the Zipper did drink too much. I'd never trust him not to harm himself but to think that the Zipper might harm any one but himself —— That was beyond me. I began to feel better, but then I thought some more. I thought of how far I would go for any of them to get them out of a jam. I knew that down in my heart I was sorry I had ever called Inspector Schmidt. I found myself thinking that Gilligan, if left to his own devices, would have fumbled the whole case, and the boys would never have been suspected. Suddenly I knew that I would stop at nothing to help any one of them. That was something to think about. Why should I assume that Red would do less for Stinker, or Stinker for Zipper, or Harry Stedman and Jim Dale for all of them. When I did fall asleep, it was a restless sleep, one that did me very little good.

I was almost glad when Schmidty rang my room to get me up in the morning. I was not so sure that I would like the realities that day might bring, but I was pretty sure that I was going to like them no less than the dreams that had made my very brief sleep seem endlessly long and endlessly horrible. The inspector was ready to go into action again, and he was getting us all up. He had heard from Gilligan, and Gilligan, he reported, had something to work on. Stitch's car had been found in the lake. When Schmidty woke me, he also called Red to tell him that he had only an hour before Stitch's autopsy. The call to Red's room naturally got Stinker up, too, and Schmidty welcomed the suggestion that we keep him with us while Red would be busy at the hospital. Red went into the Zipper's room to take a look at Zip's arm. He rebandaged it, and Zip got up and joined our party. Gilligan stopped by for us while we were all snatching a bit of breakfast, and we made further inquiries at the desk for Daggett Nelson, but he had not come in all night. On the way down to the lake we dropped Red at the hospital. Gilligan told him that he could get in touch with us through the police station when he wanted us, and we went to look over Stitch's car.

We went down the river road and stopped across the lake from the boathouse, a place I immediately spotted as about where the enemy must have been the night before when they heaved rocks at us. It was still pretty early, and the road was deserted except for a couple of Gilligan's men waiting for us at the roadside. They led us in through the broken bushes to the lake shore.

"There was a guy in the car," one of the cops said. "He drowned. We pulled him out, but he was dead as a mackerel."

It was only about a hundred yards from the road to the shore of the lake at that point, and it was easy to follow the tracks the car had made when it plowed through the underbrush.

"This guy," said the other cop, "must have been plenty drunk to get this far off his road."

"Yeah," grunted Schmidty.

When we came out on the lake shore we found the body where the policemen had laid it out. Delicately they had covered the face with a coat. Both were in their shirt sleeves, and their shirts showed great patches of wetness.

"How did you get him out?" Gilligan asked.

"We stripped and went in after him," they explained.

Evidently, while they had been doing their swimming and diving, they had also detached one of the license plates and brought it up, identifying the submerged car as the one they were looking for. The car was a sedan, and the water came to within about five or six inches of its roof. Nothing showed above the surface but the long flat top. It was very close to shore but the lake bottom is soft, yielding mud, and the car had apparently gone off the road, run down the sloping bank and gone right into the water, settling quickly on the mud bottom to drown its driver. We all stared at the top of the car, but Schmidty showed more interest in the body the police had fished out of it. He was staring thoughtfully at the wet trousers, all you could see of the man's clothes because the coat the policeman had thrown over his head covered him down to the waist. I recognized at once what it was about those trousers that interested Schmidty. They were a pair of those blue sailor pants that went with the 1926 uniform.

The inspector lifted the coat away. We all stood over the dead sailor man and looked at him. None of us knew him, but Schmidty did a rapid examination of the few pockets in the reunion suit. After a moment he fished out of the breast pocket of the sailor blouse a damp wallet. Flipping it open, he took one good look at that mica-covered compartment most wallets have. Then he whistled.

"Well," he said. "It's no trouble identifying this guy, unless he's been picking pockets. Here's a driver's license."

"Who is he?" Stinker asked.

"Who do you think he is?" Schmidty growled.

"Daggett Nelson, I bet," I murmured.

"Right the first time," said Schmidty and began taking his clothes off.

"What are you going to do?" Gilligan asked.

"I," said Schmidty, "am going swimming. You guys keep a watch out. Don't let any women come along and catch me naked."

"There's nobody else down there," the cops assured him. "We've been down."

"Sure," said Schmidty. "But there are a couple of things about that car I want to know."

Swiftly he stripped and waded out beside the car. He made various inarticulate noises of disgust and swore considerably when his feet hit slimy mud. I could remember a time when I was out in a canoe and overturned. From shore to shore the lake is so shallow that there is no danger in falling in, but just touching the slick mud of that bottom is a horrible experience. Obviously Schmidty liked it no more than I had.

"This," he said, "isn't deep enough for anybody to drown in."

"Yeah," said Gilligan, "but when you're in a sedan with the doors shut it's a job getting out."

Schmidty nodded and started reaching down inside the car. He seemed to be feeling around for something, and occasionally he ducked his head under the water for a moment or two, sticking his head and shoulders in the car door.

"Find anything?" I asked when he came up for the last time and started wading back toward shore.

"Enough," he sputtered, blowing the water out of his nose.

"What?" Gilligan asked.

"The guy was riding without lights," said Schmidty, pulling himself up on the bank. He sat and dripped in the sun for a few minutes.

"The water would get to the wiring pretty quick and short-circuit everything," Stinker suggested.

"I know that," said Schmidty, dabbling his feet in the water to wash the mud from between his toes. "But the light switch is off."

"Meaning?" I asked.

Schmidty began putting his clothes on although he was still dripping wet.

"Meaning," he said, "one of several things. Maybe this guy was so drunk that he never thought to turn on his lights, and that's how he got off the road and landed in the lake. Then again he might have been driving without lights and much too fast because it was a stolen car. That's also a good way to have an accident like this. But that isn't all. Maybe the car was run into the lake on purpose and the lights were off so that nobody would see it go."

Dressed completely, except for his shoes and socks, he padded around in the grass, examining the ground.

"Those tracks," said Gilligan. "I've been noticing them. It looks like he got in here and was trying to back out or something. Maybe he thought he had the car in reverse, gave her gas and went into the lake."

I could see what Gilligan meant. There was not a single pair of tracks such as you would have if a car just ran off the road into the lake. There were lots of tracks, as though the car had been shunting back and forth in the space between the road and the shore. Schmidty nodded absently and padded purposefully back to the corpse. He lifted it and examined the back of its head very carefully. Shaking his head dolefully, he let the body drop to the grass again.

"I think," he said, "it would be a good idea to take this one over to the hospital and get our autopsies done wholesale."

"Do you think he needs it, Inspector?" Gilligan fretted. "It's clear enough an accident."

"I've never seen a guy needs an autopsy more," Schmidty insisted.

"If you say so," Gilligan sighed. "Pick him up, boys."

The policemen took up the body and carried it to the car. Schmidty carried his shoes and socks and walked gingerly through the grass. I couldn't make up my mind whether he was watching the tracks of the car or just looking out for sharp stones or sticks which might be lurking in the path of his sensitive feet. They stowed the body in the back seat of Schmidty's car. Stinker, Schmidty and I crowded into the front seat. The Zipper rode with Gilligan.

"Do you suppose," Stinker asked, "do you suppose that this had anything to do with the guy who was heaving rocks at us and shooting at us last night?"

"That's one of a lot of things I'm supposing," said Schmidty.

"It beats me." Stinker sighed. "And what's more, it's no fun."

"Who said it was?" Schmidty murmured and would say no more.

At the hospital the doctor had not yet finished with the autopsy on Stitch. Red was in the autopsy room, but in the anteroom we ran into Jack Benjamin. He greeted us pleasantly, although he was grumbling a bit about the autopsy. What seemed to be bothering him was that the doctor was taking so long that he assumed that he was cutting Stitch into strips, and Stitch had always set such store by a fine funeral.

"Can he be made to look all right in the casket?" he asked. "I mean after they get through with him in there."

Schmidty assured him that the doctors work very neatly, and that undertakers do wonders for a corpse even after a post-mortem dissection.

