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MURDER turned the SS VAGABOND into a floating morgue!

SO YOUNG A BODY

SPECIALLY SELECTED AN INNER SANCTUM MYSTERY

FRANK BUNCE

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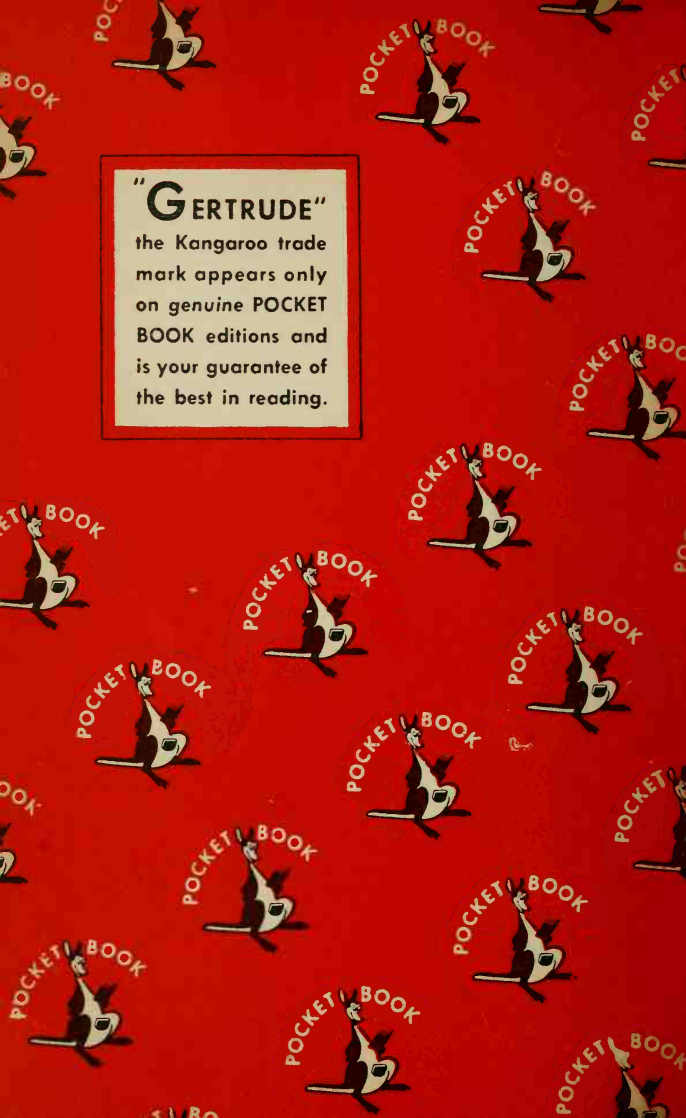
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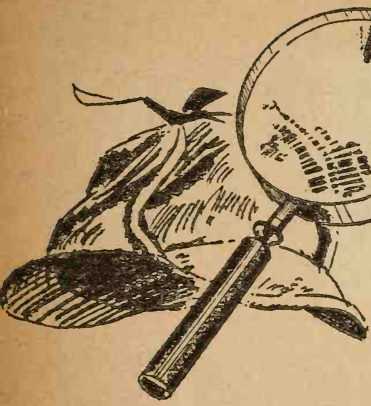

No ship ever sailed with as strange a passenger list as the SS *Vagabond.* For one, there was Serena, an aged fortune-teller. Then, there were the inevitable honeymooners. Detective Humble figured they would be slitting each other's throats before the third night out. Mr. Humble also looked with a jaundiced eye on his brace of celebrities—Larry Remington, millionaire producer, and Ginnie Rowe, beautiful actress. It was evident that a monstrous hatred existed between these two. To fill out the roster there were the middle-aged Stentsons from Iowa and the extraordinary Dorrit Bly. Dorrit had the face of a cherub and a brain that resembled an International Business Machine. This, as it turned out, was a lucky thing for Mr. Humble. For when murder became a habit on the SS *Vagabond* where would Mr. Humble have been without Dorrit Bly?

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SO YOUNG A BODY

by

Frank Bunce

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"I never knew so young a body with so old a head."

—*The Merchant of Venice,* Act IV, Sc. 1

CAST

Cast

SO YOUNG A BODY

CHAPTER ONE

UNTIL THE FIRST BODY WAS FOUND, MR. HUMBLE HAD been having a fine time, living a lie.

True, he had his moments of mild uneasiness. On a small ship like the *Vagabond,* where everyone soon got to know everyone else, the falsehood had grown with repetition until it came to assume preposterous proportions. He either should have picked a bigger ship or told a smaller lie, Mr. Humble soon saw. It probably would have been enough to have said he was a detective, and let it go at that—an accountant, after all, was a detective of a sort, dealing with figures instead of criminals in the flesh. It had been a mistake to tell people he had his own private-eye agency, palming off on them as autobiography choicer portions of all the hardboiled mystery stories he had read.

