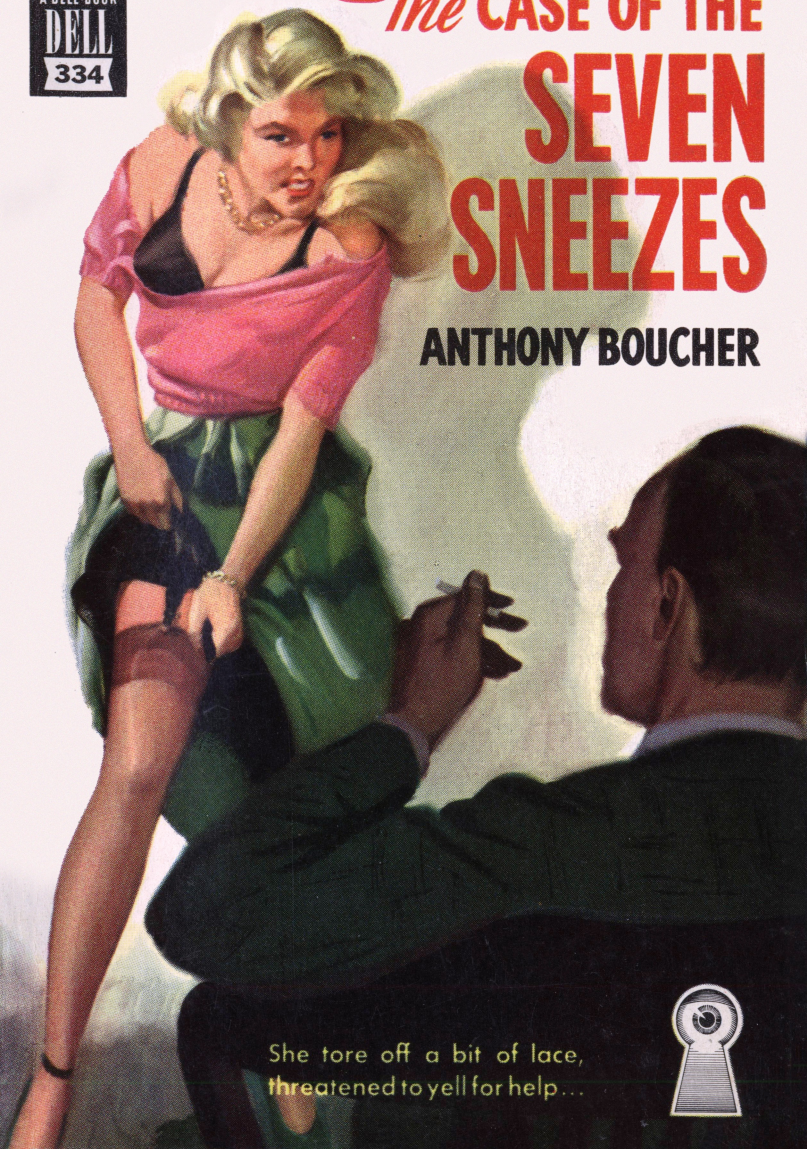


# *The* CASE OF THE **SEVEN SNEEZES**

**ANTHONY BOUCHER**



She tore off a bit of lace,  
**threatened** to yell for help...





# THE CASE OF THE SEVEN SNEEZES

.....

Persons this *Mystery* is about—

## THE SILVER WEDDING PARTY

**HORACE BRAINARD** (Husband), trying desperately to celebrate his 25th wedding anniversary, is insufferably overbearing to his associates, but at a word from Lucas Quincy he is as meek as a lamb.

**CATHERINE BRAINARD** nee Herndon (Wife), a silly and fluffy peroxide blonde, is grasping frantically at girlishness at her silver wedding.

**DR. HUGH ARNOLD** (Best Man), a thin man with strong, sharp features, has a suave composure that borders at times on the terrible.

**STELLA PARIS** (Maid of Honor), a retired movie queen, is an object lesson in How to Outgrow Glamour Gracefully.

**LUCAS QUINCY** (Usher), who owns a slice of practically everything in Los Angeles, is a dominating man with a chill self-sufficiency and a calm acceptance of the fact that nothing matters except Lucas.

**ALYS TRENT** (Flower Girl), about 30, has pure white hair and a sulkily pretty face. Passionate and brazen, Alys craves Fun, Life, and Excitement, and longs to feel—everything.

**JAMES HERNDON** (Brother of Bride), admirably well preserved, is a timid bachelor. He has taste, charm, income, and a passionate love of poetry, with no desire to do anything about it.

## OTHERS:

**FERGUS O'BREEN**, cocksure and Irish, is a moderately successful private detective, and a thoroughly nice young man.

**JANET BRAINARD**, daughter of Horace and Catherine, is a crossword puzzle editor in New York.

**TOM QUINCY**, Lucas's nephew, is a promising young psychologist.

**CORCORAN**, the man of all work on Blackman's Island, has a low opinion of his job.

**JESÚS RAMIREZ**, owner of a motor launch, is called "Hokay" because that's all anybody has heard him say.

# THE CASE OF THE SEVEN SNEEZES

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What this *Mystery* is about—

• • • THREE SLIT THROATS which poured a libation for a wedding party 25 years ago . . . A DEAD CAT which augurs fresh and terrible murder at a silver wedding anniversary . . . SEVEN SNEEZES which convince a detective his presence may be necessary at the anniversary party . . . A vanishing MOTORBOAT that leaves twelve persons marooned on an island . . . A DARK STAIN in the sand at which a woman stares with unholy fascination . . . A SAND-FILLED SOCK which is getting to be a monotonous prelude to murder . . . A LETTER significant because it was never read aloud . . . A MAN'S BLOOD on the front of a frilly pink negligee . . . A DRIPPING PIECE OF GLASS clenched in a laughing woman's hand . . . A STAB where a man's heart ought to be—but isn't . . . A great deal of PUZZLING BEHAVIOR . . . Plenty of BLOOD-CURDLING SUSPENSE.

*Wouldn't You Like to Know—*

- Who has such a curious taste for throats?
- Why Fergus O'Brien feels he must be a murder carrier instead of a detective?
- What Lucas Quincy means by: *The solution lies in Eliot?*
- Why Catherine Brainard has to sing a round to get into her own bedroom?
- What, after a quarter of a century, started off a repetition of a whole chain of horrible events?
- Why meek James Herndon is so insolent to Alys?

---

YOU will find the answers in this most unusual story, which finds murder repeating itself in a 25-year-old pattern. A night of blood and lust and horror ends with a brilliant solution to an exciting series of crimes.



# THE CASE of the SEVEN SNEEZES

By ANTHONY BOUCHER

Author of "The Case of the Solid Key,"  
"The Case of the Crumpled Knave," etc.

*I knew a man once did a girl in  
Any man might do a girl in  
Any Man has to, needs to, wants to  
Once in a lifetime, do a girl in.*

—SWEENEY.

*Things must be as they may: men may sleep, and they  
may have their throats about them at that time; and  
some say, knives have edges. It must be as it may.*

—CORPORAL NYM.

*Author's Dedication—*

For LAWRENCE and MARY PRICE  
token payment on an unpayable debt.

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DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

George T. Delacorte, Jr.  
President

Albert P. Delacorte  
Vice-President

Helen Meyer  
Vice-President

261 Fifth Avenue

Printed in U.S.A. New York 16, N. Y.

DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY WESTERN PRINTING & LITHOGRAPHING COMPANY

# THE CASE OF THE SEVEN SNEEZES

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# The Case of the Seven Sneezes

## *Chapter One*

### A CURIOUS TASTE FOR THROATS

FERGUS SAID, "I've got a license, and I'd just as soon keep it."

The red-faced man sliced the tip off a fresh cigar. "There are other private detectives," he observed.

"Sure. And you've been turned down by them first or you wouldn't be here. This office isn't used to that good a cigar."

The red-faced man puffed calmly. "I'm not asking anything illegal. I'm simply trying to hire you to investigate a murder. That's your job, isn't it?"

"A twenty-five-year-old murder."

"Which is still on the books as unsolved."

"I repeat," said Fergus, "if you've got some new angle on the case, why not go to the D.A.?"

"Shall we say political reasons? Or perhaps personal distrust?"

"Could be. But why stipulate that I can't?"

"I want to hire your services. Naturally I prefer that your reports should be confidential and addressed exclusively to me."

"Murder's not a private matter. If I turn up a murderer, hand him over directly to you, and keep my mouth shut, I could wind up as an accessory. I like my little license, I do."

"Hang your license, sir! Haven't you guts enough for a little well-paid irregularity?"

"Very well, sir; and haven't you guts enough to tell your name? The Mysterious Stranger's a most attractive role in the theater; but I'm damned if I like it as a client."

"You can always reach me at that number I gave you. And if you wish, I will pay for a bond guaranteeing your salary."

There was silence in the unpretentious little office. The red-faced man sat puffing his cigar with the calm and stolid expectancy of one who never fails to get what he has demanded. Fergus matched the silence and tried, not too successfully, to match the stolidity. Abruptly he glanced at his wrist watch and spoke. "Excuse me a moment, will you? A report I promised to put in this morning."

"Certainly." And another confident puff.

Shielding the telephone with his body, Fergus dialed the number penciled on the slip of paper before him. He listened to the vain ringing and hung up. "Clients don't stay put," he said.

The red-faced man smiled sardonically. "No use, O'Brien. That number is a private unlisted phone in my study. No one will ever answer it but myself."

"Confidence goes two ways," said Fergus.

"Not with me. That's why I can afford such cigars. And such a fee."

"If I can lay my nose successfully to a twenty-five-year-old scent, I'll have earned that fee and more." There was silence again. Then a sudden flash of light glinted in Fergus's green eyes, and he added, "But are you sure it's twenty-five years old?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you sure it isn't maybe a week old? Or a day? What's the life expectancy on a cat nowadays?"

The red-faced man's bulk seemed to tighten. "If you undertake this case, I shall give you whatever facts you may find useful. Otherwise—"

"Okay," said Fergus. "I'll take it. On two conditions: One, that I deliver all my findings to you direct, but reserve the privilege of turning them over to the D.A. if need be."

The red-faced man rose and turned to the door. "We have already discussed that," he said coldly. "And your other condition?"

"That you tell me your name."

The red-faced man snorted, "Out of the question!" and



opened the door.

A trim dark girl in the outer office rose to her feet as she saw him. "Why, Mr. Quincy!" she exclaimed. "But how nice of you to patronize my poor struggling brother!"

The red-faced man slammed out without a word.

Maureen perched on the desk in the inner office. "You can buy me a good lunch," she purred, "if you're getting clients like that."

"I'm not," Fergus grunted.

His sister stared. "Look, darling. I know the O'Breens have never been noted for an acute money sense, but you simply can't go around turning down Lucas Quincy."

"Can't I just? Though if I'd known— No, no use conjuring up imaginary temptations."

"But *Lucas Quincy*, Fergus. That man owns a slice of everything, even that lovely sweatshop I slave in."

"So that's how you recognized him? Didn't know he was tied up with pictures too. The good old mystery man. The Zaharoff tradition. The financial genius who never makes public appearances. The Man Nobody Knows. And when I do run into him, I damned near throw him out of the office."

"No, but seriously, Fergus. What goes? What did he want you for?"

Fergus grinned. "Professional ethics—" he began pompously.

"But he's not your client if you threw him out. What was it?"

Fergus shook his head despairingly and began to pace about the office. "Damned if I know what he wanted. It doesn't add up to sense. And there's a tricky smell about it. Anonymous clients are out for no good. And why in God's name anybody should pay out solid cash for the solution to a twenty-five-year-old murder—"

His sister's eyes lit up. "Murder? Oh, Fergus, are you going to find out who killed William Desmond Taylor?"

"Hardly. No, this is earlier and more obscure. The Stanhope case. You wouldn't know it."

"But what was it?"

"Pretty little business up near Santa Eulalia in 1915. Party of young people fresh from a wedding where they'd all been bridesmaids and stuff. Scream in the night and lo! one of the maidens has her throat slit. No motives pointing to anybody, no material clues, nothing. Police write it off as a prowler interrupted in raiding the girl's jewel box."

Maureen frowned. "That's no good of a murder. Not up to your standard, Fergus. Too common-or-garden."

"Sure. All but one touch. The baby flower girl at this wedding had a kitten. The murdered girl owned a fine pedigreed Maltese tom. In the week before the wedding both those cats had their throats slit too. And the police still decided it was a prowler."

Maureen's blue eyes widened. "That's not nice," she said in a small shocked voice. "What you're implying there. It's got a nasty ring to it. You mean?"

"I just mean it's too damned much of a coincidence. Sure, people do go around killing cats random-like. Aelurophobia, if you want a ten-dollar word. But when at the same time, in the same group, by the same method, a girl is killed— Hell, a prowler's the lazy way out."

"And that's what Lucas Quincy wants you to investigate?"

"After twenty-five years. Everybody scattered over the landscape and not remembering a damned thing, even if you found them."

Maureen mooched a cigarette from the pack on the desk. "There's one way I bet you could do it. If you got all those people together—I don't mean a criminal round-up, just all together so you could watch them—see how they act with each other and how they must have acted in 1915— I'll bet you could figure it out from that."

"Fancy stuff, huh? Kind of arty for a working detective, but I can see it'd have its points. Still, how the hell do you get them together?"

"I don't know. It was just an idea. Why don't you smoke good cigarettes?"

"Why don't you buy your own? But even supposing I could do that, I still want to know why. Why should the great financier suddenly want a solution to this ancient mess, and anonymous at that?"

"Maybe," Maureen suggested, "he wants you to ghost an article for him in *True Detective*."

"Nothing like a sister's loving help, my sweeting." He patted her cheek and finished off with a sharp slap. "And this hush-hush stuff about withholding evidence from the D.A. For all I know, Quincy might be the original authentic murderer himself and trying to use me to blackmail some poor dope with planted evidence."

"But he couldn't be a murderer. A man in his position!"

"Temptation, my pet, is not class-conscious. Uh uh. This is one monkey leaves Mr. Quincy's chestnuts right there in the fire. And that soft thud you just heard was the subject being dropped. How's for lunch now?"

"I've got to dash. I just came really to tell you I wasn't coming. Too busy with this reception this afternoon. But Fergus—"

"Uh huh?"

"Do you think Mr. Quincy was in that wedding party?"

"Look, sweeting. When you get home tonight, you go in my room and find a black-and-red bound book called *Persons Unknown*, by Lester Ferguson. There's a first-rate essay in there on this business. Read that and stop pestering me. It contains everything anybody knows or ever will know about the murder of Martha Stanhope."

"But Mr. Quincy," Maureen insisted, "is so rich."

"So he buys him a shamus to play with some funny business and the poor dope gets it in the neck. Uh uh." His voice changed a little. "Now run along, if you must, and I'll catch up on odds and ends. See you at the reception, maybe."

Those who know Fergus O'Brien at all know that he is Irish, curious, brash, cocksure, and colorful; and many of them know that his sister Maureen is head of publicity at Metropolis Pictures and one of the smartest career

women in Hollywood. A few add the knowledge that he is an acute, perceptive, and moderately successful private investigator; and a very few indeed know that of that handful of obvious qualities only the Irishness and the curiosity are genuine. The brashness, the cocksureness, the color are the instinctive camouflage, sometimes too garishly painted, of a man who might in another age have been a bard, a crusader, or conceivably a prophet.

The public appearance of Fergus O'Brien is an act—such a good act, to be sure, that even his closest friend on the Los Angeles police force has never quite seen through it—and even the best of acts must have its letdowns. And because of one of those letdowns, the twenty-five-year-old Stanhope case was solved in a manner which Lucas Quincy had never counted on.

It began, on the afternoon of Quincy's visit to the O'Brien office, at Metropolis Pictures' gala party in honor of the remake of *Pearls of Desire*. You remember the original picture, of course (Paradox, before the colossal merger with Metropolis), with Valentino as the Spanish nobleman who had sunk to working confidence games in Paris, Theodore Roberts as the gruffly upright American financier who frustrated his schemes, and Stella Paris as the financier's daughter who contrived to save at once the Spaniard from prison, her father from ruin, and herself from a fate worse than death. You doubtless have no such clear memories of this remake, recent though it was.

It had seemed a bright idea to start with. If *Pearls of Desire* had grossed a million in 1922, why shouldn't it do the same again? People haven't really changed. A good story is a good story, the producer observed as he set the first of five teams of writers to work at devising a new story. Beyond a little trouble with the Hays office about the title, everything looked beautiful at the time of this party; and the occasion was as festive as though Metropolis were sponsoring a combined remake of *Shoulder Arms* and *The Birth of a Nation*.

Fergus usually stayed carefully away from his sister's publicity shindigs. But she had promised that this would



be especially good, and he felt that he owed a certain sentimental tribute to *Pearls of Desire*, which had been the great emotional experience of his eleventh year. Besides, that morning's interview still bothered him.

It was patently absurd. A prominent man slinking about incognito like a spy in a Hitchcock picture and demanding the instant solution of an ancient problem, a solution at once impossible and pointless. But absurd though the situation was, it remained oddly menacing. Lucas Quincy's great financial success was not based on indulging himself in the impossible and fruitless. If Quincy wanted a task done, that task meant gain to Quincy and in all likelihood terrible loss to someone else.

*It's the not knowing what you're getting into, Fergus thought. There's the respect that makes calamity. And you lose either way. You're cautious like a good little boy, and you're out a nice fat fee. You take a chance on a probably shady client, and you wind up without your license.* Neatly goaded on this bicorn dilemma, he felt one of his rare moods of intense depression sneaking up on him. A party should help, even a publicity party.

It didn't.

Usually at such parties there was nothing but shoptalk—irrelevant and largely unintelligible chitchat, mere background noise no more distracting than a crowd of extras muttering, "Rhubarb"!

Fergus had three straight ryes in quick succession and decided to get the hell out of there. This was no party for his mood. The longer he stuck around, the blacker he'd feel.

And then he saw the woman in the corner.

She wore a plain cotton house dress, and she must have weighed two hundred pounds. But it was two hundred pounds of quiet and dignified comfort. Her hair was gray, but the face beneath it was youngish and pretty, with a very little deftly unobtrusive make-up. There was a tolerant but tired smile on her lips. She did not look like a guest at a Metropolis party. In fact, she did not look like Hollywood at all. It was as though some ordinary middle-

class housewife had accidentally wandered in on her way to the market.

She looked as out of place as Fergus felt, and a capricious impulse drew him to her side. "Hello," he said. "Could I get you anything?"

She looked up, and as their eyes met they seemed to exchange complete sets of opinions on the party, the war, and Hollywood. The exchange was satisfactory. "You could get me the largest beer they have," she said. "Then come and talk."

Maybe it was the talk; maybe it was the beer on top of the rye; maybe, and most likely, it was simply the woman herself; but from whatever cause, Fergus felt the black mood lifting. They talked about football and boogie-woogie and black magic and Edward Bellamy and food, and never once about the State of the Industry or even *Pearls of Desire*.

And at last Fergus said, "I'm having a good time, but I'd be having a better if it wasn't under the auspices of Metropolis. How's about clearing out of here and really settling down to cases? Of beer, for instance."

The fat woman said, "We'd better collect Janet. She's a stranger in town and I don't dare let her too far off the leash. I have to present her in good condition at a silver-wedding party tomorrow."

"Your parents'?" Fergus asked gracefully and the woman said he wasn't Irish for nothing and if he'd get some more beer she'd go look for Janet and he did and she did and when he came back there was Janet and, he admitted, well worth looking for.

Though the leash, he thought, was not necessary. Not that she wasn't attractive. Janet was tall and not quite too slender; her hair was a light brown, almost blond, and her eyes were a darker tone of brown, with gold flecks. She certainly would not go unmolested; but she gave a disconcerting impression of being damned well able to take care of herself. She wore a well-tailored suit and made you think that women's tailoring had been invented because of her.

Fergus liked her. Beside the concentrated glamour of promising young actresses in the room, she seemed exactly what she was—a charming, capable, and very real white-collar girl.

"Miss Brainard," the fat woman said, "may I present Mr.—Ah, beer! Thank you. And what is your name?"

"O'Brien. Fergus O'Brien, at your devoted service."

The woman hesitated and tried not to stare at him. *She knows Maureen, Fergus thought grimly, and she's heard about me and my Sinister Profession.* The idea seemed to bother her for a moment. Then her face cleared and she completed the introduction.

Janet Brainard smiled and shook hands firmly. The grip was efficient, but the hand was smooth and well-shaped. "Stella tells me you're carrying us off," she said. "Just Sabines, that's what we are. Not that I mind."

Fergus waved at the room. "Don't mind being torn away from Glamour—capital G and all?"

"I'll try to hide my tears." Her voice was low and pleasing. "Where are we going?"

"Where the Sabine twineth," said Fergus unashamedly. "Only look: while we're asking people's right names—?" He cocked an inquisitive eyebrow at the large woman.

"Oh dear," she said. "After five marriages that's a question that always brings you up short. The last was—Yes. It was Rollo Devlin."

"Only the name you might know best," said Janet, "is Stella Paris."

Fergus stood stock-still a moment. Then he lifted his beer glass to his lips and slowly drained it. When the last drop was down, he paused and carefully articulated, "Stella Paris?"

"Or would you remember?" Janet pantomimed, stroking a long white beard.

"Stella Paris," Fergus repeated reverently. "And you sit here lone and lorn in a corner while everybody celebrates the remake of your greatest opus."

Miss Paris finished her beer. "Why not? When talkies came— Sit down, children. This is a long story, and it has

a profound moral.

"When talkies came, they said to me, 'Miss Paris, your voice stinks.' Oh, they said it a trifle more politely, you understand, but I got the idea. And I looked at myself in the mirror and I saw that a dozen years is a long time to play ingénues. And I looked at my bank balance, and I found it good.

"So I retired. Boom, like that. The columnists said I had vanished. They built it up into quite something, and every so often they'd demand, 'Where is Stella Paris?' And all the time I was right here in Hollywood. But I never saw the right people or went to the right places. Rollo wanted to, but when he saw I was in earnest he went off to England and the last I heard of him was when he got the divorce in Paris. So I just went on living in a little bungalow and let my weight pile up and was comfortable. And I still am. Hollywood's a very nice town if you're not part of it."

Fergus looked at the nearest young actress. "That's a story," he pronounced, "that should be forcibly poured down the shell-like ears of every one of those baby stars. How to Outgrow Glamour Gracefully. Bless you, Miss Paris. And now where to?"

"Canapés," said Miss Paris, "are all very well. But the afternoon's getting on, and I'm hungry. Why don't you drive us home and I'll cook dinner?"

"With your own fair hands?"

"I know. When I was bigtime I always used to pose for publicity stills—Miss Paris Whipping Up a Cake in Her Adorable Louis XV Kitchen—and I never even knew how to break an egg. But I've learned a lot in the past ten years. Want to find out how much?"

"I recommend it," said Janet.

"Then in that case—"

And the three strode cheerfully out of Metropolis.

Miss Paris set on the coffee table a whisky bottle, a chilled siphon, and two glasses. "You children stay here and talk," she commanded. "I can do better in the kitchen



without what people quaintly call help."

Fergus looked around the pleasant and unpretentious little room. "Most stars," he observed, as the kitchen door swung to behind their hostess, "even the ex-est of the ex, would think this a hovel. But you can breathe in it."

"Stella has sense," said Janet.

"Straight?" Fergus asked. "Or soda?"

"Soda please."

Fergus tended bar and expressed his growing admiration of Janet's cool efficiency in the size of the drink he poured. "Madame?"

"Thank you." As she took the glass her forefinger bent over its rim and then retreated.

"You're from the East, Miss Brainard? New York, I imagine."

"Yes. But don't tell me you're one of those people who go around identifying you by your accent?"

"No. It's the way you took your highball. No barkeep ever serves a swizzlestick in the West, but in New York you always get them. In fact, I think you can divide New Yorkers into two great schools: those who always remove the swizzlestick and let it roll about the bar, and those who always carefully prop it up out of nose-reach with the forefinger."

"And which are you when you leave your unswizzled West?"

"Same like you. I'm a swizzlepropper."

"A bond," Janet observed dryly.

"And what line are you in in New York, if you'll pardon my 'satiabie curiosity?'"

"I'm an editor," she announced proudly.

"Noble! Editing does seem to be a woman's game nowadays, doesn't it? And what house are you with?"

Janet took her time with her drink. "Afraid it's not a house exactly—not if you mean like a real major publishing house. It's just—forgive this, but I didn't name the firm—it's just I. Q. Publications. Maybe you know our puzzle magazine *Brain Wave*?"

"Do I?" Fergus beamed. "I'm one of your regular cus-

tomers."

"How nice. I'm crossword puzzle editor. It's strange work and hard work, but it pays fair-to-middling and I've got ideas for building it up."

"The crosswords are good," said Fergus. "Much harder than in most of those magazines. But they aren't my main interest in your magazine. What's an unfailing joy are those magnificent crime puzzles of Lester Ferguson's."

A shadow passed over the girl's face. "They're all right," she said. "But you do do the crosswords?"

"They're a help when work's slow, especially if you do them diagramless. But tell me—" He was watching Janet's face. That momentary shadow had vanished at once, but people whose faces clouded at the name of a great criminologist stirred the O'Brien curiosity. "Tell me this; it's a point I've always wanted to make to a crossword puzzle editor. Why do you insist so rigidly on having no unkeyed letters?"

"Unkeyed letters," said Janet in her most formally editorial manner, "were all very well back in the early Plaza Publishing Company days of crosswords, when constructors didn't know any better. But technique has improved since then. We have talkies now too, and radio. Unkeyed letters are as dated as silent pictures."

"Which," said Fergus, "I likewise prefer. But that's irrelevant. What I think the trouble is, is that you editors have hold of the wrong end of the stick. Sure, a puzzle with no unkeyed letters is technically more of an achievement to construct; but who cares about that? It's a lot easier to solve, and it's for solvers that you publish your magazine."

"Don't you want it easy?"

"Why should I? If all you want is easiness, it's a damned sight easier just not to do puzzles. As long as you want puzzles at all, you want good solid honestgod bastardly braincrackers. And unkeyed letters, especially if you insist as I do on doing all puzzles diagramless, add no end to the difficulty and to the fun."

Janet shook her head. "Sorry, O'Brien, but your psy-

chology's all off. What you say may be true of yourself, but you're not a typical part of the puzzle public, at least in America. I've heard they're different in England, but the American puzzle fan wants something that looks hard and is easy. He wants to pat himself on the back and say wasn't he smart to do that one so quick? And if it's too hard, he can't pat himself on the back and he won't buy the next issue of the magazine. So no unkeyed letters, or the fans raise hell. The hard work belongs to the constructors; they get paid for it."

"All right. I give up. But then I'm no authority on crosswords. As I said," he went on, watching her face closely, "it's the logic puzzles that I really devour. Curious, isn't it, that a great criminal scholar like Ferguson should have such a first-rate light puzzle sense as well?"

There was no mistaking it. It was Ferguson's name that brought the shadow across her face. "And just which classic murder," he asked lightly, "did the great man accuse you of, Miss Brainard?"

Janet grinned at him. "It is 'satiabile, isn't it?'"

"Sorry."

"Not at all. There is something— O'Brien, if you're a Ferguson fan you might help explain this. It's ridiculous and yet—well, it bothers me. I had lunch with Ferguson the other day. You know perhaps what he's like—seventy-odd and half again as large as Stella, with a roar and a limp." She hesitated.

"What did he do?" Fergus prompted. "Denounce the waiter for arsenic in the soup?"

"Hardly. But it was curious. We met in a hotel lobby, where there'd been a famous shooting once. I forget the details, but it's one of Ferguson's pet cases. One shot chipped a marble pillar and you can still see the scar. And when I met him, he was sitting there staring at that pillar and—well, just gloating over it."

"That's natural enough. Any man's a mild maniac on his specialty. Ferguson would gloat over that pillar the way a philatelist might leer at a block of mint Cape triangles."

"No, but that isn't it. I mean, that's merely the build-up. During lunch we were talking about things and I said I was coming out here for my parents' silver wedding anniversary. That seemed to interest him, and he muttered, 'Brainard—', and '1915—', and then he asked me if my mother had had a bridesmaid named Martha Stanhope."

Fergus hoped that he controlled his features. "And did she?"

"I didn't know then. You naturally don't know much about your mother's wedding attendants. But I asked Stella later and she said yes, she was maid of honor and this Martha was bridesmaid, only Martha isn't going to be at the reunion party because she's dead. Stella seemed worried and as though she wished I hadn't mentioned it."

"Of course. If they were girls together, Miss Paris wouldn't want to be reminded of the empty chair at the reunion. Nothing to bother you in that."

"It isn't that. It was Mr. Ferguson. Now I'm not one of those women who simply exude intuition and sensitivity, but this—this did strike me rather forcibly. You see, O'Brien, when he asked me that question he looked at me, and I swear that he gave me exactly the same look he gave that chipped pillar."

Fergus laughed. "Any man, Miss Brainard, who could bestow the same look on you and on a chipped pillar can be only nominally male." And he prayed that his own eyes did not display the chipped-pillar gleam that he could feel in them.

For a moment, as she spoke of the criminologist's gloating appraisal, Janet's composure had been a trifle shaken, but she had recovered it almost instantly. "I should have known you'd laugh at me," she said. "I don't know why I told you anyway."

"Because for centuries untold every generation of O'Breens has produced at least one priest. This generation broke the tradition. There's just me and my sister; but in honor of the family heritage I am a natural-born confessor. People tell me things."

Fergus's tone was light, but he finished his drink in



something close to a nervous gulp. There was no use telling this girl the truth about Martha Stanhope. The thought of those cats had shocked even the unconnected Maureen, and if you knew that three slit throats had poured a libation for your parents' wedding— Not pretty. And one more reason for leaving Lucas Quincy's quarter-century dead case alone. Why rake up scandal and horror when there is a new generation to be slimed by it? To be a chipped pillar for the reading public of the country—

"And what are you," Janet asked, "aside from a confessor?"

"Oh," Fergus lied breezily, "I confess too. Professionally, I mean, for the magazines. I'm ruined twice a month regular. More fun. But tell me, Miss Brainard, you follow football at all?"

"Avidly."

"Who looks good in the East for this fall?"

"Well, around the office you hear great things about Cornell. All the alumni think it's going to be something terrific. And . . ."

And so they drifted peacefully away from the subject of chipped pillars and Martha Stanhope.

The dinner was simple; but clearly affection, care, and artistry had gone into its making. The delicately seasoned flavor of that ground round steak, for instance, was no matter of happenstance. And the zucchini, embellished with onions, tomatoes, green peppers, and a suspicion of unidentifiable herbs, were enjoyable enough to make Fergus forget completely how rich they were in vitamins.

"You must tell me all about these afterward," he said, "and write it down. I want to try them."

"Mr. O'Breen!" Miss Paris cocked an eyebrow. "You cook?"

"Sure. I gave up hope of my sister's ever learning and decided I might make a more promising scholar myself. And to my own surprise, I like it. But I never thought squash could taste like this. How do you do it?"

"It is good then," she sighed with relief. "If people sniff

and taste and say, 'Hni! So you use cumin in your zucchini? Yes, and a spot of *orégano*. Interesting,' that means you're wrong. But if they taste and wonder and say, 'How do you do it?' then you know it's just right."

"Cumin and *orégano*," Fergus murmured. "I'll get the details later."

"Do. You know," she smiled, "people can say what they like about Southern California. It's a strange place, Lord knows, but green vegetables all the year round isn't anything to sneeze at."

And just then, with a timing that must have rejoiced all Miss Paris's half-forgotten theatrical instincts, Fergus sneezed.

"*Gesundheit*," said Janet.

"Sorry." Fergus gave a rueful grin. "I was not trying to contradict. I only—"

The second sneeze was a honey. He turned away from the table and let the third and the fourth and the fifth shake him mercilessly. In a momentary pause he lifted his head and announced, "Two more." And when the foretold two had passed, he turned his chair back and resumed dinner.

"But how precisel!" Janet exclaimed. "Is it always seven?"

"Just about. Trust the O'Breens to have a unique and screwy type of hay fever all their own. Seven sneezes. Mystic number and stuff. But where's the cat? I haven't met him yet."

Miss Paris and Janet looked at each other and were silent.

"Come now. There's just one thing on earth that sets me off that way, and that's a long-haired cat. There must be one around."

"I do not have a cat," Miss Paris said slowly.

For over a minute conversation was dead. Fergus took another mouthful of those once-splendid zucchini, but the taste seemed to have gone out of them. Janet was taking little sips of water and dabbing her lips too precisely after each sip. Miss Paris was staring at her plate as though it

were a crystal ball.

"Mr. O'Brien," she said at last, "Janet and I, as you have gathered, are going to a silver wedding party tomorrow. It will be a small house party on Blackman's Island—you know the place?"

"That's that bleak rock off Santa Eulalia, isn't it? I didn't know anybody lived there."

"Janet's father acquired this house there as part of a business deal. I think he insists upon using it in order to prove that he was not swindled. But that is beside the point. This is, as I think I told you, an anniversary party, and the only guests—aside, of course, from Janet as offspring—are the members of the original wedding party, my own contemporaries. I have been afraid that Janet might be lonely without any young people in the group. Should you care to join the party?"

"This is so sudden, Miss Paris," Fergus murmured. "Just a pickup, that's what I am."

"But should you?"

"You don't know a thing about me. I might be a high-class jewel thief who struck up this acquaintance for just such a purpose."

"I know enough about you."

So *that's it*, thought Fergus. It had happened to him before—invitations to house parties so warmly and personally phrased that only a foul-minded low-life could suspect the genial host of saving the expense of a private detective to guard his treasures. But more than treasures might need guarding on Blackman's Island. The Stanhope case was getting in Fergus's hair more entanglingly than a gum-chewing bat. First a bastard approaches you with an illegal proposition, but a good round fee. Then nice people give you a friendly invitation, but strictly nonprofessional and no cash. If you could just strike an average—

"Sorry," he said aloud, "but I doubt if I could make it. Busy week coming up."

"If you must invite people for me, Stella," Janet broke in, "you might at least—" She stopped. "Sorry, O'Brien. Nothing personal. But there's a friend I haven't seen in a

long time and he doesn't even know I'm in town and I don't like to seem to go chasing after him and—" The sentence ended in total confusion. Janet was half-blushing and suddenly looking very young and untailored.

"At that," said Miss Paris, "that isn't a bad idea. I could call Tom tonight and—"

"No," Janet interrupted firmly. "No, please don't. Skip it."

Miss Paris turned back to Fergus. "Think about it, will you?"

"Afraid I don't see how I could make it."

"Please." She held his eye for a long moment. Then, "And do you like apple pie?" she asked.

Fergus beamed.

He and Janet insisted on doing the dishes, while Miss Paris brought out her sewing and chatted. It was a pleasing domestic scene, and he was willing to forget his usual resentment against people who want to wangle professional services gratis. He whistled quietly as he washed, and wondered why doing dishes with a charming stranger was fun and doing them with your own beloved sister was an onerous imposition to be avoided at all costs.

For Janet Brainard was charming, despite her cool self-sufficiency and the efficient editorial brusqueness with which she had put him in his place as a crossword critic. It would be fun to see more of her, to catch another glimpse of that shy young girl who had appeared for an instant at the dinner table. She made good bait for Blackman's Island, but still not quite good enough.

"Anything else I can do useful?" Fergus asked blithely, as he wiped his hands on the apron.

"If you must, you could take that trash box out to the incinerator. That sounds like a Man's Task."

"Gladly."

He was still whistling as he reached the back porch. There he paused to steady the box against the porch rail and get a better grip. Light from the kitchen window struck the floor of the porch, and as he paused he saw

something. It was interesting enough to make him set down the box and drop to his knees for a moment to peer the better at that little trail of brown spots.

He was not whistling as he dumped the trash into the incinerator. He did not even reflect happily, as was his wont, that he was breaking a city ordinance as he set a match to it. And in the flare of that match he saw the final link.

Near the incinerator was a little mound of fresh-dug earth. It was about two feet long and something under a foot wide.

It all clicked together far too clearly in his mind. His seven sneezes and the back porch and this mound, and Lester Ferguson's chipped-column stare and Martha Stanhope and Miss Paris's urgency and even Lucas Quincy. And whatever you might think of Quincy, Janet was a sound person and that had been a noble dinner.

He set the empty trash box down on the floor of the kitchen. "Any more tasks for me?" he said. "Or shall we save my energy till I get to Blackman's Island?"

## Chapter Two

### DISCORD ON BLACKMAN'S ISLAND

THIS WAS ON THURSDAY, MAY 9, 1940. You remember what happened on May 10.

All winter long we had talked scornfully of the "phony war." It was a nervous scorn, and perhaps it masked an unacknowledged fear; but we were scornful as all hell. The Finnish war provided a little action in the arena to tickle us in our box seats in the coliseum, but it was soon over and with an annoying reversal of the verdict of our thumbs. We relapsed into boredom and scorn.

Then in early April came the invasion of Scandinavia, and we said in quick succession:

"He's extended his flank too far; he's done for."

"Where the hell is the R. A. F.?" and,

"Wasn't the retreat splendid?"

We tucked the word *Quisling* away in our vocabularies and settled back in the boxes.

For a week there was a rumorous silence. And then, on Friday, May 10, 1940, came the invasion of the Netherlands.

Fergus had a job rounding off his odds and ends of business before leaving for Blackman's Island. Hollywood was diving headlong into its worst panic since the closing of the banks in '33. All the nervous terror dammed up for months burst forth now in one terrific wave, whose crest foamed furiously and incessantly the dread words "Foreign Market."

The foreign market had been lost for months. Its approaching loss could have been foreseen for years. But it took the specific shock of this invasion to make the fact clear to producers. It was clear enough now.

Nor was this panic confined to big shots with financial interests to fret about. Electricians, propmen, all the ordinary honesttogod people who are no more Hollywood

than is an Iowa farmer—these too felt the shocking impact of this final definite act. There was a sense throughout the city of the fall of an age, and a dread of the age to come.

It was good to get out at last, in midafternoon, on the broad coast highway leading north to Santa Eulalia. As the road dipped near the sea from time to time, the surf roared and the sun glistened on the waves, which was hard on a driver's eyes but most elating to his spirit. Life was momentarily fresh again. The smooth highway attested the mechanical ingenuity of man, the Burma Shave jingles along the road reminded you of his business acumen, but nothing in the whole scene suggested his propensity for slaughtering his brother. For two hours and a half of steady driving Fergus was unreasoningly happy, though in the back of his mind he knew that what awaited him on Blackman's Island might be on a smaller scale than the headlined invasions but far more immediate.

It was what Maureen had suggested—the complete gathering of the group for present analysis. But calmly analyzing the past was one thing, and forestalling the present was very much another.

He had called Lucas Quincy last night, and hung up as soon as he had dialed the private number. He could not make up his mind on this proposition. It was all very well to go dashing off quixotically to save lives, to make it stop at cats this time and avert another Stanhope case; but a fee would help. And yet Quincy's stipulation, that all evidence should be turned over to him exclusively and kept secret from the D.A., made the job not only unethical but goddamned risky. It would take a fine fee to make up for being booted out of your profession.

To expose the murderer and still to get a sweet sum out of Quincy: there was the problem. *And at least*, Fergus reflected, *I'll have both my good and my evil angel working with me on this.*

Santa Eulalia is a small town consisting chiefly of a wharf surrounded by fishing-boats. The two blocks of main street feature a movie house, a bank, five saloons, a chain grocery, and a garage, at which last Fergus stored

his faithful yellow roadster. From the back compartment he took his suitcase.

A small overnight case would have sufficed for what wardrobe he had brought. But inside this largish suitcase was another case, and in that case was an admirably compact set of accessories. An island is cut off from the resources of the mainland police, and at best the resources of the Santa Eulalia police department were probably not to be trusted. There was no telling what might bear a little scientific investigation. And beside the accessory kit nestled a loaded automatic.

Fergus carried his case down to the wharf. "Hi!" he observed to a shabby man who seemed to be trying to estimate with the naked eye the distance to China, or possibly merely to Manila. "You know Jesús Ramirez? Runs a motor launch?"

The man lifted his right hand in acknowledgment of the greeting. "Ramirez," he said. Then after a long pause he added, "Try Flannery's."

Fergus looked back at the main street. Over the smallest of the five saloons an as yet unlit neon sign said: *Flannery's*. He thanked the long-range observer and started back.

As he drew nearer he smiled and began to whistle with delight. For beneath that sign was a smaller one which read: *Steam Beer*. For some incomprehensible reason, this wonderful brew is not to be found anywhere in Los Angeles, and the O'Brien palate had long been parched for it.

The juke box was playing "God Bless America." The only customer at the moment was a fat and sodden old man with a white mustache who listened raptly to the music. "Ramirez?" Fergus asked him, but he waved his hand in denial and went on listening.

"Do you know a Jesús Ramirez?" Fergus asked the bartender.

"Sure, Mac. Everybody knows Hokay. We call him that on account of nobody never heard him say nothing only 'Hokay.'"

"Has he been around here today?"



"Ought to be in here any minute. What'll it be while you're waiting?"

"Steam beer."

"Thought so. People from out of town, they always want steam. Guess you don't find it every place. Ain't everybody knows how to draw it nowadays."

The juke box stopped. The old man rose and inserted a nickel without changing the setting. He resumed his seat, and there were tears in his rheumy blue eyes as "God Bless America" started again.

"Now that's a case for you," the bartender said. "That's Mr. Schulzheimer. Damned good butcher. Carve you out a roast as neat as I can draw this here now beer. So what happens to him? This morning three of his best customers get all hot and bothered after they read the news and they tell him they're switching over to the chain store on account of he's a German. So he comes in here and for three hours now he's been drinking beer and playing 'God Bless America.' Don't ask me what it means." All this time he had been drawing the steam beer—filling the glass with foam, letting that foam reduce itself to a minute amount of beer, refilling with foam, and so on until he had a full glass of clear brown with a firm-knit head of ideal thickness. It was—work of art might be hyperbole, but it was certainly a noble example of the finest craftsmanship.

"You know, Mac," he observed, as he removed the beer from the glass pressure bell in which it was drawn, "I'm damned if I get it. So the Germans pick on the Jews, so now we decide we got to pick on the Germans. What I'd like's a sort of a place where there wouldn't nobody have to pick on nobody. That'll be a dime, Mac."

Fergus shoved the coin across and looked at the old man listening, intently listening as though this sound of affirmation could drown out the forever departing footsteps of three best customers.

Fergus tasted the beer. It was all that he had remembered and hoped. It had that smooth rich solidity which the best draught beer never seems to equal. It was cool

and warming and gentle and bitter all at once. He set down the glass and grinned at his foam-bedecked lips in the bar mirror. Then in the mirror he saw an entering figure.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" he and the figure exclaimed at once, and in unison answered each other, "Looking for a dope named Ramirez."

When Fergus first met Tom Quincy long years ago, this nephew of the eminent Lucas was just out of college and trying to decide whether to take up football, swimming, tennis, or golf as a profession. Last year Fergus had seen that large and splendid body looming at one of his sister's parties and had asked how the decision finally came out.

"Well, you see," Tom had explained, "I couldn't decide which I was best at, and the more I thought about it the more I worried, until finally I went to a psychologist friend of mine who specializes in aptitudes. And after I talked to him, I decided to be a psychologist."

That was what he was now, a teaching assistant in psychology filling in all his spare time with elaborate research; but to the eye he remained the same magnificent athlete. His eyes were alert and shrewd, and his words made good sense; but every woman who met him was inclined to wonder resentfully why the art of the stripper was confined to one sex.

"So you're in on this too," he said now. "I'm glad of that. I can't say this was a party I was looking forward to."

"And you," said Fergus, recalling that almost girlish blush, "are Janet's Tom. My, my. I recommend the steam beer."

"Janet asked you?" For an instant Tom's deep voice was not quite so friendly.

"Miss Paris," Fergus hastened to make clear. "Janet just happened to refer to a friend named Tom. I hadn't any idea—"

Tom beckoned to the barkeep. "Maybe you've heard me mention my big-shot uncle Lucas?"

"Uh huh," said Fergus casually.

"He was an usher at this Brainard wedding, and that

crowd's always more or less stuck together. I used to know Janet pretty well before she went to New York— And where," he looked down at Fergus's bag as though he had some suspicion of its contents, "do you fit in?"

"Not professionally, if that's what you mean. I met Miss Paris through my sister's studio. Seemed to take a fancy to me. Nothing like charm, my boy."

Tom's broad face was serious. "Then soft pedal the charm around Janet. I'm making an important psychological experiment. I want to see if it's possible to cover a gap of five years."

Fergus lifted his glass. "Luck! And in return you can do me a favor."

"Yes?"

"Don't mention my sotospeak profession. Detectives, even off duty, make some people nervous."

"Sure. Anything you say. Well," he accepted his glass from the bartender, "skoal!"

Fergus answered in kind, and for a moment the two men were silent in the enjoyment of liquid perfection. The juke box was still playing "God Bless America."

"How's the academic career going?"

"Good enough. My only curse is a few tastes left over from when I was a rich man's nephew. They don't fit in so well on an assistant's salary."

"But aren't you a nephew still? Did you go and get cut off with a shilling? And at the current rate of exchange?"

"Not exactly. But my uncle Lucas," said Tom dryly, "is finding a few new tastes of his own."

"Which by the way: did you ever put in a plug for me professionally to your uncle?"

"No. Should I have? I mean, you can say, 'Friend of mine's just opened a bakery; you might try his pies.' That's fine. But if you say, 'Friend of mine's just set up as a detective; you might need him some time'—well, it doesn't sound exactly tactful."

"Sure— You know Miss Paris, of course?"

"Of course."