"You know," he continued, "we found Stitch's car."

"Yeah," Benjamin murmured approvingly. "That was quick work. Poor Stitch, he would have been glad to get it back. He liked that car a lot. He was funny about cars, was Stitch. Not every car he liked to drive. This one seemed just right for him. He always said it felt right the way it rode."

"A lot of fellows feel that way about their cars." Schmidty agreed. "But I'm afraid he wouldn't have liked it much. Not the way we found it."

"Don't tell me it's smashed up," Benjamin exclaimed. "Drunks took it, I bet. They're starting again this morning already. I saw a couple whooping it up down the road when I was coming over here."

"We found it," said Schmidty, "in the lake with a man inside it."

"In the lake?" Benjamin repeated. "What was he doing in the lake?"

Schmidty shrugged.

"He ran it into the lake, I guess," he said.

"I should think," said Benjamin, "that would be pretty average hard to do. But this guy. Did he just sit there in the water? You said you found him in it."

"Sure we found him in it," Schmidty explained. "He was drowned."

"Drowned?" Benjamin exclaimed. "You're kidding. That lake isn't more than four feet deep anywhere. You can hardly get wet in it. Only a baby could drown in that lake."

"Well," Schmidty explained, "of course the bottom is pretty soft, and the car did

sink into the mud a lot. If the guy had been perfectly all right, not drunk or anything, he could probably have gotten out with nothing more than a wetting; but a guy who was all right could never have managed to run that car down into the lake in the first place."

"It's a lousy way to die," Benjamin murmured sympathetically. "Was it one of those reunion birds?" Schmidty nodded. "That's it," Benjamin continued. "These guys don't realize. It's a celebration and all that, but they drink entirely too much. It's not good. Take this guy, for instance. You look him up and maybe you'll find that he's a family man, a model citizen back in his home town and all that. He comes back here and tries to act like a kid, and first thing you know he steals a car and goes out and gets himself drowned. I bet he had a car of his own all the time too."

"Probably did," the inspector agreed. "We found a driver's license in his pocket."

"See," said Benjamin. "It just goes to show."

"Would you like to see him?" Inspector Schmidt asked. "We've got the body here."

"Yeah," said Benjamin. "If it isn't against the rules or anything."

Schmidty asked Gilligan to call Harry Stedman on the chance that he could give us a definite identification on our new corpse.

"We have the driver's license," Gilligan reminded him.

"Sure," said Schmidty, "and it's probably his, but a guy who steals a car might also lift a wallet."

I went with him when Schmidty took Benjamin into the room that the hospital had converted into a morgue for that week end. Stinker and the Zipper stayed with Gilligan, waiting for Red to come out of the autopsy room. The new body had been laid out beside Bellringer's and Benjamin stared at the two of them and whistled softly.

"Which one was it?" he asked.

It was obviously a silly question. The new corpse's hair was still soaking wet, and you could see with half an eye that it must be the one that had just been fished out of the water.

"This one," said Schmidty. "The one with the wet hair."

"Sure," Benjamin whispered. "Sure. It's the damnedest thing."

"Isn't it?" Schmidty agreed.

"What happened to this one?" Benjamin pointed to Bellringer's body.

"Somebody strangled him last night," Schmidty answered.

"No!" said Benjamin. "Well, it is the damnedest thing. You know what I think, Inspector? There's something funny going on around here."

"Sure," said Schmidty. "Guys don't just naturally get strangled."

"Yeah," said Benjamin. "That, but there's more to it than that. I saw both these guys last night. They were out to the roadhouse and they had a third guy with them. All three were as drunk as lords."

"You don't say," said the inspector.

"Yes," said Benjamin. "They were raising all kinds of hell. First it was just roughhousing. We didn't bother them about that any. You've got to let customers have fun even though it looks like any minute they'll maybe do a thousand dollars' worth of damage to the place. But then after a while they started taking their pants off, all three of them. Can you figure that?"

"They must have been plenty drunk," said Schmidty.

"Sure they were, Inspector," Benjamin agreed. "And what's more I don't like saying anything about a guy after he's dead, but even customers, you can't let them go giving the place a bad name. When they started this undressing business Stitch stepped out from behind the bar and bounced the three of them. They were plenty sore about it, but Stitch dragged them out and tossed them into the road. That's why he was so upset when you and Gilligan came in with the third guy. He thought maybe that one, because he had to be specially rough with him, was bringing charges or something."

"The third guy?" Schmidty asked. "Who was that?"

"The one that was bounced with these two." Benjamin indicated the corpses. "He was the drunkest acting of the three of them. You've got him outside with Gilligan right now. The one that wears his arm in a sling."

CHAPTER TEN

WE WENT RIGHT OUT to the anteroom to put it up to the Zipper. Briefly Inspector Schmidt repeated what Jack Benjamin had just told us, and the Zipper listened with intent interest. When Schmidty had finished, however, Zip made no comment. He just looked thoughtful.

"Well?" Schmidty prompted. "Does that help you remember anything?"

"No," the Zipper answered slowly, as though he were speaking only after he had given the matter due consideration. "I'm afraid, Inspector, it doesn't help me at all. I can see, though, where it should help you a lot."

"That," Schmidty interrupted, "is not the point. You should try to remember."

"I am trying," Zipper answered plaintively. "But I have to have more to work on. It all makes some kind of sense. Somewhere along the line Bellringer and I switched clothes. We must have switched a couple of times. We've known that practically from the beginning, but just what went on that made us switch I haven't been able to figure out. I know this sounds as though it ought to help but, it just doesn't."

"What were they talking about?" Schmidty turned to Benjamin. "Did you hear anything, anything that sounded like a reason for this business of taking clothes off?"

"It wouldn't even have to be a good reason," the Zipper urged. "From even a drunken reason I could probably put the evening together."

I knew just what he meant. After all, there is in every act, however mad and irresponsible, some thread of logic. A drunk might do the most fantastic thing imaginable, but he does it not because he chooses deliberately to be fantastic. Under the precise circumstances of the precise moment, the act strikes his drunken intelligence as being the most reasonable and logically inevitable available. Now, despite the fact that he drank like a madman, the Zipper was nobody's fool. He knew himself and roughly he knew what he was capable of, drunk or sober. For example, he knew that he was subject to the darkest of dark moods when drunk, and each time he sobered up, I think it was with just a touch of astonishment that he had been through another drinking bout without committing suicide. That, I believe, was the root of his strange habit of checking up on himself whenever he came back to consciousness. He counted his limbs and members out of curiosity, asking himself whether this time he had really done some damage to himself. If Benjamin had told him that he started taking off his clothes and giving them to people to rid himself of his worldly effects before he went out to kill himself, he could probably have gone on from that and recalled his suicide attempt and how it had failed. Many a time the Zipper, in his cups, has given me his watch with the most careful instructions for its winding and setting, going through an oral last will and testament. In fact, among the Zipper's friends such bequests were generally recognized as a danger sign.

One would take the watch and promise to treasure it, but one would also immediately look to all sharp knives or potentially dangerous weapons and get them out of the Zipper's way.

Benjamin, however, insisted that the Zipper had not been taking off his own clothes and giving them away. His idea, or so it seemed, had rather been to undress his companions. And that left the Zipper's memory up against a blank wall. He could recall no reason he might have had for such behavior, no course of action of which it might have been the part, or to which it might have served as prelude.

Red came out of the autopsy room and joined us. He had with him the doctor who had done the post mortem and Red was in high good humor. He slapped Stinker on the back gleefully and burbled out his good news.

"You're not the strong man you think you are, keed," he chuckled. "You hardly hurt him at all. He had a better job done on him later."

"Who, Doctor?" Benjamin asked. "You talking about Stitch?"

"Yes, Mr. Benjamin," Red answered. "We just finished the autopsy."

"What did you find?" Schmidty asked.