Still, it had enabled him to cut a figure for a while—something he had never achieved before, in all of a blameless and wholly insipid life. As he was to explain to Miss Bly later when, backed to the wall, he had to confide in somebody, he had virtually been forced to it, like a starving man to theft of a crust of bread, by his desperate need for a little significance, and a way to talk to people.

Conversations, on commuters' trains and the excursion boats and busses that he patronized sometimes on his off days, all went alike. Somebody would make a remark

about the weather, and Mr. Humble would answer with too much eagerness or too stiffly—he never could seem to hit just the right offhand note. The talk would progress through the routine remarks about the scenery, that day's international crisis and a firm determination of public policy, to an exchange of names and the inevitable question:

"What's your line, Mr. Humble?"

"Line? Oh, uh, accountant," Mr. Humble would answer dreadfully, knowing just what the response would be:

"Oh."

Just "oh." Respectfully, as to one who had a good respectable line, that paid nice money. But with dwindling interest too, and the discouraged conviction that there was nothing much more to be said.

People could talk to dentists about their teeth, to businessmen about business; to lawyers, scientists, bankers, cooks, and railroad engineers. But nobody seemed to want to talk to an accountant about figures. Grimly determined to risk no similar rebuff on this vacation trip, the first real, good one he had ever had, Mr. Humble said he was a detective, not dreaming, of course, of the fantastic predicament in which the lie would involve him.

And yet, he did have a warning. On their first day out, Captain Wren went over the passenger list with him, making no secret of his anxiety about some of them. Passengers on a small coastwise freighter were likely to be an eccentric lot at best, he said—who but a screwball would choose to go that way, when trains and planes and busses were running every day? But this current shipment—present company excepted, he qualified graciously—was the most grotesque package he had carried in his nine years as the *Vagabond*'s master.

For one, there was Nellie Templeton-Lesonowitz,

otherwise billed as Serena, the Peerless Peregrinator of the Fourth Dimension. Flamboyant in a white robe, embroidered and belted in gold, that aged mystic had come aboard not long after Mr. Humble, companioned by a man called Flavius the Fourth. At the gangplank's foot she paused to stamp from her sandaled feet the dust of the medina East and extend ecstatic hands toward that mecca of California, to which the ship was destined. The gesture might have been more convincing without the escort of a uniformed policeman, trailing stolidly to see to it that she got on the ship and stayed on. Unimaginative, literal-minded men, Eastern police, it was widely known, had looked with suspicion upon her claim to be able to travel around in the fourth dimension at will. Her wanderings in that dimension, it appeared, had left behind her, in the other three, a trail of swindles, dubious promotions, and strong odors of blackmail.

Flavius too, robed in scarlet, with a jeweled turban half-framing his swart, hawk's face, was unpopular with police, for much the same reason. Mr. Humble could understand the Captain's distrust of them, though the dubious attitude toward the next pair to come aboard had been a surprise.

Mr. Humble had thought that the young Mr. and Mrs. Jack Werner, newlyweds, would be just what was needed to give the cruise an appropriate romantic flavor. But Captain Wren disagreed. A honeymoon, he explained kindly, wasn't always the blissful idyl that the bachelor Mr. Humble seemed to think it was. For both parties concerned it was a period of wary adjustment—of preliminary sparring, as it were—and the one thing certain about it was that there would be at least one big fight. In such cramped quarters as those on the *Vagabond,* with passengers limited to a double tier of little

cabins amidships and a tiny lounge deck aft, the pair would be showing unusual restraint if they avoided slitting each other's throats.

The ship's master looked too with a jaundiced eye upon his brace of celebrities, Larry Remington and Ginnie Rowe. Mr. Humble had been stunned, seeing them coming aboard on the crest of a cascade of impressive luggage: a slim, intense, dark-haired and dark-eyed girl and a bronzed and towering young man stepping out of the photo pages of the newspapers and the theatrical reviews. But again Captain Wren did not share his excitement. Both were of the theater, he reminded his passenger, and theatrical people had an attitude toward the conventions certain to shock to death such as the middle-aged, drab, and frowsty Mr. and Mrs. Stentson, from Iowa, who came aboard soon after.

Then there was the extraordinary Dorrit Bly and friends.

Miss Bly came late, and obviously. On one side of her golden head was a green dot of a thing that might have been a hat, though it seemed more suitable to the California from which she hailed than to a Jersey dock in December. She also wore a belted tan polo coat, that looked as if it had been made for someone much bigger, and purple slacks. Ignoring the blasphemy of stevedores, who are men of furious purpose and uninhibited tongues, she paced back and forth along the dock, looking the ship over with obvious contempt. Sandwiched between a giant freighter and a passenger liner of middling size, the *Vagabond* did look somewhat negligible.