"She had a cat, didn't she?"

"Yes. A fine Persian tom named Valentino, and with as much sex appeal as the original. Noble beast. But hey—I"

"Yes?"

"You said *had*."

"Did I?"

Tom set down his beer and stared at Fergus. "So that's it." There was in his eyes the slow reluctant realization of horror.

"So what's what?"

"It's 1915 again. The wheel's come full circle. Valentino for hors d'oeuvre, and for the entrée—"

The bartender ran to the front door and shouted, "Hokay!" at a passing *paisano*, who turned and shuffled toward the saloon. "That's him," the barkeep explained. "Ramirez."

"We'll talk about this later," said Fergus, picking up his precious case. "I think I may be damned happy you showed up."

As they left, Mr. Schulzheimer was putting another nickel in the juke box.

*It was dusk on Blackman's Island. The shadow of the towering rock, once the peak of some ocean-swallowed mountain, extended over the house and the beach.*

*Everybody was inside titivating, so Joe Corcoran figured he had time for a breath of fresh air and a smoke. Dinner would be late because it was the Big Dinner tonight, the anniversary. He had the roast on, and everything was all set. Plenty of time to grab a little rest.*

*He didn't think much of this job, Corcoran didn't. Even when you have to take a job that's chief cook and bottle washer and valet and porter and odd-jobman all rolled into one, you've got a right to retain your own self-respect and some kind of human dignity.*

*And that's just what you couldn't, not on this job. That cocky little Brainard that was throwing the party, he had to give somebody hell every so often just to prove to himself that he was a big shot. And he was paying Corcoran's salary, so that elected Corcoran the goat. No matter what*

he did, it was wrong. If he worked carefully, he was slow and dawdling. If he hurried up, he was careless and scamping his work.

If only he didn't need the job so bad, he'd say the hell with the whole lot of them and clear out back to the mainland. But when you've had a little business of your own and it's folded up from under you, and you're too old to learn a good trade—well, you've got to take it from bastards like Brainard or that big sullen Quincy or that doctor that always seemed to have two meanings to everything he said only you knew the nasty hidden one was the one he really meant.

Still, Corcoran thought as he looked across to the mainland where the lights of Santa Eulalia were blinking on piecemeal, still there was something pretty swell about being on an island, if you could be there with the right people. Or better yet alone. Just enough food to get by on and a pipe and some tobacco and maybe a bottle. No radio. Just alone.

Funny. As he lit his pipe, he seemed to smell pipe smoke even before he struck the match. Tricky things, your senses.

He took in a full deep draught of smoke and let it out with rich pleasure. He was so absorbed in the smoke and the lights winking on and his thoughts of eventual unobtainable peace that he never heard the attacker.

He knew nothing until the rough dull edge of the knife sawed into his throat. He knew very little after that.

It took a half hour to reach Blackman's Island in the *Joqué*, which was the name painted on the bow of Jesús Ramirez's small and sturdy motor launch. (Fergus fretted his high school Spanish in vain for some time before he realized that this was simply a phonetic spelling of the nickname "Hokay.")

The launch rode low, and cool spray splashed on you and felt good, almost as good on the outside as the steam beer had on the inside. The boat was heading southwest to where the island loomed like a rocky castle against the

backdrop of red afterglow.

From a distance it looked like sheer rock, and you wondered how anyone could exist on it, much less throw a house party. Then as you drew closer you saw the sheltered beach here on the northeast side, beyond it the house nestling in the protection of the rock and in front of it the rude makeshift wharf jutting out.

The ride over to Blackman's was silent. Ramirez concerned himself solely with the boat, and Tom sat in bewildered concentration. The hint which Fergus had dropped seemed to impress him deeply. You could almost see his mental wheels whirring to cope with this sudden new development.

It was Fergus who finally broke the silence. "Whenever I'm in a boat," he said dreamily, "I feel like there must have been an O'Brien in the crew that set out for Saint Brendan's Island. Water makes you want to fare forth on it forever and find the goddamnedest things."

Tom Quincy was frowning. "We may at that."

"May what?"

"Find the goddamnedest things. If Stella Paris's cat—"

Fergus jerked a thumb at the silent Ramirez. "No use starting gossip around Santa Eulalia. And we may be all wrong. We'll wait and see what breaks."

The makeshift wharf was empty. "As the ostrich observed," said Fergus while Ramirez made the launch fast, "'where is everybody?'"

"Probably dressing for dinner," Tom suggested. "Tonight's the big night, and we're late." He laid a hand on the wharf and vaulted upward so lightly that his spring hardly shook the launch.

"Give us a hand," said Fergus. "I haven't quite your fettlesome agility." He landed on the wharf with something less than perfect grace, recovered his footing, and lifted up the bags which the Mexican handed him.

"You wait here, Ramirez," said Tom. "Brainard may have some errands or messages to take back to the mainland."

"Hokay," said Hokay.

The two young men set off for the house, suitcases in hand. "I hadn't thought about Dressing for Dinner," Fergus mused. "Think there's any danger of the Empire-in-the-Tropics tradition?"

"On a major occasion like this? Sure to be."

"Damn. Oh, I have a suit in here. Don't think I was planning to attend a gala function in this yellow sports shirt. But still I'll feel damned silly if everybody else is in dinner jackets. You come equipped?"

"Sure. I always—" Tom Quincy stopped dead. "There's somebody. And unless I'm mistaken—"

In the gloom on the sands Fergus could make out the figure of a woman. She stood stockstill, staring fixedly down at the sand. Her cloak was black and voluminous. You could not guess her age in the dusk, but she was too short for Janet and too slender for Stella Paris. Fergus glimpsed in the back of his mind an illustration in his old Collier edition of *The Moonstone*: Rosanna Spearman standing on the sands and contemplating her death. He turned a shudder into a shrug and hastened after Tom.

"I thought so!" Tom cried as they neared the woman. "Alys!"

She seemed to look at them without taking her gaze from the sands. "Tom," she said quietly. "Where did you come from?"

"Didn't you know? We're bringing youth and gaiety to this party. It's Stella's idea. Keep you and Janet company among the graybeards."

"Janet," she said with indifferent contempt. "And who's your thin friend?"

"Fergus O'Brien."

"At your service, milady." Fergus bowed.

"Who fits in where?" the woman asked directly.

"Nowhere yet," said Fergus cheerily. "But just watch me."

"Fergus," Tom went on, "this is Alys Trent. My aunt-to-be."

The woman turned. Fergus could see that the cloak was thin, and that under it she wore only a scant black

evening gown. The night was turning cold, but her flesh did not tremble. Her face he still could not see; her eyes refused to move from the sand. But her body was young, not with the fresh youthfulness of Janet's, but with a kind of early-ripe maturity.

"And while we're asking questions," said Fergus, "where do you fit in? I'd gathered this was a party for no one under fifty."

"I was the flower girl at the wedding," she explained in a nervously abstracted tone. "I was only three then."

"Uncle Lucas says you were seven," Tom remarked quite without malice. "Just for the sake of statistics."

She laid a hand on an arm of each of the men. "Come now. It's late and you must get ready for dinner. It will be nice having you here," she added. On that last sentence she finally wrenched her eyes from the sand and her voice became abruptly human and warm. She leaned heavily on Fergus's arm, and he found his hand, half-guided by hers, resting against a rich breast.

He looked down at her face. It was a sulkily pretty face, the features too small but good and the make-up brazenly enticing. He saw, however, not the face but its expression. The eyes were almost closed. The lips were parted, and a pink tongue-tip showed between them. The head was thrown back and the body slightly arched. She looked, Fergus thought grotesquely, like a woman ridden by an incubus and loving it.

Fergus set down his suitcase and fumbled in his pockets. "Damn. Must have dropped my cigarettes. Be back in a minute." Not too brilliant an excuse, but what do you want on the spur of the moment?

He hastened back to where Alys Trent had been standing, dropped to his knees, and looked for—well, for whatever he might find.

He found it.

Dark stains. He couldn't be sure of what. Even when he lit a match (plausible enough in his supposed cigarette hunt) he couldn't be positive. But he had little doubt that the stains were of the same sort which he had seen



on Stella Paris's porch. He only wondered if it had been a cat this time.

He leaned over so that his cigarettes dropped from his breast pocket. Then he picked them up with a sharp noise of relief, lit one, and strolled back to his companions.

But there had been no need for acting out that little comedy of discovery. It had not even been seen. Alys's body was pressed tight against Tom's. Her cloak had fallen back from her head, and the mass of her hair (pure white, Fergus observed with astonishment) hid his face.

When she leaned back from the kiss, Fergus saw Tom's expression. It was that of a man ridden by a succubus, and not caring much for it.

It was Stella Paris who answered the door, with a large white apron covering a vast evening gown which must have gone out of public esteem at much the same time that she herself did.

"What ho!" cried Fergus ringingly. "Let the trumpets sound to herald the advent of Youth and Gaiety!"

"Hi, Stella," said Tom, and kissed her like a nephew. "But what's the matter? A Brainard domicile, and no slaves to answer the door?"

"Corcoran came down with something today," said Miss Paris. "Hugh says it's nothing serious, but he should stay in bed. Of course Horace is simply raging—Alys, weren't you cold out there?"

"Frightfully, darling," said Alys Trent. "But I know where the whisky is." The brooding, ridden quality had left her now. Here in the harsh bright light of the hall (from a private generator plant, Fergus decided after a moment's puzzling) she seemed nervously gay. "Come have a snort with your aunt, Tommy."

Tom hesitated. "Just a quick one and then I've got to get dressed. Join us, Fergus?"

Fergus felt the light pressure of Stella Paris's hand on his arm. "Be with you in a minute."

"Your friend's cute," Alys Trent said to Tom as they went off. "It takes genius to wear yellow with that *so red*

Stella Paris looked at Fergus silently for a long moment. Then, "How's the rest of your genius?" she asked.

"Functioning," he said tersely. "What happened on the sand today?"

She was puzzled. "On the sand? I don't understand."

"Look, Miss Paris. Rhymed couplets extempore are all very well, but you know why you asked me here. My eyes are nice and green, but they're not so fair as all that. And if I'm to accomplish anything, I've got to know what goes on."

"But I'm not trying to keep things from you. I don't know anything about the sand."

"Do you know where Lucas Quincy is?"

"Upstairs dressing, I suppose. But why—?"

"Miss Paris," Fergus said slowly and patiently. "You know my profession. And I've got a hobby that fits in helpful with it. I like the classics of criminology."

"The classics—?"

"In other words, I've heard of the Stanhope case."

"Oh—" Stella Paris was silent. "That's a relief," she said at last. "Then you do know why I invited you—that is, you know a little of it."

"Including Valentino," said Fergus.

She shuddered. "That too? But how could you know that? No, we haven't time now. I'm supposed to be getting dinner while Corcoran's laid up— Look, Mr. O'Brien. You go in and have a drink with the children so they won't think we're hatching anything. Then get dressed and— You said you could cook, didn't you?"

"Not compared to you."

"Is this a time for blarney? Then you come out to the kitchen and help me. There's not another person in this house who's a bit of use. That way we can talk."

"Fine." Fergus started to pick up his suitcase.

"Leave that there. I don't know what room Catherine decided to put you in and of course she's late coming down. Just leave it and you'll probably find her after you've had a drink."

Reluctantly Fergus set his bag down. But after all, totting it around as a guarded and priceless treasure would only make it conspicuous. No use asking for more trouble than Blackman's Island was apt to provide anyway.

The sound of a kiss made Fergus pause outside the living-room door. He could hear Tom's voice, low and tense.

"We were damned fools once."

"Why not forever?" Alys's voice was throaty.

"Lucas is my uncle. He's been good to me."

"So have I—"

"You've never been good to anyone."

Alys laughed. "Such a devoted nephew! Won't play with uncle's dolly, my no! You expect me to believe that?"

"It's true."

"You're out after Janet, and you don't want me making passes at you in front of that b—businesswoman. I know. But at least," there was a clink of bottle against glass, "you did bring me a cute redhead."

Fergus shivered, and walked in. Alys inevitably said, "Speak of the devil," and Fergus replied, "I don't wear horns; I cause them," which was just Alys's type of gag but too subtly phrased. It fell flat on its face and Fergus respectfully stepped over the corpse and poured himself a drink.

"Are you related to the Brainards, Miss Trent?" he asked conversationally.

"No. Why?"

"Just the O'Brien curiosity. A flower girl is so often some adorable young relation."

"Well, in a way I was. You see, my aunt Martha was bridesmaid. Only she wasn't really my aunt. The Stanhopes were some kind of cousins and they took me in and brought me up. I'm an orphan," she added almost proudly.

"So am I," said Fergus. "And Tom too. We must all get together some time and be caught by pirates."

"Why? But I mean really an orphan. Not like Tommy. He had a mother for a long time. I never had anybody."

"Come, darling," Tom murmured. "Even you must have had a mother."

"Uh uh. I was post-whateveritis and then my mother died in the hospital and I never had anybody so the Stanhopes took me in."

"And raised you," said Fergus, "to the flower of young womanhood we see before us."

Alys giggled. "I told you he's cute, Tommy. Yes, they raised me. Oh, they were good people, the Stanhopes. God, were they good!"

"I know," said Tom. "I've been planning to do a paper on Alys to disprove the importance of early environment."

Alys paused to decide what her reaction to this should be, and compromised on taking another drink. "I hate parties," she said. "I mean this kind of party where everything's formal and you've got to behave. Let's the three of us get plastered and see what happens, huh? Who wants another drink now?"

"I should, if I may," said a new voice. Fergus turned to see a thin man with sharp, strong, and almost handsome features, wearing his dinner jacket with as impeccable style as the hero of a drawing-room comedy.

Alys handed him a drink while Tom performed introductions. "Dr. Arnold, this is Fergus O'Brien. My collaborator in bringing youth to the party."

*A doctor, thought Fergus. That would be the Hugh that Miss Paris had said looked after Corcoran. Good; a doctor might be a handy thing to have on this island. He only prayed that this wasn't a Ph.D.*

"Getting cold out," Arnold observed as he took his glass. "This will feel good."

"Been to see your patient?" Fergus asked.

"You've heard about that already? Yes, he's doing fine. Pity that the man-of-all-work should have an accident today of all days."

"Accident?"

"Yes, he— Why, James, how are you? I didn't see you there."

Apparently no one had, but Alys did not seem in the

least disconcerted at the thought that a quiet man in an armchair had been the audience to her scene with Tom. The man rose now and came to the group, still holding a light-blue book and still puffing contentedly at a heavy curved brier with a silver band.

"It's all right, Hugh," he said softly. "I'm quite used to being invisible. How are you, Tom? Janet will be glad to see you."

"Mr. Herndon, this is Fergus O'Brien."

It was a large firm-fleshed hand that took Fergus's, but the grip was weak. Not a bad piece of symbolism, Fergus reflected. The man himself had a body that looked as though it might have rivaled Tom's twenty years ago and was still not badly preserved; but his eyes were a watery gray and his mouth was irresolute. His voice was almost timid as he said, "Mrs. Brainard's brother, you know," as though he felt bound to account for himself even to this stranger.

"It was James's privilege, twenty-five years ago," said the doctor, "to give the bride away."

"And you, sir?"

"I was best man. Horace Brainard and I were very close friends then." He stressed the last word only just perceptibly.

Fergus turned to Alys. "And your aunt Martha that was bridesmaid, am I to meet her in this happy throng too?" he asked, all innocence.

There was a silence. At last James Herndon took his pipe from his mouth and said quietly, "Martha Stanhope died twenty-five years ago tonight."

Fergus watched the doctor, but not a flicker of emotion passed over his aquiline face. The silence continued relentlessly as though Herndon had not spoken.

Then Alys uttered one word. "Men," she sighed.

"I beg your pardon?" said the doctor.

"Men. Isn't it fun? Here's me, and here's four men. Nice men too. All different, and all nice— Know what I'm going to do? I'm going to kiss every one of you!" And before anyone could reply to this proposition, she had pressed

her lips firmly against the nearest mouth, which happened to be Dr. Arnold's.

The doctor stood ramrod erect and impassive and let himself be kissed. To the casual glance, he was as indifferent as the beloved of a necrophilist. But as Alys withdrew from him, Fergus noticed her bare arm. The marks of four fingers stood out in glaring white and red.

She turned, not quite steady on her feet, to James Herndon. "You next," she said gleefully. "Put away that pipe."

Herndon kept the pipe in his mouth. As she drew very close to him, he did at last remove it, only to expel a mouthful of smoke full in her face. Then he turned on his heel and left the room without a word.

Alys choked and swore with a vocabulary which she had certainly not learned from the good Stanhopes.

"Curious," said Dr. Arnold. "I have never in my life known James to be rude before."

"Old sissy!" Alys snorted. "Come on, Tom. We'll show him."

And just as she held out open arms to Tom Quincy, Janet stepped into the room. She hesitated a moment, seeming unwilling to believe the tableau. And in that instant, Fergus, feeling exactly like something in a Restoration farce, stepped into those open arms and descended vigorously upon the open mouth.

"O'Breen!" said Janet in a voice abristle with raised eyebrows. "Such taste!" But she looked nonetheless relieved. "How are you, Tom?"

Tom was not quite over his moment of embarrassment. "Fine, Janet. Long time since we've seen each other."

Fergus freed himself and handed Alys over to Arnold. "Night air, wouldn't you prescribe, doctor? I've got to go dress."

Fergus's hand was on his suitcase when he heard a roaring, "Sol There you are!"

He looked up. It was a little man who stood on the stairs, a very little man to have produced such a roar. His gruffness clearly fell into three parts, one motivated by

the just-finished struggle with his dinner jacket, one by the sight of Fergus, and one that was just pure natural cussedness.

"Mr. Brainard?" Fergus asked courteously. "I'm O'Brien. Congratulations on your anniversary, sir. And most kind of you to—"

"Nothing of the sort!" Brainard's bristly little gray mustache quivered with vexation. "No doing of mine. But come on; can't brawl in the hallway. People in the living-room, I suppose? Come in here, sir!"

He jerked Fergus into the room across the hall from the living-room. This had presumably been built as a library, but the shelves were unfilled and the furniture sparse. Fergus sat on the edge of a large table, lit a cigarette, and began apologetically, "I assure you, sir, that I—"

Mr. Brainard was not listening. "Everything," he was saying. "Everything happens to me. My own daughter. Five years and I wouldn't know her. A stranger in my house. And Corcoran. Never knew his place anyway. Insolent lazy lout. Would pick today of all days. And Hugh. Pamper him. Care for him like a—like a thoroughbred horse. Never a thought for me. Is it my anniversary or Corcoran's? And now a redheaded young idiot dressed for a sandlot scrimmage!"

Fergus tried his usually effective inoffensive-young-man manner. "I simply understood from Miss Paris, sir—"

"I will not have my anniversary made into an open house for vagabonds. Understand me, sir? Ramirez still here?"

"Yes, he is. But Mr. Brainard—"

"Then get down to that boat! Hear me? He's taking you back to Santa Eulalia tonight. And that damned nephew of Lucas's with you. 'Tom's coming.' And see her eyes light up. No thought for her father. What's he? What's his anniversary? But Tom's coming and she's all aglow. Shan't even see the fool!"

"Horace."

Fergus knew the voice at once, that cold level voice

with its own harsh strength. He looked around to see Lucas Quincy, heavy and red-faced, bulking large in the doorway.

"Yes, Lucas," Brainard snapped.

Quincy's sharp little eyes passed over Fergus without displaying either recognition or curiosity. "If my nephew wishes to stay here as company for your daughter," he said flatly, "I see no reason why he should not." His cigar bobbed to emphasize his words.

Horace Brainard gave a jerk at his little mustache and reluctantly spluttered, "Very well, Lucas. But you," he turned on Fergus. "Still goes. Every word of it."

Fergus looked to Quincy, who in turn looked solely at the point of his cigar.

"Hear me?" Brainard shouted.

A curious intent grin spread over Fergus's face. "I hear something else, too."

"Indeed? And what may that be?"

"Listen. I hear a motor launch. And it's *leaving* the island."

Mr. Brainard listened. Mr. Brainard swore. Then Mr. Brainard dashed into the hall and thence out of the house, with Fergus at his heels and Lucas Quincy contemplating them from the hall doorway.

It was hard to see clearly. That might have been a human figure slipping across the sands to the back of the house. It might have been a shadow. There was no time to investigate now, not now that they could see a body huddled on the wharf.

Fergus got there first. When Mr. Brainard caught up with him, he rose to his feet and said, "It's Ramirez. Nothing serious, I think. Just a nasty bump on the back of the head. But we'd better carry him up to the house and have Dr. Arnold look at him."

Mr. Brainard was not concerned with the body. "Damned lazy Mex," he snorted. "But if that's Ramirez," he looked down at the water beside the wharf and off into the distance where a fading wake still gleamed, "if that's him, who the devil drove off in his launch?"



## Chapter Three

### BEWILDERMENT AND TRAGEDY

FERGUS HAD TO CARRY the unconscious Mexican up to the house alone. The fuming Mr. Brainard obviously felt that physical aid to the lower classes was beneath his dignity.

The entire house party was gathered in the hallway in one excited knot. Even in this confusion, Fergus's trained and curious eye picked out the one person he had not yet met, the fluffy little peroxide blonde with the lifted face who must be Mrs. Brainard.

Hugh Arnold stepped forward from the group, no longer a suave ornament to a drawing-room, but a crisply efficient professional man. "Library, O'Brien," he said. "I'll give you a hand." Together they got the unconscious Mexican onto the large library table. "Whisky," Dr. Arnold ordered tersely as he bent over the still form.

Fergus hurried across the hall to the living-room, snatched the whisky decanter from Alys with an unintelligible murmur of explanation, and hastened back to the library. Then, as he handed the decanter over to the doctor, a sudden chill ran down his spine. He looked again at his mental photograph of the hall he had passed through so rapidly. No, there was something that he had not seen—

He went back out into the hall. The middle-aged blonde that must be Catherine Brainard was crying now in grotesque little gulps. Janet and Miss Paris were trying to comfort her, while Alys nestled for protection against the stolid bulk of Lucas Quincy.

Fergus caught Tom's arm. "Our bags. Did you take them upstairs?"

Tom frowned. "I took mine. I didn't know where you—"

Fergus said loudly, "Has anyone seen a large and battered leather suitcase?"

Horace Brainard went on chattering wrathfully to his brother-in-law about boats that stole themselves. The

women went on comforting and being comforted. No one answered.

"Has anyone—" Fergus started to repeat on a higher pitch.

"Are you sure you brought it up from the boat?" Tom asked.

"Am I sure? Am I—" Abruptly Fergus stopped. To raise hell now about the bag might only precipitate trouble. Let it ride. See what happened. "No," he said. "I'm not quite sure. I thought I did, but—" He looked down ruefully at his slacks and sport shirt. "I'm going to be a beautiful dinner guest."

Without question the stolid Lucas Quincy dominated the library. But though his cigar-chewing silence fixed your attention, it was Horace Brainard's shrill and angry voice that filled the room.

Stella Paris, with a glance at Fergus to indicate that he should join her as soon as possible, had gone back to the kitchen. Janet had taken her half-hysterical mother upstairs. And the others had gathered here in the quasi-library, beside the unconscious Ramirez, to listen to the ranting expostulations of their host.

"Suppose we'll have to put up with it!" he went on shouting. "Launch gone. No contact. These damned young fools stay on. And on my anniversary! Damn it. No peace for a man."

"You mean," James Herndon ventured timorously, "that we are entirely out of touch with the mainland?"

"Damn it, yes. Wanted peace and quiet. No telephone. Cut myself off. Told this damned Mex to come here every day in his launch. Bring milk and eggs, take back messages if I had to contact the market. Now he's here. Launch gone. Who the devil can come?"

The quiet voice of the doctor was cool after Brainard's rage. "I doubt, Horace, if you are concerned with the condition of this damned Mex; but the more humane among you may be relieved to know that he is not seriously injured." He managed, in his perfectly tailored evening

clothes, to look quite as competent and professional as though he wore a surgeon's gown.

Lucas Quincy went to the point. "What happened?"

The doctor smiled as one might at a family joke that no one else could be expected to appreciate. "His head was bumped."

"But, Dr. Hugh," Tom protested, "who bumped him? Who got away in that launch?"

"Don't be a fool," Brainard snapped. "Not more than's natural. Who got away? Who the devil could get away? Everyone that was on this island is in this room now. Plus two damned louts that wandered in unasked."

"Corcoran," grunted Lucas Quincy.

The doctor shook his head. "Afraid not, Lucas. I saw Corcoran not twenty minutes ago. He is utterly unable to move from his bed. Curious, Horace, that such ills should befall both your employees, and, as you never tire of pointing out, on your anniversary."

"Damn it, Hugh, stop babbling! What happened?"

The doctor took a cigarette from a chaste and unbelievably slender silver case. "Since no one has left this island, no one stole the boat. Since no one stole the boat, no one had any reason to attack Ramirez. Since there was no reason to attack him, he was not attacked. And since he was not attacked, he met with an unusual accident."

*Unusual*, thought Fergus, *is a mild word for it; but who am I to point out flaws now?* He kept his mouth shut, and prayed that the alert glint of his green eyes was not enough to betray his professional interest.

"But what sort of accident?" Tom insisted.

"Let us suppose," suggested the doctor, "that Ramirez, cold and restless as he waited in the boat, decided to get out and stretch his legs. As he clambered up onto the wharf, his foot kicked against some piece of mechanism which started the boat. He tried to stop it, but in his excitement tripped and fell, receiving the blow that knocked him out, while the boat sailed on out into the Pacific."

There was a moment of incredulous silence. Then James Herndon protested mildly, "I'm awfully afraid,

Hugh, that that's nonsense. The boat wouldn't have been headed—"

"Have you," the doctor broke in sharply, "any more satisfactory theory?"

Herndon looked up quickly, then shrugged. "N—No," he admitted. "No," and he looked sorry that he had ever spoken.

"Then we may for the time being accept this hypothesis, at least until Ramirez recovers consciousness." There was a certain stress, almost a threat in that added clause. "It will not be the first time that this group has chosen the more comfortable interpretation. Should we, the renowned camel-swallowers, now boggle at the gnat?"

Alys Trent had left Quincy's side and slipped unnoticed to the table, where she gazed down upon the unconscious Ramirez almost as intently as she had stared at the sand. "Then he will live?" Her throaty voice shook a little.

"Yes," said the doctor firmly. "Sorry, Alys. Now if two of you men will help me carry this fellow to one of the upstairs bedrooms—"

"That greasy peon sleeping in my house!" Brainard exploded. "Won't have it. Put him—put him—"

"If you cannot suggest any other place for him, Horace," said the doctor quietly, "he may have my bed. This man must rest for the next few hours. Come, gentlemen. Who will help me?"

Fergus and Tom came forward and picked up the fat little body. Alys stepped back reluctantly, her eyes still fixed on the bruised head. For a moment Fergus was afraid that she was going to follow them. The last sound he heard as they left the room was Brainard's high bellow of, "And on my anniversary!"

"You will notice," the doctor observed, "that singular pronoun. Highly indicative."

"And on my anniversary!" Catherine Brainard was protesting to her daughter. She lay face down on one of the twin beds in the master bedroom and clutched desperately at a foolish gangling Pierrot doll.

"The poor man," said Janet.

"The poor man indeed! And is that all the sympathy I get from my own flesh and blood?" Mrs. Brainard began sobbing again. "It just spoils everything."

"Please, Mother. Don't be so—so— And besides," Janet added with a flash of inspiration, "if you toss about like that you'll spoil all those nice ruffles. And you do look so young and pretty with them."

Mrs. Brainard sat up promptly.

"Even Hugh!" Horace Brainard went on expostulating in the library. "Damned impudence of him. Use his own bed indeed! Man must be looked after! Look after a Mexican that lets some damned vagabond steal his boat. One of those young fools of Stella's, I'll lay odds."

James Herndon was puffing quietly at his curved brier. "But the boat wasn't stolen, Horace. Hugh proved that." There was something like a snort from Lucas Quincy. "And the young men are still here."

"You needn't remind me!" Brainard snapped.

"Nice boy, Tom," Herndon went on peacefully. "And that friend of his looks alert."

"Alert? Doesn't look as though he had a penny to his name. Lost his bag! Hmf! Probably doesn't own any decent clothes and hid the bag away to give himself an excuse. And on my—"

"On my sister's anniversary," said James Herndon temperately.

Alys stood beside the table, running her hand idly over its surface, still warm from the body heat of Ramirez. There was a secret smile on her lips.

"What the devil can be keeping Stella?" Brainard fumed. "If she's getting dinner, why in God's name not get it? Why should we have to wait around like this?"

Alys left the table and went over to the silent Lucas Quincy. "Isn't it too exciting, darling? Here I thought this was going to be just another week-end, and now all this—I!" She leaned over the red-faced man, fully aware of the effect of that leaning on the low-cut vee of her gown.

Lucas Quincy stared at her heavy-lidded, stared at her glistening eyes, at her quick breathing, at the almost imperceptible twitching of her hips. "Alys," he said gruffly.

"Yes, Lukey darling?"

Quincy continued to stare impassively. "Lay off of Tom," he said flatly.

"Yes, darling." She crossed the room again and gazed out of the window to the sands where she had stood earlier.

Ramirez was now comfortably bedded in the doctor's room, and Arnold was busy with his bag. "You shall now," Tom announced as the two younger men emerged into the upstairs hall, "see the setting of a new world's record. That noted young psychologist and athlete, Thomas Lucas Quincy, is about to get into a tuxedo in the fabulous and breath-taking space of five minutes. Want to race me, Fergus?"

"With what?"

"Oh. Sorry. That's right. You're going to have to show up at this extra-special anniversary dinner in—"

"In this, God help me. 'And the king saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having on a wedding garment? And he was speechless.' "

"And from the look in Brainard's eye, he'd like to carry out the rest of it: 'Bind us hand and foot, and take us away, and cast us into outer darkness.' "

"Myl" said Fergus. "Can psychologists quote Scripture?"

"Sure. Didn't you know? We're personal agents of the devil. Want to come watch my death-defying battle with time?"

"No, thanks. There's something I've got to check before dinner."

Tom's easy smile vanished. "Something about—?"

Fergus's lips were tight and firm, and there was a sharp glint in his green eyes. "You go get dressed," he said dryly.

"You can take this into the dining-room," said Stella Paris.

Fergus lifted the cover of the sterling silver vegetable dish and looked at the peas. "Canned," he observed unhappily.

"I know. That's Horace for you. He knows a man who knows a man and he can get canned goods wholesale. So the market is full of fresh peas and we eat canned. It's a miracle we're not having canned beef for dinner. Corcoran says what's the good of being a cook if you've got nothing to cook with."

"Miss Paris—" Fergus began.

"You're being mother's little helper, aren't you? Take that dish in."

He took it. "Miss Paris—" he started again when he returned.

"Nobody ever calls me that. I'm not used to answering to it. I'm just Stella."

"Stella, then. Though that does sound as sacrilegious as meeting Miss Pickford and saying, 'Hiya, Mary!' Stella, why did you invite me here?"

Miss Paris devoted careful attention to the stirring of the gravy. "I thought you'd guessed that," she said at last.

"I did guess about Valentino—my sneezes and that little mound— And I knew about the Stanhope case and put them together."

"Then you know why I asked you."

"You want me to find Martha Stanhope's murderer? Then why won't you talk to me? Why won't you tell me what actually happened on the sands this afternoon? Why don't you tell me the whole story of that hotel at Santa Eulalia, the story that isn't in newspapers?"

She stirred on. "What should I know after twenty-five years?"

"No conceivable motive, the papers said. That's nonsense. There hasn't been a group of people ever, close to each other, tightly knit as you of that wedding party were, where there wasn't some conceivable motive for death, if you probe deep enough. Motives aren't so simple as the classifiers make out. You can't just say, 'She didn't have a lover, she didn't leave a fortune, therefore no motive.'

Talk to me about that group, tell me all you know, and let me—"

"Fergus." Miss Paris stopped stirring and looked at him earnestly. "I don't think that is why I invited you. Not to find out who murdered poor dear Martha. If it's only that, let it be only that. If Martha was— If it was one of us, let it go. We've all lived on since then at peace with society. We've lived relatively decent lives. You can't take a man after a quarter of a century and put him in the gas chamber for something so long ago that it might as well have been done by someone else."

"I don't feel that way," said Fergus. "And especially not in this case. Not after Valentino."

Miss Paris nodded. "That's it. That's why I wanted you. Not to catch the poor devil for what he did centuries ago, but to keep him from doing it again. If Valentino was— was the same as Alys's kitten, then we need you. And if he was—just something extra, then I don't want you to learn too much. I don't want the dead past to bury the living."

"And if I can prove to you that Valentino was not something extra?"

"Then— Oh heavens! Lumps!" She returned her attention abruptly to the gravy. There was a minute of vigorous stirring and then at last she relaxed. "Even Horace," she said, "would protest over lumpy gravy. Not that he has palate enough to notice its flavor." She tasted the gravy and frowned. "Want to taste?"

Fergus took a clean spoon and tasted. "Good," he said reservedly.

"Don't be polite. I know it's not quite right. What would you suggest?"

Fergus thought. "I'd say a little lemon juice and a pinch, maybe, of celery salt."

Stella Paris smiled. "Exactly what I thought myself. We'll do well if you're as good at analyzing—other things."

Fergus took off his apron. "I'll talk to you after dinner," he said. "And I think I'll prove to you that there's nothing extra in this picture."

He whistled softly to himself as he slipped out the back



door. It shouldn't be hard to prove. And that proof should be the needed lever to pry out all Stella Paris's knowledge of what happened at the Hotel de la Playa in 1915. With that knowledge—

The whistle died as he heard quiet footsteps coming along the side of the house. This might, of course, be the doctor. Or it might— He kept himself in shadow and edged along the wall to the corner. He peered around.

James Herndon was walking along almost silently, one hand cupped around the glowing bowl of his brier, the other beating against his leg with a sort of futile desperation. He came on to the corner and there paused, stared ahead unseeing, and turned back. Twice he executed this maneuver, like a guard on sentry duty, and each time Fergus sensed a depth of despair in those staring expressionless eyes.

Then another form loomed up—the heavy bulk of Lucas Quincy, recognizable from afar by his tramping step and by the bright red dot that was his cigar end. As he saw Herndon, he hesitated, tossed the cigar down, and stepped on it. Then more softly he came up to the other and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Don't!" Herndon cried. It was almost a shriek. Then, "Sorry, Lucas," he added. "Nerves."

"That's just it," said Lucas Quincy sympathetically. "Nerves. I was worrying about that."

"Don't worry."

"But I know your nerves, James. You shouldn't wander around alone like this. It's not good for you. Nor for—" He left the phrase unfinished.

"I can look after myself." Herndon's voice took on a little of his brother-in-law's snappishness.

"Can you? And what were you doing out here alone?"

"Praying to God I might forget these matters that with myself I too much discuss."

The phrase sounded faintly familiar to Fergus, but he could not place it. Lucas Quincy said, "Whatever that means. You'd better go inside. Remember, James, I know what is best for you."

Herndon gave a short and quite unamused laugh. "I wonder, Lucas. I wonder how much of what you know, you do in fact know." But he turned and went back to the house.

Fergus was bothered. There is nothing so disconcerting as a man who abruptly steps out of character, and surely the gentle concern, one might almost say the tenderness of this scene, was completely unrelated to anything he had seen or known of Lucas Quincy. It was an impossible scene, and therefore an important one. Though in what way important—

He stepped around the corner. "Mr. Quincy."

"Ha." Lucas Quincy seemed unsurprised. "Good man. Wanted to have a talk with you alone." He took out a fresh cigar but made no motion of offering one to the detective. "Hanged if I know how you got here or why." He struck a match and puffed. "But I never saw you before."

"You're calling the tune," said Fergus. "Okay, so you never saw me before. But as to why I'm here—"

"Not interested. Wanted to make things clear." That odd brief cloak of sympathy had fallen quite away. He was as stolid and cold as ever now.

"You're interested all right." Fergus took the leap. "I'm here to take that job."

Quincy shook his head. "Said I never saw you before." He turned and walked back toward the front of the house.

Fergus grinned to himself. So the urgent need for the O'Brien services had vanished. Quincy was going to play hard to get. But there were other possible clients. And the same proof that would open Miss Paris's confidence might also reconvince Quincy—might even turn this into a legal deal.

He resumed his soft whistle as he walked away from the house. The grin was still on his lips, but with an earnest quirk to it. He was resolved on the impossible: to prove the financial advantages of quixotry.

If Fergus had gauged correctly the character of Horace Brainard, the servant Corcoran had surely occupied not a room in the house itself but some uncomfortable make-

shift outside. And if he had diagnosed correctly the nature of Corcoran's ailment, that wise-seeming doctor had left him out there, away from prying eyes. And here was just such a meager shack, cold and comfortless. The deductions were working out.

The door was locked. Sensible man, Dr. Arnold, even if he had slipped in describing Corcoran's trouble to Miss Paris as illness and to Fergus as accident. The door was wisely locked, but at one side was a window. Fergus did not want entrance. Not yet. This time only a glimpse to make sure.

Corcoran was alive. He had not been certain of that. Either way was possible. There was the slight regular motion of breathing under the blanket. And as he lifted his eyes toward the man's head he saw what he had known he must see, the dark-stained bandage around the throat.

Fergus hesitated in the doorway of the library. This was the first step in a campaign which should mean a check in his pocket, the capture of a murderer, and a new and freer life for all but one of those on the island. It was a ticklish moment.

It was a silent group in the quasi-library, or almost silent, for little splutterings of exasperation escaped with every breath of Horace Brainard. The others were still. Alys Trent stared out at the sands, one hand resting on her half-bare breasts, the other lightly and unconsciously stroking her white hair. Lucas Quincy sat mountainous, his small eyes, black dots in his full red face, fixed impassively on Alys. And James Herndon effaced himself in a corner and raptly contemplated the silver mountings of his brier.

Horace Brainard whirled and glared at the entrance of that damned young Irishman in the yellow shirt. "Well!" he yelped.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Fergus courteously, "but I have to speak with you alone. It's most important."

Alys Trent turned her slow gaze upon him, and seemed to find him as preoccupying as the sands. "So important?"

she murmured. "Let me hear too!"

"Alys," said Lucas Quincy flatly. You could not call his tone even warning, but it stopped the girl and held her by the window. There was something almost idol-like about the monosyllable solidity of Lucas Quincy, yet Fergus had a shrewd idea that he knew just where to apply the hotfoot to that idol's feet of clay.

"No time now," Horace Brainard snapped. "Or ever. But certainly not now. Time for dinner."

"But, sir," Fergus tried to suggest urgency without undue alarm. "I swear that this is most important to every person in this room. On this island, in fact."

Alys's lips parted, but she caught Quincy's eye and said nothing.

"Young man," Brainard announced, "at this moment only one thing is of importance to me. That is that I should be allowed to celebrate my anniversary in peace. Now will you get to hell out of here?"

"But, Horace," James Herndon protested gently over his pipe. "Surely the young man is dining with us."

"The devil he is. He's forced himself in on us here. No manners. No clothes. And because it's my anniversary, do I have to entertain every impecunious young rascalion in—"

"Sorry," Fergus cut in curtly. "I'm not worrying about my dinner. My passion for canned peas falls something short of the fetish level, and there are more immediate concerns. I—"

"He's exciting!" Alys gasped. "He makes you feel—oh, I don't know—awful things. And I love it. Please, Horace, let him stay!"

"Can you never have men enough?" Brainard barked.

"No," said Alys calmly and, Fergus imagined, truthfully. "But please, Horace—"

"Horace," said Lucas Quincy, and astounded Fergus by turning on him a coldly genial smile.

It had worked as planned. Fergus had noted earlier the quiet internal pleasure that Quincy seemed to take in imposing his will on Brainard, and had wondered what

the hold might be that enabled him to do so. Goad Brainard far enough and Lucas Quincy would take your side purely for the joy of deflating his host. It was a first step. But that smile was even more than he had expected.

"Very well," Brainard grunted pettishly. "Stay if you damn well like. Come to my dinner. Eat my roast. Ruin my anniversary with your goddamned yellow shirt. But I warn you of one thing: whatever you have to say, however weighty you may think it is, it can wait. This dinner is going to go on undisturbed. It's going to go on as it should have if no damned Corcorans and no damned Mexicans and no damned young brats that Stella dredges up from God knows where—"

Fergus could feel his fist clenching. He envied these tough and two-fisted investigators you read about who shoot out a straight right to the jaw whenever some dope cracks wise. The hell of this business when you're in it is that you can't afford to have a temper. You've got to take what's handed out to you and hope you can make up for it when the time comes for the bill; and Fergus had already decided that, failing Lucas Quincy, Horace Brainard was going to sign one honey of a check before this party was over. So, "Thank you, sir," he said stiffly, and forcibly unclenched his fist.

"Tell me, O'Brien." James Herndon made a touchingly unsubtle attempt at appeasement. "Are you interested at all in pipes?"

Fergus walked over to the timid man's corner. He tried to keep an eye on Quincy, but there was nothing to be read in that blank red face. "Never smoke them myself," he said, "but I think they're a joy to look at. Why?"

"I'm by way of being a collector," Herndon explained deprecatorily, "and I shouldn't think of going off even for a week-end without a few of my treasures. If you have the time after dinner, we might—"

"Come in!" Horace Brainard bellowed in answer to a knock on the door.

Stella Paris stood in the doorway. She still wore the dated evening gown; but the stance of her body was so

perfect, her head was adjusted at so exactly the right angle of dignified condescension, that you saw not a fat and friendly woman but a portly and competent butler. She cleared her throat with elaborate unobtrusiveness and spoke in fruity and British tones. "Dinner is served."

Fergus and Alys laughed with pleasure, and even Lucas Quincy half-smiled. Miss Paris had nowise lost her mimetic talents.

But Brainard winced at the laugh. "God damn it, Stella! Must even you make a farce of my anniversary?"

James Herndon knocked out his pipe. "Farce?" he repeated, looking at Fergus. There was bewilderment and tragedy in his voice.

## Chapter Four

### NOTHING IS EXTRA

THE TABLE WAS A SPLENDID AND DAZZLING FIELD of linen, silver, and crystal. It glistened with chaste elegance. The vegetable dishes were silver-covered, the crystal decanter of wine showed merely the palest yellow, and only the noble bulk of a rib roast of beef before the host's place provided the contrast of darkness.

Fergus was pleased to find himself seated between Janet and Stella Paris. He could not have chosen better, especially with Tom on Janet's other side and the friendly-seeming James Herndon across the table. Janet in a formal gown, he noticed, was something quite different from Janet in a tailored suit. She still looked straightforward and what writers like to call clean-limbed, but you realized, in the simple and vivid severity of that red gown, that she was beautiful as well. It was a pleasant realization.

He was about to sit down when he became aware of all the others still standing stiffly. He looked toward the head of the table. Horace Brainard formally inclined his head and rattled through a grace at such a rate that Fergus caught no words beyond "bless" and "amen."

Then, even as the others repeated, "Amen," Brainard burst forth with a roaring, "God damn it, Stella, did you have to cut the slices in the kitchen! You know I like to carve at table!"

"That's right," assented Mrs. Brainard, who was occupied by the task of seating herself with Youthful Grace, stolidly abetted by Lucas Quincy. "You do know how Horace prides himself on his carving."

"If it comes to that, Catherine," Brainard bellowed, "you're damned well aware of it yourself. If you'd been some help in the kitchen instead of going off to indulge yourself in vapors— Hasn't a man even the right to carve in his own home?" he demanded of an unjust and Brain-

ard-persecuting universe.

The dinner was off to a good start.

Nor did it perceptibly improve. The roast, presumably chiefly the work of the missing Corcoran, was admirable; and the gravy, in which Fergus took a certain proprietary interest, was beyond reproach. But the best of beef (especially when your host is so infuriated by your presence that he deliberately serves the outmost cut when you ask for rare) cannot be fully appreciated in the midst of a conversation of silent stares.

For despite the fine panoply of the table, despite even the smooth and infinitely dry Chablis, this was no scintillant dinner party. The lull before the storm was the obvious metaphor. There was an atmosphere of brooding, of watchful waiting. Somewhere at this table, Fergus felt, there was an agile mind working rapidly and dexterously, anticipating every move he planned to make and ready to forestall each one and go beyond to some fresh and terrible purpose.

*Nuts!* he said to himself. *Am I going psychic on me?* And he turned his attention to tabulating the various stares and trying to fit them into the dual problem of fending off murder and securing a paying customer. They were, roughly analyzed:

Dr. Arnold's, chiefly at Fergus, *Curiosity*, and occasionally at Alys, a curiously unclassifiable sort of *Speculation*.

James Herndon's, chiefly at his plate, *Discomfort*, but now and then at Lucas Quincy, an odd mixture of *Fear* and *Triumph*.

Alys Trent's, impartially at Fergus and at Tom, *Hunger*, and not of a sort to be sated at table.

Mrs. Brainard's, chiefly at Alys—and this was the very devil to analyze. Fergus had seen little of this woman so far, too little to realize anything beyond her obviously absurd pretensions to girlishness at her own silver wedding; but unless his eye was losing all its cunning, her stare meant one thing: *Jealousy*. He filed away this curious observation and went on.

Janet's and Tom's, chiefly at each other, *Tentativeness*.



Lucas Quincy's, partly at Alys, *Possession*, and partly at Tom, *Calculation*.

Stella Paris's at the company in general, *Concern*. And Horace Brainard's, at the world at large, *Injured Resentment*.

Miss Paris and Janet cleared and served, the former with the air of a born housewife, the latter with the manner of a girl who is willing to tackle any job and bring it off well. The other two women had offered to help, Mrs. Brainard with a gay flutter and Alys with dutiful boredom; but both had seemed unsurprised and relieved when their offers were rejected.