Red deferred to the local doctor, who had actually done the job, although he nodded in eager and pleased agreement throughout his colleague's report. Stitch had died of a cerebral hemorrhage caused by a skull fracture. A careful check of the body for contusions had shown some, but they were all superficial. The most severe was found on Stitch's jaw where Stinker had landed. The other bruises were located on his thighs and on his right shoulder. The skull fracture was at the back of Stitch's head

but there was a bruise, too slight to be of any medical significance, just above his right ear.

"And that," Red summed up as the other doctor finished, "lets Stinker out."

"Why?" Stinker asked. "Why? I've got to be sure."

"Listen." Red put his arm on Stinker's shoulder. "I wouldn't try to fool you. All those little bruises tell the whole story. He hit his side against the table when you knocked him down. We found the marks of that on his thighs. It was his right side, and the bruise on his shoulder shows that he hit the floor on his right side."

"Yes," Benjamin corroborated the statement. "I remember that he did land on his right side."

"So," said Red gleefully, "we have that niggling little bruise above his right ear. That's where his head hit the floor when you flattened him. He really landed on his shoulder. That took most of his weight, and that's where he had the real bruise. All he got on his head was a bump he wouldn't even have noticed."

I could see that Stinker wanted to believe Red's description of what had happened, but he had to be convinced beyond the slightest shadow of doubt.

"But," he objected, "he didn't snap out of it right away, the way a man does ordinarily from a punch in the jaw. He moped around afterward. We all saw that."

"Maybe," I suggested, "he wanted to mope."

After all, Stitch had gone for Schmidty in the first place. When a man starts using his fists under questioning, you can be pretty sure that a good part of the reason is that he doesn't want to answer any questions, or at least that he is trying to play for time. I suppose, if he had knocked Schmidty cold, he would have at least had the time it might take before the fight could be broken up and before Schmidty would be in shape to get back to the point. It worked out differently, but it was conceivable that taking it on the chin from Stinker suited him just as well — perhaps even better. If he was playing for time, he got it. Even after Red looked him over and said he was all right, he could have just been dodging further questioning with his song and dance about feeling dizzy.

"But the skull fracture," Stinker persisted. "How can we be sure that he did not hit his head against the table while he was falling?"

"Because," said Red, "he fell on his right side, which means that he was facing the table as he fell. I thought I remembered that, but the location of his bruises bears me out. If he had hit his head against the table, it could never be the back of his head. It would have been his face or his forehead."

"Is that right?" Stinker turned to the doctor who performed the autopsy.

"I," he said, "do not pretend to be a detective."

"The first man I ever met," Inspector Schmidt murmured, "who didn't."

"But," the doctor continued, "Doctor Sweeney's description of the autopsy findings is accurate in every detail, and his conclusions seem airtight to me."

Stinker heaved a sigh of relief so profound that it could have blown down a tree.

But Red was not finished. He had another detail to offer.

"The doctor," he said, "will agree with me that, from the nature of the injury to the back of the head, we can form no certain opinion of how it was sustained. We feel sure, however, that it could not have been the result of any ordinary fall."

"Sure," Benjamin murmured. "Everybody takes falls. Most times a man doesn't break a thing, but it's some helluva fall that cracks a guy's skull open."

"Exactly." Red beamed at him. "Exactly, Mr. Benjamin. I have seen skull fractures like the one we just explored. I remember one that was the result of a bad automobile accident where the man was thrown through the windshield of his car and smacked with most of the force of the collision against a concrete traffic stanchion. There was another sustained by a man who fell out of a fourth-story window. And then ——"

"I've seen them too," the other doctor interrupted. "I can remember in my intern days I saw a man who had been beaten over the head with a baseball bat. He had such a fracture."

"The well-known blunt instrument," murmured the Zipper.

"Yes," said the doctor. "I think Doctor Sweeney will agree that we cannot say definitely that this man was beaten on the head with a heavy object; but, Inspector, if you should find evidence that indicates anything of the sort, it would astonish us not at all. Medically, that would be the most likely cause of such a skull fracture, more likely than any other possible cause."

"That's it," said Red. "We are not saying that there are not other possible causes, but we agree that the others are just possibilities."

That's about as far as we had gone when Harry Stedman arrived. He had in tow young Larraby and his Peggy, explaining that he had kept them safe overnight but that he thought it best to deliver them back into Inspector Schmidt's hands rather than leave them alone out at his house. Schmidty explained about the man who had been found in the submerged car, and before he took Harry in for the identification he asked the doctor to wait and perform another autopsy.

"This one," he said, "looks like a drowning."

He took Harry into the improvised morgue, and Young Larraby edged over to Stinker. I had started to whisper to Red, Benjamin's story about the Zipper having been out to Stinker's Run with Bellringer and our newest corpse. The kid plucked at Stinker's sleeve.

"Could I talk to you alone?" he asked.

Stinker, however, now that the weight of the possibility of his having killed Stitch was lifted from his mind, was full of concern for the Zipper.

"Later, kid," he said curtly and went into a huddle with us.

I didn't bother to notice especially what Benjamin and the boy and girl were doing, except to make sure that they could not hear us. When I glanced over my shoulder at them, Benjamin seemed to be making conversation. I did notice that young Larraby

kept tossing nervous glances in our direction, but I was glad that Benjamin was keeping him away from us, because I had things to tell the boys and there was very little time. I am not exactly proud of what I did, although when I confessed it to Schmidty later, he was generous about it and hinted that it was natural enough that I should have put my loyalty to my own friends before other loyalties. I rather think, in fact, that he knew all along that I was likely to try to help the Zipper all I could, even to the point of interfering with the investigation.

Red, Stinker and I begged the Zipper to come clean with us, to tell us everything and anything he knew, but he insisted that he knew nothing that he had not already told Inspector Schmidt.

"I'm not holding anything back," he protested. "I want to know what happened just the way Stinker wanted to know what happened to Stitch Johnson. Somehow I don't feel as though I killed anybody and there is no sane reason why I should; but I was drunk and I don't know what happened, and I don't like the feeling that maybe I did kill Bellringer. I don't like it a bit."

"Yeah," said Red. "I have one idea though. I don't know that it's important, but it has points. I think I know how you got those odd bruises around your armpits."

"How?" the Zipper asked eagerly. "That might just be the detail that could start me off remembering things."

"What might?" Schmidty asked, returning with Harry.

"Red," I explained hastily, "thinks he has the answer to the Zipper's bruises."

"What's your answer?" Schmidty asked, giving me the first indication since the case started that he had an answer of his own.

"I hear," said Red, "that the Zipper was bounced out of Stinker's Run last night."

"Yes, Doc," said Benjamin. "Stitch had to put him out. He ——"

"Yeah," Red interrupted, "I know. You saw him bounced, didn't you?"

Benjamin nodded.

"Do you remember?" Red continued. "Do you remember exactly how it was done? What was Stitch's technique? Did he grab customers by the collar and the seat of the pants and heave them out?"

"That," said Benjamin, "would depend. I'd say generally we'd grab them by anything that was handy and get them out of the place when we had to. This fellow and the other two he bounced out one at a time. He just got them under the arms and hauled them out with their heels dragging."

"Could you," Red asked, "demonstrate on me?"

"Sure," said Benjamin.

He stepped behind Red and grabbed him under the arms. Red slumped and hung by his armpits on the palms of Benjamin's hands. Hanging limp, he let Benjamin drag him a few steps. What he meant about the Zipper's bruises was obvious. Benjamin had a firm grasp on him, and you could see the four fingers in front and the thumb behind. They pressed in the precise positions where the Zipper had his bruises.

"You see?" said Red. "Zipper got those funny marks when he was bounced out of the roadhouse."

"What kind of marks?" Benjamin asked.

"Four little bruises on the front of each shoulder and a slightly bigger one in the back," Schmidty explained.

"You don't say?" said Benjamin. "Of course, Stitch did have a terrific grip. You'd know that if you ever shook hands with him."

"Yeah." Schmidty grinned. "I remember. He was always one of these guys that like to grab your hand and leave you a fist full of mashed fingers."