Standing, with Mr. Humble, in the bridge wing, Captain Wren observed that open insult to his ship, and an angry rumble welled up from his throat. With a bilious eye, he watched the outrageous Dorrit allow herself reluctantly to be teased aboard by her two companions, a gawky, bespectacled young man and a svelte brunet

girl. For a few minutes she remained in obscurity. Then, emphatically, she reasserted herself.

The Captain was preparing to go into the wheelhouse for a word with the pilot when his second mate appeared, climbing the companion ladder from the well deck.

"Sir," he said experimentally.

He was young and very nervous. Actually, though carried as a second officer, he was signed on as a third, and so had a third's complete lack of standing. Captain Wren made him wait a minute or two before condescending to notice him. The Captain was a fine figure of command, thought Mr. Humble, regarding him with a wistful envy: tall, with broad shoulders board-straight under his beautifully tailored uniform coat, his eyes remarkably light and piercing in his weather-beaten, longish face suitably ornamented with a short chin beard and graying plump mustaches.

"Well, Hearn?" he said, finally permitting himself to become aware of the other.

The young junior quivered to the impact of that eagle's eye. He passed an unsteady hand over his rosy, pear-shaped face, and said, in a stilted, stumbling voice: "A bit of difficulty, sir. One of the passengers. She insists that she is an indulgence passenger, and hence that she has to be indulged. She says—"

"She? Who?"

"A Miss Bly, sir. Cabin five. Her friend and cabin mate, a Miss Laura Weldon, endorses the complaint, though Miss Bly does all the talking. She takes the position that because she is an indulgence passenger her every whim must be indulged. And some of the things she is demanding—"

Captain Wren interrupted, in a firm, dogmatic voice: "The term 'indulgence passenger,' Mr. Hearn, is one peculiar to the travel industry. It means nothing except

that a cargo ship like ours consents to indulge a few passengers wishing to go to one of our ports of call. You should have explained that to her."

"I tried, sir. But you don't explain things to Miss Bly. She explains everything to you. She quoted verbatim from the Oxford dictionary, Roget's *Thesaurus,* and two scholarly treatises on word derivations to prove her point. Had her request been for something reasonable, I should have tried to procure it for her. But I could hardly be expected to provide booby hatches and a new deck, on a moment's notice."

"What's that? Booby hatches? A new deck?" The Captain was startled out of his attitude of aloof condescension. He spoke with frank astonishment.

"Yes, sir. She also asked for a caboose suitable for cooking purposes and certain alterations in the construction of the bulkheads. She says it's her right under the law, and she quotes a bewildering assortment of statutes, word for word, to prove that she must have them before the ship can leave this dock. It appears that she works for some law office in Los Angeles; and she has, to use her own phrase, a memory like a herd of elephants. It makes her very hard to deal with. I wish you'd talk to her, sir, as soon as you can find the time."

"I'll talk to her," said the Captain confidently. "I know a thing or two about shipping law myself, and I don't remember anything about providing cabooses, booby hatches, and the like for passengers."

He looked toward the well deck, where men, under supervision of a hung-over boatswain and the bulky first mate, Mr. O'Hollihan, were battening hatches and preparing to winch up anchors. He started for the companion ladder, saying back over one thick shoulder: "Come along if you like, Mr. Humble. This might be amusing."

Obviously, he had taken a great fancy to Mr. Humble,

perhaps because Mr. Humble was supposed to be a detective. He had always wanted to be a detective himself, the Captain had admitted. It was Mr. Humble's first taste of fame.

They followed the young officer down the ladder and to a door opening to a passageway between the twin tiers of cabins. Before the opened door to the third cabin on the right the mate paused, standing aside to let his superior precede him.

Captain Wren started to enter, then drew back. None of the cabins was very big or palatial, but this was the smallest and most meanly furnished of the lot. Usually only one passenger was assigned to it, though two might be crowded in if they looked like the kind that wouldn't say much. Too late the Captain recalled that always before this had been two men.

So he contented himself with standing just outside and turning on his most ingratiating smile. "Well, well," he said, in a hearty boom, blinking in at the two vague occupants—the cabin had no porthole of its own. "Everything looks nice and cozy here, but Mr. Hearn tells me we've been having a little trouble."

"It's nothing at all compared with the trouble you're going to have," Dorrit Bly assured him, assuming outline and coherence as she got up off a bunk and advanced to the doorway to give battle. She had taken off the polo coat, and in slacks and a black sweater she looked somewhat bigger and faintly piratical. Her pink, bland face was frozen by nature to a look of perpetual cherubic beatitude, but her blue eyes were alert and watchful, like a fencer's.