At last the dessert was finished (fried cream with lambent tongues of brandy hovering over it—"I had to fix something a little special," Stella Paris confessed to Fergus, "or I swear I would have snapped into little pieces"), the coffee was poured, and the cigars were passed. (Horace Brainard winced ostentatiously as he saw Fergus take one. Fergus himself winced a little as he lit it; it was by no means up to the standard of Lucas Quincy, who wisely preferred to smoke his own.)

It was then that the doctor rose. His perfectly tailored figure, with its easy but commanding grace, seemed to collect all those random stares and focus them on him, concentrating them into the one rapt stare of an attentive audience.

He did not waste time on "Ladies and Gentlemen" or such prefatory trimmings. "Horace," he began directly, "has done me the great honor of asking me to give the toasts at this festive banquet which celebrates so beautiful and joyous an occasion as the silver wedding of our two friends." His voice was suave and melodious; only the slightest twist of his lower lip turned these ornate phrases into mockery.

"The toasts, I should forewarn you, are to be many. Those of you who have fears or qualms might do well to pour your glasses less than full, for surely none of you would so dishonor one of those toasted as to fail to empty his glass."

Sound advice, Fergus thought; but he hoped that no one else would heed it. He himself needed a clear head at this moment. Toasts all around, in the doctor's sardonic manner, could give him valuable hints on the confused and twisted relationships which he felt underlying this group; and if the others toasted all too heartily, their reactions should be that much the more helpful.

"I shall omit," Dr. Arnold went on as the brandy decanter passed around the table, "all references to the lamentable passage of time and all variations on the theme of *Eheu, fugaces, Postume*. I shall salute us as we were then, as still perhaps we are in some lumber-attic part of us, when the world had known only a fraction of one World War, and we were all alive. Even," he added lightly, "our cats."

James Herndon looked up with a sort of pleading frown, Alys gave a little gasp of pleasurable shock, and Stella Paris all but dropped the decanter.

"Now that Stella," the doctor resumed, "has recovered her own fumble (if I may temper my idiom to the surprisingly high percentage of youth represented on this venerable occasion), I believe that the ceremony of the charging of glasses is completed? Fine. Then for the first toast, I give you a name that has not passed my lips in many years, a name that most of you, perhaps, have forgotten with your tongues if not with your hearts, a name that may seem inapposite and even cruel on this anniversary, and yet a ringing name that may not be passed over. I give you: Jay Stanhope!"

The room was dead silent. Fergus tried to keep his frowning curiosity from showing too obviously. Martha Stanhope, yes, but Jay—? He was certain that there was no mention of another Stanhope in the Ferguson account of the case. To be sure, Alys had spoken of "the Stanhopes." But Martha was single, wasn't she? A bridesmaid has to be; or does she? Fergus shelved the question; certainly Jay Stanhope was not unfamiliar to the others. At the sound of this name which he had not even heard before, each of the older people seemed profoundly moved.

Stella Paris blinked wet eyes. Mrs. Brainard and her brother exchanged a brief but most inexplicable look, a mixture of deep devotion and of something else that might almost have been hatred. Horace Brainard was silent (in itself doubtless a sign of the deepest emotion), and Lucas Quincy moved his impassive stare to his brandy glass, where he seemed to behold something familiar and lost.

The glasses were raised. The toast was drunk in silence. There was, for that little instant, another person in the room, a stronger, a more dominant character than any in the visible cast.

Then the door to the hall opened of itself, Mrs. Brainard screamed shrilly, and the other guest was gone.

Fergus and the doctor reached the doorway at the same time and caught in their arms the stumbling figure of Jesús Ramirez.

"The fool," the doctor muttered with a certain tart sympathy. "He should be in bed. He needs rest after a blow like that."

Horace Brainard's face was so red as to make Quincy look pale, and was rapidly nearing purple. He shook off Miss Paris's restraining hand and shouted, "Get that damned greaser the hell out of here!" adding several reflections on the personal habits of Ramirez which implied an improbably high degree of corrupt sophistication.

Alys giggled delightedly, Mrs. Brainard was girlishly horrified, and all in all there was a grandiferous hubbub. But over it all Fergus managed to shout, "Wait!" And amazingly enough it worked.

"Doctor," he went on urgently as the noise died, "is he conscious enough to talk?"

"Yes," Arnold admitted reluctantly. "Though he should be back in bed at once."

"But then you won't let me disturb him for hours, and we've got to know tonight. Let me speak to him. Hokay!"

Ramirez lifted a sodden head. "*Señor?*"

"Hokay, who hit you?"

Ramirez shook his head fuzzily.

"Hokay, you see all these people?"

The Mexican obediently fixed his bleary eyes on each in turn. "Hokay," he said.

"Now, who hit you?"

Fergus was watching not Ramirez but the room. But there was nothing to learn there. There was equal tension, equal suspense on each face—all but that of Horace Brainard, who seemed to be building up to another purple outburst.

*"Who, Hokay?"*

Ramirez opened his mouth. Then abruptly it shut and his eyes with it, and he sank back fainting into Fergus's arms.

For that one instant the detective's attention was distracted. He could hear, somewhere in the room, that minute sigh of relief; but from whom it came he could not know.

As Fergus and the doctor returned to the dining-room, they could hear Tom's voice saying, "But surely, Uncle Horace, we have a right to—" and Brainard snapping back, "Damn it, young man, this dinner is going to continue as I planned it."

Dr. Arnold smiled at Fergus, an ambiguous and elusive smile. "My room," he said, "overlooks the back of the house."

"So?"

"I saw you go out for a look at Corcoran."

"Curiosity."

"Curiosity? Hm. Useful trait."

"It passes the time."

"You know a good deal, don't you, Mr. O'Brien?"

"I've got something by the tail," said Fergus. "But it's going to take all of us to find out what."

"And that quickly, before it turns and bites you— But please have patience with poor Horace and let us conclude this ritual rigmarole. And if you know so much, young man, I'm certain that you will drink deep at the next toast."

He opened the door to the dining-room. Lucas Quincy was gravely refilling Alys's glass. Otherwise there was no sound or motion in the room. Fergus slipped unobtrusively into his chair, and the doctor resumed his toastmaster stance beside the host.

"I have given the unfortunate Ramirez a sedative," he announced. "I think we need fear no further interruptions—or at least none from without. And now," he raised his glass, "I give you the second and last of the toasts to our absent friends. I give you a fresh and lovely girl, with a kind heart that loved simply and clearly. (Need I borrow an idiom from the ghastly style of Lucas's business correspondence and say that I speak 'as of May, 1915'?) I give you the pure, the sweet, the doomed, the damned: Martha Stanhope." His voice had an unwonted note of sincere emotion.

Fergus understood this second toast all too well. He drank reverently, and to himself mused, *May her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed . . .*

"Now," the doctor said, smiling, "a lighter touch. I give you the flower of Los Angeles society, the most eligible bachelor of 1915, that sterling young man of irreproachable income, that lazily budding young poet who soon learned the wisdom of savoring the fruits of others rather than suffering the laborious toil of his own orchard, that exquisitely gilded fainéant unperturbed by any inconvenient ambitions, that dearest friend of the dear departed, that quiet figure of grace: James Herndon."

That made the gentle Herndon clear enough, Fergus thought. Position, tastes, charm, and income; and no desire to do anything about it. Twenty-five years of that and you have just what he saw sitting across the table from him: a perennial bachelor, admirably well-preserved, pleasing and friendly and completely negative.

"Next I give you a true toast, the toast of Hollywood and the nation in those bright days when a star was a star, that slender ethereal figure whose slightest gesture of pathos wrung tears from strong men, that gallant and durable virgin who survived the advances of seventeen

villains in thirteen pictures, that lovelier Gish, that more moving Pickford: Stella Paris!"

Fergus, remembering that intense theatrical excitement which only a child can know, was half moved to applaud; but the effect was spoiled by an instantly choked but nonetheless raucous laugh from Stella herself.

"Sorry, Hugh," she added hastily. "But such a build-up, and then I look at myself now— It was too much. Couldn't you toast me as a cook?"

"Not," said Dr. Arnold precisely, "as of 1915. I can still recall your culinary attempts of that period."

"Well!" sighed Miss Paris. "You can't have everything. And I think I still suits me better this way. Go on, Hugh."

"Lest it be thought that I am saving him for a position of unfair climax, I now give you one of the lesser members of this cast: a terribly earnest young man fresh from his studies, with a peculiar sort of world-savior complex; a dreadful young man who tolerated his friends and their intrusion on his priceless time, while he dreamed of the day when his name might ring with those of Koch and Ehrlich and Pasteur and other Warner Brothers contract players. I give you, though with a firm sense of deprecation, young Hugh Arnold." He set down his glass and carefully refrained from drinking as the others acknowledged the toast.

"You are more than tolerant," he observed, "to drink to such an impossible young prig. But let us turn now to a far more worthy youth: a man who knew two driving forces, and two only. And one of these was the great American tradition of success. A man who had already tried four businesses, in each had doubled his once meager capital, and had in turn abandoned each because it promised no more than a hundred percent return. A man who had just realized that war means uniforms, even as uniforms mean war, and who had wisely established himself in the cloth manufacture from which he was to reap such prodigious benefits in 1917. A man who knew what he wanted, took it, and held it secure until he no longer wanted it. I give you, in short: Lucas Quincy."

It was a cruel toast, and the doctor's casually contemptuous tone did nothing to soften its impact. But Lucas Quincy merely nodded, and remained crimson and impassive as the others drank to him. Only Mrs. Brainard seemed to resent the toast. Her glass hesitated in her hand, and for a moment she appeared unwilling to drink. But she downed her tot resolutely, and looked again at Alys.

"Now," said Dr. Arnold, "to the youngest member of the bridal party, to that adorable and chubby tot of—but fortunately I do not recall the precise age; that delightful child who bore the flower basket and strewed the posies with pudgy fingers, that Romney infant of bright innocence: Alys Trent." This toast was in its words as banteringly sardonic as any, but the voice was different. There was a serious earnest there, some deeper emotion which even the suave Hugh Arnold could not quite conceal.

Alys spoiled the pause with a throaty giggle.

"Like Miss Paris, you feel the contrast?" the doctor observed gently, and almost regaining his normal tones. "But as she has remarked, and how many other sages before her, we cannot have everything. And surely you could not have dreamed then how early in your young life you would be—blessed with the beauty of that white hair."

It would be a swell idea, thought Fergus, if somebody could persuade Alys to sit out the rest of the toasts. People can reach a point where they're not even useful. But she drank even to herself.

"And now we reach the heart of the matter." Dr. Arnold indulged in a stage pause. "We have toasted the members of the bridal party, and even one who lamentably was not of that group. But now we come in our ritual to the pair themselves. What words of mine can describe their youthfulness, the fine absorption of their love? Should I dare to gild refined gold by painting in gross words their virtues and their charms? Can I portray to you Horace Brainard, sturdy and forthcoming, or Catherine Brainard, nearly as young and lovely then as she is now?

"Friends, I accept defeat. I am no man to scale such heights. I may only say, *tout court*, I give you: Horace and

Catherine."

The whole table rose to this and drank the toast standing. Mrs. Brainard simpered sweetly, and Mr. Brainard twitched his mustache and cleared his throat impressively for his acknowledgment.

But Dr. Arnold forestalled him. "One moment, Horace," he said, over the clatter of reseating. "We must not be so rude as to pass over the younger members merely because they were so unfortunate as not to be of our party. Heaven forbid such discourtesy. Now then I give you a vigorous and active boy of five, already a delight and a plague to his business-intent uncle, a child who foreshadowed clearly the athletic prowess if not the psychological eminence which he was to attain: Tom Quincy."

Mr. Brainard drank grudgingly, and Lucas Quincy too seemed a mite loath.

"And another little boy of, I should guess, much the same age, wiry and redheaded and doubtless already distinguished by the unfading glint of curiosity in his green eyes. I give you (not recalling his first name): the infant O'Brien."

This time Mr. Brainard ostentatiously did not drink at all.

"And lastly (and it is with a mingling of relief and regret that I say lastly), I give you a spark of life hidden in the womb, unformed and inchoate, a stirring, a quickening that was to grow to a loveliness to stir and quicken all. I give you: Janet Brainard."

"But Dr. Hugh," Janet protested. "We must be accurate. If these toasts are as of May 10, 1915, why I wasn't even unborn then. I can't come into this at all."

Alys leaned forward with an eagerness that knocked over her empty brandy glass. "Oh goodie, Hugh. I didn't know this. Was it a shotgun wedding?"

"Not a shotgun—" said James Herndon vacantly, then suddenly caught himself and looked about apprehensive lest someone else might have understood him.

Dr. Arnold gazed at Alys with a certain reproach and regret. "I referred," he explained with mock primness, "to



the womb of time. And since that ribald misunderstanding is cleared up, may we now drink this last and fairest of toasts?"

They drank. Fergus saw Tom looking down directly into Janet's gold-brown eyes. There was a question in that look, but her face gave no answer.

"The comedy of toasts," Dr. Arnold announced dryly, "is ended."

Catherine Brainard spoke for the first time since she had been rebuked over the toast. "Good," she said. "Now we'll all play games."

Upstairs lay a Mexican with a badly bruised skull. Outside was a man with a clumsily slit throat. Some place at that table sat an individual who understood throat slitting intimately. And Catherine Brainard, on her silver wedding anniversary, prattled on with her plans for games.

"—so you all go on into the living-room now and we'll all have some fun," she concluded.

"Right now?" Alys asked.

"Of course, dear."

"But after so much brandy— I mean, I don't know about some people, but—"

Mrs. Brainard smirked. "Oh, but of course. I suppose we might want to freshen up a little after dinner, mightn't we? Very well, then. We'll all meet in the living-room in ten minutes."

"What are we going to play?" Stella Paris wondered.

"I don't suppose," said Fergus, "there's any chance of Truth?"

"Oh," Alys burbled. "I know a wonderful game. It's terribly exciting. It's called—" She stopped sharply, looked around, and started to get up. Her co-ordination was not perfect. "Help me, Lukey," she commanded.

No one said a word. But there was not a person at the table who did not sense that the game Alys had almost suggested was that classic sport, Murder.

Fergus stopped Stella Paris as she was leaving the dining-room. "I want to talk to you," he said quietly.

"Now?"

"Right away. Unless you want to freshen up, as our hostess so genteelly puts it."

"Young man, I have always prided myself on my social bladder. Talk away."

"Not here. How would the library be?"

"If we're going into a private huddle," said Miss Paris sensibly, "it'll bother people a lot less if we seem to have a reason. Come on in the kitchen and we'll tackle the dishes. I don't think there's the least danger of anybody offering to help."

Fergus scorned an apron. "Nothing," he explained, "could make these clothes look more disreputable in this company." He dumped a small pile of soap chips into the dishpan and sneezed once.

"No cats here," Miss Paris objected.

"One sneeze doesn't count. It's only the mystic number that's significant, and that—well, that's why I'm here." He worked up a fine sudsy foam and started in on the glasses. "I can prove it to you now. Nothing is extra."

"Corcoran—?" Miss Paris asked hesitantly.

"I saw him. The chief difference between him and Valentino is that this is a sloppy job; he's alive. And so," he added almost to himself, "is Ramirez. I don't know—I don't like murderers that leave living victims. Something abnormal about that; it worries me."

"I'm sure the victims prefer it."

"For the moment at least— But now, Miss Paris, will you answer questions? You can see I'm not trying just to rake up an old scandal. This is present and immediate."

Miss Paris looked with intense concentration at the glass she was drying. "I'm ready." She held the glass up to the light and gave it an extra polishing flick.

"Good. The Inquisition of the Soap Suds is now under way. And I hardly know where to start. There's so damned much I want to know. And especially why people step out of character."

"Do we? I thought we were a rather self-consistent group."

"That makes it all the more striking when you're not. And stepping out of character may be the key to it all. Look. Throat-slitting isn't a normal part of any character. Whoever our friend is, these attacks are a deviation from his norm. All right. Look for the other deviations in the group, track those down to their sources, and you may draw a starting point for understanding—well, cats."

"I wish we were doing silver," said Stella Paris. "I wouldn't worry so much about keeping my hands steady—And what are these significant inconsistencies?"

"For example: Horace Brainard is dominant and ego-centric—or should I be more polite about your friend and our host?"

"Politeness? Now?"

"Thanks. He's a petty Napoleon who thinks his slightest whim is an edict from above. He expects you to weep with delight when he gives you a smile, if ever, and certainly to tremble with fear at his frown. He's insufferably overbearing to his family and to you and to Herndon, and he's tried his best on me. But one word from Lucas Quincy, and he folds up meek as a lamb. Out of character, and why?"

"Then take Quincy himself. He's far more subtle in his dominance than Brainard. He doesn't put on an act of demanding obedience. He simply and coldly goes his own way, and automatically exacts whatever obedience he needs. There's a chill self-sufficiency about him, a calm acceptance of the fact that nothing matters but Lucas Quincy. And yet, though everyone else is less than the dust beneath his chariot wheels, he shows the most touching concern and solicitude for James Herndon. Out of character, and why?"

"Herndon next. He's futile and meek and rather sweet. He wouldn't harm a tsetse fly. All he wants is peace and quiet and to be let alone. He makes helpless and pathetic attempts at pouring oil on all the troubled waters that his brother-in-law stirs up. And still he goes out of his way to be markedly rude and insulting to Alys Trent. That might be understandable enough in anyone else,

but in the gentle Herndon it's out of character, and why?

"Or take Dr. Arnold. He—"

"Whoa. Have mercy, sir. That's more than enough to start with. The answer to your Brainard problem I can guess, but it's random suspicion and nothing definite. The business about Lucas and James, I must confess, puzzles me as much as it does you. But James and Alys is simple enough; it's merely a matter of family resemblance."

"Family resemblance?"

"Of course. You see— No. It's no use trying to explain things piecemeal. They don't mean much all by themselves. You have to have the whole picture."

Fergus rinsed the last of the glasses and dumped a load of silverware into the sudsy water. "That's what I want. Go back to 1915. That's where it all is."

"Hugh gave you some idea in his toasts. But not quite all." Miss Paris blew a speck of lint off the glass she was drying. "We were an odd group. It was a strange soil to grow friendship in. We were all so tied up with other things, so wrapped up in little preoccupations. We didn't have time to know each other, to sense anything deeply. Each of us had his own world."

"You heard Hugh speak of himself then, all concentrated on his great medical career. He was going to be another Semmelweiss, another Lister—and he's wound up coining money in New York as a society doctor with a perfect bedside manner. That's the way it's been with all of us, except Lucas perhaps. We're not what we told ourselves in 1915. But it was all terribly real then and terribly obsessing."

"And what was *your* obsession?"

"Pictures, of course. I was with Triangle then, just beginning to get a start. They'd signed up Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and Constance Collier and all of a sudden it wasn't a disgrace to be a film actress any more. I was all absorbed in the Future of the Industry and incidentally of me."

"Lucas, naturally, thought of nothing but making contacts and influencing profits. James was preoccupied with

poetry; I remember he'd gone back to discover Hopkins and Emily Dickinson when most of us were raving about Joyce Kilmer. Catherine had nothing on her mind but the latest styles and being the belle of the season. And Horace—well, I think perhaps you understand Horace's obsession by now. He's spent all his life working furiously at being what Lucas, without any trouble at all, simply is. And he's never quite made it."

"It's a wonder," said Fergus, "that any of you noticed any of the others enough for there to be a wedding."

"There should have been two," said Stella Paris slowly.

"Two weddings?"

"Yes. We none of us liked the idea of a double wedding. Each couple seems to steal the other's spotlight. But a week later Martha and Lucas were to have been married. That was what made it all even more awful. And now—oh, if I were Alys I wouldn't stand for it!"

"Stand for what?"

"Lucas is marrying her a week from today. It's—it would be the silver anniversary of his wedding to Martha."

"Don't fret about Alys. There's probably nothing she'd love so much as the ghost of the Bleeding Bride at her wedding. But these Stanhopes—where did they fit into your group?"

"They were the group. They're what held us together. Because Martha was sweetness and kindness, and her only preoccupations were the ordinary things of life, looking after her invalid mother and the little orphan they'd taken in, being good to her friends, loving her brother and her fiancé— And because Jay was—well, Jay."

"And what was that?"

"Jay isn't easy to explain. In a way he was the most absorbed and preoccupied of us all, and yet the most human. I don't remember who met him first. I think perhaps it was James. But as we met him we all felt that—I can't put it well. But Lucas and even Horace felt it too. It was something—"

Miss Paris dropped the silver gravy ladle with a ringing clatter, but even that clatter was not loud enough to

drown out the echoes of the scream. Or not a scream so much as a howl, an ululation of animal pain.

Fergus was out in the hall and at the foot of the staircase before the echoes had died. "Stay here," he said curtly to Miss Paris. "Be Horatius at the bridge for me. Don't let anyone else come upstairs but Dr. Arnold. Get Tom to help you, if you need." And he was up the stairs, taking two or three at each silent bound.

Two men stood in the hall, both staring at the closed door of Hugh Arnold's room. James Herndon started toward the door, but Quincy laid a gently restraining hand on his shoulder. "No, James," he said quietly. "You don't want to go in there. Not again."

James Herndon laughed. "If all you think you know, Lucas—"

Quincy's harsh voice cut across his. "I don't think you want to say that, James, before this young man. What is it, O'Brien?"

"That scream came from the doctor's room?"

"I believe so. I was in the bathroom, and James was in his own room, weren't you, James?"

"Yes, I was reading—"

"Your volume of Eliot? Or its contents?"

At the moment Fergus hardly noticed this seemingly nonsensical remark. He went on and opened the door of Arnold's room. Nothing seemed disturbed. Jesús Ramirez still lay in the bed, incongruously dressed in a pair of the doctor's own Russian-style pajamas.

As Fergus entered the room, he heard footsteps behind him. "Stella said you wanted me," Dr. Arnold explained. "What happened?" He went on to the bed without waiting for an answer and bent over the still body.

Fergus waited tensely.

"Quite all right," said Dr. Arnold, straightening up at last. "Nothing but a nightmare, I'd guess."

Fergus saw a different picture, that of a man who sighed with relief when Ramirez did not identify him at the dinner table, who feared that that identification might yet be made, who resolved to forestall it— "A happy night-

mare," he said aloud. "It scared away the boogyman."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," said Fergus, "that we'd better all foregather in the living-room. Come on."

"I must apologize for my patient," Dr. Arnold explained to the assembled company. "But he received a severe shock, and a disturbed and tortured sleep is only to be expected. Please do not alarm yourselves."

"Let him choke in his sleep," Horace Brainard muttered, "and give the rest of us some peace."

"And now we're all here," said Mrs. Brainard brightly, "and we can play games."

"Mother."

"Yes, Janet?"

"I don't like to spoil the party. But shouldn't we be thinking about how we're ever going to get off this island? If the Mexican's boat is gone, why then—"

"Thank you, Janet," said Fergus. "That is what we are about to do."

"And who the devil," Horace Brainard began, "do you think—?"

"Please!" His voice rose clear above Brainard's splutterings, with that trumpet note of Celtic challenge which brooked no interference. "I wish to see Mr. Brainard, Dr. Arnold, and Miss Paris in the library at once." He was watching Lucas Quincy carefully and caught the almost imperceptible frown of puzzlement that crossed his face at the omission of his name. "While we talk over necessary measures, I advise the rest of you to stick close together."

"Oh!" Alys sighed. "Now I know! He's a *detective*!" Her eyes grew as round as her breasts. "Are we going to have a murder?"

"My dear," said Dr. Arnold politely, "that would be no longer a novelty in this happy group."

As Fergus crossed to the library, he felt on his arm what he had expected, the heavy touch of Lucas Quincy.

"What are you up to?" the rough voice grated.

"Carrying out your job."

"Which is no longer necessary."

"You thought it was damned necessary yesterday."

"That was yesterday. Drop it."

"And if I can prove to you that it is necessary—far more so than yesterday?"

"You can't."

Fergus allowed himself a confident grin. "I don't make threats," he said. "But I can point out facts."

Lucas Quincy let out a short barking laugh. "Young fella, I don't know anything about you as a detective. Don't want a detective. But hanged if I don't like your devilish persistence now that you've decided to get a fee out of me."

"That's part of it. The part that's important to me. The other part is more so to you."

"I've got nothing to do with this. Never saw you, and I've told you nothing. But if—" He made something between a grunt and a chuckle. "I'm giving you a tip. Horace loves his money *and* his skin. Use that. And if you can get a fee out of him—I'll match it."

Fergus's grin widened. "Sir," he said, "you have appeased my Evil Angel. And now we'll see what the good can do."



## Chapter Five

### IN SERIOUS DANGER

"ALL RIGHT," Fergus announced, surveying the group of three in the pseudo-library. "I've been putting on my nice-inoffensive-young-man act long enough. For the sake of your precious annigoddamnedversary I've strained every gut to be the most acceptable guest as ever was. And that act's laid as thorough an egg as I've seen in years. Now we're going to get down to cases." He paced restlessly about the room. In his slacks and sport shirt he looked, in contrast to the dinner-jacketed elegance of the other men, like an actor whom the costumer has forgotten and who has to walk through dress rehearsal in his street clothes.

"Cases!" Mr. Brainard snorted. "Who the devil do you think you are?"

"Miss Paris knows, and Dr. Arnold has a damned good idea. But you're the big shot here, and I owe you an explanation. I'm afraid I'm not just a rapsallion ne'er-do-well or whatever the hell it was you called me. I'm a private investigator—detective to you."

"Indeed? And I'm expected to take your word for that?"

Fergus grinned. "The big revelation scene isn't coming off so good, is it? All our hero should have to do is to say, 'I am Detective Inspector O'Brien of Scotland Yard,' and boom! down comes the second act curtain and nobody asks any awkward questions. Life should be simpler. But since you're so goddamned inquisitive, here's my credentials—and thank God they weren't in my bag too."

"Your bag?" Dr. Arnold asked.

"Take that up later. Well, sir?"

Horace Brainard looked up from the license and the identification card. "Well?" he repeated. "These items prove that your name is O'Brien and that you are a private investigator, duly licensed. What the devil should

that mean to me?"

Fergus paced some more and scratched his red pate. "You see?" he appealed to the others. "He won't play nice. Now most people would welcome a detective with a murderer at large."

"Not Horace," observed Hugh Arnold dryly. "He is no ordinary man."

"Murderer?" For the first time Horace Brainard's voice lost a little of its cocky self-assuredness, but only for an instant. "I don't know anything about a murder. And I'm damned if I see why a detective should intrude on my anniversary."

Fergus stared at him curiously. "I'll be a son of a ban-shée—I" he murmured. "I do believe you honestogod haven't any idea why I'm here. You don't know what happened to Miss Paris's cat. You don't even know what's the matter with Corcoran."

"I certainly don't understand a word you're saying."

"My, my!" Fergus hoisted himself onto the library table. "No wonder I don't make sense to you. But you two: what's all this secret-keeping? Doesn't anybody trust anybody?"

"You will have observed," said Dr. Arnold, "that Horace is somewhat insistent on the proper observance of his anniversary. I thought it kinder to keep the truth about Corcoran from him until later. But you, Stella? You hadn't mentioned Valentino to him?"

"The same reason, Hugh. I was afraid it might upset Catherine. I even warned Janet not to say anything."

"Just a moment, Miss Paris. Whom did you tell about your cat?"

"The ones that were at the party. I thought one of them might possibly have seen somebody skulking around."

"And they hadn't?"

"No. Jim seemed frightfully upset about it. He and Valentino had always been good friends."

"You phoned Quincy too?"

"Yes. He said he didn't know anything but he'd ask Alys."

Fergus nodded contentedly. "Nice to find something that fits."

"Cats—" Brainard whispered to himself. "Cats again. But that must mean—"

"Look, sir," said Fergus. "If we go on cryptic-like, we'll just ball ourselves up worse by the minute. Let's start at the beginning."

That note of unsureness was growing in Brainard's voice. "But what is the beginning?"

"For my money it's May 10, 1915. And Martha Stanhope. Right, Dr. Arnold?"

"I should dislike to speak too positively—"

"Please, Hugh," said Miss Paris. "You're not consoling a patient."

"Very well. I agree with O'Brien."

"Then we'll start there. Miss Paris has told me a little, but I need a hell of a lot more. Come on; tell all. What is the truth on the Stanhope?"

Dr. Arnold hesitated. "How much do you know?"

"I've read a little as an *aficionado* of criminology. In its own small way, it's a classic case: the perfect example of the unsolved murder that went unsolved only because of police indifference, to be polite about it. There've been commentators who hinted at more venal reasons."

"And you know the facts?"

"I haven't had time since yesterday to check up on the back files of newspapers, but I did go over Ferguson's *Persons Unknown*. You're familiar with his account?"

"I am," said Dr. Arnold wryly.

"It's good, but it's not what I want. Those facts have been available for a quarter of a century, and even Ferguson can't find a definite solution in them. What I want is what only you people can give me: not the facts but the truth, the truth of what happened at the Hotel de la Playa."

"Why the devil are we bringing up all this?" Horace Brainard expostulated sharply. "Martha's been dead twenty-five years. Her death was a tragedy. Played hell with my honeymoon. But why should we go into all that

now?"

"Because," said Stella Paris, "somebody cut my Valentino's throat."

"And," Dr. Arnold added, "somebody made a very serious attempt at cutting Corcoran's. Fortunately he used an absurdly dull knife."

"I can still see it," Janet was whispering to Tom Quincy in a corner of the living-room. "I saw it all through dinner. That poor cat lying there on the porch and the little red spots— That must be what they're talking about, isn't it?"

"Afraid so," Tom answered gravely. "That's Fergus's business; you know. God, you poor kid—!"

Janet laughed.

"Please, darling, don't be—"

"Oh, no. Don't worry, Tom. That laugh wasn't a warning signal of hysteria. It's just that— For years now I've been Our Miss Brainard. The capable editor. The woman of affairs. Miss Brainard doesn't seem the sort of person any man would call 'you poor kid.'"

"You're not Miss Brainard," Tom said softly. "You're Janet again now."

"Am I? I don't know who I am. I've been trying to be a nice dutiful child and not spoil Mother's anniversary, but I keep thinking about Valentino and wondering about Corcoran and it all writhes and coils inside of me until I—" She broke off and looked up at the tall young man. "This is a fine way to meet again after five years, isn't it?"

"We've met," said Tom simply. "That's the main thing. Just how doesn't matter so much."

"Doesn't it?"

There was silence for a moment. Janet thought of a snatch from an old ballad that Uncle Jim used to read: *And deep and heavy was the something that fell thir twa between.* Something quite irrational and unefficient seemed to be happening to her. She tried to think sensibly. She fixed her mind resolutely on that odd-looking phrase *thir twa* and tried to figure if it would be a useful addition to the crossword vocabulary. It might be quite helpful, or

would it be considered too dialectical? Though God knows you could get away with murder in that respect. *And deep and heavy was the something*— Tom's hand closed over hers and she did not stir. Another phrase from a favorite of Uncle Jim's popped into her head: *Our hands were firmly cemented with a fast bond*— That was funny too; you had to pronounce it "cemented."

*Come, come, Miss Brainard! What's the matter with you? Can you do nothing but sit and hold hands and weave streams of consciousness about scraps of verse? Are you weakening, Miss Brainard? Are you vanishing, Miss Brainard? Are you, Miss Brainard, a nebulous figure left behind in New York, while here on this island sits Janet holding hands with—*

Janet remembered the word that had escaped her in the ballad. "*And deep and heavy was the love,*" she said aloud.

"Janet darling!" Catherine Brainard was standing beside her daughter and radiating maternal affection. "I haven't really had a chance to talk to you ever since you got here. You must tell me all about your magazine and let us both forget this *stupid* business about the Mexican. You don't mind if I monopolize her, do you, Tom?"

"Not at all, Aunt Catherine." Tom released Janet's hand and rose. "I'll stretch my legs." He stretched them in the direction of the whisky decanter where Alys Trent inevitably stood.

"Poor boy!" Mrs. Brainard sighed.

Janet tried to look like Miss Brainard again. "Why?"

"Didn't you know? He won't be his uncle's heir any more. Not that that means anything to you of course but I did think you ought to know. And now do tell me all about those puzzles that I never can figure out."

"So you can see, Mr. Brainard," said Fergus, "why I have to know everything. Absogoddamnedly everything. This is a council of war." He paused to let the phrase and its implications sink in. "So to go back to the beginning: What else can you tell me about Martha Stan-

hope?"

"It wasn't a prowler?" Brainard's words came slowly. "Those hints—those rumors—they were true?"

"I will confess," Dr. Arnold admitted, "that I myself thought at the time that they were merely the fruit of some reporter's overvivid imagination. But I have told you what an impossible young prig I was, and how resolutely I refused to let personal problems intrude upon my Great Labors. I deliberately forced myself to believe in that prowler, and I preserved that belief for almost exactly twenty-five years. But when I saw Corcoran today—"

"I didn't believe either," said Stella Paris, "not even when I saw Valentino. It could have been something else. There are queer sects in Los Angeles. Some of them kill cats, people say. But I was afraid even without believing, and that's why when I met Mr. O'Brien— Well, I thought it couldn't do any harm."

"But now," the doctor went on, "we must abandon this retreat-to-the-womb consolation of wishful thinking. Cats and murder may be coincidence once, but not a second time. And when you add to that the coincidence of Europe—"

"Of Europe?" Fergus repeated quickly. "Oh. Of course. Damn, I missed that. Never was good at dates. But the *Lusitania*—"

"—was sunk on May 8, 1915," the doctor concluded. "There's a tempting parallelism in this. In each case a long struggle of European war, brought in each case to its climax of abrupt horror by one clear and terrible act: in 1915, the sinking of the *Lusitania*; in 1940, the invasion this morning."

"Damn cases and parallels!" Horace Brainard yelled. "What are we going to *do*?"

"Why, Horace," Dr. Arnold smiled. "Is not that for you to say? I had thought that you were the man of action. But this is not mere historical background. Surely you remember what the sinking of the *Lusitania* meant to us?"

"Don't, Hugh," said Stella Paris.

"But we must, Stella. You may recall, Mr. O'Brien, that

I toasted one Jay Stanhope at dinner? He was the brother of the ill-starred Martha. A flaming young idealist, one of the pure in heart whom we more mundane beings find at once so puzzling and so irresistible. It was Jay who was responsible for our group. It was he, and perhaps to a lesser extent Martha, who held us all together. He meant much to each of us. He died on the *Lusitania*."

"And you think then that the war hysteria and the final culminating shock has something to do with these throat-slittings?" Fergus was pacing again. "Could be. But—and it seems to me I have a dim memory of asking this question before—can you tell me more about Martha Stanhope?"

"Very little, I fear. We—or all but one of us—know no more than your Mr. Ferguson."

"The hell with Ferguson. I want your story. Tell it your way."

"There is little to tell. She was found in her room at the hotel; it was the old De la Playa near Santa Eulalia, which used to be so fashionable in carriage days. The whole wedding party, aside of course from Horace and Catherine, had decided to convene there after the ceremony. We danced and drank till one or two, and an hour or so after we went to bed a loud noise—a scuffle, as I recall it, or possibly a scream—woke us. We hurried to Martha's room; we all had rooms in that same corridor. We found her dead."

"We being?"

"Stella, Lucas Quincy, James Herndon, and myself."

"Who found her first?"

"I am not sure. Herndon, I believe."

"And the knife?"

"Was found later outside the window."

"Ground floor?"

"Yes. A burglar could have entered easily enough. Her jewel box was open, but so far as we could tell nothing had been taken. We supposed that he might have been panic-stricken and forgotten his purpose."

"Impractical of him. And that's all?"

"One cannot remember details for twenty-five years."

"Not much help specifically, is it?" Fergus observed. "But limiting. Damned limiting."

"Four suspects," said the doctor quietly. "And two of them here in your council of war."

"And how about the cats—the 1915 cats? If I remember right, one of them was Martha Stanhope's?"

"Yes. The other was Alys's."

"You wouldn't remember anything there after so long? Anything that might limit the group even further?"

Stella Paris answered. "I don't see how. We were all of us in and out of the Stanhope home all the time. Martha was—I suppose you might almost call it stage-managing the wedding."

"Which cat died first?"

"Martha's. He was a yowling marauder and the neighbors hated him. We thought at first it might be spite. But then when that sweet little kitten of Alys's was killed—"

"And you never believed that the man who had killed those cats killed Martha?"

"No, we didn't. We—"

"But good God in heaven!" Fergus exclaimed. "Just how much coincidence could you swallow in your group?"

"Be honest, Stella," Dr. Arnold said.

"But I am, Hugh."

"Perhaps you think you are. We were afraid to believe, Mr. O'Brien. The cats alone could mean some sadistic maniac living near the Stanhopes. Martha alone could mean a prowler. Together they had to mean what we resolutely refused to admit."

"I," said Fergus, "may be an outrageous sentimentalist, and probably am; but it hits me like this: a murderer is one thing, but a bastard that'll cut the throat of a little girl's kitten— How did Alys take it?"

"Badly," Arnold said. "I gave her another to console her, but she would have nothing to do with it."

"She never did have another cat," Stella Paris added. "She wouldn't even play with—with Valentino at my house."



"And about Valentino now, Miss Paris: what happened there?"

"It—it was after a dinner party. Janet found him on the back porch when she was helping me clean up."

"When?"

"Wednesday night. Day before yesterday."

"And who was at the party?"

"James and Hugh and Lucas and Alys. And of course Janet and I. She and Hugh had got in from New York that morning. It was a sort of advance party to let her meet all the week-end people. Excepting Hugh, she hadn't seen any of them for five years and—"

"That's another thing. Why did Janet leave home five years ago? Or no," he paused as he noticed the glare on Brainard's face; "that can ride. There are more urgent matters. Same cast then for Valentino as for Martha Stanhope?"

"Same cast," said Stella flatly. "But couldn't it be—? After all, there are sects that—"

"Look," said Fergus firmly. "Coincidence is fun, but let's not have an orgy of it. Remember what the doctor said about self-deception. And for Corcoran?" He looked at Dr. Arnold.

"It was shortly before you two young men arrived. James Herndon had finished dressing early and gone out for a pipe on the beach. He—happened on the poor wretch. He was still alive, so James came for me at once. I saw that the wound was not serious. Corcoran needed nothing more than rest and good care, and I decided that there was no purpose in needlessly alarming the party until I had had time to think things out."

"Everybody dressing—" Fergus reflected. "Enough rooms, or any people paired off?"

"Young man," Horace Brainard snorted, "my guests have never had to pair off until Fate threw loutish greasers and wild young men among them!" But his voice lacked its usual vigor.

"So nobody checks on anybody. Everybody with lots of quiet private time for dressing—or throat-cutting. Miss

Paris—"

"Yes?"

"One more question, and I think it's the most important I've asked yet. Did you tell anybody here, anybody at all, about my profession?"

This was not the question Miss Paris had expected. "Why no. No, I didn't."

"Not even Janet?"

"Not even Janet."

"Then—" Fergus's pacing was jerky and nervous. "Then why the ever-sweet hell should—"

"Just a moment, Mr. O'Brien." This was the most courteous address which Horace Brainard had yet accorded him. "You've been asking all the questions so far. Now let me ask one."

"Fair enough." Fergus halted and leaned back against the table. With any luck, this should be the point he'd been building up to. "Shoot."

"What is your purpose in all this huggermugger? What are you planning to do?"

Fergus lit a cigarette and half wished he'd brought the brandy decanter along. He'd aimed at this, and Quincy's proposition was tempting; but he didn't care for dealing with Horace Brainard. "My purpose? Well, Mr. Brainard, you'd probably put it this way: my purpose is to get some money out of you."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"It's like this. You're all in serious danger on this island. Ramirez and Corcoran and 1915 can't leave you in much doubt of that. Now I'm a man with professional experience in handling just that kind of danger, as Miss Paris realized when she invited me. But I don't like to bring my harp to the party just for the hell of it. I'm a working man."

"Yes?" Brainard snapped dubiously.

"Yes. Suppose we put it like this. There are two immediate needs: to find out who your throat-slitter is, and to get you all off this island in safety."

"And—?" Brainard's tone was that of one who fears the

worst.

"I can satisfy those needs. So let's say five hundred dollars for either of them and a thousand if I bring them both off."

"One—thousand—dollars?" Horace Brainard spaced his words with exaggerated irony. "Young man, it's you are the madman."

"Hold on. Don't let a frontal attack on your pocketbook distract you from a flanking movement by a murderer. You're on a hell of a spot here. Dr. Arnold's theory was very pretty, but that boat didn't just run off by itself after conking Hokay. Somebody wants us stranded here without protection. Very specifically, somebody wants us stranded here without my protection. You're not a poor man, sir. Your friends' lives, to put it noble-like, ought to be worth something to you. I won't stress the danger to your own."

Brainard seemed unsure of himself. "And if I refuse to accede to this—this blackmail?"

"Hell," said Fergus harshly, "that's easy. I just rear back on my fanny and take damned good care of myself. Watch the stiff go by."

Brainard tried to repress a shudder. "Very well. When we are all safely back on the mainland, you shall have your reward. Now. What's the first step in your campaign?"

"My first step? Drawing up a contract."

"A contract?"

"Sure. What other chance do you think I'd have of collecting that grand once we're all safely back on the mainland?"

Horace Brainard's face was a model of outraged innocence. "Young man," he declaimed, drawing himself up to what he fondly dreamed was a full height, "you can go to hell. I am quite capable of protecting my guests—even from such cheap swindlers as you. Come, Hugh! Stella!" And he stormed out of the library.

Fergus snapped his fingers and silently translated a historical remark of General Pierre Cambronne. *What you*

*need for success as a private detective is not skill nor intelligence nor strength nor knowledge; it's a careful study of the works of Dale Carnegie.* He'd muffed it again, and two thousand dollars had stamped out of that door.

The other two had not followed their host. "Mr. O'Brien," Stella Paris began hesitantly.

Fergus jumped down from the table and resumed pacing. "That's that," he said curtly. "Now, doctor, the first item on our agenda—"

Miss Paris let out a relieved sigh. "Then you are going to help us, even though Horace—"

"Hell," Fergus grinned, "you didn't think I was such a heel as our host, did you?"

He could feel his Evil Angel wince.

"This young Irishman—" James Herndon ventured. "Do you think Alys was right? Is he a detective?"

"There, James," said Lucas Quincy. "Don't fret over it. You know that you're safe so long as you have me with you."

"Am I? But it's not that, Lucas. It's something else. And if he is a detective, I ought to talk to him."

"Don't hurry. You'll have your chance, no doubt. But think about it first. You know what happens, James, when an excitable, sensitive man talks too much. People can get curious ideas."

"But I—"

"I'm speaking for your own good, James. Haven't I looked after your—say your best interests for twenty-five years now? Don't I know what I'm talking about?"

Alys Trent came up to them and leaned over Herndon. "Whazzamazza?" she demanded in a sort of soothing baby talk. "Uncle Jim looks sad. Can't little Alys cheer him up maybe, huh?"

Herndon brushed away her hand. "Please, Alys."

Lucas Quincy let out his bark of a laugh. "Don't drive her away, James. She'll do you good. Take your mind off of troubles. Isn't she lovely to look at tonight? What does she make you think of? Doesn't she remind you of—"

"No!" James Herndon was on his feet. Every nerve of his tall body seemed to tremble. "No, Lucas. For God's sake!"

Alys stared at him blankly. "Did I do something?"

"Sit down, James." Lucas's voice was harsh and irresistible. "Sit and think. And don't talk wild. Remember this detective's of the new breed. It's even possible he might be interested in modern poetry."

Alys was still blank. She couldn't see how such a foolish remark could make a grown man like James Herndon shudder.

"Our first job," said Fergus, "is the bonfire."

"The bonfire?" Stella Paris repeated frowning. "I'm sure Horace would be delighted to have you celebrate his anniversary so spectacularly, but why?"

Dr. Arnold nodded understandingly. "It might work."

"I don't guarantee it," Fergus warned, "but it's worth taking the chance. You see, of the two objectives I named for Brainard, I can't help thinking that getting us all safe off this island is the more important. Sure, I'd like to know, abstract-like, who our throat-cutter is; I'd like to see him neatly put away. But I think the rest of us'll be a damned sight safer from his little attentions if we get the hell off this island and back to Los Angeles."

"We are—trapped, aren't we?" said Stella Paris. "I don't think," she added with fine understatement, "that I like it."

"Your accident-theory about the launch, doctor, was a masterpiece of improvisation. I salute you, sir. But the time is past for any policy of appeasement. And now you can admit that you didn't believe a word of that theory yourself."

"Of course not."

"That boat was not stolen. Ramirez was knocked out, the motor of the launch was started, and the boat was sent straight out to sea. Or no, fortunately not really that. From the lee side of the island here it would go ashore some place on the coast if it had enough gas, as it certain-

ly must have had. But there's no telling when it would be found and identified, or whether people could ever figure out what it meant. He wasn't taking many chances that way."

"You mean," said Miss Paris slowly, "that one of us deliberately sent that launch away to—to trap us all here?"

"Exactly. And trapped we damned well are. It's all building to something. Valentino and Ramirez and even poor Corcoran are an overture, a nice grisly overture full of sinister chords on the double bass and menacing thuds from the kettledrums. But the overture's about finished now. The stage is all set for something that we still don't know the script of. And it's up to us to keep the curtain from going up."

"Hence the bonfire?"

"Hence the bonfire. If we build a nice big hell of a blaze that can be seen from Santa Eulalia, some curious person may decide the house is on fire and dash forth to rescue us."

"Or," suggested Dr. Arnold cheerfully, "he may think what a wonderful wienie-roast we're having."