Benjamin nodded.

"He thought it was funny," he said. "First time he did it to me I busted him in the eye. It was after that we became friends."

"All very interesting," murmured the Zipper, "but it doesn't help me any. I'm still up a tree."

"Well," Schmidty interrupted, "about this new corpse."

"Yes, Inspector," said the doctor. "If you are ready, I can do the autopsy right now."

"Good," said Schmidty. "The body has been identified by Professor Stedman."

"Is it —— " I asked.

"Daggett Nelson," Harry finished for me. "This seems to have been a dangerous reunion for the class of 1926."

"I think," said Benjamin, "the college ought to stop having these reunions. Fun's fun, but this is bad stuff."

"I agree with you there, Benjamin," said Schmidty. "But we've got work to do."

That, of course, is the inspector all over. He will never bother his head about a general principle or some large reform when there is anything like a specific fact available for the ferreting out.

"Red," he continued, "would you mind helping the doc with the Nelson autopsy?"

"Sure thing," said Red. "It's a nice change from my daily run of sick women."

"Say, look," said Stinker. "If nobody minds, I'd like to see one of these things. Might I watch?"

"It's up to the doctor," Schmidty answered. "Makes no difference to me."

The doctor had no objection to Stinker as an audience, and that was arranged. While Inspector Schmidt went with the doctor into the room where the bodies were laid out, Bob Larraby got his chance to buttonhole Stinker. They had a whispered conference in the corner of the room. The kid, it appeared to me, was getting something off his chest, and he was doing it with obvious difficulty. That Stinker did not like what the boy was telling him was equally obvious, but at length he patted the kid on the back. They broke it up, and as they came toward us Stinker spoke loud enough for me to hear.

"Don't worry, kid," he said. "I'll get it."

Then he buttonholed Harry Stedman and they huddled. I was watching them and saw Stinker writing Harry a check. Harry put it in his wallet without looking at it, took out his own checkbook and wrote a check which Stinker pocketed. Larraby watched them anxiously all the time. He was whispering to Peggy James the while, and they seemed to be arguing. After the exchange of checks, Stinker thanked Harry and went into a huddle with the two kids.

The end of all this maneuvering was that Larraby explained that he had an errand to do in town, and Stinker added that he had to get up to the bank before it closed.

"We'll go uptown together," Stinker said. "Do you mind taking care of Miss James till we get back, Harry?"

"A pleasure," Harry answered.

"Why can't I go with you?" the girl asked.

"You'd better stay with Professor Stedman," Stinker advised. "We're going to make time."

"What about the autopsy?" Red reminded him. "I thought you wanted to watch it."

"I did," Stinker answered. "But I forgot about the bank closing at noon. Somehow it didn't feel like Saturday today. I'll just have to give it the miss."

"You're not missing much." Red shrugged.

"Tell Schmidty," Stinker said as they left, "that I'll be keeping an eye on the kid. I'll bring him back safe."

I didn't try to stop them although I did have a feeling that there was more to all this check and bank business than met the naked eye. I tried deliberately to look the other way and let them go because, whatever Stinker was up to, I rather wanted him to succeed. Down inside me, I just couldn't feel that he would be doing anything to obstruct justice, but I had a hunch that Schmidty would not feel as I did about it and that therefore the best thing for me to do would be to just know nothing. Although I was aching to get together with Harry Stedman and get a line on what Stinker and he had whispered about, I refrained from asking. After all, Gilligan was on hand and he had the authority. I thought that if Schmidty really got sore, I could let him take the rap.

The inspector, however, took it all pretty much at its face value. He didn't seem to mind especially that Bob and Stinker had slipped away to the bank. The doctor and Red went to do their autopsy, and the rest of us went up to the police station. Schmidty wanted to look at any reports that might have been coming in on Bellringer, and the rest of us strung along. Benjamin murmured something about getting back to Stinker's Run, explaining that he expected the day's business to start early, and he left us when we got up to Main Street. Since Schmidty had shown so little concern about Stinker and Bob, I figured that it was safe to ask Harry about the checks. As we went into the police station Harry explained.

"Stinker," he said, "just needed some cash. He figured that the bank wouldn't

honor his check for any sum as big as five hundred dollars. So he gave me a check for five hundred and I wrote him one of mine. He's getting it cashed."

As he spoke he tipped me the wink, and I realized that he had guessed, just as I did, that Stinker wanted the money for Bob Larraby. Naturally he didn't want to say anything about that phase of it while Peggy James was with us, but the whole thing left me wondering just what young Larraby had wanted with five hundred dollars. I didn't have long to wonder. Before many hours passed we all knew.

There was nothing at the police station to tell us much about Bellringer that we did not already know. The New York police had reported that he had no record although they did know that he had been a speakeasy operator for about three years, beginning in 1926. That evidently had been the profession into which he first drifted after he had been kicked out of college. The name of the speakeasy meant nothing to me but it pleased Schmidty mightily, and I could understand his pleasure when he explained that Stitch Johnson, to his own knowledge, had tended bar there.

To Gilligan, while the rest of us listened, he expounded the importance of this bit of information. As he explained it, it gave us a lead to a possible connection between Stitch and Fundamental Finance, Inc. If Stitch had once worked with or for Bellringer, the association might well have continued after Bellringer went on to bigger things like launching fraudulent holding companies. It also threw an interesting light on the little scene Benjamin had described for us. That Stitch should have bounced three disorderly customers out of Stinker's Run had seemed to him all in the day's work. Of course, it was odd that the three should turn out to be the Zipper, Daggett Nelson and Bellringer, but the bouncing began to look like more than just an odd coincidence when we learned that Bellringer, so far as Stitch was concerned, had not been just any disorderly customer but rather a man whom he knew and knew well.

We were discussing this point when Stinker and Bob Larraby turned up. Schmidty asked them if they had gotten their errands done, and they said they had. Leaving it at that, he returned to his explanation of the significance of this new lead on a Bellringer-Stitch Johnson connection. I noticed that Larraby and Stinker exchanged a glance, and I thought I saw Stinker flash the kid what looked like a reassuring smile. But Stinker rapidly turned it into a broad grin.

"Fry me for a catfish," he said. "You were keeping bad company last night, Zipper, old kid."

The Zipper agreed absently and Schmidty asked if by any chance Stinker and Larraby had run into either Mander or Brink in their errands around town. They replied in the negative. I looked at my watch and had a suggestion to offer.

"They could be anywhere at all now," I said. "But if you want them, you can pick them up in the parade. It's due to start in a few minutes."

"What parade?" Schmidty asked, and we explained.

If you've never been down to the old place for a reunion, you may not know about the parades, although pictures of them turn up almost every year in newsreels or

rotogravure sections. Every reunion week end, on Saturday morning, the alumni parade in their reunion costumes. The parade forms around the campus flagpole, and the line of march is through the campus and down river road to the football stadium. It ends with a mass meeting of all alumni in the stadium. The ceremonial of the march has long been fixed by tradition. Leading the parade comes the senior class, the boys who are to become alumni on commencement day, two days later. Then, each with its band, the other classes follow after. They march according to age, with the previous year's graduates following the seniors and so on back through the years until the oldest living graduate brings up the rear. At the stadium each class falls out and lines up on either side of the road. The senior class takes its place nearest the gates and the others continue down the road, so that all the classes are lined up outside the stadium when the oldest living graduate arrives. He is always too old and feeble to march, but in his car he goes down between the rows of cheering alumni. The next oldest class, after his car has passed them, falls in behind him and so on down the line, so that gradually the parade re-forms and goes into the stadium with the oldest first and the years following after in order until the senior class enters the stadium last. By that method, each class has an opportunity to cheer every other class as the others march by, and each class in turn is cheered by all the others, for the oldest living graduate is the last to arrive outside the stadium and the first to enter it. He passes all the classes on his way in. The others outside the stadium pass all classes except those older than themselves. Inside the stadium they find these older classes already in their seats ready to review their juniors who have just been reviewing them.

"You mean," Schmidty asked eagerly, when we had finished explaining the procedure, "that if you march in that parade you see all the classes and all the costumes?"

"Yes," I answered. "Every last one."

"That," said Inspector Schmidt wistfully, "is something I'd like to see."

"Sure," said Gilligan. "The whole town turns out every year to watch it."

"You can do better than that," Stinker suggested. "What say we make Schmidty an honorary member of the class of 1927?"

"Oh." Schmidty blushed. "Thanks."

"That," I said, "is a swell idea. You march with us, and then you can be right along with Mander and Brink and at the same time you can see the whole thing."

"That," said Schmidty with what seemed to me an almost childish joy, "will be swell."

Just before we started for the flagpole Red and the doctor came over from the hospital. As we all walked over to the campus, they reported their findings on Nelson. Daggett Nelson had drowned, but they found that he had been slugged first. As they described it, he had been alive but almost certainly unconscious when the car went into the water. They figured that the car had probably collided with a tree or some such obstacle before it rolled into the lake — that perhaps it had caromed off a tree

into the lake — because Daggett Nelson had received a blow on the head that was more than a stunner.

"Where," asked Schmidty, "did you find these marks on his head?"

"Back of the head," the doctor answered. "The same as Johnson."

"No accident," Schmidty murmured.

"Murder?" I asked.

"Nothing else," he said.

As he explained it, there seemed to be little possibility of doubt. The body had been found in the driver's seat of the car just as though Nelson had been driving, had driven into the lake and had drowned without making a move to save himself. A collision that would give him a blow on the back of the head, sufficient to stun him into an unconsciousness deep enough to continue through submersion in the lake, would necessarily have dislodged the body somewhat from its neat position in the driver's seat.

This new information, however, had no effect on Schmidty's determination to see the parade. He was like a kid on the Fourth of July, and I couldn't figure him out at all. Considering the trouble he always had with his feet, just the suggestion that he march in a parade could be expected to send him into a veritable passion of revolt. He had made no secret of the fact that he found the whole reunion business puerile and silly. Why he should decide that the parade was any different was beyond me. He was absolutely eager for it. On the way over we adopted Peggy James as another honorary member of the class of 1927. Larraby had to leave us to form with his fellow seniors, and Stinker invited the girl to march with us.

"Are women allowed?" she asked. "I thought reunions were completely stag."

"They are," Stinker explained. "But the parade is different. Wives and children march in the parade. You just pretend you're my daughter."

"Don't you think I'm rather a big daughter for you?" She dimpled.

"Naw," Stinker grinned. "Everybody knows I've always been precocious."

We found our own gang easily enough. The yellow pants and pirate shirts ran high in visibility. Harry Stedman dropped back to join his sailor boys, and while the parade was getting started we milled around in our own crowd, looking for Brink and Mander. We spotted Brink first, and when we hailed him he joined us. To his pirate suit he had added one extra item of clothing. He had a white silk scarf wrapped several times around his neck and knotted. Over this mass of gleaming white his face looked red and flushed. As he pushed through the crowd toward us, Schmidty plucked at Stinker's sleeve.

"This guy," he asked, "the one you almost choked in Larraby's room last night, did he have ordinary clothes on, or was he wearing one of these costumes?"

"I don't know," Stinker answered, staring at the scarf around Brink's neck. "I didn't see him, I told you."

"I know," Schmidty continued, "but you had your hands on his neck. Didn't you feel a collar or tie or anything like that?"

"No," said Stinker just as Brink came up. "No collar or tie. Whatever he was wearing must have been open at the throat."

Schmidty turned to Brink.

"Hello," he said. "How are you this morning?"

"Lost my voice."

Brink mouthed the words rather than spoke them. All that came out was a husky whisper.

"Let's have a look at your throat." Red turned medical again.

"I'll be all right," Brink whispered. "It's just a touch of laryngitis."

"Better to have it looked at anyway," Red insisted.

Brink shook his head. At that moment Mander spied us and came over to join us.

"Say," he said. "Did any of you happen to find a gold cigarette lighter last night? I lost mine sometime after I first ran into you. I can remember using it over at the firehouse just before I went to the hospital to look at that body you had."

"What did it look like?" Schmidty spoke for us.

"It had my initials on it," Mander answered.

"That's it," said Schmidty. "I have it back at the hotel. I'll give it to you later."

"Where'd you find it?" Mander asked casually enough.

"In that Larraby kid's room," Schmidty answered equally casually.

"What?" Mander exclaimed. "The dirty little rat. He must have snitched it out of my pocket. And I thought I had lost it all the time."

Peggy James gasped and I saw Stinker's fist clenched, but Schmidty took charge.

"You're a pretty smart liar, aren't you, Mander?" he asked.

"I'm no George Washington, if that's what you mean." Mander grinned nervously.

"Yeah" said Schmidty. "You and Brinkley here thought you could give me the run-around on Bellringer's identification last night."

"All right," said Mander. "I knew him, so what?"

Schmidty, however, had looked around at Brinkley to see how he had taken it. Red had persuaded him to let him look at his throat, and Schmidty's crack had startled Brink so much that he bit Red's finger. Red yowled with pain.

"What did you see down there?" Schmidty asked.

"Teeth," Red growled, "There's nothing wrong with your throat, Brink."

"That's what you say," Brink answered. "But I can't talk anyhow."

I began to wonder whether that husky shadow of a whisper might not be a fake. I was aching to whip that scarf off his neck and see whether Stinker had left any fingerprints there.

"Last night you wouldn't talk," Schmidty remarked as the parade started and we began moving, "and now you can't. I suppose you can't even tell me that you weren't sucked in on Fundamental Finance by Bellringer."

"What the hell," Brink whispered. "You tell him, Humph. He knows anyhow."

"I don't care which one of you talks, but talk," said Schmidty.

The bands were blaring march music, and we swung along while Mander told their story. Both he and Brink had known Bellringer and Daggett Nelson at college. The four had played bridge together often. After Bellringer had left college they had kept in touch. Mander insisted that they had never known that Bellringer had been kicked out. When he formed Fundamental Finance, he offered to let them in on it. As Mander explained it, he had made it sound like a good thing and they had both invested heavily. He told us that, a couple of weeks before reunion, Brink had begun wondering about the company. Things had turned up which led him to suspect that there was funny business afoot. He had heard rumors in Wall Street, and he had gone looking for Bellringer. Bellringer had been out of town, and Brink had seen Daggett Nelson and told him of his suspicions. Nelson had promised to tell Bellringer that Brink wanted to get out. Later Brink had seen Mander and had warned him that there was something rotten in Fundamental Finance. Neither of them, however, saw Bellringer until reunion. At reunion, Brink had accused him of pulling a swindle and Bellringer had blandly admitted it. Brink, according to Mander, had threatened to go to the police and Mander had backed him up on the threat.

"Then," said Mander, "Bellringer said a curious thing. It scared Brink badly, and I must confess that it gave me a bit of a turn. 'You're not going to the police,' he said, 'because I know what to do about guys who go to the cops. I know a fellow who'll strangle anybody at all for me. His rates are twenty-five dollars a killing but, since he's a friend of mine, he'll do them for me at two for thirty-five dollars.'"

"And that scared you?" Schmidty asked.

We had reached our stopping place outside the stadium, and the older classes were marching past us. Schmidty gave the octogenarians in their automobiles scant attention.

"It made us think," Mander answered. "It was after that, in the crap game, that Bellringer made the crack about it taking a thief to catch a thief. Brink and I talked it over, and we decided that the thing to do was to mark the investment down to experience and forget about the whole thing. Of course, when Bellringer turned up dead a couple of hours later, neither of us wanted any of it. All we were trying to do was keep out of the whole thing if we could. That's the story."

"Tell him about Bellringer's other proposition," Brink prompted in his husky whisper.

The older classes just wear arm bands, with their class numerals as a distinguishing mark, but these arm bands do not make their regular clothes look any more colorful. The first real costumes passed us with the class of 1912. Schmidty began giving closer attention to the parade, but he still had an ear for Mander.