"It's a chance we've got to take. There's no other boat. It's too far to swim. There's no telephone. And I don't think any of us is capable of whipping up a radio sending set out of a few random wires and the generator plant. Of course by tomorrow we'll be all right; but the sooner we can get off of here, the happier I'll be."

"And why should our position have improved so much by tomorrow? Do you plan to send heliograph messages when the sun rises?"

Fergus grinned. "That's a point. I never thought of that. You know Morse?"

"No."

"Neither do I. And five'll get you ten that nobody else in the company does either. We simply aren't a properly equipped Stranded Party. But tomorrow, you see, we'll receive a visit from the Los Angeles Police Department."

"E.S.P., no doubt," said the doctor dryly. "You must send a paper on this to Rhine."

"Nothing so wonderful. I knew what I might be walking into. I hoped I could forestall it; but if—if I failed, there should be somebody to take over. So I left a note for my friend Andy Jackson. He's a lieutenant on Homicide. If he doesn't hear from me by phone or wire tomorrow, he's to take steps. And they'll be shrewd ones."

*The sergeant at the desk said, "Hi! What's all the rush?"*

*Detective Lieutenant A. Jackson paused briefly. "Just got a sure tip on Campetti."*

*"That bastard? Where'd they find him?"*

*"They haven't yet. That's why the rush. But Gino talked. He says Campetti's headed for Las Vegas with that waitress that saw the shooting. The old gag: marry 'em and they can't testify."*

*"It may be old," said the sergeant sagely, "but it works."*

*"Not this time. I'm flying to Las Vegas, and I'm stopping that wedding."*

*"Or a slug," the sergeant added optimistically. "Well, have yourself a time at Las Vegas. Hit the jackpot for me."*

*"Thanks." Jackson's unbelievably long legs resumed their rapid stride.*

*"Hi! Almost forgot. Guy left this note for you."*

*"Thanks." Lieutenant Jackson crammed the note into his pocket unread and immediately forgot it.*

"Then it behooves the murderer," Dr. Arnold reflected, "to get his business over with tonight—"

Stella Paris looked at him oddly. "Please, Hugh. Don't talk like that. You sound almost as though—"

"As though I were the cat-killer? And why not? Hasn't Mr. O'Brien demonstrated that it must be you or I or James or Lucas? One of these four—or did he include Alys?"

"Alys!" Miss Paris laughed.

"Don't be too hasty, Stella. Alys was remarkably precocious in many respects. Who can say how many?"

"Glad you brought that up," said Fergus. "It leads us right into the next point, which is what comes after the

bonfire. I think you'll agree, doctor, that we ought to get some sleep tonight. I'll admit the safest possible procedure might be for all of us to sit up all night in one room where everybody could watch everybody. From a material point of view, that's ideal. But psychologically—"

"Yes," Arnold agreed. "There were tension and suspicion enough evident at dinner, when many of us no more than half realized our situation. A solid night of that silent glaring could bring about more murders than our cat-killer has ever dreamed of. You're quite right, O'Brien; we must sleep. But surely with guards?"

"Of course. And I think you'll agree with me that those guards will have to be Tom and me, with possibly Janet to help us. We three are the only ones who can't come under any conceivable suspicion—aside from Alys, and you can guess how much use she'd be."

"The Brainards," Stella Paris suggested. "They weren't at the hotel when—when Martha—"

"Do you see me getting any co-operation out of the Brainards? A beautiful and touching dream, Miss Paris, but highly impractical. No, it's Tom and me, with one sweet thought to warm us in our vigil."

"That being?"

"That our throat-cutter is curiously inefficient. That dull knife on Corcoran— He seems to be one killer you've got a fair chance of surviving."

"That point worries me," Arnold confessed. "In all the history of psychopathic killers—and surely this must be one—I have never heard of one so neglectful of the tools of his trade."

Miss Paris gave a shuddering little cry. "But that's why—I Oh—I"

"What?" Fergus demanded.

"You remember I carved the roast ahead of time? Well, I noticed when I was in the kitchen serving the dessert, the fork of that carving-set was right where I'd left it, but the knife— I didn't look for it; I just thought it might have been mislaid in the confusion. But now—"

"Who had the chance to take it?"



"Anybody might have. I carved the roast before I went to call people to dinner. I was in and out of the kitchen; anybody could have slipped in for a second."

"And anybody," Dr. Arnold added, "could have known that we were having a roast and that a carving-knife would be at hand in the kitchen."

Fergus said nothing. He was seeing in his mind those thin, sharply cut slices of beef. It would not be a dull knife the next time.

"—the damned audacity," Horace Brainard was indignantly expounding to his guests, "to demand a thousand dollars of me, or we'd all have our throats cut!"

"High stakes," Lucas Quincy grunted, with a certain admiration.

"Come now, Horace," James Herndon interposed mildly. "I'm sure you misunderstood the young man. He can't have had the brass to threaten our lives like that."

"Can't he? You ask Hugh. Ask Stella. They heard him. 'A thousand dollars,' he said. 'Your guests' lives ought to be worth that to you!'"

"But, Father," Janet suggested, "mightn't he have meant that he wanted to protect us?"

"That's right," Mrs. Brainard sniffed. "Stand up for him because he's Tom's friend. That's the way young people are. Their own generation means more to them than their own people who've borne them and bred them and loved them—"

"Loved them so much," said James Herndon, "that they drove them off to New York." His words were as light as his pipe's smoke, and drifted away as unheeded.

Mrs. Brainard turned, with a sort of reverential coquetry, to the red-faced financier. "What do you think, Lucas? Don't you think that Horace was right?"

"I think," said Lucas Quincy, "that that young Irishman has guts."

"Hasn't he just—!" Alys murmured.

Fergus felt the hostility when he entered the room. It came at him in heavy warm waves and stifled him. Or per-

haps it was the open fire and the aftereffects of the brandy.

He walked to the fireplace and stood facing all those eyes. Stella Paris slipped in quietly after him and sat down beside Janet. "I wish," Fergus said, "that I could speak to you under different circumstances. If Mr. Brainard had so desired, I could have given orders. As it is, I can only make suggestions." His voice belied his words. There was in it a new and commanding strength. The vanished carving-knife had made the whole terror immediate. There was no time now to curry favor or to angle for checks. The Evil Angel had gone home in disgust at such impracticality. There was nothing to do now but take over and do your damndest.

"Where the devil is Hugh?" snapped Brainard.

"Have you started with him?" Mrs. Brainard demanded shrilly.

"Don't be an ass, Cathy," said Lucas Quincy.

"Dr. Arnold," Fergus explained as calmly as he could, "has gone to check up on his patients. I've come here to see, if possible, that he's not going to have any more of them. I'm not strong on this oogyboogy approach, but I've got to jolt you into doing what has to be done. So without asking the permission that I know Mr. Brainard will refuse to grant, I'm going to ask a few questions. First, are there any flashlights in this house?"

"I saw one in the kitchen," said Stella Paris, and Janet added, "I have one."

"And Dr. Arnold thinks he remembers one in Corcoran's room. That's some small help. And are there any firearms among you?"

There was silence.

"You know," Fergus explained patiently. "Little things that go *boom!* and kill people. The makeshift gap until we get disintegrator rays. Come on. Are we an unarmed group?"

"Don't *you* have a gun?" Alys sounded hurt and disillusioned.

"Light of my life, that is a sore subject, and we'll pass over it in gentle silence. Nobody?"

"I—" James Herndon's voice was so loud in the silence that he broke off and began again more softly. "I do have a gun, I suppose."

"You *suppose*?"

"Well, you see, Mr. O'Brien, it's a set. A morocco case containing a meerscham pipe and a bone-handled revolver, designed to match. The meerscham is a beautiful piece of craftsmanship, semi-curved, a modified-bulldog bowl carved into—"

"And the revolver?"

"You see, I never think of that as a weapon. It's just something that lives with the meerscham. But I suppose it is a firearm."

"Don't be too scared," said Fergus. "Maybe it's really a water pistol. Is it loaded?"

"I—I think so."

Fergus groaned. "Whatever the hell it is, I want it. You can have it back tomorrow, God willing; I won't spoil your pretty set. But something in my hand would make me feel a damned sight more comfortable tonight."

"You surely aren't going to do that, James?" his brother-in-law blustered. "Entrust the one weapon on the island to this threatening young imbecile?"

"You think it's wise, James?" Lucas Quincy asked heavily.

James Herndon looked at Fergus a long time. "Somehow, Lucas, I think it is." His tone was that of a man who has just heard the foreman say "Guilty" and who rejoices that now that weight is off his mind.

"All right," said Fergus. "Now if all the revered members of the older generation will stay put happily in this room for the next half-hour, we younger ones are going gathering nuts in May, or shells on the seashore Willie, as you prefer. In simpler words, we're out for driftwood, lagan, flotsam, jetsam, Cottontail, and Peter to make the goddamnedest bonfire Blackman's Island has ever seen."

James Herndon's voice was low. Only the fact that one of Fergus's odder friends had recently been forcing Eliot down his throat enabled him to catch the quotation:

*"To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
burning"*

## Chapter Six

### SEVEN MORE SNEEZES

IT WAS IN THE MIDST of the driftwood hunt that Fergus found the knife.

His self-allotted area was the center of the beach, nearest the house if any fresh hell broke loose there. Off to his right and left he could see the wandering beams of the flashlights which indicated the quests of Tom and Janet. Near him the pyre grew. It was not going to be quite so mountainous as he had hoped, but it should serve.

And there on the sand, halfway between the house and those dark stains that had so entranced Alys Trent, his flashlight glinted on metal. He bent over and picked up the knife. Not the stolen carving-knife; that still hung in Damoclean suspension over their heads, or to be more anatomically precise, their necks. This must be the Corcoran knife.

It was an unusual and unwieldy sort of implement, somewhat along the Boy Scout model. The blade that was open bore blood and sand. There were several other blades, for unimaginable purposes. Despite his ever-active curiosity, he refrained from opening them. It was a long chance, but prints might be taken from the metal trim of the horn handle. Next to impossible, but still worth the try.

He touched the sand-clotted blade firmly with his thumb. Definitely dull. Not an efficient murderer this; and the point Arnold had made was well taken. But next time— He wrapped the knife in a handkerchief, slipped it into the breast pocket of his shirt, and turned hastily back to the house.

When he came into the living-room, all was silent save for a sort of rasping gurgle. At first he could not place it. It sounded like a peculiarly damp death rattle.

Then Horace Brainard shouted, "Will you for God's

sake clean that damned pipe, Jim!"

"I'm so sorry." Herndon laid the offending pipe gently upon the table beside him. "But I can't clean it. I've lost my knife that has all those handy gadgets on it. And this has reached a state where a simple pipe cleaner is helpless against it."

"Then use another pipe. Brought along your whole damned collection, didn't you?"

"Very well, Horace."

"Just a minute, Mr. Herndon," said Fergus. "When did you lose this gadget-knife?"

"When? Oh— This morning, I think. Since I came to the island, I'm certain. If you should happen to see it while you're hunting around—"

"Sure. I'll let you know. Miss Paris, could you come into the kitchen with me for a minute?"

"Well?" Stella Paris demanded when they had reached the kitchen. "I imagine Horace thinks you've dragged me out here for rrrrevenge because he wouldn't come across. But what is it really?"

"A little spot of plain and fancy stable-door-locking. If our throat-slitting friend is given to switching knives, we might as well prevent another switch. You worked in this kitchen. You know the layout. I want you to find me every remaining knife with a sharp cutting edge. Make certain that carving-knife is missing, and see if anything else is."

Without a word Miss Paris was setting resolutely about this gruesome task when Lucas Quincy appeared in the doorway. He nodded at Fergus and said, "Hall."

This time, when he took out a cigar for himself, he offered one to the detective. It was worth taking. The perfect suavity of the first puff was a noteworthy sensation even in the midst of such a night.

"No luck with Horace?" Quincy asked tersely.

"None. And double zero is zero. The house wins or either of them."

"You were right, hang you," Quincy grunted reluctantly. "Since I've heard about Corcoran and the carving knife, I see what you meant by proof. This is the job

again."

"On my terms?"

"Which are?"

"As before. D.A.'s office if need be."

Quincy hardly hesitated. "It's a deal."

"We've got to talk." With Quincy, Fergus found himself dropping into the man's own laconic speech.

"Not now. You go ahead with your bonfire and guard arrangements. Come see me late tonight—others asleep."

"Okay."

"And O'Brien."

"Sir?"

"Here's an idea for you: I think you'll find that the solution to this problem lies in Eliot."

Fergus all but gasped. "You read Eliot?"

"Never read a word of him," said Lucas Quincy, and walked back to the living-room.

Fergus frowned as he returned to the kitchen. He saw one possible reason for Quincy's off-again-on-again-Finnegan attitude, a reason that would make the entire problem both simpler and far more complex. But the Eliot allusion was beyond him.

He was so intensely preoccupied by now with the immediate urgency of the case itself that he gave hardly more than a passing thought to this definite prospect of a fee at last. He had not even thought to mention a contract this time, though God knew he trusted Lucas Quincy no more than he did Brainard.

He found Stella Paris regarding a pile of a dozen or so knives of varying sizes, shapes, and uses. "I think," she said, "that these are the only ones that would—that would do."

"And no others missing?"

"Just that carving-knife. It was Sheffield steel with a smooth bone handle. That's all that's gone."

"But 'tis enough," Fergus mused. "Twill serve."

In the house you forgot you were on an island. You seemed to be—well, just anywhere. In an ordinary civilized

abode, where you simply went to the phone and called the police if anything extraordinary happened.

But out here on the beach it was different. You saw the twinkle of stars above you and the twinkle of Santa Eulalia lights before you, and they seemed equally far away. You were another Selkirk, another Crusoe; but the footprint you had stumbled on betokened no friendly servant, but a black shape with no face, a shape with a Sheffield carving-knife and a curious taste for throats.

The first three matches went out. The fourth glowed at last in Fergus's cupped hands. "I'd make a hell of a Boy Scout," he observed.

"But just think, O'Brien," said Janet, "how cute you'd look in short pants."

"If I did, the rest of the troop would undoubtedly be wearing dinner jackets. I never realized before what a psychological disadvantage clothes can put you at."

The papers caught fire quickly and spread crackling brightness to the pile of wood.

"This," said Tom, "is going to be the swellest blaze since Mrs. O'Leary's cow brandished her temperament."

"Is that funny, Tom?" Janet asked.

"Did I say it was?"

"I think Alys might like it."

"Tut tut!" Fergus tut-tutted. "Undignified bickering." He stood back, surveyed the glowing pyre, and seemed medium content. "God knows what will come of this, but it's worth the try. And now comes the time to put the rest of the plan into action. Tom, you and Janet go back to the house and herd those people to their rooms. Then Tom, you take the business half of Herndon's precious matching set and establish yourself on guard. I'll stick around here for a while and see that this gets started good. Relieve you later."

"And my duties?" Janet asked.

"Nothing probably."

"But I want some duties. Doing nothing isn't my line."

"We'll hold you in reserve. Run along now."

"I'm not running," she announced decisively. "If I have



no duties at the house, I'm staying here. Tom can get along without me. And I need this fire. I need to look at something clean and bright until it burns out all the horror and fear and nonsense inside me."

*Burning burning burning burning*, Fergus thought, *to Carthage then I came and the solution lies in Eliot and nuts!* He shrugged. "Okay. You go on ahead, Tom. I'll send up Janet as soon as she's purged."

But Quincy hadn't said *T. S. Eliot*. Had he just jumped to that notion because Herndon's quotation was still in his mind? But what else did Eliot mean? A five-foot shelf and *The Mill on the Floss* which what is a floss anyway? and a president's son and "Some Day I'll Find You" and the solution lies in Eliot and my heart belongs to daddy with moonlight behind you—"Better move back a little," he said aloud. "The fire's getting hot."

"We should at least have marshmallows." Janet smiled. "Huge ones like footstools to match the size of this fire."

The firelight glistened on Fergus's collection of knives. Janet looked at them and then away quickly.

"Tell me, O'Brien," she said, with an abrupt return to the efficient manner of Our Miss Brainard. "You are a detective, aren't you?"

"Tom told you?"

"It wouldn't have been too hard to guess anyway since you started taking over. I don't know who's paying your bill, and I'm not asking; but I suppose in a way we're all of us your clients here, aren't we?"

"All," said Fergus, "but one."

"Yes—of course—" She faltered for a moment, but rapidly regained her brusque manner. "Then tell me, as detective to client, do you really think that anything more will happen tonight?"

"With an O'Brien in charge? Hell, no, my sweeting. You're snug as the dug of a bug in a rug."

"And you wish you believed that, don't you?"

Fergus damned her accuracy silently but thoroughly. Then he said, "You don't happen to know Morse, I suppose?"

"No, I don't. Sorry."

"And with all your efficiency. Shocking."

"Why should I? Oh, of course. Signals."

"Uh huh. Comes daylight. The sun'll be right, and we could rig up one of the dressing-table mirrors. But comes daylight I won't be worrying so much anyway. Wonderful thing, night. The human capacity for terror wouldn't be half so well developed without darkness. It's primeval and it's prime nonsense, but it works."

"I know," Janet said after a pause. "Things do work. Whether we want them to or not. Whether we're sensible or not."

"Atavism is the first law of nature," said Fergus. "Which on reflection doesn't seem to mean anything, but wouldn't sound bad at a highbrow party. I'll save it."

"Like being filial. Are you filial, O'Brien?"

"I was once."

"That's what I would have said. I was once. I'd cut all my home ties. I was a free woman, I was. I walked by myself and the world was spread out before me like my own private if singularly pearlless oyster. I was me, the bright young editor. I could stand up and say, 'I yam what I yam, just like Popeye.'"

"Saint Paul said it first," Fergus remarked.

"It's a good thought whoever said it. But it's not true. You aren't just what you are. You're what you have been too, even when you think it's done with. I come back here I look at Father and Mother. I'm rational and dispassionate and I think: here are a couple of people who've always been silly only now they're getting old and all the sillier. I feel closer to Stella or Dr. Hugh or even to Uncle Jim. But just the same, if I don't stop and think, if I just let myself feel, then it's: 'I'm home again with my family and it's good.'"

Fergus gave the fire a needless poke. "I never knew my mother," he said. "My father was swell when he was sober and even sweller half the time he was tight. The other half—"

"I suppose it wouldn't last if I stayed. I'd think more

and I'd feel less, and pretty soon it'd be the whole mess over again. I'll have to go back East. The Live Alone and Like It Girl. And the damndest thing is, O'Brien, I do like it."

"You were lucky. Striking out on your own like that and landing a decent editorial job."

"Was I? I don't know. I've got my suspicions. Uncle Lucas has a finger in so many pies of so many assorted flavors. I wouldn't put even crossword puzzles past him."

Fergus watched the flames for a while. Beyond their upflaring brightness the little shorelights of Santa Eulalia vanished, and you faced an empty expanse to the east as though you were looking out west. "Why, Janet?" he asked at last.

She jumped a trifle at the sudden breaking of silence. "Why what?"

"Why did you strike out on your own like that?"

"Why not? A girl wants to lead her own life, doesn't she?"

"Does she always?"

"This one did."

"You mean that you are," he lightly burlesqued the banal phrase, "a Career Woman at Heart?"

"Who knows what he is at heart?" she burst out, with a sudden flaring glimpse of a passion he had hardly suspected in her. But her voice was calm again as she resumed. "If you really want to know, O'Brien, if you think you can pin everything down to one all-significant little episode and say, 'This is it,' I'll tell you why I walked out on the family. Because I couldn't wear my new dress."

"I'm not sure the male mind follows."

"Not even the trained mind of the detective?"

"Educate me," Fergus suggested humbly.

Janet leaned back and clasped her hands around her knees. "I was nineteen then. I was in college and I was meeting people and I was beginning to have fun. Only I never bought my own clothes. Mother always bought them for me. And I was pretty slow realizing what was the matter. Only one night after a party I got to thinking about

all the other girls there, girls I knew were my own age, and I looked at them in my mind and I looked at me in the mirror. And I saw. They were all women now, and I was still a little girl." Her voice was bitter but it was also curiously young. As she spoke, she seemed almost to be nineteen again.

"I don't think I out-and-out admitted to myself why Mother did that. It was too cruel a thing to admit, but I must have known it even without admitting. Because I never complained to Mother or asked her to get me anything different. I just saved as much as I could out of my allowance, and I bought myself an evening gown. It was wonderful. It was so simple that it cost twice what I'd figured on, but I couldn't resist it. It wasn't a dress; it was just a black slinkiness that covered part of you. I tried it on in my room alone and I'd stolen one of Mother's cigarettes and I looked as though my name ought to be Sonya or Dagmar until I started coughing. Which by the way—I don't cough any more—have you—?"

Fergus tossed her a package of cigarettes and held out a brand from the fire for a light. "And did you knock 'em dead?"

"Wait. The story's just started. It was for a big party of Uncle Lucas's. All sorts of important people. And of course Tom would be there. I used to put on quite a performance then of pretending I couldn't see him—girls are silly things—but still I knew I wanted him there when I wore this. I took a long time dressing that night because I put things in the bath and then I had to wait till Mother was out of her dressing-room so I could sneak in and rifle her table. Oh, I did myself up proud, I did. Father and Mother were waiting downstairs and getting pretty impatient when I Swept Down the Staircase—that's the proper phrase for Sonya, isn't it?"

"Sounds more like Dagmar."

"Hm. I think you're right, O'Brien. Anyway, I Swept. And then I paused at the foot of the stairs and rested one hand on the rail and tossed back my head and tried a Lynn Fontanne sort of laugh—oh, that was an entrance!

That *was* an entrance!"

"And—?"

Janet's face was turned away from the fire into shadow. "Then it was awful. I tell you, O'Brien, it was terrible. Mother began to scream and make a scene and this was treachery and going behind her back and had she nurtured a viper in her bosom. Oh, I don't mean she actually said such absurd things as that, but I got the general idea all right. And Father backed her up and what did I think I was and a daughter of his making a Common Exhibition of herself damn it all and— Well, it was just plain hell. I suppose maybe it's funny from outside, I don't know. But it was hell then. It still is."

"And so you were—filial?"

"Of course. What else could I be? You can't let your mother cry. Not even when you're nineteen and in your first evening gown. No, I was an angel child. We went back upstairs together and we had a Good Cry and we made up and I changed my clothes. We were late for the party and I looked about fifteen. And I was nasty to all the important people and especially to Tom and I went to New York."

"Fast curtain."

"Second act," Janet picked up the metaphor, "five years later, Blackman's Island—"

"Cast, same as Act I. And our heroine, who so intensely wanted to look nineteen, now at last does so."

Janet smiled in the firelight. "Compliment?"

"Intended as such. Rough draft."

"I'm not used to them. Not that kind anyway. The compliments I hear are more apt to be, 'Smart work on that last issue, Miss Brainard.' "

"What's the matter with men in New York?"

"The East is too near the South. The Cindy Lous are the standard of femininity; and God keep me from entering that competition. . . . What do you think of Tom, O'Brien?"

"I resent him. No one with his mind has a right to be that good-looking. Divine gifts should be split up."

"I wouldn't say he's so good-looking as all that." Her tone was not convincing. "But do you like him?"

"Aside from that resentment, a hell of a lot. He's a good joe, Tom is."

"It's funny with Tom. Here I thought I was—" Janet let her voice trail off and stared at the fire. Abruptly she rose and shook sand from her gown. "I'm going back to the house before I let all my hair down. You should have followed the family vocation, O'Brien. I can just see you in your little box, listening to them pour it all out."

"Uh uh." Fergus shook his head. "I'd be lousy at it. You can't smoke in a confessional. And imagine other peoples' troubles without tobacco."

"Does everybody talk to you like this?"

"Plenty. Especially murderers. They think it makes a good smoke screen."

Janet shivered. "Thanks. I needed a cold shower. Any orders, chief?"

Fergus mused. "There's one thing you can do. Maybe you're just the person for it. While you keep Tom company in his vigil, you can ponder on a riddle."

"If it's good, I warn you, I'll steal it for the mag."

"Not this one. Different style. It's only five words long, and it goes: *The solution lies in Eliot.*"

"But that doesn't mean anything."

"Put your puzzle mind to work on it. Tell Tom too. There's just the goddamnedest bare chance that it may mean everything."

The house was all lights. Presumably everyone had gone upstairs by now, but no one had turned off the lights on the first floor. Janet could understand that. To turn off a light would be a concession to the darkness. It would be opening the door to fear and the unknown.

The second floor was quiet. Tom sat sprawled in a chair with his back to the wall. On another chair beside him were a pack of cigarettes, an ash tray, and Uncle Jim's bone-handled revolver.

Janet moved with deliberately cautious softness, but

the guard was alert. He had sprung to his feet, seized the revolver, and covered her accurately before he recognized her.

Then he laughed quietly. She applauded in pantomime. "Nice work," she whispered. "Good watchdog."

"I thought it might be Alys. She's not in her room—must have slipped off into the night. And she's not too sober."

"Worried about her?"

"To be frank," said Tom, "I'm worried about Fergus. I know my Aunt Alys."

"Do you?" She put the most malicious meaning into the question.

"How's the fire?" he asked.

"Blazing nobly."

"Feel all purged now?"

"I'm my own sane self again."

"Does your own self have to be sane?"

"I like it that way. And I think I'm sanely ready for bed."

"No, please. Not yet. Stay and talk with me."

"I shouldn't distract the watchdog."

Tom shrugged. "Women weren't intended to be sensible. Why try to break the rules?"

"Victorian male."

"And unvictorious— But tell me, my fine modern woman, any orders from our commander in chief?"

"Not a thing. Oh, except this. We're supposed to do some fancy brain-cudgeling."

"God," said Tom. "What else is anybody on this island doing?"

"But this is a special assignment. Find the meaning of the five-word phrase: *The solution lies in Eliot.*"

Tom frowned. "You mean that Fergus seriously asked us to—" He broke off and turned to one of the bedroom doors, his hand tense on the archaic revolver.

The door opened slowly and James Herndon's balding head appeared. "Janet," he called softly.

"Yes, Uncle Jim?"

"Could I speak to you a moment? In here?"

Tom layed a restraining hand on her arm, but she shook it off lightly. "Don't be foolish, Tom," she whispered, and added aloud, "Of course, Uncle Jim."

This was beyond any doubt Jim Herndon's room, she thought as she entered it. Even in the short space of a week-end it had become unmistakably his. There were a half-dozen of his favorite books, chiefly poetry—and the only books, she reflected with some surprise, that she had seen in the entire house. And there were pipes.

Five pipes and a cork-knocker ash tray sat on the bedside table, and six or eight more were visible in the open suitcase, chiefly briars but with a corncob or two, a cherry, and of course his treasured meerschaum that matched the revolver. A highly polished bronze humidor shone on the dressing-table, and a black hole in the scarf beside it demonstrated that pipes jiggle sparks when you comb your hair.

Janet breathed deep of the smoke-thick air. "It smells good, Uncle Jim," she smiled.

"If I could ever have found another woman who thought so," James Herndon observed, "I might not be a bachelor now."

"It makes me feel like a little girl again. I haven't smelled this smell for— Oh, I don't mean I haven't been around pipes. Half the crossword contributors are frustrated authors, so of course they have to wear pipes with their tweeds. But they all smoke very ladida mixtures specially blended that are so glamorous and fancy that they don't even smell like tobacco."

"Nor taste like it, probably."

"And that's why I like this honesttgod stench. It takes me back to when I was terribly little and I used to think it really came out of you, like from a dragon. Remember when I asked you to make it come out of your ears?"

"And I never did, did I? You see, Janet my dear, I was failing you even then."

"Uncle Jim! You never failed anybody."

"Except my life," Herndon quoted, "except my life,



except my life."

"But so many *pipes*!" Janet exclaimed. "Do you need all these just for a week-end?"

He picked up the meerschaum and began filling it. "Oh, it's comforting to have them, you know. But let me show you my gem."

He reached into the suitcase and brought out a deep red morocco leather case. He unsnapped it tenderly. There, encushioned in satin, lay a brier pipe, a light reddish-brown in color, of a simple straight billiard shape and utterly devoid of ornament.

"Nice," said Janet, not knowing what on earth she should say. It was uncomfortably like being expected to comment on your friend's infant.

"Nice? But my dear, look at that graining. Notice those perfectly straight lines of grain, clear and even all around the bowl. One piece of brier in ten thousand!"

"It's pretty," she admitted. "Even if I don't appreciate its subtleties. Pipes do look so much nicer before you smoke them."

"I had planned to break it in over this week-end. But in such times of trouble and confusion, one wants the consolation of old and tried friends," he patted the meerschaum, "rather than the difficulties of making acquaintance with even such a splendid specimen as this."

There was a light rap on the door, and Tom's voice called softly, "Are you all right, Janet?"

"Of course. Don't be foolish. Your job's to watch that hall."

James Herndon cleared his throat. "But Tom reminds me; I did not call you in here to talk about pipes."

"But I—I'm surprised at myself, but I like it. It makes me feel so nearly at home."

Herndon laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "You do want to be at home, don't you? You've always wanted to, and they wouldn't let you."

"I don't know. I truly don't know, Uncle Jim. I have a good life now. I know interesting people, I like my job, I make decent money, I'm comfortable living alone. I used

to think about a home and being part of One Happy Family like some of my girl friends, but now—I was perfectly contented."

"Was?"

"Until I came here. And now— Damn it, Uncle Jim, I don't know what I want or who I am."

"Listen to me, my dear. I—I have done very little good in my life. I think I can say that I have done equally little harm; but that would not have defended me in Jay's eyes, nor does it in my own. I have been nothing.

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas . . ."*

"But Uncle Jim—"

"Let me go on. I— You may know, Janet, that I have a little money. Not so much as I had once, not what Lucas or even your father would consider much, but a great deal probably in your eyes or in Tom's."

"Tom's?"

"Purely illustrative," said Herndon hastily. "A great deal to a young person in his position or say O'Brien's. I only wished you to know that—I am not young, Janet. And at this moment, on this island, life does not seem a certain thing. We cannot tell where or when next— Oh dear, I wish I could speak clearly."

"Don't try, Uncle Jim. And don't talk about dying. This O'Brien lad's clever. He'll see us through."

"I know. I know— But I want you to know that—well, if it should affect your plans in any way, that I—that is, I mean, that you—" James Herndon set down his meerschaum and drew himself up with an odd formal stiffness. His body was so strong and handsome, Janet thought. Usually the ineffectiveness of his manner made you blind to what he really looked like; but at moments like this you could see it clearly.

"Janet," he announced with quiet dignity, "you are my sole heir."

"Uncle Jim," she murmured, "you are a darling."

She put her arms around him and buried her face in his coat lapel. The rich reek of honestly cheap tobacco

filled her nostrils, and before her moist and blinking eyes she saw a small coal-burned hole in the black cloth.

There was another tentative tap on the door.

"Tom," she whispered, "is an idiot. He suspects even you."

James Herndon freed himself reluctantly from her arms and took up his still-glowing meerschaum. "Go to him, my dear," he said, and puffed contentedly. "Go home."

Fergus had watched after Janet closely until he saw her enter the house. Then he let his eyes stare unseeing at the flames while his mind worked beaverishly at all the hints and fragments of hints which the past few hours had brought.

It wasn't impossible, even as soon as this, to say who the throat-slitter was. If he were reading this case as a narrative, he'd make his guess now, check at the end to see that he was right, and sit back feeling smug. But spotting the murderer, putting the finger on the one individual was only a part of it. He needed to understand them all; he needed to get under their little shells of ego-centric self-sufficiency and find out what made this tightly knit group click, what had held them together for so many years. The Stanhopes, yes. Devotion to Jay and involvement in Martha's death were undoubtedly factors in keeping the group intact. But what were their relations to each other, how did the pieces interlock?

He went back to contemplating his working hypothesis on the identity of X. It wasn't bad. It was ingenious and conceivably even true. But he hadn't the trace of a physical fact to clinch his suspicions. He did, indeed, have one fact that apparently contradicted them. For that, of course, there was another possible interpretation; but that would be at once too fantastically unlikely and too horribly possible to entertain—

It was not so much a sound as a scent that made him look around.

"A fine guard!" Alys Trent jeered. "I could have slit your throat like *that*." She giggled at such a delightfully

Fergus grunted and turned back to the fire. In some respects, he reflected, the murderer might be safer company than the white-haired Alys. But his inhospitable reception was futile. Alys needed no invitation to settle herself down by the fire. The glow of its flames flickered warmly on her vivid face, but she kept her heavy black cloth coat wrapped tight around her.

"You don't like me, Fergus, do you?"

Fergus lit a cigarette and said nothing.

"Why don't you?" she insisted. "We could have lots of fun. If you liked me." She edged across the sand closer to him.

"Look, Miss Trent," he said slowly, his eyes resolutely fixed on the invisible coastline. "I've got troubles enough."

"I know why you don't like me," she answered herself. "You think I'm marrying Lucas Quincy for his money."

"And aren't you?" he asked indifferently. "And what the hell business is it of mine anyway?"

"I'm not." She shook her white head with a vapid sort of leer. "Uh uh. Not *just* for his money."

"All right," Fergus conceded. "All for Love or The World Well Lost. Very touching. Good night, Miss Trent."

"Lukey isn't old. Not that way he isn't. It wouldn't have to be for his money. And when he's still young *that* way why shouldn't he want a change?"

A green light of interest glinted in Fergus's eyes. "A change? From what?"

Alys drew back a little. "I don't know. A change. Just a change." She leaned closer again and lowered her voice. "Wouldn't I be a change?" she murmured huskily.

Her scent would have been unbearably cloying indoors. Here on the beach it was tantalizing and, Fergus admitted reluctantly, tempting. "The money makes more sense," he said brusquely.

"I know." Her tone was petulant and injured. "That's what Tommy thinks, too, because it's his money."

"Whoa there. His money?"

"Well he always thought maybe— I mean he *was* Lukey's sole heir and now Lukey is going to marry me. I might even give him a son. I've always wondered if I could do that. I'd like to feel it. I'd like to feel—everything!" She bit off the last word with a kind of harsh delight.

"You're dated, darling," said Fergus.

"Oh, you—! You're just as bad as Tommy. And I can't understand. I've always been so nice to Tommy."

Fergus looked back in his memory and saw her being "nice to Tommy" on the beach that afternoon and saw Tom's agonizedly embarrassed face. "All in the family, isn't it?" he said.

She laughed. It was a loud shrill laugh with no humor in it. "All in the family You don't know how funny that is."

"I don't know everything," said Fergus. "Yet."

She came close again and stared hard into his face. "You know what I saw here on the beach today?"

"Sure. Blood."

Her eyes glistened. "You do know! You *are* a detective!" She slipped her arm into his. "I *like* you, Fergus. Let's have us some fun. I like to have fun. I've got to have fun. I've got to feel things and know things and— You know what we need?"

"Fun?" said Fergus.

"No. What we need right now is a drink."

Now this is a remark that Fergus himself has made many times before and since. It is a remark that is undeniably true ninety-nine times out of the hundred. But Fergus had never before felt so forcibly that this was a hundredth time. He opened his mouth to say as much. But his mouth stayed open. His nose wrinkled. The first of what he knew must be seven sneezes shook him in a fierce spasm.

Alys backed away. "Now you see—" she started to say, but the explosion of the second sneeze drowned her voice. Only after the seventh could she make herself heard. "You see? You're catching cold out here on this beach. Maybe I will too. What we need's a drink."

"Okay. You go on back to the house and have one." His voice sounded strained and preoccupied.

"Uh uh. I brought some. I brought it in a pocket. *Singa songa six pensa pocka fulla rye . . .*" She rose, chanting softly to herself, and executed a clumsy dance step or two. Her hands fumbled, but she finally extricated a bottle from her coat pocket and triumphantly held it aloft. The coat fell open as she did so. There was nothing under it but pink flesh, warm in the firelight.

## Chapter Seven

### BLOOD ON A PINK ROBE

"WHAT DID YOUR UNCLE WANT?" Tom asked, almost apprehensively, as Janet came out into the hall.

"Nothing. Don't take your guard duty so hard. He just wanted to talk to me. Could I have a cigarette? I left mine hidden in a dresser drawer—hang-over of my fears of mother."

Tom handed her his pack. "You're a big girl now."

"Sure. At the office. But here I keep slipping." She nodded thanks for the light and blew out a large cloud of smoke. "You know, Uncle Jim is sweet. He's the most useless man on earth, but he's sweet. And being so useless does hurt him. He said the damndest thing just now. He said he wished he was a pair of ragged claws."

Tom's alertness suddenly sharpened. "He said that? Ragged claws scuttling across the floors of something seas?"

"Yes. But why the ear-pricking? What's so—"

"And earlier this evening he was quoting the Fire Sermon from 'The Waste Land.' Your scuttling claws are from 'Prufrock,' I think. Look, darling. If 'the solution lies in Eliot,' there's just one person here who could be indicated by that hint. Your uncle seems steeped in the man, probably because he sees himself in J. Alfred Prufrock. And if—"

Janet laughed. "We've got a professional detective. Leave the deductions to him. It's too silly to think of Uncle Jim being—"

"It's pretty damned silly to think of anyone being—what someone must be, isn't it? We know that it's somebody in this house; but look at them all one by one and—Well?"

"I know." Her voice was grave. "All the murders I've ever read in books, and those crime problems that Fergu-

son does for the mag—well, they're fun, and you always know it's going to be the least suspicious character. But when it's people you know, and you're all tied up with them—why then every one of them is the least suspicious character. And that's the hell of it."

Catherine Brainard came out of the bathroom at the end of the hall. She wore a pink and frilly robe over blue figured pajamas; but her pretense of youthfulness slipped several notches without her girdle.

She looked at the young people and clicked her tongue. "Isn't it time you went to bed, Janet? I'm sure Tom can guard us more effectively without you to distract him." She tried to sound arch and playful, but there was worry in her voice.

"Yes, Mother," Janet started to say, and then changed her tone sharply. "Damn it, I'm not distracting Tom, and if I want to stay out here, I'll—"

"Janet! How can you stand there and use such language to your own Mother?"

"Sorry, Mother. The rudeness was accidental. I simply mean that I'm an independent individual, and that my comings and goings are my own concern."

"On a night like this, in this situation, I don't think anyone's comings and goings are their own concern. We'll all be much better off in bed."

"I'll go, Mother, as soon as I'm through talking with Tom."

"I am not going to discuss it any further, Janet," said Mrs. Brainard firmly. "I'm sure I don't understand why my own child should turn on me like this. But we won't talk about it any more tonight. Good night, Janet." She went to the master bedroom and tried the door, but it did not open. She tapped on it and called, "Horace!"

"Who the devil's there?" Horace Brainard snapped from inside.

"It's me. Catherine."

"And how do I know that?"

Mrs. Brainard gasped and placed a fluttering hand on her bosom. "Don't you know your own wife, Horace?"



"No," said Horace Brainard flatly.

"It is Mrs. Brainard, sir," said Tom, trying hard to keep from laughing. "I'm still out here on watch. You're quite safe, Uncle Horace."

There were shuffling footsteps. The lock clicked, then instantly turned back. "No," the voice decided. "If you can imitate Catherine's voice, you can imitate Tom's."

"And mine?" asked Janet.

"And yours. I mean, hers." They heard the footsteps moving away from the door. "I'm staying in bed," the voice announced from farther off.

"'Three Blind Mice,' " Tom cried in sudden triumph.

"What on earth—I" Mrs. Brainard gasped.

"Look. This murderer your husband's so afraid of might imitate any one of our voices, but he certainly can't sing rounds with himself. You start, Aunt Catherine, then I'll come in, then Janet."

"I never heard of such a thing! To be forced to sing rounds to get into my own bedroom—I" Mrs. Brainard controlled herself with a strenuous effort and took up a stance like a local celebrity giving a recital before the Tuesday Morning Club. You could all but see the book of words in her hands.

"*Three blind mice*," she began, shrill and tuneless; "*three blind mice . . . See how they run; see how they run . . .*"

"*Three blind mice . . .*" Tom followed in an unkeyed bass rumble, and Janet joined in at her turn with the only passable tune of the trio. They all sang pianissimo, but the discord was nonetheless impressive. There were sounds of restless stirring in the other rooms, rustlings of curiosity that dared not open the door to gratify itself.

It was Mrs. Brainard who first reached the fateful words. "*She cut off their tails*," she intoned, "*with a—*" And there she broke. "A carving-knife," she said unsinging. "With a carving-knife—"

Horace Brainard banged the door open. "For God's sake come in, Catherine! Do you have to stand out there caterwauling all night?"

"I'm sorry, Horace. But Tom thought it was the only way to prove to you that I was me. I mean that it was I. I mean—"

"Tom thought! Tom thought! If Tom knows so damned much, maybe he can tell me—" He hesitated. His eyes lingered reflectively on his wife, and his fingers twitched at the little gray mustache. "Catherine. If that O'Brien lout is keeping watch tonight, he won't be using his bed. Do you think you might like to—?"

"Why Horace!" Mrs. Brainard tittered. "Are you *afraid* to sleep with me?"

"Afraid? Good God, no! I merely thought that it would fit in better with this ridiculous scheme of observation and segregation if—"

Mrs. Brainard pushed past him into the room. "Horace Brainard, you're a fool." It was not said jestingly. "Good night, children. And Janet, go to bed."

Horace Brainard said nothing. He closed the door slowly and tried it several times after locking it.

"Funny—" said Tom.

"Father is getting old. You worry when you get old."

"But why? Why should he be afraid of your mother of all people? As I understand it, they're the only ones who couldn't possibly have had anything to do with Martha Stanhope's death."

"But of course they could, if you want to look at it that way. They— But that's right. You wouldn't know."

"Know what?"

"It was always a standing joke in the family, but I don't think they ever told anybody else. It was a smart gag. They wanted to get away from the wedding party for their first night, and they were afraid somebody might track them down. So they tried a—I suppose you could call it a Purloined Letter stunt. They took a room, under assumed names, at the De la Playa, the very hotel they knew the wedding party was going to, and the last place on earth where anybody'd look for them."

"But wouldn't the police have— No, that's right. There was only the most routine once-over-lightly on that case."

"But of course," Janet hurried on, "they must have been together all that night and Father would know that. He's just nervous, that's it. And aren't we all?"

"We are," said Tom. "Even the stanch and loyal guards. And now you'd better get to sleep. Be a good girl like Mamma says."

"I was stupid about that, wasn't I? Making a scene like that. Please don't think I'm one of these hysterical women."

"I don't."

"It's just that tonight everything's so—"

"I understand."

"Good. 'Night."

"Oh, and remind me to ask you some time—"

"What?" Janet hesitated with her hand on the door-knob.

"I asked you a question at a party five years ago. We were pretty young then to talk about engagements. We called it going steady."

Her voice was low. "I remember."

"I wondered if five years was time enough for you to make up your mind."

"I haven't got a mind tonight. No, please, Tom, don't look crushed. I didn't mean it to sound that way. Any more than I meant to snap at Mother. But tonight—A week ago everything was so simple. I had my life all planned out, neat and accurate. And now I'm all mixed up and twisted and I don't know what I feel about people and I don't even know if I'll see them alive in the morning."

Tom took her hand gently. "But Janet dear—"

"No, Tom. It's not fair. Things I say tonight don't mean anything. Your hair's still curly, isn't it? And lots of it. I was afraid—you must be almost thirty now."

"December and May," Tom murmured quizzically.

He lifted her hand to his lips, but she withdrew it hastily. "No, darling. Tomorrow. Some time when there's sunlight and we know what's happening. Not now. Good night."

Fergus let only a small trickle of the whisky course down his throat, but he pantomimed a gargantuan gulp. Alys snatched the bottle back and downed an eager quick one, her third since she had made the suggestion. The fire and the whisky were warming; she apparently saw no reason to close her gaping coat.

"Like me any better now?"

"Sure," said Fergus disinterestedly. "I think you're swell."

"Then for God's sake act like it." She snuggled close to him. The coat was soft and smooth under his hand, which he was damned careful to keep on the cloth.

Alys moaned blissfully. "This is exciting!" she murmured. "This is even better than the radio."

"The radio? Madam, I resent that comparison."

"You know what I mean. The newscasts. Life's thrilling again now. I remember when I was a little girl— Only you had to read about it the next day then. Now you hear all about it right away. And it makes you feel all—I!" She ended the sentence with a little voluptuous shudder.

"Fun and games," said Fergus.

"Hitler knows," she went on. "That's how people have to live. Dangerously. It makes you come all alive. You go along quietly and peacefully and goodly and you aren't really living. You're just a vejeable."

"A what?"

"A vejeable. You know, like spintch."

"Make mine broccoli."

"Now you're making fun of me."

"Of you? No, darling." Fergus's voice was quite serious. "I don't think you're funny."

"Good. Only," she added perversely, "I am funny. live—oh, I don't know how to say it—I live *deeper* than other people. I feel things more. And it takes deep thing to make me excited. Like—" She gestured at the sand.

"Blood," said Fergus. "*Blut und Boden*—"

She smiled to herself. "I know a better Nazi quotation than that: *Woman is the relaxation of the warrior*. And isn't a detective a kind of a warrior?"

Fergus was noncommittal. He said, "Hm."

"Only it's a shame to go and catch murderers. They make life so exciting. I like this man, whoever he is. If I knew which one he was, I'd go up to him and I'd say, 'Here!'"

"Here?"

"'Here I am!' And it'd be new and thrilling and wonderful. I've never been to bed with a murderer. At least I don't think so."

"You never know," said Fergus. His hand had slipped off the cloth, and it bothered him.

"I think I'd know, though. It'd feel different—I've never been to bed with a detective either," she added.

Your hand has notions of its own. You can deplore its actions, but not restrain them. "Haven't you?"