"Oh, yes," Mander continued. "Bellringer came over to Brink in the firehouse after he threatened us, and he tried to take the whole thing back. He had some kind of song and dance about how it had hurt him to think that we didn't trust him, and he tried to convince Brink that although Fundamental Finance was in trouble, it was

all on the up-and-up. He wanted us to put more money into it to tide it over, and he promised that we'd end up by making plenty. Of course, Brink wasn't having any more and told him so."

They had all passed us, all the classes that had seniority over us. The costumes seemed to have Schmidty fascinated. His eyes never left the parade while he listened to Mander. By the time we got moving again to pass in review before the younger classes, he should have been surfeited. He had seen Indians, cowboys, Mexicans, Chinamen, swordfishermen, bullfighters, gladiators, cops, white-wings, poilus, French sailors, baseball players, kilted Scots, leather-breeched Tyroleans, and American sailors. When the last sailor had gone by — it was Harry Stedman and he thumbed his nose at us — we swung into line behind them, and still Schmidty feasted his eyes on the costumes. As we pirates went down the line of the younger classes, he stared at tricolor-clad French revolutionaries, brown-robed friars, helmeted and goggled aviators, bearded and smocked Russians, wooden-shod Dutch boys, diapered and ruffled babies, a whole battalion of ragged Huckleberry Finns, aproned bartenders and leopard-skin-wrapped cavemen.

Until we came to the soberly clad senior class he was as attentive to the sights as was Jim Dale, who walked along with us using his camera every step of the way. As we passed the seniors, we spotted Larraby. He stood in the back row of his class, and right behind him was Jack Benjamin, whispering in his ear. We had agreed before the parade that we would all fall out at the gate. The mass meeting is always a bore, and none of us had wanted to go. As we fell out, Peggy James headed for young Larraby and we followed, elbowing our way through the rows of seniors.

"Did we see all of the classes?" Schmidty asked eagerly.

"Every last one," I assured him. "From 1912, the oldest class in fancy dress, down to Larraby's class that hasn't graduated yet."

"That," said Schmidty unexpectedly, "does it, I think."

"What?" I was asking when we joined Larraby and Benjamin.

I received no answer.

"Come on," Schmidty called. "All of you. We're going back to the hotel right away."

I didn't think that Benjamin was included in the invitation, but when Larraby took Peggy James's arm and began following after us, Benjamin came along, and I didn't think it was my place to object. It must have occurred to him, however, that he was a bit of an outsider because he touched Schmidty's shoulder.

"Anything new on Stitch, Inspector?" he asked.

"Not quite yet," said Schmidty, "but I hope to find what I'm looking for back at the hotel."

"Would it be all right if I came along?" Benjamin asked.

"Sure," said Schmidty. "Stitch was your partner after all. I can see how you'd be interested."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

AS WE WENT BY the police station on our way back to the hotel Gilligan hailed us from the window. Schmidty stopped to talk to him and he sent the rest of us on to the hotel, after explaining to Jim Dale what he wanted. His instructions were simple enough. He wanted another showing of Jim's firehouse films, and he promised he would join us at the hotel by the time Jim would get the reels out of the hotel safe, set up his projector and get the bed sheet hung for the show.

All the way to the hotel, Stinker stuck close to Bob Larraby and Peggy James. Brink, Mander and Benjamin walked right behind them and seemed to have a lot to say to each other. At least, Mander and Benjamin did the talking. Brink was still contributing only an occasional husky whisper. The rest of us were following behind, and I managed to detach Red from the group. We dropped a couple of steps behind Harry Stedman, the Zipper and Jim. Immediately Red guessed what I had on my mind.

"As sound a pair of tonsils," he said, "as I've ever seen."

I kept my eye on Brink, as we talked. I preferred that he should not overhear us while we were discussing him.

"Why the husky whisper then?" I asked.

Red shrugged.

"Maybe," he suggested, "he doesn't want to talk."

"But he let Mander talk for him," I objected. "In fact, he prompted him to tell more than Mander seemed ready to spill of his own accord."

"Yeah," said Red. "It's got me. All I know is what I read on his tonsils. There's not a sign of inflammation there."

"Could there be inflammation without it showing?" I asked.

"No," said Red. "Inflammation shows."

"Then," I concluded triumphantly, "the husky whisper is just a dodge to hide the real reason for tying up his neck."

"Exactly what I thought," Red grinned. "I'm not in the tonsillectomy business. Brink can keep his tonsils for all of me. I insisted on looking at them because I wanted to know whether Mr. Peter Brinkley really had a bad throat. Whoever it was that Stinker grabbed in Larraby's room last night should be wearing his neck in a sling. Would you have ever figured Brink as the kind of a guy who would hide behind doors waiting to bean a kid with a hammer?"

"No," I murmured. "I've never liked the heel."

"No more have I," said Red. "But there are lots of people we don't like, and still they don't seem the least little bit like hammer slayers."

"That," I agreed, "is just what I was about to say. Brink is a liar and a hypocrite, a sanctimonious bore and a pompous ass, but it would never occur to me that he was the skull-basher-in type. I don't know what to make of it."

"Do you think Schmidty does?" Red asked. "I just can't imagine Brink as Strangler Brinkley."

"Of course," I muttered, "Schmidty doesn't know Brink as well as we do. He lectured me last night on being deluded by the natural impulse to assume that no one of one's own acquaintance could possibly commit a crime of violence."

"Yeah," Red interrupted, "I see what he means, but there's also the other side of the picture. Schmidty has known so many murderers in his time. Isn't he likely to jump as automatically to the opposite conclusion, assume that anyone, however unlikely, might have a crime of violence in him?"

"I suppose so," I answered. "But the inspector does have a way of being right more times than not. He also has a way of playing dumb when he finds it convenient. I think he has this case all tied up in one of his neat packages. What gets me, though, is that he acted only mildly interested in Brink's neck. If it didn't sound so completely silly I'd say that the parade cleared the whole thing up for him."

"I think," said Red, "that he was just pretending to be interested in the parade, and that he was up to something else all the time."

"Possible," I admitted grudgingly. "His wanting to run off Jim's movies again — that looks as though he was ready to really put the heat on Brink and Mander."

"Have you a pin?" Red asked suddenly.

"What," I asked, "would I be doing with a pin?"

"Lending it to me." Red grinned. "I've got a balloon to prick."

"Don't be a dope," I growled. "Of course I haven't a pin."

Red darted into the hardware store which is a couple of doors away from the hotel. In the hotel lobby he caught up with us, and while Jim was getting his films out of the safe Red whispered gleefully in my ear.

"Got them," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"Thumbtacks," said Red. "They've got pins beat all hollow."

We all trooped up to Jim's room.

"Setting this up," said Jim, as he started stripping the bed, "is going to be more trouble than it was last night. The window blinds are going to let a lot of that sunlight come through."

We all pitched in to help, and when it came to hanging blankets over the window to shut out the light Red triumphantly produced his box of thumbtacks.

"I," he boasted, "am the guy who thinks of everything."

He tacked the blankets up over the window while Jim hung the sheet. When Schmidty arrived Jim was already loading his projector. The room had been pretty full of people from the start, but Schmidty brought with him Gilligan and a half-dozen of Gilligan's men. Of course, at the end of the parade, he had practically told me that he was ready to make a pinch, but even without that strong hint he had given me I should have known it when I saw him come in trailing so many cops.

While Jim fussed with his projector I buttonholed Schmidty.

"All set?" I asked.

"Just one little detail I want to check to make sure," he answered. "Look what we've got now."

He took from one of the cops a neat brown paper package. We all watched him unwrap it. It contained a wooden mallet, short-handled and heavy.

"What," Peggy James asked, "is that?"

"I can see" — Stinker smiled — "that you are one of those nice girls and don't hang around bars. That, my girl, is a bung starter."

"A bung starter," Schmidty agreed, "with a little blood and a little hair sticking to it."

Bob Larraby went whiter than the sheet that Jim had hung to use as a screen.

"Where?" he gasped. "Where did you find that?"

I saw Stinker grab his arm, and Benjamin patted him on the back. Stinker whispered something in the boy's ear. My lip reading has never been much good, but I read it as "Steady, kid."

"I didn't find it," Schmidty answered, ignoring the byplay. "The bartender over at the firehouse found it by the back door this morning when he came in to open the bar. He turned it over to the police." He addressed Brink directly: "That's a good, law-abiding bartender you hired for your reunion, Mr. Brinkley."

Brink nodded and looked worried.

"Is it his?" I asked.

"Your bartender's?" Schmidty smiled. "No. He has one of his own with no blood on it. If this one was it, you boys wouldn't have had any beer last night. This one was in use most of the evening."

"Reunions," Harry observed, "are always a big time for bung starters."

"Sure," said Schmidty, "and this one had quite a career. It conked Stitch Johnson, and it conked Daggett Nelson. It missed Larraby by inches."

"That's horrible." Peggy James shuddered.

"You mean that it missed him?" Harry Stedman tried to kid her out of her fright and horror. "For me, I'm glad it wasn't only Larraby, because I shouldn't want the inspector to think that it was a member of the faculty out to beat some sense into an undergraduate's head."

"You know," said Stinker, taking it up and joining Harry in his effort to keep the mood light, "professorial jokes haven't improved a bit since we were in college."

"Are you ready, Dale?" Schmidty asked, rewrapping the mallet and giving it into the care of one of the cops.

"All set," said Jim. "Sit down, everybody, before I douse the lights. That is, if you can find any place to sit."

Seating arrangements were complicated. The boys insisted on Peggy James having the easy chair. Larraby perched on one arm beside her, and Harry Stedman took the

other arm. The Zipper, Brink, Mander and I distributed ourselves as best we could on the bed where a couple of the cops joined us. The rest distributed themselves about the room as best they could, some sitting on the floor, some lounging against the wall. Red drifted about restlessly. I had a hunch that he was up to something, but I did not give it much thought. What Inspector Schmidt was up to was obviously more important and at the moment interested me more.

Jim doused the lights and started running off his pictures. They were, of course, the films we had seen the night before. Jim's record of that reunion never was as complete as his others because he had wasted a lot of time chasing around with us, but what he got was good. I, however, having seen these films and not being especially in the mood for movies, watched Schmidty more than the pictures. At least I watched him as well as I could, peering through the darkened room. I had a feeling that he was going to make a move before the lights came up. What it would be I could not imagine, but whatever it might be I knew that it would probably be decisive.

When things began to happen, they happened fast. That much I had expected, but what I had not foreseen was that the action did not come from Inspector Schmidt. Suddenly the bed heaved up in the middle and collapsed with a resounding, dust-raising crash. Beside me I heard Brink cry out, in the loudest and hoarsest whisper imaginable, something that sounded like ouch. Almost at the same moment the projector crashed to the floor with a tinkle of broken glass and a clank of metal. Its light went out, and the room was suddenly pitchy dark. There was the sound of scuffling and a couple of thumps that I identified as overturned chairs.

My role in this melee was necessarily passive. The collapse of the bed sprawled me on the floor with a couple of pillows on top of me and somebody's elbow in my ear. It was totally dark for probably only a matter of seconds, but I seemed to be hours scrambling free of those pillows and trying to get to my feet.

I remember thinking that it was high time somebody got to the light switch, but nobody did. When we finally got light it was because one of the cops yanked the blankets off the window and snapped up the blind. For a moment we blinked at each other.

The easy chair was overturned with Peggy James under it. Bob Larraby was trying to right it and haul her out from under it.

"Who dumped this chair on Peggy?" he demanded belligerently.

"I did," said Harry Stedman. "I thought she'd be safer under it if anyone started shooting."

"Brink," said Red. "I'm sorry. I thought you were faking."

"What was the idea of sticking me with a pin?" Brink whispered dolefully, as he felt gingerly of his behind.

"It wasn't a pin," said Red. "It was a thumbtack. I wanted to know if you really lost your voice. You had. I didn't know I'd get a reaction that would bring down the bed."

"Look what I've got," Stinker spoke from the floor. "He crashed the projector as soon as his picture hit the screen."

"I know," said Schmidty. "Thanks, Stinker. We'll take him now."

With Schmidty and Gilligan and a whole battalion of cops standing over them, Stinker grinned up from his seat on Jack Benjamin's stomach.

"Can I smack him one for last night before I let you have him?" Stinker asked.

"That," said Schmidty, "is up to Gilligan. He has jurisdiction here. Your prisoner, Gilligan."

"Better let me have him, Mr. Smith," Gilligan said regretfully. "I can't take chances on him saying we third-degreed him."

"Let me up," said Benjamin.

Stinker let him up, and Gilligan's men took him over.

As soon as we had the room as much set to rights as could be managed — the bed was wrecked beyond our abilities — I made Schmidty come clean. He rather rubbed things in on Benjamin, made it very clear to him that his trouble was that he had not really planned his murders. He had been stupid and changed his tack too often, had improvised his crimes and, by following all his criminal impulses, had drawn suspicion to crimes that would have been more difficult to solve had they been simpler.

"You kept doubling back on yourself all through this thing," Schmidty told him. "And left a trail of half-executed, discarded schemes all over the place."

The whole thing went back to Bellringer's Fundamental Finance. Benjamin had been his silent partner in the swindle. With the SEC closing in, Bellringer and Benjamin were preparing to skip the country. For that they needed money, and Bellringer came down to reunion to work out on Daggett Nelson. Since Nelson was listed as one of the officers of the company Schmidty realized that he would share responsibility in the crash. He guessed that Nelson, apparently new to crime, would be panicked by the threat of jail, and that Bellringer would naturally get the idea of squeezing more money out of him on the pretext of saving the company. That would be money with which Benjamin and Bellringer could skip. Apparently Nelson did not come through. Either he had no more money to sink in Fundamental Finance, or he did not fall for this final swindle. That disappointment Bellringer had after telling Brink and Mander off. It made it necessary for him to go back and try to mend his fences. He tried apologizing to Brink and propositioned him for more money. This, of course, after he had told Benjamin that it was no go for getting the cash out of Nelson. Benjamin, however, did not trust Bellringer, and he was keeping his eye on his partner in Fundamental Finance. Disguised, he followed him into the firehouse and eavesdropped on his conversation with Brink. As he had suspected, Bellringer was still trying to get the money. He saw him outside and accused him of trying to count him out on the getaway money. They quarreled, and in a rage he grabbed Bellringer by the throat and strangled him. Benjamin knew enough about police methods to realize that sooner or later Bellringer would be identified and the trail would lead to

him, but he wanted to make it later if he could. He had seen the Zipper earlier in the evening at Stinker's Run, and the Zipper was the most completely drunken person about. While he was trying to find a way of hiding the body he ran into the Zipper, passed out by the memorial fountain. Zipper had a large pirate suit on and Bellringer had a large sailor suit on. He had the brilliant idea of switching the Zipper's clothes with those of the body which he had in his car. It was when he hauled the Zipper out of his clothes that he bruised his shoulders. His story of Zipper being bounced by Stitch was phony. Stitch's long unmanicured nails would have left marks along with the bruises. He dressed the Zipper in the sailor suit and the corpse in the pirate suit. Loading the corpse back in his car, he drove to the empty lot behind the firehouse and carried the corpse into the alley where he laid it on its back. He figured that it would pass for hours as a drunk sleeping it off. Then, he thought, when it was discovered that Bellringer was dead, much time would be lost in trying to identify him as a 1927 pirate. He hoped that, by the time Bellringer could be placed in 1926 and identified and the trail could lead to him, he'd be out of the country. That, however, is where I came in.