"Or should I take the murderer? You know a lot about both. Which is better?"

"That isn't exactly the angle I know them from. How's about another drink?"

Again Alys gulped eagerly and again Fergus faked a magnificent swallow. "Why not try the murderer?" he asked. "If you know who he is. I'll always be around. You may not have so many more chances at him."

Her answer was to press a whisky-wet mouth against his. "I like you," she whispered.

"You're bluffing, toots. You've got to take me because you don't know who killed Martha Stanhope."

She drew back, rye-dignified and resentful. "Maybe I don't. I was just a lilgirl then. But I know who killed Valentino."

"Miss Paris's cat?"

"I was at that party. 'N' I saw it. It was on the back porch. It was just one quick cut 'cause the knife was sharp and it bled on the porch. It was painted all white the porch and there were these red spots and they steamed-like and it made me feel—like I feel now," she ended in a throaty whisper. She pressed her open mouth against Fergus's and moved his hand to where it pleased her better.

"Who?" he whispered in the first possible pause. "Who

was it?"

"Let's have fun," she gasped. "Afterward— Tell you afterward."

Fire and warmth and closeness. Black cloth and pink flesh. Night and danger and tension. Heavy breasts that half-perceptibly sagged with unvirginal promise. Rye-sweet lips demandingly parted. White hair gleaming in the firelight and the writhing body beneath it violating its whiteness.

"There is," Fergus announced deliberately, "one thing to do." He drove a short hard right to the point of Alys's jaw.

Back of the house, Joe Corcoran stared at the darkness in a brief interlude of consciousness and wished his throat would stop hurting so that he could smoke.

In the house, Tom Quincy sat, back to the wall, revolver in hand. It was foolish to be nervous, he kept telling himself. This was something that had to be done. He'd faced far more active danger in his days as an athlete.

Lucas Quincy tossed half-awake and wished for something young and warm in his bed. Fear and age make the bones cold.

In the master bedroom, the Brainards pretended to sleep and stared at each other silently in the darkness.

James Herndon decided to fill his meerschaum once more before he turned in. For a moment he longed for its companion, and then wondered what he could do if he did have it.

Janet slept soundly.

Stella Paris lay awake, wishing for some human soul to talk to.

Jesús Ramirez began to toss a little. The narcotic was wearing off.

Dr. Arnold settled into the armchair beside the sleeping Mexican. Then he rose, found his medicine case, and tucked it safely under the chair. The murderer's weapon had been a knife so far, but ideas can change.

*The murderer—*

*The murderer went about it quietly and efficiently.*

*The first step was the stunning. That was easy, just as it had been with Ramirez. A sock makes a first-rate weapon when you have a beachful of sand available.*

*The murderer looked at the unconscious body on the floor. He looked at the empty chair where the guard had sat. He left the bone-handled revolver on the floor. He didn't need that.*

*He smiled.*

*Then he tried his victim's door. It was unlocked. He had counted on that. His victim would trust the guard, and his pride would be too great to allow him to display such symptoms of fear as locking doors.*

*His victim stirred and said, "Who's that?"*

*The murderer stood by the light switch but did not touch it. He said, "I was worried about you."*

*His victim said, "Oh. It's you." He sounded unimpressed and a little scornful.*

*The murderer said, "Premonitions are absurd."*

*His victim gave a wordless snort.*

*The murderer said, "Still I had to satisfy myself."*

*His victim said, "Touching."*

*The murderer said, "You're sure you're all right? You haven't seen or heard anything?"*

*His victim said, "Not a thing. I'm all right. And I'm sleepy. Go away."*

*The murderer said, "Sh!"*

*His victim said, "Why?"*

*The murderer said, "Don't you hear something? Right in the next room there?"*

*His victim said, "Nonsense."*

*The murderer went to the wall to listen. Now he stood beside the bed. The rest was simple.*

Fergus tied the bundle of knives to his belt (keys to an empty stable since one was already missing, but still—), hoisted the unconscious Alys onto his shoulder, and started back to the house.

*This is going to slay Andy Jackson, he thought. He*

could see the detective lieutenant arriving the next morning and grinning his slow grin at this narrative. "What was really in danger," Fergus would say, "was my virtue." And why is it that a reluctant woman is a noble heroine, while a reluctant man is inescapably a figure of fun?

The weight of Alys's body was warm against him, and her scent was strong. It was easy to ridicule her, to say that her fun-and-excitement philosophy was dated, that life was real and life was earnest and depraved was not its goal, that physical diversions have no place in the carrying out of duty.

But just the same, Fergus kept thinking as he lugged her up the staircase of the silent house, just the same— It isn't so much that the flesh is weak. The trouble is that the flesh is so damned strong and peremptory.

He reached the top of the stairs. And all temptations, all unprofessional urgings of the flesh were dispelled by one glance. He dumped Alys on the floor with something less than due ceremony, and hastened to the outstretched body of Tom Quincy.

He knelt beside the quiet form, put forth a none too steady hand as if to touch it, then paused and settled back on his haunches while he took in the picture: the empty chair standing against the wall, the burst sock and the trail of sand on the floor, the revolver lying near it, the sand on the back of Tom's neck.

He took a deep breath of relief, and his hand was steadier. It was Ramirez again, and not Corcoran; the stunning blow to the head, and not the knife at the throat. He crouched there a moment longer, fixing every detail of the scene on his mind. Then he took up the revolver, rose nimbly, and hurried to the room where they had taken the Mexican.

He opened the door quietly. Ramirez lay on the bed. His breathing was heavy and regular. Dr. Arnold sprawled in the armchair, his dressing-gown wrapped blanketwise about his crimson Russian-cut pajamas.

Fergus shook him gently by the arm.

The doctor opened his eyes. "At last," he said. "You've



got the kettle boiling?" Then he blinked and stared at Fergus. "I must have been dreaming back to my G.P. days," he apologized. "I always went to sleep when I was waiting for a delivery." He stood up and began to put the dressing-gown on backward, as one wears a surgeon's gown. He caught himself, laughed at his mistake, then suddenly grew grave. "What has happened?" he demanded tensely.

Fergus kept his voice deliberately cool. "Not what you think," he said, and added, "I hope. It's Tom. Somebody slugged him."

Dr. Arnold gestured at the bed. "Like—?"

"Uh huh. Reprise of the Ramirez theme. *'Twas the voice of the slugger; I heard him complain—'*"

"Where is he?"

"Out here."

Fergus led the way into the hall. Dr. Arnold started toward Tom, then saw the sprawling form of Alys and wavered. "Both of them?"

"She doesn't count. That's just a subplot."

"But if—"

"Full explanations later. Point is, Tom needs attention now."

But Dr. Arnold seemed inescapably drawn to the unconscious girl. He opened her coat, and his eyes narrowed. He rested his fingers against her flesh for a moment, and then jerked them away as though they were burned.

"Leave her alone," Fergus insisted. "She'll be okay in ten-twenty minutes. If I gauged it right."

"If you—?" Dr. Arnold looked from the naked body to Fergus and back. He smiled slowly, sardonically, and yet almost admiringly. "Such strength of character," he murmured. He replaced the coat and went over to Tom.

Fergus had finished half a cigarette when the doctor rose. "He'll be all right," Arnold announced contentedly.

"Thank God."

"Nothing near so serious as Ramirez. Just enough to stun him. Here, help me get him into my room."

Tom stirred a little as they carried him, and muttered

wordless noises. "He should come to of himself in a few minutes," said the doctor as they settled him into the armchair. "Then perhaps he can tell us—" He started to close the door.

Fergus intercepted him and pushed it even wider open. "Sorry. But I've got to keep an eye on that hall. Somehow I don't think this slugging was personal."

"Not personal? What does that mean, O'Brien?"

"It means our playful friend the sock-mucker didn't slug Tom personal-like, he slugged the guard. Same like he didn't slug Ramirez, he slugged the guy with the boat. The slugging part makes good practical sense, whatever you think of the throat-cutting."

Dr. Arnold frowned. "You think then that Tom was attacked in order that someone might—"

Fergus nodded. "And we'd better get there before he does. Or at least," he added tautly, "pretty promptly after he did."

The two men looked at the silent doors. "There is no point," said Dr. Arnold, "in rousing everyone. If nothing has happened, why, let them sleep on in peace."

"Right," Fergus agreed. He tried the door of the master bedroom, then bent over and peered in at the keyhole. "Locked on the inside. That should be all right."

As they were about to pass on, Mrs. Brainard's shrill voice sounded from inside. "Who's that?"

"Let her go back to sleep," Fergus whispered.

Arnold nodded. "Catherine is a nervous woman; she will need what rest she can get."

"Which don't we all." The door of the room shared by Janet and Stella Paris was unlocked. Fergus opened it cautiously and peeked in. Janet was sound asleep, curled up in a tight ball and looking very young. Miss Paris opened her eyes at the light from the hall.

"Just a check-up," Fergus whispered reassuringly. She nodded her comprehension, and rolled over.

Next he opened the door to James Herndon's room. Noiselessly he stepped into the still smoky atmosphere. Then he retreated sharply.

"Job for you," he said tensely to Arnold.

He hadn't looked closely. He hadn't seen more than that long old body stretched out on the floor and the meerschaum fallen beside it.

You don't get used to bodies. Maybe you do in time. Maybe doctors do. They at least know that they can help, if help is still possible. But when you know that the only thing you can do now is to try to bring about atonement—

His mind was already active on this problem of atonement. Somehow this latest turn had astonished him. It shouldn't have been Herndon. That bitched up the whole train of reasoning. It meant starting in again from scratch and—

Dr. Arnold was speaking to him. "This is getting monotonous."

"Cold-blooded, aren't we? Any hope for the old man?"

"You misunderstand me. I said monotonous. This is the slugger again."

"What?"

"It must be. No noticeable bruise—there's the great advantage of the sock method—but there are particles of sand in the hairs at the nape of the neck. Another light blow like Tom's. He'll be all right in no time."

Fergus swore, flatly, quietly, and colorlessly.

"I know," the doctor agreed. "It's nonsense. Slugging could only be a means, not an end. But two of them—"

"Worse than nonsense. It's an outrageous perversion of possibility. But supposing—"

There was one loud sharp scream. Then there was a confused babble of words that put Fergus's swearing to shame. Then there was silence.

"Quincy's room," said Fergus. "Quick."

The light was on in the room and the door was open. Mrs. Brainard stood by the bedside. There was blood down the front of her frilly pink robe. Her only movement was a spasmodic clenching of the hands that hung at her sides. Her eyes were fixed rigidly on the bed and its burden.

The monotony was over.

## *Chapter Eight*

### MUCH TOO ACTUAL

CATHERINE BRAINARD did not see them. She stumbled toward the door, wide-eyed and blind. Fergus caught her by the wrists. "Where are you going?"

She lurched forward and stopped. "Lucas. He killed Lucas." The blood from her robe smeared onto Fergus's yellow shirt.

"Who killed him?"

"He did. I don't know. He can't—"

"What did you see? What brought you in here?"

"Let me go. Let me go, I have to—"

There was strength in her wrists, a wrenching twisting strength that almost freed her. Then all force abruptly went out of her and she sagged limp against the detective. Her body jerked with dry sobs.

"Go back to bed," said Fergus. "Dr. Arnold will give you something. You'll feel better."

"Here. Let me." This was Stella Paris standing behind him in the doorway. She put a gently compelling arm around the shaken woman and led her off toward the master bedroom. Horace Brainard stood by the open door of that room. His face was pale and his jaw hung down useless. He did not say a word as the two women went past him. He only stared at Fergus and moved his eyes questioningly to indicate the inside of Quincy's room.

Fergus nodded. Brainard's pale face grew paler yet, and he leaned back against the doorjamb for support. Then Fergus saw another door open. Janet was coming out. Hastily he stepped back into the room where Quincy lay, and shut the door behind him.

Dr. Arnold straightened up from his examination. "I've touched as little as possible," he said.

"No chance for him then?"

"It was a sharp knife this time."

"Is it there?"

"No. I simply judge from the wound. The knife is gone. Probably our friend prefers to remain armed."

Fergus tried not to stare at him. It was unbelievable. No man could remain so composedly unmoved beside the corpse of a friend of twenty-five years standing. It was understandable, perhaps, that the passing of Lucas Quincy should be not too deeply mourned; but an attitude of such complete indifference bordered on the terrible.

Fergus shook his head wordlessly and started pacing. For the duration of one cigarette he roamed the room in silence. His green eyes glanced eagerly about, trying to take in each last detail that might be significant.

"In that famous vanished suitcase," he said at last, "there was a damned accurate little Leica which would come in mighty handy now. Though at that I'm hanged if I know what it would find worth recording. Tidy man, the late Mr. Quincy. Room all shipshape and not a sign of anybody else's presence. What can you tell me from the wound, doctor?"

Dr. Arnold spoke with the impersonality of a police surgeon. "Very little, I fear. The murderer must have stood here beside the bed, slightly behind Quincy. He made it with one stroke."

"Indicating some knowledge?"

"Knowledge? Oh, surgical, you mean? Perhaps. Not impossibly. But equally possibly it was simply good luck."

"And practice," Fergus added bitterly. "He's had plenty of that. Go on."

"As you can see, the blood spurted forward. I doubt if so much as a drop hit the murderer."

"Helpful-like," Fergus grunted.

"The body is still warm. I'd say the killing took place within the past half-hour, though that is necessarily guesswork."

"While I was being Pure and Stainless. Fun. Anything else?"

"Nothing specially indicative. It's your elaborate killings that leave a signature. This one is so simple. The

man's throat was cut. That is all."

"And somebody out there—" Fergus gestured toward the hall.

"Or," Dr. Arnold amended meticulously, "in here. Oh, and one thing more: the cut was right-handed."

"And so," Fergus grunted, "is everybody on this island. We don't get much co-operation from Fate, do we?" He knelt down, peered closely at the floor, stretched himself out full length, struck a match, and thrust it under the bed. "Uh huh," he muttered. "Thought so." He took a handkerchief in his right hand, scrabbled about a bit, and emerged with the smooth-bone-handled carving-knife.

"So he did disarm himself," Arnold observed. "Possibly his fixation includes some curious notion that each crime deserves a fresh weapon. But why tuck it under the bed?"

Fergus indicated a little dark pool on the floor. "He probably dropped it here. Then—see this smudge?—when Mrs. Brainard came to the bedside—"

"And again, why?"

"God knows I'd like the answer to that one myself. But why or no why—when she came, she kicked the knife under the bed."

"Accidentally?"

"You tell me. Anyway, here it is." Fergus held it up by the blood-stained blade and regarded it intensely. "Quite a change for this from beef. Or was it? Butchery is butchery. It was a brute part for it to kill so capital a calf—" He crossed to the dressing-table and began to examine the toilet articles on its top.

"What are you looking for there?"

"My insufflator was another loss, of course. And he knew that. So there's the bare chance that he was careless." Fergus laid the knife on the dresser. He took up a container of talcum powder, poured a little of it into the palm of his hand, and began to blow gently on it. A cloud of powder rose and settled evenly over the handle of the knife.

Fergus groaned and absently wiped his palm on his shirt. "Nothing. Not a trace. But at least I don't have to

worry about guarding this handle like the crown jewels. This coarse powder couldn't have brought out very clear impressions, but it should have shown us if there were any. It's clean." He added the knife to the collection hanging from his waist.

Arnold smiled. "Such an arsenal."

"If our friend wants a nice fresh knife again, I'll be due for the next slugging. Sort of impractical to corral all the socks on the island too."

"What next?"

"Well, first of all—" Fergus paced a turn around the room and halted facing Arnold. "You know, doctor, I'm a heel. I've got a pretty fair loathing for myself right now."

"There's no need to blame yourself, O'Brien. You took intelligent precautions. You stationed an armed guard. It isn't your fault that he was caught out."

"It's not that— Remember the conditions I set for Brainard?"

"Indeed I do. Five hundred if you caught the murderer, another five if you got us all safely off this island."

"Uh huh. And I've been hoping that if I pulled it off I still might collect. Brainard might get a rush of gratitude to the heart or such. And besides—hell, there's no point to keeping a secret now—Quincy himself had promised me a fee for the solution of the Stanhope case."

Dr. Arnold's eyebrows rose, but he made no comment.

"So now, while I'm standing here wearing a bloody knife and that poor bastard is sprawled there in his own gore, you know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking, well, there's one fee and half another shot to hell."

Dr. Arnold looked at the bed and smiled incongruously. "Don't feel so perturbed, Mr. O'Brien. I am sure that Lucas Quincy would have the liveliest sympathy with your reaction."

Alys was propped up in what had been the guard's chair. Janet was alternately bathing her forehead with cold water and waving a crystal bottle under her nose. Horace Brainard still sagged ashen beside the now closed

door to his room. An unintelligible and persistent noise came from inside.

As Fergus and the doctor came out into the hall, Horace Brainard started hastily forward. "O'Brien, I feel I have done you a great injustice I had not recognized the true gravity of the situation if you are still disposed to discuss the matter with me I am sure we can reach—" His words gushed out all ababble, as though he had been composing and memorizing the speech ever since he awoke and now could not get it said quickly enough. But in midsentence he choked, coughed, and looked about him with wild fear. He seized Fergus's hand and gasped, "Oh, God. You won't let him—" His free hand jerked spasmodically toward his throat.

"Mr. O'Brien has everything well in hand," said Dr. Arnold soothingly. "Control yourself, Horace."

Janet paused in her ministrations and made a contemptuous face at her patient. "What's been going on around here? What's the matter with Father? And what happened to Alys? Did she pass out at last?"

For a moment no one spoke. Then Horace Brainard made a strangling noise that might have been "Lucas" and pointed helplessly at the closed door of Quincy's bedroom.

Janet said "Oh God—" Her hands clenched tight. "It's—it was—?"

"He is dead," Dr. Arnold announced in a level voice.

She stood perfectly still for an instant, her gold-brown eyes dull and expressionless. Then with a sudden fear she clutched Fergus's arm. "But Tom was on guard—Tom—! Where is Tom? What's happened to him?"

"He's all right." All at once Fergus felt very tired. "He'll be out here any minute."

Slowly Alys Trent opened her eyes and cast a blank and blinking gaze about the hall. The eyes lit on Fergus and came alive. "There he is!" She rose, pointing with a dramatically outstretched finger like an avenging ghost or a 1917 recruiting poster.

Janet turned to her and urged her back into the chair.



"There, Alys. You're all right now."

"The hell I am," Alys stated emphatically. "That son of a bitch socked me."

"Fergus!" Janet laughed, not hysterically but with a much needed relief of tension.

"Mr. O'Brien!" Brainard drew back from the detective. "What does this mean?"

"It means," said Fergus, "that Alys was right after all. What I need's a drink." He reached into Alys's coat, nimbly eluded the sweeping scratch of her nails, hauled out the whisky bottle, and uptilted it.

Exactly three drops fell into his mouth.

"Nyaaal" remarked Alys gleefully.

The bottle clunked on the floor. "It also means," Fergus went on quietly, "that I'm hereby taking over this house as thoroughly as if I were the Los Angeles Police Department in person. Or make it Santa Eulalia or the Coast Guard or whatever the hell has authority on this bleak rock. I know this is absolutely extralegal and unconstitutional enough to curl a judge's beard, but I'm doing it. And anybody wants to argue, argues with the Smoker's Companion." He held the bone-handled revolver clearly in sight.

"Our friend likes night," he continued. "People are off guard then. It's easy. All right: as has been previously remarked by Mr. Lunt and by a certain elderly gentleman on the Isle of Patmos, There Shall Be No Night. From now on nobody sleeps. Macbeth hath murdered sleep. A night of memories and sighs we dedicate to this, and our sleeves'll get the hell raveled out of them. And I'm bitchtired and babbling but I can still think and I can still act; and somebody here had damn well better remember that. Okay?"

"But of course, Mr. O'Brien," babbled the pallid Horace Brainard. "Of course. We want you to do everything possible. You are in full charge. Take absolute command. Do everything."

Fergus smiled with his mouth but not with his eyes. "Quick-change artist, huh?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't bother. I should argue with such co-operation. All right, I'm in charge. Here's orders for the campaign: I want everybody rounded up in the living-room. I'll station myself in that thing that hopes it's going to be a library. I'll talk to each one of you in there. We'll spend the rest of this night pounding and sweating till we've found the truth. And tomorrow we'll—"

Miss Paris stepped out of the master bedroom. Fergus broke off and turned to her. "How is she?"

Miss Paris shook her head. "Still hysterical. She's quieted down a little, but not much. Hugh, I think you'd better help."

Dr. Arnold nodded and followed her back into the bedroom.

"A sweet cast," Fergus mused aloud. "Twelve people on this island. Five of them are either unconscious or hysterical. One is dead. And one is a murderer."

"O'Brien," said Janet.

"Yes?"

"Take me to Tom."

"If ever I manage to get me a fee out of this case," said Fergus, "I'm going to buy some books for this hypothetical library. Not sets—just good solid lived-with handfals from the two-for-a-quarter trough—" He paused in his pacing and looked down at Tom Quincy. "How's it going?" he asked, almost gently.

Tom felt the back of his neck and tentatively shook his head as though to make sure it was still fastened on. "No tackle ever hit me like that," he groaned.

"Handy thing, socks."

"And Uncle Lucas— While I was lying there, he—"

"We make a swell pair of guards, don't we? Youth will take charge. You are all safe as houses with the redoubtable team of Quincy and O'Brien on guard. *No pasarán* and stuff. And look at us— I'm damned near tempted to hand in my license."

Tom shook his head again and seemed to get his eyes

at last in focus. "You can't blame yourself."

"Can't I just? Toin, my boy, you don't know the bottomless depths of the O'Brien capacity for self-blame. Sure, in a whodunit it's swell. As soon as the Great Detective shows up at the house party, all hell busts loose. Murder in every nook and cranny. Murders by every crook and nanny. And at the grand finale he nabs the murderer and preens his tail feathers and says what a good boy am I and the hell with those corpses. But my—what can I say without sounding like a prig?—my professional ideals don't run that way. I think the best detective isn't the guy that solves murders, he's the man who prevents them. And by those standards I don't stack up so good right now."

"It didn't seem real before," Tom reflected. "Cats—Cats die and it's too bad, but it isn't anything immediate. Even Corcoran—a servant that we've never even seen—he didn't make it come home to me. Before, it was all not quite real and rather curious and interesting. Now it's so goddamned actual that you can't bear to think about it. And what, in God's name, can you be grinning about at this time?"

"Sorry." Fergus let his face go serious again. "I was just thinking of Janet being a ministering angel and bringing you back to consciousness. She puts on such an impressive act of being independent and efficient, but there's a lot of good pure feminine in her. And somehow I think she likes you, God knows why."

Tom was half-grinning himself. "Isn't she wonderful? She's an even finer girl than I remembered. She's the one bright spot in this whole—"

"Come in," Fergus called.

Janet entered with a bottle. Fergus started to snatch, restrained himself, said, "We must be dignified, we must," and slowly poured a long gurgle down his throat.

Janet went directly over to Tom. "Are you all right now?" She rested her hand lightly on his head.

He said "Ow!" and jerked away. "It's all right if you leave it alone, but it still doesn't feel quite like part of me. It's like that Thurber—you know, the fencer with his

head sailing off in the air and saying, '*Touché!*' "

"You poor man. But at that you're—" She paused.

"—damned lucky," he finished for her. "Sure. Damned lucky I'm not stretched out in splotted sheets like— And I was on guard, Janet. I was on guard."

Fergus wiped his lips. "Now who's wallowing in self-blame? Here, take this. O'Brien's Standard Home Remedy for Self-Accusation."

Tom followed the prescription.

Fergus turned to Janet. "They all out there?"

"Stella's still upstairs with Mother. She'll bring her down as soon as she thinks she's up to it."

"And the others?"

"Uncle Jim's up and around now, looking even worse than Tom, I'm afraid. And Father and Dr. Hugh are out there. And," she added contemptuously, "Alys."

"The doctor checked up on Corcoran and Ramirez?"

"They're all right."

Fergus frowned. "That bothers me. If our murderer's mad, you'd think he'd want to finish off his work nice and neat. If he's sane, you'd think he'd be afraid they might talk. How's your father holding up?"

"He's suddenly decided you're wonderful and our only hope."

Janet's voice was steady and her face impassive, but Fergus watched her with curious concern. "Stick out your hands, babe," he commanded abruptly. "Straight out, like this." He observed their helpless tremor. "O'Brien's Standard Home Remedy for you, too," he prescribed.

"I couldn't!" she burst out. "I don't see how you can sit around drinking as though this were a literary tea when—"

Fergus perched himself on the library table. "Look, my sweeting," he said patiently. "Did you lead a normal childhood?"

She looked blank. "I guess so."

"By which I mean: of course you know *Alice* damned near by heart?"

"Yes."

"Well, remember when the Red Queen explains to

Alice how you have to run as fast as you can to stay in the same place?"

"Of course. But—"

"All right. That's the way it is with the Home Remedy. There come times you've got to drink as hard as you can to stay sober. And this, macushla, is one of those times." He took the bottle from Tom, illustrated the precept with another swig, and set it on the table beside the now complete knife collection.

"I still don't want any," said Janet. "But I understand now. Sorry. I shan't lecture you again."

"I could do with a good lecture. I could do with anything that made sense. Because that is the primest hell of this whole primally hellish business: it does not make sense."

"Sense from a madman?" Tom asked.

"But it doesn't make even mad sense. Take it from the beginning. Well, Valentino and Corcoran—maybe they do make mad sense. But Ramirez: say our murderer wants to isolate us all on this island. So he conks Hokay and sends the launch off into the nowhere. Sure. Fine. Only why does my suitcase disappear?"

Janet's serious expression relaxed. "That's funny," she said. "And I mean funny-ha-ha. It's the comedy relief in this mess of ours. The brilliant young detective rides hi-yo to the rescue, and the first thing happens is all his equipment gets stolen."

"Okay," said Fergus dourly. "Let's all have a good laugh. Ha ha. But if you can control your mirth—why was it stolen?"

"He knew you were a detective. He was afraid you might have a gun in there or—"

"—or all the possibly helpful stuff I damned well did have. Okay. Pretty and logical. But who knew I was a detective? I'm not famous. My fair Irish puss doesn't grace the tabloids. My name doesn't ring resounding through the land. Two people on this island knew who I am. Quincy was with me at the time the boat was stolen, and as for Miss Paris, if by any unbelievable chance she didn't

want me around, why, all she had to do was just not invite me."

"Madmen," said Tom tentatively, "do the damndest things."

"From a professional psychologist, sir, that's feeble and unworthy question-dodging."

"I know," Tom admitted. "Wait till I've got a brain again instead of this fuzz."

"Or," Fergus resumed, "take what just happened. The socks with the sock. Can you find even a madman's reason for that? Lay out Tom, sure. That's clear and sensible. Get rid of the guard before you go about your dirty work. Though even at that, if you were a madman with a passion for throat-slitting, if you had a nice sharp eager carving-knife in your hand, and if a man was stretched out there unconscious all ready for you, like a trussed sacrifice—would you stop at socking?"

"Now that," Tom insisted, "does make mad sense. He wasn't thinking of me as a living person with a throat to be cut, but simply as an obstruction in his way. He'd no more slit my gullet after laying me out than he'd have carved up a door after picking its lock. I was just a thing."

"Could be," Fergus reflected. "Could be. But that isn't the major inconsistency. The big problem is: why sock Herndon? The sand-sock, for our man, is what you might call a utilitarian weapon. He uses it to get rid temporarily of people who are in the way: Ramirez at the boat and you in the hall. How was Herndon in his way?"

"Perhaps he'd cached the knife in Herndon's room."

"Possible. But not what I'd call downright likely. He'd want it somewhere handy, where he could get at it whenever opportunity arose. No—" Fergus sprang lightly from the table and lit a cigarette as he began to pace. "But the hell with these questions. The limbo, rather; they're just shelved, not irrevocably damned. But we've got other fish to fry first." His momentary despondency had now vanished. He moved with a lithe rhythm, and his green eyes were eagerly alive.

"We'll make a formal start on you, Janet. Then you

can go join the happy group outside. First question: tell me everything you did between when you left the bonfire and when you heard your mother scream."

"I went inside the house," said Janet. "Tom was in the hall, and we talked together a little while. Then Uncle Jim wanted to say good night to me. I was in his room probably about five minutes and then came out to Tom again. Mother came out of the bathroom, and Father was so nervous he wouldn't let her in their room till we proved she wasn't the murderer."

"And how did you achieve that?"

"It was Tom's bright idea. We sang 'Three Blind Mice.'"

Fergus reached for the bottle. "Forgive me, Miss Brainard," he said formally, "but I need a reassuring slug. I have heard of people establishing their innocence by every means from a knowledge of Chinese ceramics to getting murdered themselves, though that always seemed to me an extreme measure. But this is a new one. Will you tell me how the ability to sing rounds is incompatible with guilt?"

"It proved she was plural. I mean, we were."

Fergus thought a moment and nodded. "I guess it's all right. Go on from there."

"I talked with Tom a while longer and finally went to bed. I was feeling all confused and upset and I expected to toss for hours, but I went right to sleep."

"Unromantic," said Fergus. "And you didn't hear anything?"

"Not a thing. I was a log."

"Ah," Fergus sighed, "the healthy sleep of tired youth. Touching-like. And how about this afternoon? Where were you when Corcoran was attacked?"

Janet forced a smile. "Aren't you supposed to say, 'You understand this is all purely a formality'? I was dressing, I guess."

"And later on, when the boat was stolen? Where were you then?"

"Then? Why I—"

"I left you in the living-room."

"I know, but—" She hesitated and looked sidewise at Tom.

"Go on."

"All right. I was very silly and I got annoyed because the first time I see Tom in five years there he is drinking with Alys. So after you left, I left too and went upstairs. I didn't have any earthly good reason for doing that so I tried to alibi myself to myself by putting on some more lipstick and then deciding it looked terrible and taking it off again and Tom Quincy if you go on grinning like that I swear I shall sock you."

Fergus went to the table and made a few scribbles on a sheet of paper. "Thanks, Janet. Good clear direct answers, aside from rounds and lipstick. Maybe there's something to the theory of crosswords as mental discipline."

"I've got to keep myself clear, O'Brien. It's the only way that I can help you. And you're the only one who can help us."

"I'll try to live up to that," said Fergus seriously. "And now you run along and be a good shepherd. I'll send Tom out as soon as I'm ready for the first interview."

Janet rested her hand on Tom's as she passed him. She did not speak, nor, after that exchange of glances, did she need to.

"I don't suppose," said Fergus dryly, "that you can tell me one damned thing?"

"Don't rub it in."

"I'm not. Just stating facts clearly, like Janet. Am I right?"

"Of course. If I knew anything, if I so much as suspected anything, don't you think I'd have come out with it before this?"

"I'd hope so."

"This may be a job to you, Fergus. It's a damned sight more than that to me. These people are my friends, almost my own family. That man who was murdered was my uncle. And Janet—"



"I know. I didn't mean to start anything. But tell me, while we're on these tender family emotions: how did you get on with your uncle?"

"Well enough. No house afire, you understand, but well enough. He—I suppose you might say he tolerated me, and that was more than he did most people. He never rode me the way he would ride his employees or Mr. Brainard, even though he did have a financial whiphand over me. And now that he's dead—

"Uncle Lucas was my only living relative, you know. My father died when I was in diapers, and my mother was always an invalid. Died about ten years ago. My uncle put me through college on an allowance—even my work for the Ph.D. And now that he's dead, it somehow seems as though I'd been damned close to him."

"Even though he was leaving you in the lurch in your financial difficulties?"

"What difficulties?"

"You were moaning something in that beer joint about living up to acquired tastes."

"Was I? Oh, I could use more money. Hell, who couldn't? But it's nothing serious. No, Lucas was damned decent to me by and large."

"Queer man," Fergus mused. "He struck me as a silent and unscrupulous old bandit, but somehow with an integrity of his own."

"I think you're right. It's hard to judge your own family, and doubly hard to judge a man like Uncle Lucas who never let anybody get close to him, but—"

"Nobody?"

"Well, Herndon, oddly enough. I never did understand that relationship, but he could probably tell you as much about Lucas as anybody."

"Excepting Alys."

Tom's face was sour. "Yes. Excepting Alys."

"She won't be an heiress now. And you will be an heir."

"At the moment, Fergus, I'm damned if I find even that bright thought very cheering."

"You will in time. Inheritances have their points. And

my only uncle is a priest at the Maryknoll Mission in China. Hell, I picked the wrong family."

"Money—" Tom began.

"—isn't everything and you can't take it with you. Sure I know. But let's get ahead with the questions and let me earn a little of that vile and contemptible stuff. Maybe You didn't see a thing?"

"I told you, no."

"How did it happen?"

"I thought I heard a noise in the bathroom. It bothered me, because I thought everybody was in his room but you and Alys. I got up and was facing that way when *crack*. The next thing I knew I was coming halfway to in Dr Arnold's room. I saw Ramirez stretched out on the bed and I decided that was my corpse. I was outside it now and I could watch myself all stretched out. That almost felt good. It was like a release, a new birth of freedom. Then you and Janet came in and—"

"Okay," said Fergus. "That's that. Result, nil. Maybe Herndon'll have a glimmering. And there's still some hope from Corcoran or Ramirez, if the doctor'll ever let me talk to them, but not too much. I doubt if even Quincy knew who got him."

"I hope not."

"And why not?"

"If it was one of his old friends, and it must have been he'd be happier not knowing."

Fergus looked at him curiously. "For a rational psychologist, Dr. Quincy, you can be the goddamnedest sentimentalist. More Home Remedy?"

"Not right now."

"Okay. You can go out and send our cocky host in. Maybe if I take him first it'll help appease his strutting vanity."

"Sound idea. You, sir, have the makings of a psychologist yourself."

"Strictly of the applied variety. I couldn't tell an Electron from an electron. But get along with you. We've got a long hard night ahead of us still."

"I'm getting." Tom started to pick up the bone-handled revolver.

Fergus laid a protecting hand on the weapon and shook his head. "Uh uh. You'll be in a group out there. Safety aplenty. But at least at one point in the next few hours, I'm going to be alone in this aborted library with a throat-slitter. Somehow I think I'll keep this."

## Chapter Nine

### TRICKS—CUTE AND OTHERWISE

HORACE BRAINARD had dressed himself hastily. His tie was askew, and his carelessly slung-on coat looked a size too large for his drooping shoulders. "Well, O'Brien?" he snapped. He had recovered most of his cockiness; he was no longer the craven suppliant he had been in the upstairs hall. The tone was a reasonable facsimile of his usual brusque commands, but his eyes shifted nervously from the bone-handled revolver to the whisky bottle.

"Sit down there, if you please, Mr. Brainard," Fergus began politely. "I'm sure that with your shrewdness you already understand the double purpose of this inquisition. It'll serve to get the facts straight while they're still clear in our minds, and God knows that's a lot; but more than that, it'll keep us all occupied for the rest of the night. No time to brood and worry. As a businessman, you'll see the wisdom of that."

Brainard began to expand under this buttering. "Of course. Of course, O'Brien."

"That's why I had you in first. Set an example for the others."

"Naturally. Glad to." Horace Brainard twisted his mustache and tried to look like an example, but his eyes did not leave the whisky bottle.

"Care for a drink?" Fergus suggested. "Go right ahead. After all, it's your liquor."

"Thank you. Not that I'm a drinking man, you understand. Never had time for that sort of thing. But under the circumstances—"

Repressing a grin, Fergus watched his host drink and splutter. He was obviously unused to taking it straight from the neck of a bottle. "And by the way, Mr. Brainard, what is your business? That's never been very clear to me."

"Retired at present, young man." Mr. Brainard hesi-

tated, overtaken by a belated shudder. "Of course still busy with my income properties and the market."

"And before that?"

"Various lines. Never believed a man should tie himself down. It's business itself that's the career, O'Brien, not the line of business you happen to be engaged in. A good dry-goods manufacturer could run an aircraft factory, I've always said."

"Producers aren't so open about it," said Fergus, "but you've just pronounced one of the guiding principles of Hollywood."

"Wish it was a principle of Washington. A good businessman could show them a thing or two about running this country."

"You were in dry goods, sir?"

"For a while. And in drugs. In dye-tools. Even turned my hand to investment broking."

"Banking too?"

"Bricfly."

Fergus nodded to himself, and made the mental note that each of these fields was one in which Lucas Quincy had at one time played a major role. "Now, Mr. Brainard, I'm sure you won't object to the formality of a few questions. Make matters much simpler for the police if we get all this down now."

Horace Brainard blenched at the word *police*, but said nothing.

"First of all, tonight. When did you go to bed?"

"As soon as you went out to tend the bonfire."

"And then?"

"What should I do then? I went to sleep. No patience with these fools who sit up reading half the night. A man has to conserve his energy."

"How true. And nothing woke you?"

"My wife coming back from the bathroom, and some fantastic business of young Quincy's about singing rounds to prove she was herself. Pretended to think I was afraid she might be the murderer. Nonsense!"

"Of course. And after that you slept until—?"

"Until I heard my wife's scream."

"You didn't hear anything before then?"

"No."

"You didn't—forgive the leading question—you didn't hear me rattle the doorknob and your wife call out, 'Who's there?' "

"I sleep very soundly."

"Under the circumstances, I envy you. Now as to this afternoon: where were you for, say, an hour before we arrived?"

"Dressing."

"Take you that long to dress?"

"Damn it, O'Brien, am I being grilled?"

"Sorry. It simply seemed a long time."

"Never guess it from your present costume, but you conceivably may know the difficulties of getting into evening clothes with a helpless wife cluttering up the room."

"Not the wife part, no; but I live with a sister in a small bungalow. I can get the picture. And you and Mrs. Brainard were together all that time until you came downstairs and met me?"

"Yes."

Fergus made marks on his paper. "When'd you come to the island, Mr. Brainard?" he asked without looking up from the table.

"About nine years ago. Some poor devil had put it up as security. Had to foreclose. Never would have advanced so much if I'd known the damned nuisance it was. But since I own it—"

"Yes. But I mean when did you come out this time?" Fergus inquired.

"Wednesday. Late afternoon."

"With your wife?"

"And Corcoran. Servants in town won't come to this godforsaken spot. Can't say I blame them now. Got him at an agency. And I'll tell them what I think of them."

"For sending you a potential murderess? How did you come?"

"Drove to Santa Eulalia, left the car there. That

damned fool Mex brought us over."

"And why so early?"

"Catherine. She wanted to spend Thursday getting everything shipshape for the party."

"Hm. Then you weren't at Miss Paris's dinner on Wednesday?"

"Goddamn it, O'Brien, do you suspect me of having an astral body?"

Fergus's green eyes grew hard. "Mr. Brainard, you're accustomed to using that snarling tone with your servants. It isn't a nice habit, but still it is your habit. Just let me remind you, however, that I'm not yet on the salary list."

Horace Brainard looked down, almost shamefaced. But his downward gaze hit the collection of knives, and he lifted it quickly. "Mr. O'Brien," he protested, "I didn't mean to—"

"Okay. Just remember I'm a human being too. You might even try holding that thought on Ramirez and Corcoran. Or is that asking too much?"

Brainard rose jerkily to his feet. He glanced at the whisky bottle, but rejected the idea. "Mr. O'Brien," he burst out, "I haven't room for more than one thought: get us off of here!"

"I'm trying."

"You were trying before Lucas was killed. And how do I know who'll be the next? How can I trust anybody, even my own family? How can I walk through a door without wondering what I'll meet on the other side? You've got to find this man and get us off of here. I'll do anything for you. I'll—" He paused and took a deep breath. "I'll give you a blank check."

"Signed?" Fergus asked cynically.

"Signed."

"Greater love," Fergus murmured, "hath no man than this, that he should lay down his checkbook for his life."

"Then you will? You'll get us off of here and you'll find this man who—?"

"As to finding the man, I'll do my damndest. And I guarantee that we'll get off of here tomorrow."

*The plane descended toward the landing-field of the Las Vegas airport. Detective Lieutenant A. Jackson checked his service automatic (he knew this Campetti bastard) and felt in his pocket for the warrant. His fingers met another piece of paper there.*

*And what could—? But of course. That note the desk sergeant had handed him as he left. He might as well see—*

*A gentle bump shook him. The plane had landed. His fingers thrust the note back. Nothing could be so urgent as finding Campetti before he could locate a minister and invalidate that girl's testimony.*

Horace Brainard giggled nervously. "Good man," he said. "Knew you wouldn't let us down." The giggle grew louder, more insistent. Fergus sat still and coolly watched the man's half-relieved fear spend itself in hysteria. He glanced down at the slowly growing chart of scribbblings and then up again.

"Mr. Brainard," he said sharply.

"Yes?" Brainard gasped in the midst of a giggle.

"Better take another shot before you go back to the family. You're a little nervous."

"Yes. Yes, afraid I am a little. Shock, you understand. He drank, and the giggles gave way to choking guggles. "Lucas was very near to me. Very dear."

"Of course. Ask Tom to send in Miss Trent, will you?"

"Alys? Certainly. Certainly."

"Oh, and Mr. Brainard?"

"Yes?"

"Where did you spend your honeymoon?"

"My honeymoon?" Brainard's earlier pallor began to return, and his hand clinked the bottle against the table as he set it down. "Why, at the Hotel de l— Yes. Yes, of course. The Hotel del Monte. That's it."

"Up north on the peninsula, you mean? Near Monterey?"

"Yes."

"Start the honeymoon there? Wedding night, I mean?"

"Yes. So of course you can see that Catherine and I can't



have had anything to—"

"Quite," said Fergus, and then was Irishly annoyed with himself for using a Britishism. "But have you any idea who could have?"

"None whatsoever. Everybody liked Martha."

"And no changes in that period before the wedding? Nothing in particular that happened then that might have caused anybody to—to stop liking Martha?"

"Not a thing. Is that all now?"

"That's all. Thank you, Mr. Brainard."

*Not a thing*, Fergus repeated to himself. But Horace Brainard's smug self-sufficiency could have blinded him to events strong enough to motivate a dozen murders. This was a point for further checking. He cached the bottle and the knives under the table and kept his hand on the revolver. This next was not an interview that he was looking forward to.

Alys Trent came in quietly, shut the door softly behind her, and stood leaning against the jamb. She had clothes on now, a dark green sports skirt and sweater ensemble. Her hair went every which way and her blue eyes were bleary. She looked like the Spirit of the Hang-over.

"You bastard," she said.

"That's starting the scene off with a bang, that is."

"You bastard," she repeated.

"Come, my sweeting. A little more imagination. Can't you think of anything more colorful?"

"I can think of plenty," she said flatly. "You bastard."

Fergus shrugged. "Interesting use of the formal refrain. When I've got the time, I'll work out a ballade on it. Hell of a word to rhyme, though. But look, beloved. This is no time to waste on our personal grievances. Things have been happening. Or hadn't you heard?"

She came closer to the table. "I've heard all right. They got Lukey. You were supposed to be guarding him. And while you were trying to make me, they got him."

"While I was—? Okay, that's one way of putting it. But they got him, as you say; that's the chief point. And that's why I'm going through this routine. I want to know who

got him, and I'm damned well going to see to it that Lucas is the last. Now how's about sitting down like a nice child and answering a few questions?"

"You bastard," said Alys Trent.

"You remember me? I'm the man that's a detective and mustn't that be just *too* exciting! Well, detectives ask questions; and here goes."

"You socked me," said Alys sullenly.

Fergus let the observation pass. "First the routine stuff. Where were you this afternoon? Before we saw the spots on the sand?"

"You bastard."

"Thank you. Just what I needed to know." He looked down at his paper. "Now as to the other crucial points: Martha Stanhope you're out on, and I know where you were when they got Quincy, God help me. And when Ramirez was socked— Let's see; the party sort of split up after my exit, but I'll make it five, two, and even that you stuck in the living-room by the decanter. Right?"

"You bastard."

"Quite the little conversationalist, aren't you, too! Ah, the flashing steel of vivid repartee! All right. This stuff doesn't go for much. Just filling in the chart. But on this next question I want an answer. So does Lucas. Maybe it was okay to hold out before; I won't argue. Maybe you didn't know what might happen or how you could prevent it. But now you do know, and I think you'd better talk."

Alys opened her mouth. "You bastard," Fergus said in unison with her. "You know," he went on, "we could work this into an act. Get the timing down just right and we'd have 'em in the aisles."

Alys glared in silence.

"Now there's one essential point, my fairest fair, that you know more about than anybody else but the murderer himself. And that's Valentino. As long as you keep your rosebud mouth shut, you're a menace to our throat-slitter. Tell me about it, and you're safe. Keep it quiet, and you may end up with something a damned sight worse than a sock on the jaw." He paused, then added hastily, "You

bastard."

Alys opened and shut her mouth speechlessly.

Fergus's voice grew quiet. His manner was earnest and insistent. "Sorry. We'll cut the clowning. The time's past for that. It's past for a lot of things: clowning and necking and— And silence. No more silence now. Truth's got to be shouted. 'The truth shall make you free.' Sure, but only if you use the truth, use it strong and loud. So out with it, my heart's delight: what did you see on Stella Paris's back porch?"

She said nothing.

"Who did you see?"

She rose and stood beside the table. She did not open her mouth. She put one hand on the neckline of her sweater and ripped straight down.

"Nice," Fergus commented abstractedly. "They looked better in the firelight maybe, but still very nice. Thanks. Now who did you see on that porch?"

Alys returned to her leitmotif. "You bastard."

"Uh uh," said Fergus. "I've got an alibi."

"Not for this you haven't." Her voice was slurred but nonetheless intense. "I'm going to yell. They're all going to troop in here. And how much trust are they going to put in a detective that tries to lay the murdered man's fiancée?"

"Nice games," said Fergus. He was not quite so self-assured as he sounded. "Run away, little girl. Papa doesn't want to play."

"You thought you could sock me and get away with it. Well, we'll see about that." She lifted her skirt, tore off a scanty bit of lace-trimmed black, and threw it on the floor. "Now, you bastard, you're through." She opened her mouth wide.

"Sorry," said Dr. Arnold. "Your mistake, Alys."

She whirled and stared at the man who had just come in, contriving to look quite as distinguished in his rumpled dressing-gown as he had in full evening regalia.

"You—" she started to say.

"Uh uh," said Fergus. "Not both of us."

"I persuaded Tom," Dr. Arnold explained, "that no man should be left alone with this—young lady. Our sex must band together for self-protection." He leaned over and picked up the lacy black scrap. "Yours, my dear, I believe? Such a touching notion for mourning. To cite a noted anecdote, '*Quelle délicatesse!*' "

Fergus suddenly realized his palms were wet.

Alys stood irresolute, then headed wordlessly for the door.

Dr. Arnold stopped her. "One moment." He felt under the lapel of his dressing-gown, found a pin, and with a not quite steady hand fastened the torn sweater back into place. "We mustn't give any wrong impressions, must we?"

Alys wavered on the balls of her feet. Then she delivered one stinging slap on the doctor's cheek and hurried from the room.

Fergus retrieved the bottle and used it. "After a drink," he admitted, "that sweet little scene looks funny. It didn't at the time."

Dr. Arnold declined the proffered bottle. "I thought it might happen," he said. "If I had Alys for a patient, I should never dare treat her save in the presence of a nurse."

"Afraid of her cute little tricks?"

"Of her tricks and of—" He left the sentence unfinished.

"And Quincy was going to marry her."

"Lucas was no longer young. He found Alys—how shall I put it?—warming. I told you that Lucas had only two interests in life." Dr. Arnold seated himself. "And now, Mr. O'Brien, since I am here in your sanctum, I suppose we might as well have my interview next?"

"You can guess," Fergus gestured at his notes, "what these interviews are about."

"I can imagine. You are doubtless taking the entire series of violent acts, the attacks upon Martha, Corcoran, Ramirez, and Lucas, and checking each individual right down the line. If anyone shows possibilities in every instance, you have something to concentrate on."

"Exactly. And so, Dr. Arnold?"

"May I beg a cigarette of you? Thank you. And so, Mr. O'Brien, you may enter a complete set of possibilities under Arnold, Hugh, M.D."

"I hope not," said Fergus.

"And why, pray?"

"Because you'd be such a damned sight harder to cope with than any of the others. You're so much more clear-sighted that you could be infinitely more slippery."

Arnold bowed. "Again thank you."

Fergus waited a moment before saying, coolly, "It's not necessarily a compliment."

"Allow me to take it as such. And allow me further to show you that my claim is correct. As to Martha, of course each of us is a possibility there. It is too long ago to recall accurate details. All we know now is that we were all in that hotel and all on the same corridor. Anyone might have taken the opportunity."

"Check," said Fergus.

"At the time of Corcoran's mischance, I was dressing. I imagine you have heard that before?"

"I have. With monotonous regularity."

"I could easily have caused that mischance and returned to my room before James came there to fetch me. As to Ramirez— When that little group in the living-room broke up, I went outside to find James. I was puzzled by his rudeness to Alys and wondered if he were well. He might easily have suffered some shock from his earlier discovery of Corcoran. I did not find him, and returned to the house only just before you carried in the unconscious Ramirez."

"And tonight?"

"I was, as you found me, asleep in my chair beside my patient; but I fear that he is in no position to give evidence to that effect."

"Uh huh," Fergus nodded, dutifully entering these statements on his chart. "Beautiful guilty-looking record. But there's one other—what was your phrase?—violent act."

A frown of apprehension crossed Arnold's lean face.

"Another?"

"Valentino."

"Oh. Of course. Stella's cat."

"Now you were at that dinner party. Who could have had the opportunity to kill the beast?"

"A pleasant beast," Dr. Arnold mused regretfully. "He resembled a negative photograph of Hitler. No, let us keep the connotations as pleasant as we may, and say Chaplin. He was dead black, save for a minute white Chaplin mustache. A grotesquely pleasing effect. But as for who could have killed him, I have been puzzling over that problem myself."

"With what results?"

"None, I fear. We saw Valentino, heartily alive, after dinner. He was eating his dog food—the perverse beast loathed all forms of cat food—while Janet was clearing the table, and we all trooped out to the kitchen to greet him. And after that: we spent the entire evening in the living-room. We played a frantic round of flying patience, and the rest of the time we talked. We older ones recalled our *temps perdu*, while Alys was bored and Janet fascinated. Lucas and Alys left first, and together. I was staying overnight with James in his bachelor apartment; we also went home together. And shortly after our departure Janet made her discovery. No one had been outdoors alone at any time."

"And all of you were together in the living-room all that time? Didn't anybody even—?"

"The hall to the bathroom opens off the living-room itself and does not connect with the kitchen. You could not have reached the back porch in that way."

"Was there much drinking?"

"Merely enough for sociability. Certainly not sufficient to befuddle our recollections—save, of course, for Alys."

"She was cockeyed again?"

"She—well, she had had one over the eight."

"Not that I've ever known quite what that meant," Fergus muttered as he added to his notes. "One under the eight of zombies, say, would be a Bunyanesque achieve-

ment, while one over the eight of beer might be just a warming-up." He stared at his notes a moment. "In other words—?"

"In other words, Miss Paris's first conjecture must be correct. Valentino must have been killed by some weird cultist. No one of us could have done it."

"I don't like coincidence," said Fergus.

The doctor started to rise. "I take it that concludes my quota of questions?"

Fergus waved him back into the chair. "No. One more question, Dr. Arnold, if you don't mind."

"Certainly."

"Tell me. Are you fish or reptile?"

Arnold smiled. "I had heretofore admired you, Mr. O'Brien, for your directness. I hope you are not going to adopt the cryptic manner of the fictional detective."

"That's direct enough. It means just this: mammals are warm-blooded. You don't seem to fit into that order, Dr. Arnold."

"I shock you? One in your profession should not be so sensitive."

"I'm not shocked. Just curious."

"Very well, Mr. O'Brien. I shall attempt, doubtless crudely enough, to analyze what you consider my callousness. I don't know that I have ever analyzed it even to myself." He took a cigarette from the pack on the table, struck a match, let it burn out, and set the cigarette down unlit. "It goes back, I suppose, as does so much else, to Jay Stanhope."

"Jay was a good man. I do not know what that term conveys to you, Mr. O'Brien, but it is a phrase I have never applied to any other man. There was nothing evil, nothing self-seeking about Jay. And I, who had always taken for granted my vices, my greeds, my cruelties, and those of my friends, met Jay and recognized their true horror."

"But I could not adjust myself to that horror as could Jay. He knew that humanity was vile and contemptible, but he loved it for the beauty which redeemed even that

vileness. He had the sharp vision of a Swift and the compassion of a Christ. I could attain only the former. So I took refuge in what, with youthful pride, I called the Scientific Attitude. Grant the stupid evil of mankind, but go your way observing and untouched. Do what you can and leave the rest to God, or to his more probable absence.

"These are my friends and you feel that I should mourn for them. But can I mourn the extinction of the domineering, power-lusting Lucas? Can I feel compunction for any danger that hangs over that strutting popinjay that is our host, or that bland mass of ineffectualness that is his brother-in-law? I am inhuman, Mr. O'Brien, because I am human, because I know in myself the baseness of our nature. I cannot believe that the universe trembles when one blemish the more is removed from it."

"I am myself," Fergus quoted, "indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse myself of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me."

Dr. Arnold nodded bitterly. "What indeed should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth? What but to check the worst in oneself, to observe others, and rigorously to discipline oneself to an absence of emotion?"

"Nice life," said Fergus, "if you can lead it. But tell me, doctor, were you being observant in 1915?"

"Imperfectly so."

"I gather that everybody was damned near as fond of Martha Stanhope as of Jay. There doesn't seem to have been any sane motive for her death. And yet something not quite a motive for sane murder might be just the guiding prod for an insane one. Can you think of anything? Anything, say, that changed in the last few days before the wedding?"

Dr. Arnold tried to think back. "There was one odd little episode. I remember worrying about it later, and then conveniently masking my worry with an unthinking acceptance of the prowler theory. It was something about a letter."

"Yes?"

"I am remembering, I fear, at one remove. That is, I



can remember remembering this episode, but not the episode itself. It was a letter from Jay. Let me see. This would be several days before the wedding."

"And before the cats?"

"I am not certain. I think so. I can recall us all sitting on the front porch at the Stanhopes'. Some of us were drinking beer and we were discussing plans for the wedding. Then the postman came." He seemed to be watching his memory like a film projected onto a screen. "The only mail was a letter for Martha. We realized somehow that it must be from Jay. But what happened then? Why should that scene seem so important in my memory?"

"What was in the letter?" Fergus prompted.

"That's it. Thank you, Mr. O'Brien. I don't know what was in the letter. That is it."

"You remember it because you don't know it?"

"Exactly. Martha always read Jay's letters at one eager gulp, and then read them aloud slowly for all of us to savor. This letter she read through, folded up again, and tucked into her shirtwaist. It was the last letter Jay wrote before his death. And I never knew its contents. And that is the only remarkable event that I can recall in that period."

Fergus frowned. "Martha was going to get married too, wasn't she? To Quincy?"

"Yes."

"Why? Or has Quincy changed a lot since then? From all I've heard of the Stanhopes, he doesn't seem just Martha's type."

"He didn't change. He became intensified, perhaps. He grew to be more markedly what he had always been. But I should not say that he changed. He was young then, of course, and two who are young have always at least that common ground for love, even though the analytical eye sees no other."

"Is that enough?"

"They may think so."

"But it—it seems wrong that Martha was marrying him."

"After all, Mr. O'Brien," Dr. Arnold reminded, "remember this: she did not marry him."

Fergus smiled at the pipe in James Herndon's hand. "A corncob, sir? I thought you went in for the fancy lines."

"Scorn not the corncob, Mr. O'Brien," Herndon attempted an answering smile, but it was feeble. His face, his whole body looked terribly old. "It is a noble smoke. And my meerschaum is broken. It must have fallen when I was struck. The shank cracked as it hit the floor."

"I suppose," Fergus began, "you haven't any idea—Nuts! That's a damned negative approach. Let's be optimists. Tell me who struck you, sir."

Herndon shook his head. "Your first approach was negative, but justifiably so. I have no idea."

"But what happened?"

"I heard a knock on my door. At least I think I did. I opened the door and looked out into the hall. And then something hit me."

"From behind?"

"Yes. I saw nothing."

"And what did you see in the hall?"

"Nothing there either. Simply the empty hall."

Fergus made a note in silence. "How about this afternoon? Where were you before you found Corcoran?"

"Dressing."

Fergus had automatically written the word down before Herndon spoke. "Did you see anything around there—anything at all to give you a hint as to who'd been there before you?"

"Not a thing."

"And later on? Where were you after you walked out on Alys? And by the way, why that?"

"She was offensive," said James Herndon simply.

"I know. I can understand your feelings. And after all, all she did to you was try to kiss you. But you, sir, are not an Irish ruffian like me; does a gentleman openly insult a lady merely because she offends him?"

"Mr. O'Brien, what is for you the most beautiful pas-

sage in what is loosely termed 'classical' music?"

"I'm not sure. Probably the second movement of the Beethoven seventh. You know—" And Fergus tapped on the table dum da-da-dum dum.

"And what would you think of a cheap and banal 'popular' arrangement of that movement?"

"I'd wring the neck of the guy that tried it."

"A gentleman, I think, might do likewise. Nothing is so intolerable as the perversion of noble beauty."

Fergus was puzzled for a moment. Then he recalled that Alys was a distant relation of the Stanhopes, and suddenly much was clear. He nodded. "And after you left, sir? Where were you when the boat was stolen?"

"Back in my room, smoking and reading Eliot. I came down when I heard the commotion."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"And apropos of Eliot— But let's finish the chart first. Now last Wednesday you had dinner with Stella Paris?"

"Yes. It was a pleasure to see Janet again after all these years. And of course Stella provided an admirable dinner."

"I don't doubt that. But tell me: you knew Miss Paris's cat was killed that night?"

"Yes." Herndon sounded even more than usually perplexed. "Yes, I knew that."

"As you remember the evening, who could have had a chance to do that killing?"

"No one," said James Herndon, slowly and hesitantly, as though praying that someone would contradict him.

The details of his story fitted exactly with Dr. Arnold's narrative. Fergus checked them over, shook his red head doubtfully, and said, "Then you think it must have been a cultist too?"

"Mr. O'Brien, I am confounded if I know what I think." The old man's voice was tortured. "I can remember the cats the other time. Twenty-five years ago. They led to Martha's death then. Now they lead at last to Lucas's. It cannot be coincidence. And yet it is impossible."

"Nothing's impossible," Fergus stated, "if I may coin novel truth. But why did you say 'at last'?"

"Did I?"

"You said, 'Now they lead *at last* to Lucas's death.' "

"I don't know. One uses turns of speech—"

"Sure. You didn't much like Lucas Quincy, did you Mr. Herndon?"

Herndon's lips trembled for a moment, but when his speech came it was calm enough. "No, Mr. O'Brien. I confess that I did not."

"Why?"

"Does one ever know why?"

"One sometimes has a pretty shrewd idea."

"Not I. Not in this case. Is it not Algernon Blackwood who expounds the theory that dislike may be purely chemical, apparently unmotivated, but all the more real for that very reason? Or as Martial put it long before, *Non amo te, Sabidi—?*"

"*I do not love thee, Dr. Fell?*" Fergus suggested in the vernacular.

"Exactly. I have never loved Lucas, I admit. But it is simply that we are antipathetic. There is no precise and definable cause."

"Not even," Fergus guessed, "your sister?"

"My sister? I don't understand you." But Herndon's body had momentarily stiffened, and his teeth had tightened their grip on the corncob.

"But shouldn't such chemical reactions be mutual?" Fergus went on. "For Quincy you were no Dr. Fell. No Sabidius, if you prefer that."

"No?"

"In fact the only soft and human trait I observed in Lucas Quincy was a kind of tender regard for you. Solicitous, that's the word. If you were alone and worried there was Quincy, looking after you, consoling you—"

"God damn him," said James Herndon.

Fergus was silent. This had been no ordinary oath. It was not the nasty snapping "God damn" of Horace Brainard nor the casual friendly "God damn" of Fergus him-

self. It was a perfectly literal request that God in His infinite power might condemn to Hell forever the soul of Lucas Quincy. It was terrifying in its simple sincerity.

"Let's go back," said Fergus. "Let's go way back to 1915. Tell me: were you satisfied with this prowler theory at the time?"

"No. To speak frankly, Mr. O'Brien, I was not. But as time went by— In twenty-five years, even the murder of a most dear friend can become something dim and distant. You may not believe that now, but it is true. Martha herself is still close to me. I can remember her smile and her absurdly small boots and the wind in her motoring veil. But her death and the details of her death are almost as faded in my mind as the plot of one of the Gene Stratton Porter novels that everyone was reading then."

"It was you who found her?"

"Yes. But I cannot remember even that, though for quite a different reason. That first moment of shock erased itself from my mind at once. Hugh could doubtless explain the defense mechanism involved. Even later that same night, I could not recall having found her. I knew only that I was there with her and she was dead and the others had come—I must have cried out—and there was blood on my dressing-gown. As there was on Catherine's tonight," he added.

"And how did you happen to find her? I gather you'd all retired. Wasn't it a bit unconventional to go to a young lady's room like that, especially twenty-five years ago?"

"It was Jay," he said simply. "Her brother. My friend. He was lost on the *Lusitania*, you know. Only two days before the wedding. He had gone to Europe on a mad peace crusade, working with some hopeless and glorious league. Not an excursion of wishful long-hairs like the Ford fiasco, but an honest and noble movement growing up out of those most deeply concerned.

"We all tried not to think of him, for Catherine's sake and for Horace's. Jay would not have liked to be a skeleton at their wedding. We pretended to forget him. But when I was alone in my room that night— Now I am wiser.

Now I should smoke a pipe and find my own solace. But then I knew only cigarettes, and I was lost. My Sweet Caporals failed me. I needed desperately to talk about Jay, to make him alive again with warm words. I went to his sister.

"And I found death."

"Dr. Arnold," said Fergus quietly, "was trying to tell me something about Jay's last letter to Martha, but he couldn't remember clearly. Do you happen to recall what was in it?"

"Jay's last letter—" Herndon trembled slightly. "No, Mr. O'Brien. Martha never read that letter to the group."

Fergus was silent for a moment. It seemed indecent to pursue his questioning in the face of Herndon's obviously deep emotion, the deepest and most sincere he had yet encountered in this company. "This Jay," he ventured, "you liked him a lot?"

"I loved him," said James Herndon.

Fergus hesitated. Like any good Irishman, he devotes much of his time to dawning the qualities of the British; but he has nonetheless a trace of British reserve in his make-up. There are some emotions one does not mention in so many words, and one of these is the emotion between man and man. One simply says, "Sure, a hell of a good joe," or something equally meaningless. But this—

He changed the subject. "Lucas Quincy made a cryptic remark to me earlier this evening, and I think you're the man to interpret it for me. Want to play Daniel?"

Herndon roused himself. "Gladly. If I can."

"Daniel's text was four words long, and it took him twenty-nine to translate it. Let's see how many words you can get out of these five: *The solution lies in Eliot.*"

Herndon started. "Then it was you—! Oh no. Of course. You wouldn't ask if you—" He paused and asked, "Might I take a very small drink?"

"Go ahead."

"Thank you." The drink was not small, it was minute; but it seemed to give him courage to go on. "It is because I do not hope to turn again that I can speak. I must speak.

Because I know that what is actual is actual only for one time and only for one place and yet this is the time and the place when this is actual and urgent and needful. I—This is exceedingly difficult, sir; you must have patience with me."

Fergus nodded in sympathetic silence.

"I thought for many years that I—that I knew who had killed Martha. Then Corcoran taught me otherwise and again I thought I knew. Now I know nothing; and yet you must know these false knowledges, because they may lead you to the truth.

"I could show you where it 'lies in Eliot,' but there is one thing not there. I forgot it then, though now you have reminded me and I see its place. It was the letter that Martha never read to us and her dear and unbelievable change and Jay's last letter to me and that odd threat to Lucas, though I never understood it. And yet it must be the key, though now even that does not fit in the lock—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Herndon. I don't think I understand all this. Perhaps if you went back and started at the beginning—?"

"You spoke of Eliot, Mr. O'Brien. Do you remember Sweeney trying to tell of a murder to Doris and Snow and the others, trying to explain how he knew a man once did a girl in, and finding that there are no words to tell what he knows? 'I gotta use words when I talk to you,' he complains, and there are no words. But I shall make my poor attempt to—"

It was then that the offstage noise drowned his speech. It was a confused noise, compounded of screams from several women and a harsh bellow of rage and pain which could have issued only from Horace Brainard.

Fergus snatched up the Smoker's Companion and dashed across to the living-room, James Herndon at his heels.

It was a tableau, a game of living statues. The guests were ranged about the room, frozen in attitudes of futile intervention. Horace Brainard stood in the center, furious amazement on his face. His hand was clasped to his jaw,

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and blood was seeping through his fingers.

Before him stood his wife Catherine. Her hand still clenched a dripping shard of glass, and she was laughing softly.



## Chapter Ten

### A HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE

"DAMN YOU, CATHERINE." Horace Brainard's voice was more bewildered than angry. "You're—you're as bad as your Aunt Margaret."

His words seemed to dissolve the tableau. These were people again, and no longer gorgon-struck statues. Fergus stepped forward, the Smoker's Companion obviously in readiness. "All right," he said curtly. "What goes?"

For a moment no one seemed willing to speak. Then Dr. Arnold took the floor. "Merely a moral lesson, Mr. O'Brien, in the rewards of the loud-mouthed."

"And what may that mean?"

"Horace was singing a psalm of deliverance and discovering a striking instance of divine justice in the fate that had singled out for destruction Lucas Quincy, the lone bachelor, and spared Horace Brainard, the solid paterfamilias. He exulted to such a point that Catherine felt herself driven to snatch up a glass, shatter it on the table, and cut short his triumph with the broken stem."

Mrs. Brainard's laughter had ceased. She was sobbing gently now, and Janet was murmuring, "There, Mother—"

"I was deeply relieved," Dr. Arnold added, "that she did so. Another sentence on the wonders which God has seen fit to shower upon His chosen Horace, and I dread to think what I might have done myself. Take down your hand, Horace. Let me see the cut."

Sullenly Brainard lowered his hand. "Crazy bitch," he muttered. "Could have killed me."

Dr. Arnold smiled. "No fear, Horace. The wonders of the Lord are still manifested. I have cut myself worse than that while shaving."

"Oh." Brainard looked crestfallen.

"Okay," said Fergus and began to pace the room. "Here's one more reason why we should get ahead with

these interviews and luse order out of chaos as soon as conceivably possible. We've got more to fear than the murderer. We have to fear ourselves. Until that murderer is found, we are every one of us in such a state of nervous tension that we could outdo his best efforts at the drop of a hat. This may be a moral lesson in the rewards of the loud-mouthed; it's also an object lesson to all of you to co-operate with me to the crowning pitch of your ability.

"Now I'll leave Dr. Arnold in charge here and resume my questioning. Mr. Herndon, shall we finish our conference?"

James Herndon boggled. His corncob was still glowing, but he made much business of relighting it to gain time. "Mr. O'Brien," he said at last, "I am afraid I have already told you all that lies in my power."

"But man, you—"

"Please, Mr. O'Brien. Go on with the others. Finish your meticulous charts. And then let me see if I can say what I must say. And in the meanwhile, may I have permission to leave this focus of emotions and retire to the calm of my own room?"

"You may not," said Fergus curtly. "I can't force you to talk to me, but at least I can keep you from tethering yourself out as a stalking-goat. You stay here. Miss Paris, will you come to the library with me?"

He followed her to the door, then turned abruptly and demanded, "One more question: who the hell is Aunt Margaret?"

On the part of the young people the ensuing silence was merely puzzled. To the older generation it was seemingly painful until Dr. Arnold broke it.

"Miss Margaret Herndon," he explained, "was a charming and gentle old lady whose sole slight flaw was a conviction that she belonged to the eminent Sanson family of French headsmen. She called herself Madame de Paris and spent much of her time in devising new and improved guillotines to be used on her closest acquaintances, including, quite naturally, the attendants at the asylum."

"Fun!" Alys murmured.

"But as anyone can see," Dr. Arnold added casually, with a benevolent glance at James Herndon and his sister, "her nephew and niece are as sane as you or I."

"I got you into this," Stella Paris confessed as her inquisition ended. "Now you've got to get us out of it."

Fergus looked out of the window. "No sign of dawn yet."

"You sound like a symbolic subtitle from my great days. Or are you just making a literal statement?"

"Both. It's a long night and a long black problem—" He turned back to the table and looked over his notes. "There's a terrible unanimity about these reports. Not that they check each other, but that they all so consistently refuse to check anything."

"Mine too?"

"Same like the rest. When Corcoran was attacked: dressing. When Ramirez was slugged: alone in the kitchen. And like the rest, you agree that nobody at that dinner party could have killed Valentino."

"I said it must have been a cultist, didn't I?"

"And so that's why you called me in?"

"Do you expect me to make sense? Look. When a hand's as fat as that and can still tremble— I'll bet you I couldn't even whip up a soufflé, the state I'm in, and my soufflés used to be worth coming miles for."

"They will be again, and I'm counting on one. That's a delicate height of art I haven't reached yet myself. Oh, and tonight: you were still awake when Janet came in?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't speak to her?"

"I'm afraid I'm a sentimentalist. I'd heard her and Tom murmuring outside the door; I thought she'd want to lie undisturbed in starry-eyed bliss. And instead she goes right off to sleep. Yours, young man, is an unromantic generation."

"Healthy, though," said Fergus. "Great for the nerves, sleep. Wonderful for the constitution. God, I wonder what it feels like— And you went on staying awake?"

"Kind of. Tossing-like."

"And you didn't hear anything in the hall?"

"I did hear movements now and then. But I thought it would just be Tom stretching his legs on guard or maybe somebody going to the bathroom. I thought if anything serious should happen— Well, after all, Tom was there, wasn't he?"

"Sure. The O'Brien guard system. Magnificent. And Janet slept all this time?"

"Like a log. Only she looked more comfortable."

"All right." Fergus made checkmarks. "Now tell me, Stella: what do you know about Jay Stanhope's last letter?"

"Jay's last letter? But I'm afraid I don't remember which was his last. Why?"

"I don't know. It's just that some of the others mentioned that Martha hadn't read Jay's last letter aloud. It seemed an odd fact."

"It would be. She always read them. And she looked so much like Jay that you'd think he was telling you all about it in person. But wait—I do remember. There was one letter she didn't read. And it was that night—or was it? Yes, it was right after that—"

"—that the first cat died?"

"No. That was the next day. But this— It's just another funny thing. Something little and meaningless, probably, but you say you want to know everything. It was just after that letter that Martha went for a long walk with Jim when she was supposed to go to the dressmaker's with Catherine. They were gone forever, it seemed like, and when they got back Jim was terribly upset."

"Upset's a vague word. How do you mean?"

"It's hard to say, especially after so long. But I can see them coming back and remember wondering what on earth Martha had said to him. He was frightfully disturbed, as though something were gnawing at him. And just the same there seemed to be something almost—well, almost exultant about him."

"Hm," said Fergus.

"Does that help any? Does it mean anything?"

"Damned if I know. But it goes into the hopper of this sorting machine that I call a deductive mind, and we'll see what comes out. Think I could see Mrs. Brainard now? I hate to plague her after all she's been through—and been up to—tonight, but I have to feed that hopper chucka-block full."

"I know Catherine's nervous crises," Miss Paris smiled. "Only men really worry about them, and please, I'm not miaowing."

"Which incidentally: did she like Martha?"

"Of course. We all did."

"As herself, or as Jay's sister?"

"Well—the latter mostly, I guess. I don't think we did pay much attention to her as herself, excepting Lucas of course. And Jim."

"Herndon too?"

"Yes. I thought for a long time that she'd probably marry him, and then she up and announces her engagement to Lucas. I still think it's a shame. If a girl like Martha had married Jim, he might have been somebody. But after her death he just—just drifted."

"After this walk-episode—would you say he seemed angry with Martha?"

"I don't know. Puzzled, confused—yes, and I would say angry, too. Martha had tears in her eyes. I think they'd had words. And that's odd enough, because I don't remember anybody else ever having words with Jim. At him, perhaps, but not with him."

"Damn," Fergus muttered. "I keep feeling there's something to this letter and this walk if I could only get at it. Maybe everything— But meanwhile, I'll see Mrs. Brainard."

"One suggestion, if I may?"

"Sure."

"Don't say anything about Horace and the broken glass. You know that that has nothing to do with—with the rest of it, and it might just start her off again."

There was a strange urgency in Stella's voice.

"Murder is an epidemic. One guy lets loose his hatred with a carving-knife, and the idea begins to appeal to everybody else who ever hated. I've got to crack this god-damned thing, or we'll all be shattering glasses."

"And probably," said Stella Paris, "all using them on Horace."

Tom Quincy knocked on the door and came in. "Uncle Horace has walked out on us."

"Walked out?" Fergus repeated.

"Thought you'd like to know. Of course I could have thrown one of my famous blocks on him, but—"

"Where did he go?"

"Upstairs. Said he was damned if he was going to sit around with people who carved him up with glasses. You can see his point."

"And you let him—?"

"What could I do?"

"You could have socked the cocky little— No. You're right. It wouldn't have accomplished a thing beyond putting the final kibosh on my chances for a fee. But I'm going out there now and talk to the others."

"Okay," said Tom. "But I warn you: I think they're all going to follow his example. After all, my friend, I can't actually stop them."

They already had, most of them at least. Only Janet and Dr. Arnold remained in the living-room.

"When Father left," Janet explained, "Mother said what was he doing, returning to the scene of the crime? and went after him."

"Juicy remark," said Fergus.

"You can't pay any attention to what she says, she's so upset. And I don't blame her; it's all I can do to keep from grabbing glasses myself. Then Uncle Jim said so long as the gathering was breaking up, he had a little quiet thinking to do; and Alys put on a putrid Garbo imitation and said she wanted to be alawn and trailed off upstairs."

"And now," Dr. Arnold asked courteously, "what do you plan to do, Mr. O'Brien?"

Fergus paced and swore inaudibly. "What can I do? Maybe they're right at that. God knows another scene like that glass business wouldn't help us any. And I'm not the police. I can't drag 'em back here by main force and station a guard with orders to shoot. You might as well run along too, all of you. Crawl into your nice white winding-sheets and go to sleep and pray God you'll wake up again."

Arnold bowed. "Thank you. I need sleep."

"We all do. Look: I'm staying awake, keeping an eye peeled if possible. You can't get much sleep in that arm-chair; why don't you use my room?"

"Thank you. I shall. Are you retiring too, Stella?"

"You don't need me any more?"

Fergus waved her away. "Go rest. And forget my choice little outburst about winding-sheets. We're safe enough with every cutting edge in this establishment under my eye. Hold out through the night, and tomorrow we'll be safe back in civilization."

*Las Vegas, Nevada, thought Detective Lieutenant A. Jackson, is the goddamnedest town. It exists solely for the violation of California laws. Its three industries are quick marriage, quick divorce, and open gambling.*

*It was the first of these that absorbed him at the moment. He grinned indifferently at the slot machines crammed into every available square foot of floor space and at the grimly intense gamblers, even at this hour of the night (or morning) resolutely pursuing their favorite will-o'-the-wisps; but what concerned him was the marriage racket, the endless number of auto camps with signs MINISTER IN ATTENDANCE, ready at any hour to solve the problems of Californians who can't wait three days or who are doubtful as to the results of the compulsory Wassermann.*

*Finding the needle in the haystack would be nothing compared to guessing the minister Campetti would pick to legalize his proposed venture into the hay, and incidentally to silence the chief prosecuting witness. Routine*

*was useless here; you had to play your hunch.*

*And Jackson's hunch looked good to him. He'd checked up on the waitress. She was a decent girl, despite the mess she'd got herself tangled up in, and, what was specifically important, a devout Catholic. He was positive that she'd insist on a priest. She might consent to an elopement, but never to what she would consider a sinful marriage.*

*The young priest at the chaste and pleasing little church of Saint Joan of Arc hardly objected at all to being dragged out of bed; but he did protest vigorously against the suggestion that he would perform what he pityingly referred to as "a Las Vegas marriage."*

*"In the case of a mixed marriage, there'd have to be a dispensation. And if both parties are Catholics—"*

*"Campetti was probably born one."*

*"Then in that case the marriage would have to be solemnized in the woman's parish, and after the publication of banns. You don't understand the laws of the Church, Lieutenant."*

*"I'll lay odds Campetti doesn't either. He's never given us any reason to believe he understands laws."*

*"At any rate he hasn't been here. No one has."*

*"I came by plane," Jackson reflected. "That'd cancel out the head start he had. Maybe he hasn't got here yet. Do you mind if I wait?"*

*"Certainly not, Lieutenant. I'll fix you up in the study. A glass of wine, perhaps?"*

*"Afterward," said Lieutenant Jackson grimly.*

*"Let me stand guard again," Tom Quincy said. "Give me the Smoker's Companion. I've got to make up for my—my—"*

*"Your bad luck," said Fergus. The others had gone up to bed now. The two young men sat in the library again, and Fergus fiddled restlessly with his charts.*

*"You're kind, sir. Too damned kind. I wasn't unlucky. I was inefficient and stupid and a pretty contemptible failure. Let me prove to myself that I am worth something."*



"To yourself?"

"All right. To Janet, then. Let me justify myself in her eyes."

"I think you're pretty well justified as is. You didn't see her when she learned you'd been hurt." Fergus rose and went to the window. "No, don't torture yourself so. Go up and go to bed or visit with Janet or do what you damned please. I'll keep an eye open. And it won't be many hours before we have light again." He stared out the window at the embers of the great bonfire.

Tom followed his gaze. "The beacon didn't bring much result, did it?"

"It may yet. Some bright mind in Santa Eulalia may be doing a slow take. And tomorrow—" He returned to the table and thumped his clenched fist on the chart. "These goddamned facts! The whole thing's there, somehow. It has to be. Some place in those hentracks of mine is the key to all this reign of terror—which is as pretty a piling up of metaphor as I've achieved in some time. I've got the solution there before me, yet I, a dull and muddymettled rascal, peak, like John-a-dreams— Who's there?"

"Mr. O'Brien?" a woman's voice asked from outside.

"Open the door, Tom. Oh, Mrs. Brainard."

Catherine Brainard had changed from the pink to a baby-blue negligee, equally frilly and silly but bloodless. She had made herself up carefully and well; the result was like an excellent job of tinting on a death mask. Her pale drawn face was set in an expression of fixed resolution.

"You want to talk to me?" she asked tonelessly. "Stella said I was the only one you didn't have on your chart."

Fergus smiled sincerely. "Thanks. I hadn't expected such unsolicited co-operation. Will you sit down here?"

She held the negligee about her with the automatic coyness of a Greuze painting, and looked questioningly at Tom.

"I get it, Aunt Catherine. No stooges wanted. See you later, Fergus." He left quietly, seemingly still weighted down by his burden of responsibility and failure.

Mrs. Brainard seated herself wearily. She seemed spent after her sudden physical outburst in the living-room, but some inner compulsion kept her going. "Now, Mr. O'Brien?"

She sat patiently through the questioning, giving only quiet *Yes's* and *No's*. Yes, she had been dressing when Corcoran was attacked. Yes, she thought her husband had been with her most of that time. No, she couldn't be positive. No, of course they weren't in Hollywood Wednesday night. No, she couldn't remember anything about Martha's death. No, she didn't know a thing about an unread letter. Yes she'd always believed in the prowler theory herself. Who else would do such a thing?

But these routine questions were manifestly not what she had come downstairs for. There was growing impatience in her brief answers. At last she leaned forward across the table. "Mr. O'Brien." Her little eyes glinted bright. "Aren't you going to ask me about *tonight*?"

"Of course, Mrs. Brainard. I was coming to that. What were you doing between—"

She swept his words aside with a quick petulant gesture. "What I was *doing* doesn't count. You want to know what I *saw*."

"And what did you see?"

"*I saw the murderer.*"

She reached a well-manicured flabby hand across the table and seized Fergus's arm. "I saw him, I tell you. I saw him get out of bed and slip out of the room. I heard a *thump* in the hall. That must have been Tom. Then I didn't hear a thing. Not anything. But then," her breath was coming fast now, "I saw him come back and lock the door and get into bed. He didn't think I saw him, but I did. I saw him after he killed Lucas, and I didn't know it."

Fergus regarded her narrowly. "You mean your—?"

"Of course I mean Horace. Then I heard you at the door. I knew then something was wrong. I couldn't breathe. My chest was solid. It wouldn't move when I tried to breathe. And I knew it had happened to Lucas. I felt it. I went to his room. Horace tried to stop me, but I went

to him."

"Of course you did," said Fergus gently. "He meant so much to you, didn't he?"

"More than you'll—" She broke off and jerked her hand away. "So now you know," she spat out. "What will you do to him?"

"To your husband?"

"They don't hang people any more in California, do they?" Her eyes gleamed viciously. "They use gas now. He'll have to sit in that little room and people watch him through the glass and he tries to sleep so it'll be easier but he can't sleep and the gas comes in and crawls around him like snakes and he tries to breathe but his chest is solid too. He can't breathe and then at last he has to breathe and he breathes in snakes of gas and they coil into him and—I"

Abruptly she let her head sink onto the table. Her back shook beneath the frilled negligee, but no sound came. Fergus rose and paced helplessly. At last he laid a gentle hand on her shaking shoulder. "Mrs. Brainard. You'd better go to bed now. I'll attend to everything."

She looked up. A pathetic trusting appeal lit up her make-up-streaked face. "You won't let him—?"

"Nobody's going to get away with anything. Now you go to sleep."

"But I can't sleep. I'm all twisted and miserable and—and old," she confessed. "I never admitted that before even to myself, but I'm old and Lucas is dead and I can't sleep."

He put an arm around her and helped her out of the chair. "Come on. We'll see Dr. Arnold. He'll help you sleep. And don't talk to him about what you saw. You mustn't talk to anyone until we're in a position to take definite action."

Fergus realized, with some surprise, as he tapped on the door of what had been pointed out to him as his room, that he hadn't even been inside it yet. Something had been happening every instant since he'd hit the island. With his bag gone, dressing had been out of the question,

and sleep seemed equally so.

"Idiot," Dr. Arnold muttered when Fergus explained the summons. "No, Mr. O'Brien, not you. I mean myself. I left my bag in my own room. I pray earnestly that no one— Wait here with Catherine."

He returned in a moment, his aquiline face seriously perturbed. "Here, Catherine." He held out a white tablet and a glass of water. "Take this now, and if you still can't sleep," he handed her a small box, "take one of these in an hour. Shall we see you to your room?"

She hesitated, shuddering. "I can't go there. Not where Horace is. I'd—" She stopped short at a warning glance from Fergus.

"Then if you'd care to sleep here, Catherine, and let me move back to my old room?"

"But that Mexican's on your bed."

"The armchair is more than satisfactory. And I begin to feel that I should not have left my patient alone. Come, Mr. O'Brien. Let us leave our hostess to her rest."

"What's the matter?" Fergus demanded as they came out into the hall. "You look as if you'd heard a banshee. And you so impassive."

"This struck close," said Arnold quietly. "I feel that I have betrayed what little good there is in me by reveling in a comfortable bed while my patient— But see for yourself."

He opened the door of his room. The bed lamp shone down on Jesús Ramirez and on the metal handle protruding from the left side of his chest.

*"... But I don't need to give you all the lowdown on the Stanhope case," Lieutenant A. Jackson read; "you'll remember the beer-fest last week and the argument we had on Ferguson. The point is: I'm with these people on an island and there's been another cat. If you don't hear from me Saturday morning, for God's sake send somebody or come yourself to take over."*

*"The damned fool!" said Jackson aloud.*

*The young priest seemed not to mind the vocabulary.*

"What's the trouble?"

"Friend of mine's got himself into a hellish mess, and I should be getting him out. But here I am in Las Vegas and—"

There was a loud banging on the outside door of the rectory. Jackson followed the priest, his hand on his automatic, keeping invisible in the shadows of the hallway.

"We want to get married, Father," a husky voice announced. "And quick, see?"

Jackson felt his grip involuntarily tightening. There was no mistaking that harsh loud whisper. The hunch had worked.

"Won't you come inside?" the priest was saying. "We can discuss things better in there."

There was a shadow of doubt in the whisper now. "Kind of eager, ain't you, Father?"

Then a girl urging, "Go on, Caesar," and the whisper again, "Saw a light when we drove up. Kind of late hours, isn't it, Father?"

"My son," the priest began, and then it all happened at once. Campetti's hand had darted lithely into the hall and found the light switch. He swore one short word when he saw Jackson, and reached instantly for his gun.

The two explosions made one, deafeningly loud in the little hallway. Jackson saw the gun bounce from Campetti's wounded hand, and at the same time felt a throbbing arc of pain spread from his own left shoulder. He dived forward, caught Campetti about the knees, and brought him down with a thundering crack against the cement of the doorstep. Campetti did not move.

Jackson felt a warm stream flowing from his shoulder and his strength pouring out with it. He waved the priest away and said, "Call the local police. And a doctor."

The girl was crouching over Caesar Campetti and whimpering softly.

Jackson groped his way back to the study. Funny, he didn't remember anybody turning off that hall light. As he sank into a chair, he called out to the priest, "You can bring that wine now." Then all the lights went out.

Fergus stared at the Mexican. "Another one dead," he said bitterly. "Hell, I'm not a detective. I'm a carrier."

"Would it console you, Mr. O'Brien, to learn that he is not dead?"

"Not dead? But look, that thing, whatever it is, that toad-sticker is jabbed straight through his heart."

"It is jabbed," said Dr. Arnold precisely, "through the left frontal wall of his chest, in what is normally the cardiac region."

"Normally?"

"Ramirez has the amazing good fortune to be a dextro-cardiac, or dexiocardiac, to use a perhaps better term. I had observed as much when I examined him before, but thought it not worth mentioning. I am now deeply grateful that I kept silence. For though the wound is a serious one, Ramirez's heart still beats firmly on the right side of his chest."

Fergus was making rapid mental calculations. "You last checked up on your patients after the others had gathered in the living-room. Nobody left that room during my inquisition. Then Ramirez was stabbed some time between Horace's indignant exit from the living-room and the time I came upstairs—in other words within the past fifteen minutes. Everybody was on the loose then and unobserved—getting ready for bed, going to the bathroom—"

"Mr. O'Brien," Arnold broke into his speculations, "you are about to undertake a new profession. Have you ever been a male nurse?"

For the next quarter hour Fergus fetched hot water, held towels, lit candles for impromptu sterilization, and was all in all far too busy to think of more than the wonderful dexterity of Hugh Arnold's long thin fingers. The patient moaned and tossed but never awoke. Occasionally Fergus had to hold his arms as they made instinctive unconscious gestures of defense.

"He doesn't feel much," Arnold explained. "That was a stiff local. He was probably still somewhat under the narcotic I gave him when this happened. He doubtless lost consciousness again from the shock and from loss of

blood."

Now at last the hasty operation was over and the wound sterilized and bandaged. "I'm worried about that lung," the doctor admitted. "I need an X-ray and some decent equipment. But this will see him through till we can get him to a hospital tomorrow, if your plans work. If he has to wait longer, I make no guarantees." He rinsed his hands of the last stains of blood. "In a way, O'Brien, this is almost a relief. To feel that I am doing something, making my training and my skill count for something. Damned sight more satisfactory than lolling in your chromium-trimmed office prescribing bread pills."

Fergus looked at the weapon. It was a common, or garden, meat skewer, about four inches long. The point was not too sharp; but with strength behind it and enough skill to miss the ribs, it could easily have disposed of any individual whose heart was literally in the right place. "I thought I was so smart," he said, "rounding up all the cutting edges on the place. I thought our man had an *idée fixe*. I no more expected him to use a point instead of a blade than I'd have expected him to use poison. Maybe murder's like drinking. I despise gin, but I've been known to plaster myself liberally with it when there wasn't any whisky. And if you've got the itch and there are no blades, a point has to do."

Dr. Arnold gestured at his bag. "There are blades."

"He wouldn't expect that. I wouldn't myself. Do you ordinarily go around so professionally well equipped on house parties?"

"Only," said Arnold dryly, "when cats have been killed."

"Valentino," Fergus reflected, "had his uses— Or look: this makes more sense. This isn't in the killing line at all. I mean, it doesn't belong with the maniac throat-slitting of Valentino and Corcoran and Quincy. This is rational and utilitarian like the sluggings. Remember when I was asking Ramirez who slugged him and he fainted before he could answer? Somebody was afraid Ramirez did know, and somebody, coldly and quite sanely, tried to make sure

that he would never tell."

"And earlier?" Arnold suggested. "That scream from Ramirez after dinner?"

"I don't know." Fergus thought back and remembered the curious scrap of conversation in the upper hall between Quincy and Herndon. "Only one of two men could have made an attempt on him then, and now one of those two— No, that time I think your appeasement theory was right. That was probably a nightmare. But it might have planted an idea in our friend's mind. Get rid of the bastard before he—" Fergus broke off and smoked in silence for a full minute.

"Well?" Arnold asked at last.

Fergus's eyes were alive with a green enthusiasm. "I've got an idea. It's hazy still, but the form's coming through. And if I can— Dr. Arnold, I'm asking a favor of you and I want you to obey me without any questions."

"If it will help you to put an end to this—this—"

"Massacre?" Fergus suggested. "I think it will."

"Then what must I do?"

"Stay here in this room and if humanly possible stay awake until I come back, which will be some time after dawn. That's about six, if I remember right. Admit no one, speak to no one, and above all let no one have any notion that Ramirez is still alive."

"Catherine—" Arnold began.

"Yes. She knows you came back here, and from that she could deduce, if she— But we'll have to take the chance. Tell no one else, and stay here."

"And where are you going?"

"Me? I'm going to sit up with a sick goat."

Janet sat on the edge of Tom's bed, in a tentative sort of posture as though she might at any moment take flight. "Unconventional setting to be discussing—marriage, isn't it?" she asked.

"But I've got to know, darling. We've been thrown so close together here tonight; it makes up for the whole five years of not seeing you."



"Does it? I've changed a lot in those five years, Tom. The changes don't show so much tonight."

"I'll chance the changes."

"You're a brave man, Tom Quincy."

"I'm not brave. I just happen to love you."

"Can't you let me wait till I'm clear again? Can't you leave the decision up to Miss Brainard?"

"The hell with Miss Brainard. I want to marry Janet."

"But you'll be living with Miss Brainard. She's sensible, she is. She doesn't approve of love-at-first-sight-after-five-years. She thinks people should know each other and—"

"What does Janet think?"

She looked up and saw him standing beside her, tall and strong and (a word you'd never dare say to a man, but you can think it to yourself) beautiful. "I'm afraid Janet just thinks you're wonderful," she said simply.

Tom was on his knees beside her when the light tap came at the door. He said, "Damn," but rose and answered it.

"Listen," Fergus began in a whisper. "I've got the final scheme that's going to straighten out this tangle. We're—Hello, Janet."

"Am I in the way, O'Brien?"

"Meaning that I am? But this is important. Mind if I steal your boy friend?"

"He's not my boy friend," said Janet stoutly. "He's my fiancé."

Tom stifled a shout of triumph.