He had just dropped the body in the alley when I came along. He didn't dare run for it because I would hear him on the cobblestones, so he just froze in the darkness and waited. He was watching me all the time I was scratching the matches. When I made my dash back into the firehouse, he realized that I had been feeling for heartbeats and that his plan had already gone awry. Bellringer was not passing as a drunk. I knew he was dead. He scooped up the body and dashed back to his car with it. The business of getting rid of the body became more difficult. Now he was rushed and nervous. He drove back to the memorial fountain. Since he saw me burn the corpse's shirt, he figured that the thing to do was to get the pirate suit back on the Zipper and try to really hide Bellringer's body. That was his second plan. He hoped that if I reported the corpse, the Zipper would turn up, as he did, with a burned shirt and all would be well for him. He did not notice in his haste that my match had burned through and left a mark on the corpse's undershirt, or that the blue dye of the sailor pants had come off on both Bellringer's and the Zipper's thighs. He was interrupted by some passer-by at the fountain and had time only to return the Zipper's shirt. He had to leave the pants as they were. Then he took Bellringer's body, still in the pirate pants, and hid it somewhere that he thought would do. That is, he thought it would do until he heard that Inspector Schmidt had come to town and gone to the firehouse. That made him change his mind about how easy it was going to be. He had not counted on any high-powered detective work.

When Stitch told him Schmidty was in town, he first started after him in Stitch's car. He tried to run him off the road and failed. That left nothing more for him to do but cover up his tracks as well as he could. The only officer of Fundamental Finance left in town was Daggett Nelson, the only man who knew that he had any connection with Bellringer. He conked Nelson with the bung starter and, knowing that Schmidty

had seen Stitch's car, he decided to get rid of both bodies and of Stitch's car all at once. It had been his plan to put the two bodies in the car and push it into the lake, hoping that it would look like two drunks who had drowned themselves. Since both were officers of Fundamental Finance, he hoped that it would be assumed that they both had good reason to commit suicide if their deaths did not pass as accidental. The one trouble with that was that Nelson was not yet a corpse, and Bellringer was already dead. If it was to look as though both had drowned he would have to get water into the dead man's lungs. He thought of artificial respiration, but two bodies were too much to manage. He enlisted Stitch's help with the threat that he was in it anyway since Schmidty had gotten the license number of Stitch's car. They took the bodies down to the boathouse. Leaving the unconscious Nelson in the car, they dragged Bellringer's corpse to the water's edge, put his head under water and tried to pump water into the dead man's lungs by artificial respiration. They heard Peggy and Bob coming and had to skip for the bushes, leaving the body on the dock. They were trapped. They couldn't get to their car without the kids seeing them, but when Peggy went for help they made a dash for their hidden car. Larraby saw them, but Larraby owed them five hundred dollars he had lost on the roulette wheel at Stinker's Run. They told him to keep his mouth shut, that if he told on them they'd see that the dean knew about the five hundred and he'd be fired out of college two days before graduation. That put the kid on the spot. Leaving Larraby there with that threat of expulsion hanging over him, they got into the car and zipped back to Stinker's Run with the unconscious Nelson still on their hands. They then, with Nelson still in Stitch's car, drove both cars back to the lake. This time, however, they tried the other shore. They pushed Stitch's car, with Nelson's body in it, into the lake. The multiple tracks were made when with Benjamin's car they nudged Stitch's car into the lake.

They could see us across the lake under the boathouse light, and it was then that they tried to scare Schmidty off with that silly note tied to the stone. On the whole, however, Benjamin thought he was all right except for Larraby. He wasn't sure that his threat would keep Larraby quiet, and he was afraid that as soon as he skipped town Larraby would surely start talking; and he knew that if he skipped out on Stitch, Stitch would talk rather than take any rap for him. That made it necessary to have another change of plan. He had to stick around and watch his chances. When we all came barging into Stinker's Run, and we had Larraby with us, they had a bad moment. It relieved them when they realized that we had come only to inquire about Stitch's car. It was in the lake and had been reported stolen. They felt all set on that part of it. Stitch, however, did not like being on the spot. After we left he began weakening, and Benjamin was pretty sure that he'd blab the next time Schmidty went to work on him. Stitch had been stalling about feeling dizzy, but Benjamin turned the stall to his own purposes. He used the bung starter he had already used on Nelson, and this time he made sure he finished the job. He killed Stitch and tried to make us think that Stinker had killed him with that punch.

He realized, however, that the more violence he piled up, the more Larraby would be likely to forget his own problem and talk. He went to Larraby's room with his bung starter to finish him. That was why Larraby tried to get the cigarette lighter before Schmidty could see it. He was afraid that if suspicion fell on Benjamin, Benjamin would yowl about the five hundred. He realized, however, that if Benjamin had tried to kill him, it must mean that Benjamin was taking no chances on his keeping mum. It looked as though the kid was in a tight spot either way, and he did not know what to do about it. He told Stinker his troubles in the morning at the hospital, and Stinker loaned him the five hundred. They dashed up to the bank for the cash and went out to Stinker's Run to see if they couldn't get the bartender, left in charge out there, to take the money and give the kid back his I.O.U. before Benjamin got back from the hospital.

"That was it, wasn't it?" Schmidty paused to ask.

"Yep," Stinker and Larraby chorused sheepishly.

"Then," said Schmidty, "not that it matters any, but why didn't you tell me what you knew after that?"

The answer to that was simple. Benjamin had not been so dumb as to leave the I.O.U. where such things were usually kept out at Stinker's Run. He had carried it around with him. They had paid the bartender the five hundred dollars and had gotten a receipt, in the hope that if worse came to worst the dean would be more lenient about a paid gambling debt than about an unpaid one; but they could not be sure that the dean would make so fine a sporting distinction and they decided to let Schmidty go his own gait. As Stinker explained it, he was trying after that, as far as possible, to keep his eye on Benjamin to forestall any further crimes or a getáway.

"All right," I said. "That's a good airtight reconstruction, Schmidty, but how did you know that Benjamin belonged right in the middle of the picture?"

"I knew," said Schmidty, "because he was right in the middle of the picture. When I came over to the firehouse I was the most conspicuous man in the joint. Why? Because I was wearing ordinary human clothes. If I had put on any kind of a crazy outfit, I would have looked as though I had belonged. When Benjamin was following after Bellringer and snooping around, he did just that. He put on a crazy outfit so that he could mingle with the crowd and not be noticed. The first time I saw these pictures last night, I took notice of the costumes. There were lots of pirates, a couple of sailors and other things and one gypsy. I didn't pay any special attention to the gypsy then. I was looking for other things, but all through the night I saw all kinds of costumes but no gypsies. The parade just now clinched it. There was everything in that parade, but no gypsies. Then I knew that the gypsy in Dale's picture was a guy who had no business in the firehouse, anyway no legitimate business. I thought I remembered what that gypsy looked like, but I wanted to make sure."

On his way over to make sure, however, Gilligan stopped him and showed him the bung starter. Benjamin had had another of his clever little plans, another bright

improvisation. He knew that on his neck under his collar he bore the marks that Stinker's fingers had left the night before. When he saw Brink turn up with a scarf tied around his neck, it was a splendid opportunity to throw suspicion in the direction of a man he knew had been heavily hit in Fundamental Finance. He just left his bloody bung starter at the back door of the firehouse. He scattered things like that about, just as he snitched Mander's lighter when they were both trying to revive Stitch and later dropped it in Larraby's room while he waited for the kid.

"So," I asked. "What is the matter with Brink's throat?"

"I don't know," said Brink in his ordinary voice.

He looked surprised and slowly he unwound the scarf. There were no marks on his neck.

"My voice has come back just like that," he said.

"Were you very scared this morning?" Red asked.

"I've been scared ever since I talked to Bellringer last night," Brink confessed.

"That's it then," said Red. "It happens occasionally, like a hysterical laryngitis. Nothing wrong with the throat, but under emotional shock the voice goes."

"Well, fry me for a catfish," said Stinker.

"Someone," said Schmidty, taking off his shoes, "will take you up on that one of these days — in butter."

THE END

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