Fergus looked at him curiously. "What the hell, sir? Is that news to you?"

"Practically," Tom admitted. "And is it marvelous?"

"I'll congratulate you when we have time. Come on. Sleep tight, Janet."

In the library, out of all possible earshot of the others, Fergus explained his plan. "Our friend's getting practical in his murders. This attempt on Ramirez was no outburst of mania. it was cold rational self-protection. So what should be his next step?"

"Corcoran."

"Head of the class. He thinks Ramirez is dead, but he can't be sure that Corcoran mightn't have seen something too. The last living witness is going to be a hell of a temptation."

"And if he succumbs?"

"We'll be there. He won't expect a guard there, and no matter how he's armed himself this time—and God how that man can improvise: socks, skewers, scout knives (alliterative too)—the two of us should be able to overpower him. That'll be the last piece of evidence we need."

"The last piece? You mean you know who it is?"

"I've got some vague ideas, but I'm not talking yet. Now you hie out to Corcoran's shed. Go the long way round and come up on it from behind so you aren't seen from the house. Sconce yourself in the dark there and wait for me."

"While you do what?"

"Drop around and see if everybody's all right for the night and incidentally mention casual-like that Corcoran's much better and Dr. Arnold says he can talk in the morning."

Tom hesitated in the doorway. "Are you sure— You know we can't positively eliminate anybody. Is it wise to leave Dr. Hugh guarding Ramirez? Supposing that was just the chance he wanted? Shouldn't one of us stay here?"

"Single guards don't hold up so good against our friend. No, we'll double on Corcoran. Ramirez is safe; his attacker must think he killed him or he wouldn't have left him without finishing it off."

"But the doctor knows he's still alive."

"Uh uh." Fergus shook his head. "No danger there. Arnold is the one man who's positively out on this now. He had examined Ramirez before. Out of all the people on this island, he's the only one who couldn't possibly have stabbed the Mex in the left side. Now go watch the goat; I'm going upstairs to chat with prospective tigers."

## *Chapter Eleven*

### ALL HELL LET LOOSE

THE LITTLE ROOM smelled of antiseptic and sickbed sweat, with a sweet underlying base of blood.

The moon had set hours ago. Fergus stepped into a cube of solid black. He held the antique revolver in one hand and a flashlight in the other, but he had not used the light. The knives, still fastened to his belt, jangled as he entered.

"Hi!" said Tom. "Welcome to the tiger trap."

There was a linen rustle from the bed.

"Sh!" said Fergus. "No talking. Give our friend credit for some sense. He's not going to stroll into a trap baited with cheery voices."

"Okay," said Tom resignedly. "But how do I keep awake?"

"Think about Janet. Or Lana Turner. Or work cube roots in your head. Or solve this case, just to pass the time. Now let there be a deathly hush."

There was. Fergus groped his way to the bed and listened reassured to Corcoran's regular breathing. It had not been really a lie that he'd used for bait. There was a good chance that Corcoran would be talking tomorrow—today?—what time was it anyway?—and that he'd have something vitally important to say. It behooved the anonymous gentleman whom Fergus had taken to calling "our friend" to act and act promptly.

Fergus settled himself in a corner where he could watch both the door and the window. He deliberately squeezed himself into an uncomfortable position. Ease and comfort were dangerous seducers when you were as sleepy as this. And a sleeping guard is a degree or two worse than none.

What he could use right now was a radio program of symphonic music. That worked sometimes; set the thoughts flowing in regular channels, marshaled them,

ordered them until suddenly there they were all in parade formation and spelling out the solution. He remembered the time he had embarrassed his sister Maureen by jumping up with a yelp in the midst of a Hollywood Bowl program and dashing to the phone to explain to Andy Jackson who had murdered the dwarf who kept tame chameleons. Good old Andy; there was a man, take him for all in all. Levelheaded but imaginative, ingenious yet never erratic. The very model of a modern detective lieutenant.

*This is driveling thought, he reminded himself sternly. This is what you put yourself to sleep with. Think about the case.*

He wished there were some light, so he could study that careful and illegible chart. He knew the facts in his mind, but that wasn't the same thing. You see them on paper, neatly serried among ruled lines, and they mean something fresh. But he wasn't taking a chance on the flash, and the starlight was too feeble.

He could just make out the form on the bed now, the tethered goat of this hopeful trap. And he could see Tom near him, perfectly silent but still awake. At least his eyes were open.

Fergus felt wrong somehow. He was beside one victim of a mass murderer, waiting for the maniac to return and finish off his job. He should be feeling stress and tension and unimaginable suspense. His hackles should be rising, every nerve should be aquiver, and all the other physiological phenomena so commonplace in pulps should be following their wonted course. And instead he sat there calmly and tried to keep from going to sleep. What was the matter with him? Had he become a blasé spectator like Arnold? What the hell went on?

And then he realized. That was just it. Nothing went on. Nothing stirred. There was not a twitter of noise in the world but the lapping of the sea on the beach. There was not a glinting of light in the universe but the faint, faint sheen of the stars. He and Tom and Corcoran were alone in a cube of space. Outside were stars and ocean. And that was all.

For suspense you needed the creaking board that might be the murderer's footfall, the flickering fire that might be the murderer's candle, the hovering bat that might be the murderer's shadow. Here and now, where there was nothing, there could be no horror, no murderer, even though you sat beside his victim, even though you knew that your life and his might be balanced against each other within the next hour.

So Fergus, awaiting a murderer, yawned.

He seized a fold of flesh on the inner surface of his leg between the knuckles of his index and middle fingers and nipped with all his force. The stinging sharpness of the little pain shot through his body and his eyes popped wide open. He stared ahead of him into the dim starlight and began asking himself questions. Some of these inconsistencies might resolve themselves now that he had more knowledge to work on.

*Why had Catherine Brainard accused her husband of murder?*

Because she knew that he had a motive for murder. Lucas Quincy had been her lover. This was hypothesis, but it explained so many matters. It explained Mrs. Brainard's odd stares of jealousy at Alys. It explained Alys's remark about Lucas's wanting a change and her other cryptic comment about "all in the family." It explained Catherine Brainard and the broken glass. It explained the accusation against Horace—with the reservation, of course, that that accusation might be perfectly true. It even—yes, it explained one of his earlier questions.

*Why was Horace Brainard so meek and subservient to Lucas Quincy?*

Because he was dependent upon Quincy. Because all his pretense of being a financial big shot was simply a cover-up, possibly even for himself, of the fact that Quincy had made him. His horns had sprouted and borne profitable fruit. For Catherine's sake, Lucas had dragged this nasty little nonentity after him in his career. Wasn't each of Horace's endeavors one in which Lucas was eminent? And Horace, not realizing the true cause, was still careful

never to offend his patron. Yes, that checked. He thought over his other questions.

*Why was the polite James Herndon so markedly insolent to Alys?*

That was easy now, too. Because she looked too much like a vicious parody of Martha Stanhope. And of Jay, as well. The Stanhopes must have had an unusually high degree of physical resemblance; and that accounted for a good deal. It could explain why both Lucas and Herndon had been strongly drawn toward Martha; it was a way in which devotion to, even love of her brother could be expressed within the normal mores of our society. Or would Lucas's emotion for Jay be love? More probably a curious mixture of involuntary attraction and complete scorn. The two men were completely opposed in their entire philosophies. Marrying Martha, conquering her mentally and physically, would be the compensatory means by which Lucas could triumph over Jay, whom he despised and yet knew to be greater than he.

Now Martha was dead. And Alys had grown up to be her bodily replica. So Lucas took her, thereby finally taking Martha and conquering Jay. But Herndon, who loved the other part of Martha that was also Jay, her sensitivity, her character, her—to use the simplest word—her goodness, loathed this monster that resembled Martha so much and yet debased her image so vilely.

Fergus nodded his head and felt something like self-satisfaction. The snarls were coming undone. But so much yet remained snarled, and all of it seemed to focus around one man:

*What had Lucas meant by "The solution lies in Eliot"?*

*Why was the callous Lucas so solicitous for James Herndon?*

*What was in Jay Stanhope's last letter, and why did Martha take James Herndon on that long walk from which he returned perturbed and angry?*

*What had James Herndon meant by his cryptic promise to reveal "false knowledges"?*

It all pointed in one direction, and so many other little

details fitted in there too. It was all of a piece. Another look at those charts—at least one angle there resolutely refused to fit, as he remembered it, but it might be made to yet—just one clear survey of the body of evidence, and he'd have his case.

But by the time he saw the charts, he reminded himself with surprise, he wouldn't need them. He'd have his certain proof then, the murderer himself, seized in the very act of polishing off the last witness against him. Somewhere on this island a mind was working fast, determining what improvised weapon to use this time. Somewhere on this island a hand was twitching toward blood. And here beside him—

But it was so still. So blissfully, peacefully still. The stars and the ocean and beyond that nothing—

And the problem. He shut his eyes and tried to focus on the porch of the Stanhope home in March of 1915. "We were sitting around, some of us drinking beer—" You rushed the growler in those days, didn't you? He pictured a large tin bucket of beer and the group around it. The people were harder to picture than the beer. Stella minus twenty-five years was easy. He'd seen revivals recently of her early stuff for Triangle. She was then rather like a cross between the two Gishes, more graceful than Dorothy, but more real than Lillian. Arnold, he thought, would not have changed much; a little more color to his skin, a little more hair on his forehead, a little less poise to his manner. Herndon—that was possible too; you could still see how splendid his body must once have been before it went flabby. Picture him as something like Tom, but with a trifle less vigor even then. Catherine—a straight and vapid ingénue, probably very pretty. Horace—the cocky little guy who is always going to do something pretty damned smart next week. Lucas—but Lucas defeated him. It was impossible to imagine a young Lucas Quincy.

And Martha—Fergus was an impersonal devotee of time-travel. He reveled in such problems as What happens if you go back in time and kill your own grandfather? But an aspect that he felt had never been sufficiently

treated was What happens if you go back and marry your own grandmother? Love across the centuries—the *Berkeley Square* sort of thing—had always fascinated him. In moments of drunken introspection he had been known to decide that his true love had died long ago and that their paths would never intersect in this space-time continuum. He had been in love, at various times, with Nefertiti, Mary Stuart, Catherine of Braganza, Mary Fitton, Ethel Le Neve, and Thérèse de Lisieux, though he doubted if even time-travel would have done him any good in the last case. And now he found this odd and familiar feeling focusing on Martha Stanhope.

They sounded grand, the Stanhopes. They must have been, to impress so intensely such a diverse group of people. And of the two, he preferred Martha. Jay would be a little too exalted, a little too heroically aflame for his tastes. But Martha—Even her name fitted—Martha, that dear good kind person who washed up the dishes while her more famous sister entertained the visiting celebrity. Martha was all right. And how to picture such a person, knowing only that she looked startlingly like that bitch Alys?

He concentrated. And slowly the picture grew clear. The common pettiness of Alys's little features grew slowly into a lovely delicacy. The flagrant smudges of bad make-up faded to a natural vividness. The blue eyes lost their hungry glitter and became serene. He saw Martha.

He saw the whole 1915 group now, in their natural being, with the one curious inconsistency that they were dressed as of 1940. The costumes of 1915 are too fresh to be glamorous. They are merely funny, and you cannot visualize them in a serious context. They belong in a revival of early Sennett and nowhere else.

James Herndon savored his beer. "We owe the Germans this at least," he sighed. "This and Heine."

"That is the least of our debts," young Dr. Hugh Arnold announced pedantically. "Think of their immeasurable contributions to medical research."

"Oh, but they're nasty!" Catherine Brainard squealed.



"Look at what they did in poor little Belgium, crucifying all those little children and killing all those nuns and cutting off their—and mutilating them," she ended refinedly.

"There's still too much of the beast in man," Hugh admitted. "One of the ultimate objects of all medical achievement must be to eradicate it."

"And we see that beast," said Martha, "so much more clearly in our enemies."

Young Lucas, that amorphous shape, snorted. "Every man's your enemy. Only sensible rule of life. Eh, Horace?"

And Horace nodded sagaciously.

Then the postman came, a blue-gray uniform without a face, and handed a letter to Martha.

"From Jay!" Catherine gurgled kittenishly, and James leaned forward.

Martha read through the letter in silence. Her grave eyes showed no expression until she had finished. Then with an odd frown of concern she looked around the group. She raised her hands and dropped them with a meaningless gesture.

"Lucas—" she began.

"What is it? More highfalutin nonsense?"

"No. No, I couldn't." Her lips set in a firm line. "James, I want to talk to you."

James rose and offered her his arm. "A turn around the park, fair damsel?"

"Yes. Yes, that's an idea. We'll go for a walk. You don't mind?"

The others said they didn't. Fergus's eye tried to follow the strolling couple, but it met only darkness. Reluctantly he returned it to the porch.

The slim and pretty Stella Paris started up. "Somebody's watching us!" she cried.

"Think nothing of it, my dear," said Hugh. "Merely time-travel. You know, like that odd little novel by Wells."

Horace looked hungrily at Lucas's throat, and the gash there. "Not so deep as a Wells," he observed, "but it will serve."

A little girl of seven with bouncing breasts came up to the porch. "Look at my kitten," she called out gleefully. "I've just sliced his throat. Isn't it *fun*?"

The beer container growled its approval.

Tom Quincy stared through the starlit gloom at the young detective and smiled sympathetically. Fergus had been through a hell of a nervous strain this whole night; the reaction was inevitable. And why not let him sleep? If the need arose, he could be waked. Meanwhile let him rest. His alert brain was an invaluable asset on that island, and all the more useful if properly rested.

Tom reached over and picked up the bone-handled revolver. Just in case. He thought for a moment of the house and Ramirez, and then remembered that Dr. Arnold was watching in that room. He himself could do more good here. And that Corcoran should safely survive the night and speak his knowledge tomorrow was of immeasurable importance.

Despite Fergus's cogent reasoning, Tom was far from persuaded that the goat-trap would work. It was possible, maybe it was even plausible, that the man who had attacked Corcoran would return to finish his work. But wouldn't even he have some sense? Wouldn't he smell a trap? Murderers can be highly canny individuals.

Just the same Tom kept a tight grip on the revolver. *And I'll keep my ears pricked*, he said to himself, and had an absurd vision of himself as a private chieftain with vast gold earrings thrust through those pricked ears. He held the revolver and listened intently; for at the moment nothing on earth, not even Janet, seemed so important as that Corcoran should come safely through the night and tell his story tomorrow to Fergus's friend the police lieutenant.

*Detective Lieutenant A. Jackson lay on a cot in the Las Vegas police station and wished to God that he could just put that left shoulder away in storage someplace until it felt human again.*

*An officer with a florid face came into the little room. Jackson had a faint memory of seeing that red-veined nose at some point earlier. "Well?" he asked.*

*The officer laid Jackson's warrant down on the table. "You won't be needing that."*

*"Campetti—?"*

*"Some guys' skulls don't take so good to cement. You saved your state a trial, Jackson."*

*Lieutenant Jackson shuddered. Sending a man to the gas chamber is one thing. Being, personally, his executioner is another.*

*"The doc says you better sleep if you can," the officer went on. "And he ain't too sure if you'd ought to travel for a couple of days."*

*Jackson leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes. Then he sat up too suddenly and groaned at the pain in his shoulder. "Can I use a phone?"*

*"Operator," he was saying a little later, "put me through to the Chief of Police in Santa Eulalia, California."*

The dot that was Blackman's Island rolled round in earth's diurnal course with rocks and stones and trees. The sun came over the Liebre Mountains and the San Rafael Mountains and the Santa Ynez Mountains and hit Santa Eulalia, where the only light still burning was that of the all-night poker game at Police Chief Donovan's. The sunlight went on across a short stretch of the ocean and struck the wharf of Blackman's Island and the beach and the window of Corcoran's cabin.

Fergus woke with a start and tried to grip his empty hand on the revolver that wasn't there. Automatically he grasped the flashlight as a club and stared up straight into the revolver.

"Mr. O'Brien," said Tom levelly, "you're trapped. No use struggling."

Still half asleep, Fergus gasped. Then he grinned slowly. "Had me going there for a minute," he confessed.

"I couldn't resist it. It makes me feel a little better for

what happened to me on guard duty."

Fergus held out his hand. "Think I can be trusted with the Smoker's Companion again? Thanks. Now watchman, what of the night? What went on while I slept?"

"Nary a thing. Our tiger just isn't interested in goats."

Fergus began to pace. "The Clue of the Unsprung Trap," he muttered. "Maybe that's it. Maybe that's the— Come on back to the house. We're going to rouse this party and get back to work."

"I read a novel once," said Tom, "where the detective's subconscious outdid his intellect; he went and dreamed the solution. Did you have any such luck?"

"I'm not sure," said Fergus slowly. "But I wouldn't say no."

*Big John Donovan, Chief of Police of Santa Eulalia, hung up the receiver with a snort of disgust. "Some damned fool card says he's the Los Angeles Police Department and we should go chasing out to Blackman's Island and catch him a murderer. I told him where to put his murderers."*

*"How'd you know he was phony?" Officer Koplinski asked.*

*"How'd I know? Hell, Koppo, the dumb cluck was phoning from Las Vegas. And expecting me to believe it was the L.A. Department! Probably one of the boys around town went and eloped and wants to have some fun celebrating. That Hankin boy's been hanging around the Union Hi a lot; I wouldn't be surprised if maybe he and that redheaded Spanish teacher—" Chief Donovan settled his firm-muscled bulk into a grunting chair and picked up the deck. "Dealer's choice? Well boys, how's about deuces and one-eyed jacks?"*

*Officer Koplinski frowned, unsatisfied.*

"God bless you, Stellal" Fergus ejaculated piously as he finished his tomato juice and started in on toast and coffee. "Henceforth I want you in on all my murders. Anybody who can produce refreshments at just the right

time—"

"But what got you up so early?" Tom insisted. "Was anything—going on in the house?"

Stella Paris looked comfortable, capable, and capacious in an old flannel dressing-gown and shabby mules. "We all talked so much about getting our sleep," she said, "but I don't think we did much sleeping. I know I didn't. And when dawn came, I decided I might as well be up and doing. Help everybody start the day more cheerful."

"Are the others waking up too?" Fergus asked through a mouthful of toast.

"I heard people stirring."

"Then do me a favor. Get 'em all downstairs for me. I'll be in the library checking over my chart. Keep 'em happy with breakfast till I send for them. Will you do that?"

Stella paused in her steady beating of a bowl of batter. "As soon as I get this colleecake in the oven."

Fergus sniffed the spicy air and breathed a happy sigh. "If it's as good as your coffee, madame—and by the way, what's your secret on that?"

"Just careful measuring and don't let it perc too fast."

"I'll remember." Fergus finished his coffee reluctantly. "Come on, Tom. I want an appreciative ear."

The library looked even more desolate in the growing sunlight. Fergus spread the chart on the table and began to explain.

"Now here along the top are the keypoints, the outbursts of violence: Martha Stanhope, Miss Paris's cat, Corcoran, Ramirez, and Quincy. By Ramirez, I mean the slugging; the stabbing's wide open, with no check on anybody. And the evidence on the first cats is too vague by now. These five are our vital points."

Tom rubbed the back of his head. "Don't I count?"

"You and Herndon are included under Quincy. That triple play was all one occasion. Now down the side are the names of—well, of the survivors. I've even, for the sake of completeness, put in the younger generation."

"And the result is?"

"Here. Look. *Yes* means opportunity on that occasion, *No* means a convincing alibi. Queries mean there's something phony about the evidence, or I haven't got it all yet. See what you can make of it."

Tom looked.

	STANHOPE	VALENTINO	CORCORAN	RAMIREZ	QUINCY
HORACE BRAINARD	?No	No	?No	No	?Yes
CATHERINE "	?No	No	?No	Yes	?No
DR. ARNOLD	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
JAMES HERNDON	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
STELLA PARIS	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
TOM QUINCY	No	?Yes	No	?Yes	No
JANET BRAINARD	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
ALYS TRENT	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

"It doesn't seem to tell you much," Tom said at last.

"No. Not right on the surface. It'd be so simple if there was one person with a straight *Yes* reading all the way across, or one victim with only one possible *Yes* in his column. But just the same I think this does tell us something. Let's take them up one by one." He set the chart back on the table and began pacing.

"First, Martha Stanhope, the poor damned child. That's twenty-five years ago. Nobody remembers anything clearly, and we can only generalize. Any member of the wedding party could have done it, and obviously every one of our generation could not. As for the Brainards themselves, I put those queries because Horace was pretty evasive on just where he spent his wedding night."

"Oh. Didn't you know?" And Tom related Janet's story of the *Purloined Letter* ruse.

"So?" Fergus observed. "Neat. Very neat. I'll file that away for eventual personal use, God forbid." He came

back to the table, crossed out the two queried *No's* and made them plain *Yes's*. He gazed at the chart with satisfaction. Even your contradictions, your impossibilities looked clearer and more surmountable when neatly diagrammed. Between this and the Unsprung Trap—

A goose walked over his grave. He suppressed his shudder and went on talking. "Now on Valentino the evidence is all too clear. Unless we've got a total conspiracy on our hands, no one who was at the Hotel de la Playa when Martha Stanhope died could possibly have killed that cat. The Brainards were here on the island, and everybody at Stella's party gives a blanket alibi to everybody else. Which, by the way: you notice what's opposite your name there?"

"Query yes," Tom smiled.

"So where were you on Wednesday night? For the record?"

"Faculty meeting."

"What time?"

"Seven-thirty on."

"And before that?"

"Dinner with two colleagues in Westwood. We met around six."

"All of which'll be easy enough to check. You can cross out that query and put a straight *No* if you want."

"Sir," said Tom, "you don't take the record seriously enough. We'll leave it this way till you've checked."

Fergus grinned. "Okay. Stet, as Janet's puzzles keep saying. Now on Corcoran: you were drinking steam beer with me on the mainland. The Brainards were dressing together, but pretty unspecific on alibiing each other. Everybody else is way out in the open. Could be anybody."

"On Ramirez and the boat-stealing: Horace Brainard was with Quincy and me. Everybody else was wrapped in seely solitude."

"There's another query here on me."

"Yes. So?"

"For the record,' as you say, I was unpacking after finally managing to ditch Alys. Janet didn't seem too

friendly at the moment. What does that make me?"

"Cross off the query. That's a simple *Yes* for you on Ramirez. So nobody has even a straight *No* record. This is a sweet mess. And yet I've got a feeling it's clearing up there before our very eyes. And high time too, before—" There was tension and apprehension in his voice. He broke off and paced in silence. When he resumed, it was with his normal bantering agility.

"And now for the major event of the evening: Brainard gives his wife an alibi, but she most unkindly fails to reciprocate; so there's two queries. Arnold was with Ramirez, who can't very well check. Herndon and you are fellow victims. Stella Paris guarantees Janet, who was unromantically asleep and therefore can't vouch for Stella. The one thing I do know is that Alys was with me."

"Yes," said Tom reflectively. "That's something you don't forget."

"You're telling The O'Brien?" As he paced, his green eyes began to grow even more alive. "You know what I did while I was with Alys?" he asked slowly.

"Spare my blushes."

"There's a psychologist for you! Nothing of the sort. I sneezed. Seven times I sneezed."

"Didn't some physiologist once say that a sneeze was the closest spastic parallel to an orgasm?"

"Not my sneezes. Or at least not my—"

Tom was studying the revised chart carefully. "It's like those logic puzzles in Janet's magazine where Brown runs the locomotive and Mr. Smith lives in Scranton only Robinson has never met the conductor."

"And when you reduce those to chart form they make sense. Everything falls into shape and you've got a straight clear line of deduction."

"And with this?"

"Add the sneezes, Tom, and you've got it. Exactly as in my dream. Your gag was right. I did dream the solution, and the sneezes prove it. Fit them into that chart, and the blossom starts to unfold. Only I'm going to be a bastard and hold out on my stooge. You'll know soon enough."



His pacing was lithier, more rapid, and his eyes gleamed triumph.

"And what's the next step?"

"For you? Go out and see how Stella made out with the roundup. Keep 'em all herded together and as happy as possible. And as soon as she comes down, send Alys in here. And Dr. Arnold as chaperon." He was whistling vigorously as Tom left the library.

"Sit down," Fergus said courteously to the white-haired girl.

She remained standing, sullen and speechless. She had forgotten to remove her make-up last night, and her face was a smudgy mess. With equal negligence she had pulled on the same sweater this morning, tear and pin and all.

"You prefer to stand? Then, doctor, at least you can make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you." Dr. Arnold did so. "I notice a certain light of success in your eye, Mr. O'Brien; but I am surprised that you should summon simply the two of us. I expected you to make an announcement to the entire group this morning."

"First I want to ask Alys a question. Rather, I want to tell her I know the answer to one. And I think this is going to call for a little reinforcement. Here you are, my sweater-ripping little badger."

Alys snatched at the bottle and gulped, but still said nothing.

Dr. Arnold waved it away. "Before breakfast? But now, O'Brien, let's hear your question." His eyes were fixed on Alys, and there was fear and concern in them.

"My answer," Fergus corrected. "I want to tell Alys that I know she's responsible for Quincy's death."

"The hell!" Alys snorted.

"Isn't it just?"

"The hell I am. You know that. You were with me, you—" She was far more imaginative in her description this time.

"I know," said Fergus calmly. "I know. I didn't say you

killed him. I said you were responsible for his death. You roused sleeping dogs. You let all hell loose in this tight little group, and your future husband died of it."

She turned to Arnold. "He's crazy. What does he mean? What did I do?"

"I'll tell you." Fergus picked up his chart. "You slit Valentino's throat."

## Chapter Twelve

### CRACK-UP

"TECHNICAL PSYCHOLOGY," Fergus began, "isn't my long suit. I'd a damned sight rather have good solid factual clues you can get your teeth into. But when the two meet, as they do here, I find it pretty conclusive. Now doctor, if you were covering up with a fancy patch of technical nomenclature, what would you call Alys?"

Dr. Arnold regarded the quivering girl. There was something almost like pity in his gaze. "I think I should say," he observed levelly, "that she is a sadistic nymphomaniac."

"Big words," said Alys contemptuously.

"Like 'vicious bitch' any better?" Fergus suggested.

For answer Alys grabbed the bottle again.

"You see, my sweeting," Fergus went on, "emotionally you never outgrew the 1920's. For you the sun still also-rises. The world's changed meanwhile. Even youth has changed. But for you Lady Brett Ashley is still the exciting prototype. You're holding onto youth as tenaciously as Mrs. Brainard; only for her Being Young means being coy and fluttery, and for you it means being cruel and avid and generally bitchy. You want Excitement. You want to Live with the biggest L in the type foundry, which for you means lots of liquor and lots of laying. But you're getting older, and the bottle and the hay aren't quite enough."

Alys wavered on her feet and looked down at the detective with pitying scorn. "All right, Galahad. So I am a bitchous vish. What's it to anybody but me?"

"It might have been something to Lucas Quincy."

"Or even," Dr. Arnold added, "to his friends."

"Lucas knew what I was like. He knew what he wanted. And he knew marrying me would mean he could get it regularly. He didn't care what I did the rest of the time."

"He cares now," said Fergus.

"You talk a lot."

"Sure. That's how I get ideas. That's how I notice things. Like knowing that you killed Valentino."

Alys made a suggestion.

"Remind me," said Fergus, "to tell you some time about the young man from Calcutta. He did just that. But at present we're interested in your own peculiar practices. You wanted Excitement. Drink wasn't enough. Sex wasn't enough. And the third great excitant is blood.

"You've probably been to Tijuana for the bullfights haven't you? You know what it feels like to watch the blood come and the muscles twitch in that last spasm?"

She said nothing, but her hands clenched and her tongue slipped for an instant between her lips.

"You knew about the Stanhope case. You must have heard rumors in this group. You probably went ahead and read up on it, learned about the cats. You were excited now by the war news too. You liked that. It wasn't close enough, but it was something. And you thought 'Isn't it funny, here it is the anniversary of the wedding and the war again and—supposing there should be another cat?' "

The tempo of his speech doubled and his voice rose in pitch and intensity. "Was it fun? Was it up to your expectations? Standing there on the back porch, holding that furry little black beast in your arms, pushing that white-mustached head back to bare the throat, pulling the knife across and turning it quick so the blood dripped on the porch and not on your coat? Was it a new thrill was it—?"

Alys's voice cut across his. It was low and throaty, and her breathing was heavy. "It was better than anything an man ever gave me."

No doubt was possible. She meant it.

Dr. Arnold looked up horrified. For once his reaction was anything but impersonal. "Alys! You admit that you—"

"Sure!" She whirled on him. "Why not? What's life to

but to get all the thrills you can out of it? What's a cat? You doctors! You cut them up alive and pretend you're doing it for the good of humanity, but I'll bet you get one hell of a boot out of it! Don't you? Don't you?" She turned away from him. "Just another lousy damned hypocrite. You all of you want your thrills. This bastard here chases down murderers and fools around with corpses. I suppose that's all for the good of humanity too? Nuts! I'm honest with myself. I know what I'm out for. And I get it."

"With a bonus," said Fergus quietly. "You hadn't counted on Quincy, had you?"

"What's that got to do with me? I wanted Lukey alive. I still do. I'm the last person would have—"

"I know you didn't kill Quincy. I'm even pretty sure you didn't attack Corcoran. If you had, you'd have been gloating over him in his cabin, not mooning over a few drops of blood on the sand. Those attacks were the McCoy, and it's the McCoy that you let loose, Pandora."

Her face was troubled now. "How? What did I do?"

"You let loose a devil. Twenty-five years ago, something snapped in somebody's mind. Somewhere, somehow, the idea of throat-slitting had been planted there, and it broke loose. A couple of cats paid for that, and Martha Stanhope. But the brainstorm passed. Somebody went back to a normal life. Maybe he wasn't even sure himself of what had happened. Until now. Because now it all happened over again. The same setup. The wedding party, the war—and the cat.

"You killed that cat. It was clear none of the original party could have done that. It had to be a new figure, playing god-out-of-the-machine-age. You killed that cat. And that cat killed Lucas Quincy."

"I think I'll sit down now," said Alys faintly. Her sullen defiance was gone; she looked worn and spent. "God! I did plenty, didn't I?"

"But, Mr. O'Brien," Dr. Arnold protested vigorously. "Confession and all, I remain unconvinced. The girl is manifestly psychotic. Your suggestions were so strongly couched that they might easily make her confess to an

untruth."

"Why so skeptical?"

"Because we went over all this. She had no opportunity that night. No one had."

"Sorry, doctor. But this confession's a true bill of goods. I know. And for two reasons: because Lucas Quincy changed his mind and because I sneezed."

"This is no time, O'Brien, for cryptic jests."

"Sorry, but it's true. My subconscious pieced it together first. I dreamed this morning of Alys slitting a cat's throat."

"Dreams!"

"That was only my starting-point, my cue. It checked when I remembered my sneezes. And then I understood this: Quincy came to me Thursday morning. He wanted me to investigate the old Stanhope killing, obviously because he thought the killer was on the rampage again and had to be stopped before he went beyond cats. I turned the job down because one condition was that I should keep my findings from the D.A., which could land me behind the eight ball as accessory after the fact. Then when I'd met Janet and Miss Paris I went all quixotic and took the case anyway. I thought I might as well get a fee out of it; so I put the bee on Quincy. He wasn't interested any more.

"Now why? On Thursday he thought that he was in peril of his life. On Friday he didn't give a damn. Some time in between he had realized that Valentino's killer could not possibly have been the original madman. He had reconstructed that evening exactly as you and the others did, and seen that no one of the Hotel de la Playa group had opportunity. But he and Alys left together, and Alys was tight. Supposing she made the excuse of a walk around the block to clear her head. He remembered that, saw that she alone had had the chance, knew how the act fitted into her character, thought that he could handle her by himself, and lost his interest in reopening the Stanhope case. But it was the sneezes that clinched it for me."

"Mr. O'Brien—"

"Don't say 'cryptic' again. I'm getting there. Now I have, doctor, the goddamnedest freak allergy you've ever run into. So did my father. Nothing sets us off but a long-haired cat, and it's always exactly seven sneezes, no more, no less. It happened to me at Miss Paris's home. Valentino, of course, was dead then, but his hairs must have been still around on furniture and rugs. And it happened to me again on the beach last night.

"Alys was wearing nothing but a cloth coat. There was no fur about her that could have accounted for it. Therefore there must have been cat hairs on that coat. She couldn't have picked them up off the Paris furniture because you don't wear a coat at a dinner party. She hasn't owned a cat herself since her kitten was killed in 1915; and according to Stella she even refused to play with Valentino. Long cat hairs on her coat would mean only one thing: holding that poor damned beast while she slit its throat."

"And you figured out all that while—?" Alys sounded insulted.

"I was a little distracted at the time, my sweet, if that comforts you any. It took the dream to make me see what it meant. And now the whole shape of things begins to jell."

Alys stared at Fergus with haggard eyes. "Tell me," she entreated. "Who was it? Oh, I did it. I can see that. But what did I do? Who did I let loose on us? Who killed Lukey before I married him—before he could even make a will?"

"That's true, isn't it?" Fergus mused. "A passion for excitement means a constant need for money."

"But I don't even care about that now. Not just yet anyway. Right now I've got to know who. Don't you see?"

"Go on back to the others, Alys," Fergus said abruptly. She rose, but looked at him in pleading silence.

"Go on."

"I'm trusting you," she said slowly. "You bastard." And she walked to the door.

Dr. Arnold accompanied her, his steady hand resting on her shoulder, but paused in the doorway at Fergus's voice. "No, Dr. Arnold. Stay here another minute, if you will."

There was authority in the order.

The doctor looked after Alys a moment, then turned back to face the detective. "Well, sir?"

"So you were in love with Martha Stanhope too."

"Nonsense."

"Fact. And Alys's resemblance is sometimes too much for you. It attracted Quincy and it repels Herndon. To you it does both at once, and it's hell."

"What concern is this of yours? Even if it were true," he added hastily.

"Every emotion, every feeling that anyone experienced in connection with Martha Stanhope is my concern. Ever if her murderer was mad, some underlying element in his mind drove him to choose Martha as his victim. I have to know everything."

Dr. Arnold's sardonic smile was only half-convincing this time. "You seem to know enough without being told. More than I knew myself." He seated himself and paused over a cigarette. "You're right, of course, O'Brien. You should know everything. But it was only after Martha's death that I realized what I had felt—what I might have felt. I've told you how priggish and self-absorbed I was. I took Martha for granted. And then, years after her death when I wearied of being a bachelor and cast about to find a wife, only then did I realize that the only woman I could ever have married had died at the Hotel de la Playa."

"And Alys?"

"Damn the girl. She was in New York three years ago you know. I saw her a good deal. I— Do you realize O'Brien, that that girl is as fascinating as she is horrible. I loathed her, and yet I felt the most intense desire for her. I—I have even made love to her when she was so drunk that thank God she remembers nothing. I despise myself. I tortured myself with thoughts of how Jay and Martha would despise me. And yet that girl's face and



body were in my mind day and night.

"I hadn't seen her in those three years. I had thought that I was cured, that I could see her again and laugh at myself. And instead the same— Damn it, O'Brien, she is not lost. Even after the confession you forced from her just now, I cannot believe that she is lost. Surely a psychiatrist and a treatment for her dipsomania—"

"You want to build up Martha again out of her image? I think you'd find it tough sledding."

"I must do something for her to redeem myself. Don't you see? Only if I can make her whole can I prove to myself and to Jay that I am not a middle-aged lecher sniffing at a bitch. I—"

Fergus snapped, "Come in!" in answer to a knock, and Tom Quincy entered the room. "Herndon's walked out on us," he announced.

"Walked out?"

"When Alys came back it was more than he could stand. He calmly told me that he was not staying in the room with her and that I could not stop him, and went on up to his room."

Fergus paced frowning. "All right. Leave Janet to keep an eye on the others. Then you make the rounds. Take a look at Corcoran and at Ramirez. Make sure they're okay, and see that Herndon is in his room."

Tom made a mock salute of obedience. "It is done, sire. Oh, and look—forgot to ask you this before—did Herndon see anything?"

"When?"

"When we both got slugged."

"Not a thing."

"He looked out into the hall?"

"Yes."

"And didn't see anything? I know I'm just the dumb stooge, Fergus, but if I were the mastermind, I'd brood about that." With which Tom Quincy left them.

Fergus was all eagerness and rapidity as he turned back to the doctor. "There's just one point left now, and I think you're the man to help me. Will you?"

"Indeed I will."

"This throat-slitting fixation must have started from something. You knew all this group in 1915. What could have induced such an outrageous form of mania?"

Arnold thought a moment and then let out a sudden "Ah!"

"Yes?"

"I think perhaps I have it, Mr. O'Brien. I have been pondering that problem for days with no results, but when you said 'throat-slitting,' something clicked."

"That being?"

"You know how attached we all were to Jay?"

"Yes."

"I can still remember Jay brooding, as what man of good will has not, over the perverse ingenuity of the race of man in finding ever new and more terrible means for its own destruction. I can still hear his high voice inveighing, with that slight nervous lisp, against long-range guns and poison gas and submarine warfare, and concluding, with a sort of wry despair, 'Throat-slitting is the only clean way.' I think that that impressed all of us deeply."

"Thank you. Thank you, doctor. And look," Fergus went on rapidly, "out of this whole devoted group, who would you say was most broken up by Jay's death on the *Lusitania*?"

"It's hard to say. It affected us all, naturally. But probably—yes, I'd say certainly it was the two Herndons who felt his loss the most."

Fergus snapped his fingers impatiently and began to whistle under his breath. He crossed over to the table and made one slight revision in his chart.

"There!" he said confidently. "You've driven the last nail, Dr. Arnold. The case is wound up. When Andy arrives, I'll have a nice neat bundle for him."

Dr. Arnold leaned forward tautly. "Who?"

"So eager, doctor? Losing your impersonality?"

"Who?" Arnold insisted.

"Wait. We're going back to the living-room now, and there—"

Then he stopped dead. The detective and the doctor were alike frozen silent, listening to the echoes of the shot upstairs.

The last nail had been driven too late, Fergus thought ruefully.

James Herndon's tall old body slumped over the table in his bedroom. Blood trickled from his open head onto the sheets of manuscript before him. The automatic lay on the floor beneath his dangling hand.

"I couldn't help it, God damn me," Tom was saying. "I'd been the rounds as you told me, checking on Corcoran and Ramirez. And as I came out of the room down there where Ramirez is, I heard the shot. I should have checked up on him first. I should have realized—"

"Look, Tom," said Fergus. "You go herd all these people downstairs again. Leave the doctor and me here. We'll be with you as soon as we can."

Tom cast one reluctant look at the table, shuddered, and left the room.

"No remotest chance, doctor?"

Dr. Arnold straightened up from the body. "Not the slightest. He died instantly." He looked at the manuscript, read its first words, and said, "I think this is what you want."

Fergus took the bloodstained sheets from him. "*Throat-slitting is the only clean way*," he read. "Pity you didn't recall that phrase earlier."

"I never dreamed— Poor Jim!"

"The wound—it's consistent with suicide?"

"Perfectly. But why? You can't have any doubts?"

"After this?" Fergus was leafing hastily through the manuscript. "Hardly. But I just like everything tied up neat-like."

"The gun."

"What about it?"

"I thought that Jim gave you the only firearm on this island."

"So did I."

"Then where did he get this one?"

"It's mine. Lifted from my stolen suitcase." Fergus dropped to one knee and peered at the automatic without touching it. "Check. That's Baby." He rose slowly. His tension seemed if anything to have increased rather than relaxed at this sudden denouement. His lean face was taut and worn. "Nothing you can do for him?"

"There's nothing any man can do for him now."

"Excepting these unlucky deeds relate— All right. Go on downstairs, will you? I want to read this over alone before I talk. We've got to get things straight."

Dr. Arnold hesitated in the doorway. "One thing—"

"Yes?"

"Getting off this island."

"Andy'll show up soon."

"It can't be too soon. I've got to get both Ramirez and Corcoran to a hospital. And I'd hate to predict what might happen to the rest of us if we sit around here all day brooding on death."

"We may get results from the bonfire yet. And if Andy's late, we can even try your heliograph gag. We may not know Morse, but we can at least send SOS."

"Which is?"

"There you have me. But it's either three dashes, three dots, three dashes, or the other way round. And even if we send OSO, some bright soul should get the notion."

"Some bright soul," said Dr. Arnold, "had better."

Alone, Fergus went back to the table. To the left of the bloody head lay the light blue volume of T. S. Eliot's *Collected Poems 1909-1935*. At the right was an empty morocco-leather pipecase, its white interior spattered with red. On a pipe-rest near it stood a chaste and virginal brier of unbelievably straight grain. There was a little gray ash in the bottom of its bowl.

Fergus gently touched the still warm pipe. "Poor guy," he said aloud.

There was the sound of movement in the kitchen when Fergus came downstairs twenty minutes later. He peered

in and found Stella Paris glaring at the stove.

"They want more coffee," she said. "And they say they can't eat a thing, but they're going to get coffeecake with it if this oven'll ever heat up. I'm not used to wood stoves any more; civilization spoils us."

Fergus looked at the confession in his hand. "Shall I hold off my reading? It may not leave them with much appetite."

Stella Paris wiped her overheated face with a kitchen towel. "To be frank, Fergus, I don't care a rap whether they've an appetite for this coffeecake or not. Making it is enough. So long as I can worry about ovens, I don't have to worry about Jim. You go ahead and hold your reading; I'm better off out here."

"If you were cooking dinner," said Fergus, "you could blame those tears on the onions. At breakfast it's not so plausible."

The living-room was silent. Not even a burbling pipe disturbed it now. Dr. Arnold was playing a complex two-pack solitaire at a side table. Alys stood beside him, watching, but too listless to kibitz. The Brainards sat together on the sofa, but carefully refrained from looking at each other. Horace's cheek bore a neat decoration of gauze and adhesive plaster. Janet and Tom, hands clasped, stared off unseeing at the beach.

This was the great climactic moment. The terror was over. The throat-slitter's confession lay in Fergus's hand. But there was no glitter of triumph in this moment, no aureole of glory. There was nothing in this room but weariness and apathy and a longing to get off the island.

Horace Brainard roused himself as Fergus came in. "Well!" he snapped. "So it's over now. And no thanks to you." His pallor was gone; he was bristly again, and aggressively dominant.

"He beat me to it," said Fergus wryly.

"Indeed! Suppose you'll claim you'd solved the whole case and were about to nab him!"

"That happens to be true, but I'm not expecting you to believe it." Fergus found this damnable apathy infect-

ing even him. "And I certainly don't expect you to remember your fear-stricken babblings about blank checks."

"Blank checks? What about blank checks? Nonsense! Never said a word of such a thing!"

"You knew, Fergus?" said Tom, "Even before the poor old man—?"

Fergus nodded. "I knew. The main point was that parting hint of yours." He paused. That parting hint, the unsprung trap, a few gray ashes— Suddenly the cloud of listlessness had risen. He had his professional reputation to maintain, and it was going to be a good job. "You see," he went on, picking his words with great care, "it all comes out of my nice little chart. After I broke down Alys, that canceled out the Valentino column."

"Alys?" Janet gasped. "You mean that she—?"

"Shut up!" Alys shouted. "You— You—" She groped for a sufficiently contemptuous word and found it. "You virgin!"

"Uh huh," said Fergus. "So with that column canceled out, plus one belated correction, we were left with three candidates who had straight *Yes's* all the way across: Stella Paris, Dr. Arnold, and James Herndon. But if either Stella or Arnold was the thro—the one we wanted, then he or she must have slugged Herndon *after* disposing of the guard, so that Herndon, when he looked out into the hall, would have seen Tom's unconscious body. There was no place of concealment in the hall itself, and our friend couldn't have opened one of the other doors without starting trouble.

"But Herndon said that he looked out into an *empty* hall. Therefore Herndon was lying and therefore his own slugging was faked. A sandbag doesn't leave visible bruises; if you rub sand into your back hair and fake a plausible pain, you'll have a reasonable facsimile. Herndon's slugging was a puzzle anyway. There was no possible reason for it excepting this one: to clear himself by seeming to be another victim."

"Balderdash!" snorted Horace Brainard.

"It makes damned good sense to me," said Tom.

"Sense? Certainly. But to have the gall to pretend that deduced it before— Come, O'Brien; admit it. You ured all this out after the event."

"There's no need for such persistence, sir," said Fergus etly. "I told you I'd given up all hope on that check. ow this," he set down the light blue volume he had been rrying and held up the manuscript, "this was apparently itten on Thursday, before even Corcoran, but after ys's cute little prank had sowed the seed. He wasn't re then but what he might have killed Valentino him- f. He was cracking and he knew it and he wrote it out." "God damn your deductions!" Brainard roared. "Read to us!"

"I intend to. In fact, there's no stopping me. At the top the first page is written:

*If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
3 ll. ff."*

"'Prufrock,' isn't it?" Tom sounded puzzled.

"Probably some note he was making on Eliot. He oughtlessly grabbed the same sheet of paper when he inted to set down his story. And that story reads:

## Chapter Thirteen

### "I AM THE MAN."

"THROAT-SLITTING IS THE ONLY CLEAN WAY." I can still hear Jay saying that. It was the last conversation that I was ever to have with him, though we had no idea of that then.

"This war in Europe," he insisted in that clear strong voice, with the almost undetectable lisp that made it all the stronger. "German military might against British economic power. Killing with bayonet, with bomb, with gas. Killing with strangulation, with starvation, with blockade. No; throat-slitting is the only clean way. Let the filthy blood run out of our avid race, and see if Providence can find a fresh breed to people this planet."

But then he smiled. It was like that with Jay. He would speak bitterly, inveigh against this foul race that delights in killing and torturing its brothers, make you feel that total extinction was the only desirable end; and then he would smile. And in that wordless smile you knew that he embraced all mankind.

"Wasn't it Tertullian," he said once, "who believed because it was impossible? Well, I love because it is unlovable."

But that was a rare occasion. His love was almost never in words. His words were a scorpion lash of scorn. But his smile and his acts—

We had spent our last night together seeing "The Clansman," as "The Birth of a Nation" was called then, in the days when it was new. I was unreasoningly swept away by youthful enthusiasm. Now at last I knew that the cinema was important. The exquisite fooling of "Tillie's Punctured Romance," the passionate melodrama of "A Fool There Was," these had delighted me in themselves, but failed to convince me that the form of the film was permanent. But here I could see what genius can do with a medium. From earlier films to this was as great a step as



from "Gorboduc" to "King Lear," and I said as much to Jay as we left the theater.

"I wish you were wrong," he replied. "But you're right, and that's the devil of it. This man Griffith does have genius, if you insist upon using the term; and there is nothing more terrifying than genius devoted to hate."

I explained that I had felt no hate. The picture was biased, I admitted, but it left me with no emotions other than admiration of its artistic qualities.

"So you think," he said, "and doubtless honestly. But you think on the surface, and you feel more deeply. The racial poison of this picture is already creeping into those deeper parts. Watch yourself. See if you do not involuntarily shrink from the next Negro you meet. If not now, then later. Poison may work slowly, but it works."

He knew that. And yet he never knew the poison which he himself gave me.

"Throat-slitting is the only clean way."

I thought on the surface. In my conscious mind I was aware, not of Jay's bitter words, but of his loving smile. Yet those words pierced deeper, and remained.

We parted that night almost in anger. "What earthly good can you do in Europe?" I protested. "What can any one man do? Stay on here for the wedding, and make your friends happy with your presence. Why sacrifice the small and possible happiness for the great and vain?"

But Jay was full of his resolve, his noble, saintly, idiotic resolve, the splendid resolve that achieved nothing but his own death. The last words I was to hear in that ringing voice were words of reproach.

The lisp was more marked when he was angry. Hugh has told me later that his studies convince him that psychoanalysis could have cured it, discovered the trauma and destroyed it. But if one were to destroy the source of the lisp, how much else might one not have destroyed? Would it still have been the same vigorous, gallant, ridiculous, glorious Jay? But that never mattered. He was destroyed, trauma and lisp and all, destroyed in oily choking water and throat-slitting is the only clean way in a

*world that destroys Jay and lets Lucas live.*

*And so Jay went to Europe ( . . . consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall . . . ) to see his friends in London and Berlin and Paris and Vienna—that strange undercover unorganized organization of intellectuals and workers who dreamed that they could hammer the concept of peace into the stolid skull of the world—and we made up our petty quarrel by mail (thank God for that at least) and I forgot even the war (that was still possible in 1915) in the confusion of preparations for the weddings.*

*For you might have thought that we were all being married. The same confusion descended upon the entire wedding party which usually attends only the bride and groom. To be sure, we ate and drank as usual and saw Lina Abarbanell at the Orpheum and Stella received her first starring role at Triangle and sweated over it and Hugh slaved at the last year of his course and the surface of life was ordinary; but beneath that surface all of us, this tight little group that centered around Jay and belonged to him, thought, felt, and saw nothing but the weddings.*

*And particularly the first wedding because it was the first. It was a symbol. It was our growing up. It was our transition from a group of gay young people to the Young Married Set, or so we thought then though look at us now: their silver wedding and the rest of us still unmarried if one forgets Stella's five which have in truth left her more unwed than even am I.*

*But Martha would have married. Not Lucas of course as things fell out, but she would have married. I am sure of that. She was tender and warm and needed to give comfort as much as we poor fools of nature need to receive it. It should not have been her throat.*

*If a madman is the tool of fate, then fate is blind and stupid. It should not have been Martha. Anyone else in that party, best of all myself, but not Martha. The cats—why, cats are easily replaced. It was not a good deed; but not immeasurably bad either. But Martha—*

*Of course Jay could not know that I was mad. If he had*

known, he might have guarded his words. He might have seen the crimson skull-and-bones on his phrases and set them carefully back on the shelf of silence beyond my reach. But I did not know myself. I had heard the rumors about Grandfather's death. I had seen Aunt Margaret, but I had thought in my young innocence that it was merely because she was so very old. They can live a long time.

It was there all along. I can see that now. It was there from the start. But even Jay's words might not have been enough. I was stronger than that. Martha would be alive today if it were not for that torpedo.

That was the final blow. We had all been horrified by the first use of gas at Ypres. When the *Gulfight* was sunk we had said, "Is no one safe?" and wondered if Jay would dare to cross the ocean. But we knew that our wonder was wishful hope. Jay was brave, as absurdly brave as he was absurdly honest. I doubt if he once thought of the perils of submarine warfare when he booked passage on the *Lusitania*.

It was on a Friday that the U-20 fired its torpedo. Friday, May 7. We learned the news on the Saturday. You will remember—you, whoever you are, hypocrite lecteur, if you are a reader and not the coals of the fire for that would be best if it were not for Lucas and for that other cat, that fresh cat, and yet so long as the Maginot Line still holds and there is yet a hope of peace.

You will remember, if you are old enough, the hopeless confusion of those first casualty lists. No one knew. The others of our group hoped. Catherine said he couldn't have died like that just before her wedding, it wouldn't be fair. And Martha said that he was not for death. Martha knew so little then of the ways of death.

But I, even then I saw the skull beneath the skin. I was certain. The swinish world had rid itself of Jay. And that night, Saturday night, was the first cat.

I do not know why cats. They are sage and sensible and jellicle; selfish, but reasonably so. It may be that the mad part of me is as timid as the sane. It cannot take the big

leap without frittering away its energy on little futile tip-toeing steps. I do not know. But it started with the cats. One that night, Saturday, and one Sunday night when I was drunk and vainly trying to employ the same fuddledness to mourn Jay and to celebrate Horace's coming happiness but not Lucas's though the rounds pledged him as well and how vainly.

I did not believe it. I would not believe it now if it were not for Aunt Margaret and what followed and above all for what Lucas told me but why should he keep silence? Then perhaps out of pity and hope but now when he fears what I fear and why is this enough?

During the wedding I could even forget it or did I know then? Had I realized it that afterward I could kiss Catherine and never pause to wonder if my hands left blood-stains on the white satin?

It was strange, that kiss. She looked long at me afterward and said, "Good-by, Jay." We were the closest to him, we two. If Jay loved anyone, loved as an individual and not as part of the race which he so dearly and loathingly loved, it was Catherine or I. And Jay was dead and Catherine was Horace's and I slit the throats of cats and of Martha but that was later that night and again no one knew unless Lucas and why?

They said a prowler because her jewel box was open. Nothing had been taken; but that they argued was because he had been frightened away by me. Yes, it was I who found her. For a moment I believed that myself for between the motion and the act falls the Shadow. My memory began when I was standing over her and she was already dead. Even the stains did not reveal me. They thought it so natural that I should have picked her up to—You see they knew that even though as they believed Martha was to marry Lucas still I

Why not Lucas? That I do not understand. Why should I spare what I hate and destroy what I love? Is that the meaning of madness—to violate not only the laws of life and man and society but even the laws of your own being? Would I have killed even Jay?

*But if Jay had lived would I have killed anyone?*

*I have read the confessions of others. They do not sound like this. They are rational, cogent, often moving documents. But that may be because those others have their ghost writers and how meet and fitting it is that we who take life must speak through a ghost some sympathetic reporter or efficiently unsympathetic police stenographer while I write alone because of the fresh cat and*

*It is twenty-five years and the wheel has come full circle. The scattered group is now whole again save for Jay and Martha. For wedding, read silver wedding. For war, read war. For fear and hysteria, read fear and hysteria and the only clean way*

*I had You will think me callous, mon semblable, mon frère, but I had forgotten it all. It was not I. It was no part of my life. But now when all else comes back in the revolving of two and a half decades, must that come too?*

*A wise man, a brave man would kill himself.*

*But I love life, in my own quietude, as deeply as any robustious concert baritone. It may not happen. So long as there is hope, there is life. But if*

*So I write this out, my confession. If in any way*

*I do not want another to bear the blame. This time they might not believe in a prowler. And here they will find it written:*

*I am the man*

*So this is the way my world ends not with a bang but a whimper*

## Chapter Fourteen

### FILLING AN INSIDE STRAIGHT

"AND THERE," Fergus added, "the poor devil was wrong. His world ended with a bang all right."

"Jim!" said Mrs. Brainard into the silence. "All these years—"

"Because Jay died—" said Dr. Arnold softly.

"Jay!" Horace Brainard snorted. "Milk-livered, dreaming fool!"

"Please, Horace," his wife urged. "You can't blame Jay."

"This is what came of all his fine preaching. Thought himself so much above the rest of us. And look at the fruit!"

"Please, dear."

"I'll not please. What was your precious Jay? I'll tell you. He was an *idealist*." He spewed out the word with a peculiar patronizing hatred. "Good for nothing! I took you away from him, didn't I?"

Catherine Brainard turned and stared straight at her husband. Then she laughed. "You took me away! And you know why? Because he wouldn't have me. Because he wanted to keep himself free for his ideals. Because he would not give—what was it he said?—hostages to fortune. And I had to turn to somebody, and I turned, God help me, to you."

"God help you? And what did you want? Haven't I kept you in luxury? Haven't I made a fortune for you? Haven't I—"

Mrs. Brainard laughed again. "Haven't you lived off me?"

"Off you? No, let me alone, Hugh. What do you mean lived off you? I used your little capital, yes. Look what I've run it up into."

"What you've—!" Her laughter was becoming uncontrollable. "Do you think you'd have made a cent withou

Lucas backing you? Do you think your big bluster meant anything? Do you think you became a success simply by aping his ideas and his dear funny curt way of speaking? Do you think you really made your money?"

"Do I think—!"

"Don't you know that Lucas helped you and raised you and built you? And why? Because I—"

"Catherine," said Dr. Arnold sharply. "Catherinel!"

Her voice sank again. "I know, Hugh. I shouldn't have—I'm sorry. But to hear this blustering little fool strutting his goosetep over Jay's grave—"

"You—" Horace Brainard plucked ineffectually at his mustache. "You and Lucas— I don't believe it. I won't believe it."

"I believe it," said Alys. "I've heard plenty about it. Lukey admitted he had lousy taste when he was young."

Catherine Brainard's eyes blazed and she raised her hand in a swift open-palmed threat. But then she let it sink to her side again, shrugged, and looked helplessly about the room. "Janet—" she said.

Janet was at her side at once. "Mother—"

"I'm old, dear. Perhaps—perhaps I have some sense at last. I've been a bad wife, a stupid wife. Maybe now at least I can be a good mother—twenty years too late."

Dr. Arnold drew Fergus aside. "That was a sample," he said. "How many more hours do you think we can stand on this island?"

"Andy should be here soon."

"Soon?" Arnold repeated harshly.

"Or the bonfire may work."

"And in the meantime? Can't you contrive some task, O'Brien, some occupation to keep these poor people so absorbed that they cannot brood and torture themselves? And each other. Can't you find some way to save us from this—this—"

"This dangerous corner?" Fergus suggested. "You're right, doctor. Another hour of this tension could wreck more lives than—than have been lost on this island," he

ended bitterly. "Of course I could—" He paced for a moment, the lids lowered broodingly over his green eyes. "Tell me, doctor: which is more harmful, a terrible new shock, or stewing over an old one?"

"Is this a theoretical question?" Arnold asked, watching him narrowly.

"Answer it anyway."

"It is difficult to answer with certainty. But I should say that the cumulative effect of a series of shocks may be deadening. The last and most fearful shock may not only counteract the others, but have relatively little effect in itself." He paused and contemplated Fergus curiously. "What is it now, O'Brien? Do you mean that you have something still up your sleeve? Something even more terrible than what we have already endured? More terrible than that Jim—"

"I wasn't sure," said Fergus. "I might have kept quiet. I thought it would be bad enough to know that one of your friends was a murderer, without— But since I've got your professional endorsement, here goes."

He left the openly bewildered Dr. Arnold and strode to the fireplace. "Please," he said loudly. "Your attention, ladies and gentlemen. I'm afraid I've left you under a lamentably wrong impression."

Horace Brainard was for the moment too broken even to explode. He simply turned slightly and glared at the detective.

"You heard Mr. Herndon's confession," Fergus went on, "but I spared you my comments on it. Naturally this left you believing it."

"But of course," said Tom.

"It's too dreadful to believe," Janet protested.

"I know, darling; but that confession is so damned explicit, so convincing—"

"And so false," said Fergus.

"You mean," Catherine Brainard gasped, "that the confession's forged? That someone killed my brother and—"

Fergus shook his head. "Uh uh. Your brother wrote that confession all right, the poor devil. But he never



killed a cat, and he did not kill Martha Stanhope."

There was a dead numb instant. Then you could see apprehension sliding into every eye, the horrible realization that if James Herndon was not the throat-slitter, then—

Stella Paris appeared in the kitchen doorway. The fresh clean smell of baking entered with her. "Coffee and cake," she announced, almost cheerfully.

The verbal suggestion of food would have been set aside with sensitive scorn. Even the sight of that golden-crisp coffeecake might not have sufficed. It was the rich spicy scent from the kitchen that overcame the company. Even Fergus's startling announcement became abruptly less important than the sudden realization that they were every one famishing.

This was all to the good, Fergus thought. It meant that much more distraction, that much more time snatched from nervous contemplation and self-torture. It was not until the fresh coffee had been totally swilled and the magnificent cake entirely devoured (*drunk and eaten* would be far too mild words for the eagerness of that group), that he returned to his theme, and then only at a prompting from Dr. Arnold.

"Mr. O'Brien," the doctor began, neatly wiping cinnamon-flecked crumbs from his mouth, "our sudden distraction implies no contempt for your announcement. It is startling and unbelievable. It has implications which one's mind refuses to grant. But you must forgive us if our appetites took unexpected precedence."

"I understand all right," Fergus nodded. "Maybe I'm a genius as a detective, though God knows that's a debatable point; but even if so, Miss Paris represents genius of a damned sight higher order, and I bow to her."

"Thank you, sir," said Stella Paris. "But what is all this about an announcement? What have I been missing in the kitchen?"

"This young fool," Horace Brainard burred with a sort of muffled echo of his old bluster, "has just proclaimed that poor James is after all innocent of the 1915

Stella Paris all but dropped her coffee cup. "But then—If that's true, it must—"

"Hold it," said Fergus warningly. "Before you go to work on the implications, look at the facts." He crossed the room in deliberate silence and took up his fireplace stance again.

"Fact A: James Herndon did write that confession. The internal evidence of style and thinking is enough in itself; and I'm morally certain a handwriting expert would uphold it on the external as well. But as Dr. Arnold was pointing out to me a while back, a suggestible and unstable mind can easily be persuaded of a false guilt.

"Fact B: James Herndon did attack Corcoran. A throat-slitter in search of a knife would never have picked out Herndon's dull tool when the kitchen was full of far more serviceable weapons. That knife could have been used only by the man who happened by chance to have it on him when the cutting impulse came.

"Fact C: James Herndon, after botching the Corcoran attack, did not remain and finish off the job neatly, nor even leave his victim to bleed to death. He ran instantly for a doctor.

"Fact D: James Herndon, last night, had something he tremendously wanted to say to me, and yet he was afraid to go through with it. I can remember one of the things he said: 'I thought for many years that I knew who had killed Martha. Then Corcoran taught me otherwise. Yet you have to know this false knowledge because it may lead you to the truth.'

"Fact E: James Herndon scribbled a cryptic quote from Eliot at the top of his confession."

Fergus gave up his dignified and dominating pose and began to pace as he talked. In all his experience, he had rarely held an audience in such tense silence as this. He could see their eyes darting to each other. He could hear the one mass-thought of the group: *If not James Herndon, who?*

"Someone else killed Martha, for a damned sane and

comprehensible reason, and the first cats. That someone, knowing of Aunt Margaret, knowing of Jay's dictum on throat-slitting, knowing of Herndon's almost abnormal devotion to Jay, taking advantage of his finding Martha, of his being drunk when the cats were killed, worked on poor Herndon until he was convinced of his guilt, or at least so pitifully uncertain of his innocence that he would be sure to crack under an official investigation.

"It was a perfect out for the murderer. If things got dangerous, he had only to direct official suspicion ever so gently in Herndon's direction, and he'd have a confession on a silver platter. But he never needed that out. The police handling of the case was incredibly stupid, and they accepted the prowler theory, which was even safer. The murderer gladly accepted this gift from the gods, but never quite let Herndon forget how fortunate he had been in escaping punishment for 'his crime.' There would be a certain sadistic pleasure, a bitter humor in holding Herndon on a string, in keeping him under obligation for the considerate silence of the real murderer.

"And then comes 1940, and the external duplication of the emotional setup of war and wedding. And Alys decides to have some fun.

"Valentino's death must have meant terrible doubts to Herndon. Was this half-forgotten past nightmare the truth? Had this throat-slitting beast reawakened in him? And imagine the terror it must have caused to the real murderer. Had Herndon finally broken down under the quarter century of strain and become in truth what the murderer had convinced him he must be? If so, he might not stop at cats. The whole cycle might repeat. That would mean investigation, a revival of the old Hotel de la Playa case, and God knows what danger to the murderer. If Herndon could be talked into writing out a confession as protection to a hypothetical innocent suspect, everything might be all right.

"So the murderer went to work on Herndon, and the result is what I just read you. The old man believed it when he wrote it. He brooded on it. He lived in dread of

what he might do next. He remembered nothing of what he had done before; how could he prevent what he might do in the future? And brooding in this fashion, he went out on the sands for a pipe before dinner yesterday.

"This is the one time he cracked, the single moment when Aunt Margaret's strain was strong in his blood. It's little wonder. Even a man with no mental taint might well have broken down under what he had gone through. There he stood on the sands, loathing himself, dreading the future crimes he might commit. There also stood a lone defenseless man, and in Herndon's pocket was a knife.

"But the instant that dull knife bit into the flesh of Corcoran's throat, Herndon knew that it was all wrong. He felt none of the vicious elation of the madman he by now believed himself to be. He felt only disgust and pity. He flung away the knife, ran for the doctor to save his victim, and knew, finally and irrevocably, that he was not the murderer."

"But why," Tom protested in bewilderment, "why didn't he destroy the confession?"

"Because he knew now that this kind friend who had so nobly withheld his knowledge of the Stanhope case, who had sympathized with him so for twenty-five years, who had so considerately talked him into writing the confession—that this inestimable friend must be the murderer himself. This friend knew where the manuscript was hidden, and would be most zealously sure that it stayed where he could find it if it ever became necessary for him to use it. To destroy the confession would be to expose yourself to the hatred of the murderer of Martha Stanhope. James Herndon was not a brave man. The most he dared do was to add an apparently harmless notation on Eliot, which read:

*If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl  
And turning toward the window, should say:*

3 ll. ff.

"These lines are, as Tom recognized, from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'—fortunately the first poem in

the collected volume, or I might have been a great while longer in deciphering this clincher. The three lines following are:

*That is not it at all,*

*That is not what I meant at all.*

*No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be . . .*

Or to translate: "This manuscript is not the truth I meant it to be, and I am not a madman." "

There was silence in the room. Eyes darted restlessly, distrustfully. Stella Paris started to speak, caught a curious calculating look from Alys, and subsided. Horace Brainard plucked nervously at his mustache. Catherine twisted a handkerchief in her fingers and shifted her chair away from her husband.

"Damn you, O'Breen!" Arnold burst out at last. "I ask you to help us, to relieve our tension, and what have you done? You've given us a new terror ten times worse than the old."

"Because," said Miss Paris, "it was awful enough to think it was Jim. But if it wasn't Jim, then—" She looked around the group and was silent.

"I'm sorry," said Fergus sincerely. "I thought it was clear enough from the 'confession' itself. There's no need for you to fear each other now. The real murderer, of course, was Lucas Quincy."

"There is," Fergus went on, "one key paragraph in that confession." He thumbed through the manuscript and read:

*"I did not believe it. I would not believe it now if it were not for Aunt Margaret and what followed and above all for what Lucas told me but why should he keep silence? Then perhaps out of pity and hope but now when he fears what I fear and why is this enough?"*

"There are other references to Lucas in the manuscript, but this paragraph alone is plenty. All by itself it's a fifty-word summary of the whole situation of false guilt that I've just outlined to you. *This*, in the last sentence, obviously means the confession. Why should Lucas, knowing

my guilt, be content simply with my writing it out? Such contentment is possible only to the murderer, who does not want a possibly dangerous reopening of the old case, but finds the manuscript invaluable as a reserve weapon of self-defense.

"Lucas Quincy came to me when he thought that Herndon had broken under the strain and killed Valentino. He doubtless planned to lead me subtly into finding the manuscript and putting unofficial pressure on Herndon to get him put quietly away, voluntarily if possible, where he could no longer revive the Stanhope case. When Quincy realized what Alys had been up to, he felt safe again; but the Corcoran and Ramirez episodes brought back his fear and he rehired me. His cryptic 'The solution lies in Eliot' referred, not to Herndon's devotion to that poet, but to a topographical fact: the hiding-place of the manuscript, which had been concealed in the *Collected Poems 1909-1935*—a wise choice, since no one else in the party was too apt to investigate that book."

"But why?" Arnold demanded. "Was Quincy a madman? And do madmen cover their tracks with such elaborate plots?"

"No, Lucas was no madman. Unless you feel, as doubtless Jay Stanhope would have, that anyone who willingly takes human life is not humanly sane."

"But why? He was going to marry Martha. I think he loved her in his own harsh way. Why should he kill her?"

"Are you so sure he was going to marry Martha? Look again at a couple of phrases in the confession: Herndon tells how he drank *to celebrate Horace's coming happiness but not Lucas's though the rounds pledged him as well and how vainly*. And again he says: *But Martha would have married. Not Lucas of course as things fell out, but she would have married*. And yet again: *. . . even though as they believed Martha was to marry Lucas . . .*

"That was what you all believed, but James Herndon obviously knew something more. He knew that the second wedding would never have taken place."

"But Lucas," Stella Paris objected. "Lucas was so dread-

fully hardheaded. You can't imagine him risking his own life simply because he had been jilted."

"I agree. But though the jilting is not the source of the murder, the two facts might have the same cause. Here we have to guess, but I think it makes a pretty clear picture:

"Lucas foresaw our entry into the war. He foresaw the profits that could be made in what we then called Preparedness. He was already, Dr. Arnold has said, laying the foundation for the fortune he was to make in uniforms. And we know from our history books that some pretty rank corruption went on in that line. We also know that Jay Stanhope was a man of fanatically insistent honesty.

"Jay had found out something—what, we will never know. Lucas was wise enough in his generation to realize that there was no appeal, no bribe that could silence him. I have no doubt that only the sinking of the *Lusitania* kept Jay from being the first victim of the throat-slitter. But Jay's death did not remove the menace. Martha also knew, and she was her brother's sister.

"This information, whatever it was, must have been in that famous last letter of Jay's. It was something that shocked Martha deeply, something that she could not read aloud to her friends, something that she had to think about. And she took James Herndon as her confidant.

"That was natural enough. He was Jay's closest friend. She could speak to him almost as to her brother. And besides—Martha doubtless knew that Herndon loved her. In his quiet ineffectuality, he had probably never bothered to mention the fact; but she must have been aware. And now, in the shock of this disillusion about Quincy, the first time that she saw him as all of us knew him in recent years, she would realize how wrongly she had chosen and what the breaking off her engagement would mean to Herndon. You remember, Stella, that you described Herndon after that walk as disturbed and yet somehow exultant?

"He did not know the true facts, or he would never

have been allowed to live with that knowledge. Probably all that Martha told him was that she had learned something terrible about Lucas and did he think that she should fulfill her obligations and go through with the marriage anyway? I hope he took up his cue. I hope for once he rose to the occasion and persuaded her to marry him. I should like to think of one high spot of triumph in that poor drab life.

"Martha was a Stanhope. So of course she was scrupulously honest with Lucas. She told him what she knew and why she could not marry him. She also told him, quite without realizing it, why he could no longer let her live. She let the others go on thinking she would marry Lucas. why should her problems cast a shadow over the wedding festivities of the Brainards? And Lucas was more than willing that everyone should go on thinking so, while he matured his plans.

"They were, you have to admit, excellent plans. With one plot, he avenged the insult of the jilting, poisoned the life of the man who had supplanted him with Martha, and—the essential point—protected the secret of his dishonesty. It remained, for twenty-five years, an admirable marvel of planning."

"For twenty-five years—" Dr. Arnold repeated reflectively.

Suddenly Horace Brainard was on his feet. "But it caught up with him, didn't it? Twenty-five years, and now Lucas dead. And if Lucas was the original murderer, for God's sake, O'Brien, tell us who killed Lucas?"

It was Tom who answered. "Who? Who else but the man whose life he'd destroyed?"

Catherine Brainard's voice trembled. "James?"

"Of course. All Fergus's chain of reasoning on the slugging still holds good. When Herndon realized that he'd been duped and tricked all his life, he hated Quincy as he had never hated him before. And he took the perfect revenge: killing Quincy by the very act of throat-slitting which he'd been falsely trapped into confessing."

"Smart stooge," said Fergus approvingly.



"But when it came to his suicide," Tom went on, "he couldn't bear even then to confess the real truth, the sane murder. That was too close, too terrible. He left the old confession, knowing its falseness, but hoping that it would be taken as explaining the situation."

"And Ramirez?" said Dr. Arnold.

"Herndon again. A desperate attempt at a cover-up before he finally gave up and cracked. He must have—"

Janet was staring out the window. "Hi!" she called. "Either I'm seeing mirages, or there's a motor launch headed straight for here."

Fergus looked as relieved as Hercules after transferring the burden of the heavens back to the shoulders of Atlas. "Thank God!" he said. "Andy."

From the wharf you could see three men in the launch, two in uniform and a heavy-set blue-jowled individual in mufti.

"Which one's your friend?" Tom Quincy asked.

Fergus narrowed his eyes. "None of 'em. But God knows they're the United States Marines."

With Tom he helped secure the launch to the wharf and gave a hand to the landing officers. Blue Jowls rumbled and took charge. "I'm Donovan. Chief of Police at Santa Eulalia. Where's a guy named O'Brien?"

"I'm O'Brien," said Fergus. "This is Tom Quincy, my official stooge. Brainard and the rest are up at the house. Did you hear from Jackson or come to investigate the bonfire?"

"We heard from Jackson. I thought it was a gag, but Koppo here insisted on checking back. I'm having me a friendly game with the boys and I say, 'Nuts,' but we check and it's official all right. This L.A. bull of yours thinks there's all hell popping on Blackman's Island and we should investigate. Then we prowl around and we hear as how old Hokay Ramirez is missing and his launch too and people've been seeing a fire on this island like the whole place was burning up."

"So we decided to check," said the taller of the officers.

"I'm Koplinski, O'Brien, and this is Sanchez. I met your Jackson at a convention once; he told me about you."

"Which is all very fine," said Chief Donovan, "but did we come out here for social introductions? What's your story, O'Brien? And it had better be good."

"It is," said Fergus modestly. "We have on this island, in addition to assorted extras, one man recovering from a slit throat, one man with a stab where his heart ought to be, two corpses, and a murderer."

"That's a start," said Officer Koplinski.

"Fergus is building it," Tom explained. "To be exact, we've got two murderers, but they're likewise the two corpses."

"Kilkenny cats, like?" Donovan rumbled.

"Oh, no," said Fergus quietly. "I play fair. Chief Donovan wouldn't like to break up his game for a mere pair of corpses, would he? I've got a nice live fresh murderer. And you better grab him quick, Chief. He's a joker wild. He steals boats."

Tom frowned. "I don't get it. Something still up your sleeve? But in that case we'd better hurry back to the house. We can't leave Janet on a spot like that."

"She's safe enough," said Fergus, "as long as you're here."

It was over in a minute. Tom's dive for the launch was well aimed, but he failed to allow for the agility of Officer Koplinski, who suddenly stood where there had been a clear passageway. Nor did he allow, as would any Santa Eulalian criminal, for that officer's celebrated one-two, second only in fame to his ability to draw to an inside straight.

When Tom sat up again, Officer Koplinski was clicking shut the handcuff. Officer Sanchez was replacing his automatic in its holster, and Chief Donovan was saying, in tones of rumbling admiration, "You play much poker, O'Brien?"

## Chapter Fifteen

### THE UNSPRUNG TRAP

"GENTLEMEN," TOM QUINCY APPEALED. "Officers. You surely aren't paying any attention to this wild accusation?"

"You tried to get away, didn't you?" Chief Donovan lowered.

"I was panicky. What would you do, Chief, if anyone hurled such a denunciation at you?"

"Me? I'd sit tight and say nothing."

"Maybe. Maybe you would. But I'm not made that way. It took me by surprise, and my first thought was to get the hell out. But I'm sure that once you hear the circumstances, you'll realize how absurd these handcuffs are. The situation is simply this: we had on this island a poor devil who had been tricked into believing that he was mad. He cracked up under the strain, killed one man, and attacked three others, including me. Then he finished matters off by committing suicide, thereby depriving O'Brien of a fee. The shock of that loss and a practically sleepless night have made the poor lad scatterbrained."

"Look, boys," said Chief Donovan. "Let's go on up to the house and get all this straight."

"Okay," Fergus agreed. "But not at the house. I'd sooner have a strictly official audience for some of the things I've got to say. Chief Donovan, would you send one of your men up to keep people quiet?"

The heavy-set Chief frowned and looked questioningly at Officer Koplinski, who nodded. "It's a deal, O'Brien. Sanchez, you take over up at the house."

Officer Sanchez looked reproachfully at Fergus. "When this case breaks on us, I'd just filled a straight flush for the first time in a year. And now I got to walk out on the party without even hearing what it's all about. I should ought of been a plumber like I wanted to."

"Scram, Sanchez," Chief Donovan growled. "Now,

O'Brien. What goes?"

Fergus told his story succinctly: first a brief outline of the Martha Stanhope affair (for the Chief's benefit, since Officer Koplinski seemed already familiar with it), then a sketch of the Valentino and Corcoran episodes, and lastly a relatively detailed account of the past night.

When he had finished, he turned to Tom. "Check?"

"Check," said Tom confidently. "And mate in three to you, my fine fertile friend."

Fergus did not smile.

"That's as may be. But you endorse that as a correct account of the events on this island?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now, gentlemen, we come to the pith of the matter, and that is the double slugging."

"That would've bothered me from the start," said Officer Koplinski.

"It did bother me. When I thought we were dealing with a maniac, I wasn't even willing to grant the slugging of the guard. For all the sophistries you can sprinkle around the notion, I still don't think a homicidal maniac would so carefully not kill one man in order to kill another. But when I realized that this murder was sane, the slugging of the guard seemed to make sense."

Tom rubbed the back of his head and said, "Well?"

"Now sane or insane, there was no apparent reason for the murderer to slug Herndon, was there? There he was in his room, harming nobody and in nobody's way. What seems to be the only possible reason?"

Fergus looked at Chief Donovan, but it was Officer Koplinski who answered. "Slugging himself to make himself look like a victim."

"That's what I thought too. But isn't that just a little too obvious? You might make yourself look like a victim when a victim is plausible. But when there's no reason on God's green footstool why you should be a victim, the frame works the other way round. It actually calls attention to you instead of protecting you. And I began to think that maybe that's just what it was meant to do.

"Then there was Herndon's own evidence: he heard somebody at his door, found no one there, and looked out into the hall. In the hall he saw nothing. Now clearly something's phony there. If the murderer slugged him, the murderer must have slugged the guard first, so that Herndon, looking out, would have had to see the guard's body. Therefore, I thought, even before Tom oh so kindly pointed it out to me, that Herndon must be lying. But there was one other explanation. Herndon would see an empty hall if it was the guard who slugged him from behind."

"Neat," said Officer Koplinski. "That's a good point, Chief."

Chief Donovan nodded and frowned.

"Pretty," Tom observed. "In an abstract sort of way, I can admire this game. But what have you proved? That the double slugging can be interpreted in either of two ways. One way incriminates me, the other Herndon. I'm sitting here calm and cheerful, if handcuffed, and Herndon has committed suicide and left a confession."

Chief Donovan frowned and scratched his head.

"A false confession," said Fergus, "to another crime."

"Which you explained perfectly, a half hour back, as covering this one."

"All right. Leave this for a minute; it's just one point. Now let's go back to the Ramirez episode."

Chief Donovan looked relieved to find matters on a simpler plane. "How is old Hokay? Pulling through?"

"Your first job's going to be getting him to a hospital. But Dr. Arnold thinks he'll pull through all right. He's our friend's one serious failure."

"Good. I kinda liked that old bastard. Go on, O'Brien."

"What happened then? Somebody knocked out Hokay Ramirez, sent his launch careening off into nowhere, and left us all stranded on this island. People were scattered then; almost anybody could have done it. But the point is that whoever did it also pinched my suitcase. Not only were all my clothes in there, which accounts for my present disreputable attire, but so was all my professional

equipment. Plus an automatic."

Officer Koplinski disapproved. "You come on a case and you leave automatics around to be snatched?"

"I wasn't supposed to be a detective, which is the point I'm building to. And despite the novelists, it's pretty hard to carry a gun without a bulge in Southern California clothes. Somehow I thought I wouldn't look quite the Compleat House Guest with a rod sticking out; so I left it in my suitcase, and it vanished.

"Now if A is planning a murder on a house party, and B, the lousy old spoilsport, has gone and invited a private detective as a guest, it's obviously up to A to do something about it. Getting rid of the detective doesn't fit into A's picture; maybe it would start trouble before the proper time. But at least A can draw the dick's claws and leave him stranded with nothing but his hands and his brains.

"Which is precisely what happened, and logical enough. But to do that, A had to know that I was a detective. Now ostensibly I was just a young man that Stella Paris had invited, along with Tom, to provide youth and gaiety on the party. Of all the people on this island, only three knew my profession: Miss Paris, Lucas Quincy, and Tom. Miss Paris could hardly have invited me only to draw my teeth upon arrival; and Quincy, quite apart from his being the intended victim, was with me when the boat and the suitcase were stolen. So what's left?"

"A guess," said Tom coolly. "Even if such logical speculations had any value as evidence, how can you conceivably prove that a dead man did not know a certain fact? There are dozens of ways in which Herndon might accidentally have heard about you and preferred to keep his knowledge to himself."

"All right. We now come to the Curious Episode of the Unsprung Trap. The murderer was getting cautious now; he was tying up loose ends. Living victims aren't so good to have around. He began to worry about what Ramirez could tell if he recovered consciousness; so our friend stabbed him through what he fondly supposed was the heart. The attempt failed, but Herndon didn't know that

If Herndon was the murderer, he'd have thought that Ramirez was dead and that Corcoran was the one remaining witness. Or why specify Herndon? Anyone would have thought that, if Corcoran's attacker were the murderer. So I baited a trap, spread the news that Corcoran would be talking in the morning, and waited for the logical attempt to finish him off. And nothing happened. Nobody came near the place. The killer had no interest in Corcoran's death. On the contrary, he had a very real interest in keeping Corcoran alive; anything that Corcoran might have seen was that much more evidence to clear him."

"So because I kept vigil all night beside Corcoran while you dozed, and never lifted a finger to harm him, that proves I'm a murderer? Fergus, you're outshining yourself." He turned to Chief Donovan. "That's simple enough to explain. After the second Ramirez attack, Herndon had his revulsion of feeling that finally led to his suicide. He wasn't interested any longer in keeping it all dark. It didn't matter whether Corcoran talked or not."

Fergus stared at him with admiration. "You stick to your guns, don't you?"

"I stick to the truth. How about it, Chief? Do the cuffs come off now?"

"Just a minute," Fergus interposed. "One more point. Herndon's quote suicide unquote. Now that was a pretty job. Dr. Arnold gave his official okay to the wound, and an examination of my automatic will probably show fingerprints in just the right places. But all the same it's here that our friend made his most serious mistake: on the table was a very expensive, very beautiful, very new pipe—still warm."

Chief Donovan scowled. "I don't get it. Seems to me if I was going to commit suicide, I'd like as not light a cigar while I was thinking it over. And that reminds me—" He fished out a cigar, bit off the end, and spat.

"Sure," said Officer Koplinski. "A cigar, sure. But—"

Fergus turned to him quickly. "You get it?"

"You said a *new* pipe?"

"Exactly. Now smoking before suicide—sure, that's

plausible enough. Think of all the dopes that light One Last Cigarette in a gas-filled room and blow themselves to shreds. And a cigarette or cigar smoker would smoke whatever came to hand. But a pipe smoker, with a whole collection of his old favorites about him, would never pick a new pipe for his Last Smoke on Earth. Nobody with suicide on his mind could possibly start to break in a pipe. It would be like commencing a mystery novel in the death house at a quarter to midnight.

"James Herndon left the living-room to ponder over his confession and try to decide how much he could tell me. He went upstairs, took this beautiful straight-grain brier from its case, and began to break it in. That was a positive act, a sort of distraction from his worries. He smoked it carefully down to the bottom; there was only gray ash left in it. And a matter of minutes later, he was dead. That was no suicide."

Officer Koplinski grinned at Fergus. "Your friend Jackson underrates you," he said.

"What's the matter with you both?" Tom was scornful. "Are you letting those green Irish eyes hypnotize you? The psychology of pipe smoking, for God's sake! Since when do they convict on that?" But his tone was noticeably less cocky.

Chief Donovan scratched his head. His voice lacked conviction as he said, "It looks okay, but still—"

Fergus interrupted. "Look, it sounds complicated but it's as simple as hell. Cut out the phony stuff—all the squirming red herrings that have been giving us the razzle dazzle. Forget what happened twenty-five years ago. Think of what's happened here. Sure, Hokay was conked, Corcoran was knifed—but they're still alive, aren't they?"

Fergus had asked the question but he had no intention of giving anyone a chance to answer it. He went on talking.

"I'm saying again: what have we got? Just this. Lucas Quincy was murdered. *That* was the main idea. And who had the best reason in the world to murder him—before Lucas could get to the altar with the fair Alys—before



Lucas had a wife instead of a nephew to leave his money to?"

Officer Koplinski nodded. "Then the Herndon murder was just a cover-up, close the case and no questions asked and Herndon takes the rap."

Chief Donovan grunted, but there was no longer a shade of doubt in his voice. "Checks," he said. "But a little material evidence wouldn't do no harm in court, O'Brien."

"All right," said Fergus slowly. "Sure, he thought of everything. He got the angle right and he framed the print. But I wonder about the nitrate specks."

"Nitrate?" Tom frowned.

"Little specks on the hand. A sort of invisible backfire from shooting off a firearm. You can't see them, Tom, but they're on your hand right now. And they're not on Jim Herndon's."

Suddenly Tom whirled. His handcuffed fist was on the grip of Koplinski's automatic when that officer's right whipped up and met his jaw. There was a sharp crack of bone, and the tall athlete fell back on the ground, pulling the steel-linked policeman on top of him.

"The dumb bastard!" Chief Donovan scowled. "Did he think he could shoot his way out while he was handcuffed to Koppo?"

"Not so dumb," Fergus grinned. "All he wanted to do was pull the trigger, even if the gun was still in the holster. We'd have no charge against him on that unless maybe resisting an officer; and he'd have destroyed the one concrete piece of evidence against him."

"Sonofabitch!" said Chief Donovan, in approximately one syllable.

"But this test," Fergus went on. "We've got to make it damned quick before something else crops up to spoil it. How're you fixed for a laboratory here, Chief?"

"Laboratory? Hell, O'Brien, all we get here is drunks and speeders. Don't you know how to do it?"

"I've used it, but always with a lab man. I know you coat the hand with paraffin and apply Lunge's reagent to

the cast. But what the hell Lunge's reagent is or where you get it—God damn. This is practically symbolic. Our civilization is so almighty scientific that we rely absolutely on the scientist. Without him, we're as helpless as a Cro-Magnon. Here we've got a murderer, and he can laugh at us."

Officer Koplinski spoke up from his comfortable position on the unconscious prisoner. "Lunge's reagent? That's half a gram of diphenylalimine in a hundred cc. of sulphuric acid at sixty-two degrees Baumé. Mix that with twenty cc. distilled water. Works swell, too."

Chief Donovan's eyes bugged. "Koppo—I" he sounded hurt.

"Aw nuts, Chief," said Officer Koplinski unassumingly. "I just like to horse around with stuff."

"So the real credit belongs to Koppo," Fergus said to Dr. Arnold. "Without that choice bit of practical knowledge, I'd have been helpless."

"If there'd been a man like Koplinski on the Santa Eulalia force in 1915," Arnold mused, "this might all never have happened."

The two were sitting in Flannery's, with rich-collared glasses of draught beer in front of them. The case was rounded off now. Tom Quincy was under arrest; his protestations of innocence were more faltering now that Lunge's reagent had revealed the nitrate specks. Corcoran and Ramirez were in the local hospital; and Dr. Arnold had stayed over to supervise their treatment. The rest of the depleted anniversary party had given their depositions, been released under bond as material witnesses, and headed back to Los Angeles.

"That test was so all-important," Fergus went on. "I had to keep stalling for time, praying that Tom would never guess what I knew or how I could prove it. If he'd had any suspicion of that, he'd have found some way of firing off a gun before plenty of witnesses and destroying my one solid piece of material evidence. I was the only man on the island anywhere near his strength; I wanted

good comforting police support before he caught on."

"Tom— That shocked me, O'Brien. I think it shocked me more than the truth about Lucas, more even than Alys and Valentino. Tom seemed so— But there was motive enough. It's curious to think that it was Lucas's painstakingly amassed fortune which finally killed him—that, and his own murderous plot."

"A nice piece of petard-hoisting," Fergus nodded. "Tom had to get that money before Lucas married. Before he heard about the cat, before he got this brilliant idea of using the 1915 throat-slitting to cover up on his crime, he told me he was having money troubles since all of Lucas's cash was going to Alys. Later on, he denied the whole conversation. That should have been a partial tip-off, but it wasn't till the pipe that I woke up."

"One question, Mr. O'Brien. I can see that Tom, as a student of psychology, would doubtless know about the throat-slitter; but how, on the slugging, did he pick poor Jim to frame? He can't have known about the false confession then, though it fitted so wonderfully into his plans."

"I figure that this way: he picked Herndon first for the double slugging just to confuse the trail. Brainard slept with his wife. You were too alert to frame well. Herndon made the perfect victim there. Then he'd deciphered the Eliot clue that Lucas Quincy gave me. He'd guessed that something was hidden in that book. While Herndon was unconscious, before the murder, he took a look. From then on he felt on sure ground."

"That's not quite all guesswork, either. When I asked Herndon about Quincy's cryptic Eliot reference, he started to say, 'Then you were the one who—' Somebody had been at his Eliot volume, moved it so that he knew it had been touched; but he realized it couldn't have been me because if I'd read that confession why was I wasting time on foolish questions?"

"You're a highly capable young man, O'Brien. You've done a good job."

Fergus scowled. "Have I? I started out on this case be-

cause I was in a black mood, and I'm winding up in an even blacker. What have I done? I've cleared up a twenty-five-year-old murder and I've brought a fresh murderer to justice, if you'll forgive the cliché."

"Isn't that enough?"

"Like hell it is. I failed to prevent two deaths; and though it's hard to regret Quincy's, poor Herndon was a damned nice guy in his futile way. And for all my brilliant elucidation of the case, it's left all the people in as confused a torment as though it had never been solved. Worse. Look at Janet."

"She will find consolation quickly in her work. This love for Tom was a sudden growth, a forced growth under abnormal circumstances. She would never have been happy as an inactive faculty wife. She belongs back in New York."

"Maybe. But she's got a choice spot of hell ahead of her. And look at the Brainards. They've talked too much and too freely. They can never live together again in that stupid happy calm they used to know. And look at Alys."

"There," said Dr. Arnold, "you can do something."

"Me? God save me from ever seeing the wench again."

"Alys is going to a private nursing-home. She is going to be cured of her drinking, and a good psychiatrist, a brilliant friend of mine in New York, is going to see what can be done about her other-defects."

"Ha," said Fergus tonelessly. "You think you can get that bitch to consent to such a program? That wouldn't be Fun."

"She will consent. Or you and I will go before the Lunacy Commission and give evidence, you as detective and I as physician, concerning her cat-killing venture. Are you willing?"

"It's hopeless, but I'm willing. You know, sir, I admire you. It's easy enough to hate Alys as Herndon did, or use her as did Quincy; but you're the first person who's ever thought of doing anything about her. And God knows I wish you luck."

"There's one more thing to brighten my life," Fergus

added after a brief silence. "And that's the trifling matter of my fee. One of my clients is dead, and the other, God help me, is Horace Brainard."

"Your fee? Oh, I spoke to Alys. She'll take care of that."

"Alys? She hasn't got any money."

"What? Don't you—? That's right; you were off with Koplinski testing paraffin molds. When Officer Sanchez made the routine inventory of Lucas's effects, he found a will, unwitnessed but holograph and hence perfectly valid, dated last night and leaving everything to Alys."

Fergus goggled. The last act of Lucas Quincy's life had been an unselfish one. Knowing the danger on the island, fearing that the persecuted Herndon had really gone mad, he had remembered Alys. No one, he thought, is completely without a part of Jay Stanhope, any more than anyone is completely without a part of Lucas Quincy.

"Hey," the barkeep called. "You guys want to hear the late news?" He turned up the radio.

"German bombs fell twice today upon ancient Brussels, bringing death and devastation to untold . . ."

Fergus stared into his empty glass. Throat-slitting was comparatively clean.

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