"I just hope you're not in a big hurry to get started on this trip," she went on, in a dulcet voice. "It's going to take quite a while to build those booby hatches and housings over us, as well as to renovate these bulkheads all around to the standards required by law; not to men-

tion the penalties attaching to your failure to do so before, as specified in sections 152 and 153 of the United States Shipping Code. The former statute specifies that in all vessels carrying or bringing steerage passengers, all unmarried female passengers shall be berthed in a compartment separated from the space occupied by other passengers by substantial and well-constructed bulkheads; while the latter provides that in all such vessels there shall be properly constructed hatchways over the compartments or spaces occupied by such passengers, properly covered with housings or booby hatches, the combing or sills of which shall rise at least six inches above the deck. Not only are no such hatches or housings provided here, but the walls or bulkheads are so unsubstantial that I could hear the man next door breathing. He wheezed like a clogged steampipe from the mere exertion of shifting his own luggage. He must be tubercular, or something."

"That was me. I'm asthmatic, but not tubercular, Miss Bly," said Mr. Humble.

Captain Wren waved aside the interruption, continuing to smile ingratiatingly. "You know the shipping laws, I see, Miss Bly. But I'm afraid you're a little mixed up in applying them. We don't carry steerage passengers. You aren't steerage. You're cabin class. Your ticket says so."

"What my ticket says is irrelevant. The law says, section 151 of the same code, that the expression 'steerage passengers' means all passengers except cabin passengers, and that no person shall be deemed a cabin passenger unless the space allotted to his exclusive use is in proportion of at least thirty-six superficial feet. There aren't thirty-six feet of space in this reconverted broom closet for one person, let alone two. Nor is that all. The same section provides that the height between that part of the deck on which steerage passengers are carried and

the deck immediately above it shall be not less than six feet, but the distance here is three-fourths of an inch under that. I measured it with a ruler that your Mr. Hearn himself supplied to me. It's going to be an awful nuisance for you to have to raise one whole deck by three-fourths of an inch."

The Captain held up a gnarled, muscular hand, interrupting this torrent of words. He still wore his smile, though it was becoming perceptibly frayed at the edges. "One moment, please, Miss Bly. Theoretically, according to your peculiar methods of reasoning, all this may be true. But its practical application is another matter. My ship is regularly inspected by duly qualified inspectors, and I am carrying their certificate of approval. It's posted where you or anyone else may examine it at any time."

"Well then, you'd better make arrangements to have your friends, the inspectors, share the same cell with you, so that you can while away your time in jail pleasantly, playing pinochle or whatever else it is that you all do when they're supposed to be inspecting you. The law says that for violations of the statutes I have cited, the masters and owners are liable to fines of up to five hundred dollars for each offense and imprisonment up to six months; not to mention the civil responsibilities of such masters and owners for negligence, breach of contract, and default. I suppose you will insist upon making me prove that; though if it were me, I'd take the easy way out."

"What way?" Captain Wren tried for restraint, but his voice betrayed him. He sounded like a drowning man yelling for help.

Dorrit took her time about answering, while she seemed to debate within herself. "Well, I suppose I'm a weak fool for telling you this, especially without charging you a cent for legal advice, but I never was the mer-

cenary type. As I have explained, the basis for any action we might initiate against you would be the lack of sufficient superficial space to entitle us to classification as cabin passengers. This could easily be remedied by transferring us to more commodious quarters, such as the choice corner cabin at the end of this tier, which has a private shower, a window instead of a mere porthole, a dressing alcove, and other de luxe features. I just happen to know that, due to a last-minute cancellation, it is vacant; and a rough survey of its exterior indicates that it is big enough to satisfy the provisions of the law, and make us bona fide cabin passengers. I explained all that to Mr. Hearn, who says he has to act as purser too and part-time wireless operator, along with other duties that you and your first mate, Mr. O'Hollihan, foist upon him, because you're too tight-fisted to pay for a complete complement of help and too lazy to do much work yourself. But he has refused to see reason."

Captain Wren swung upon his hapless junior officer. "What's this, Hearn?" he said, in a terrible voice.

"I'm being misquoted, sir," the suffering Hearn protested. "I didn't say you were tight-fisted or lazy, exactly. I said I had a lot of work to do—"

"We'll take that up later, if you please. For now we will stick to the matter under discussion. You know that it is any passenger's privilege to transfer to better quarters, providing that such quarters are available and also of course that the passenger pays the difference in cost. In this case it amounts, I believe, to sixty dollars."

"I told her that, sir," said the harassed mate. "But she not only won't pay the difference—she holds that, if anything, we ought to pay her."

"That was just a thought," said Dorrit. "I might be persuaded to trade even, but only because I do not have a vengeful or avaricious nature. Aside from all the fines, court costs, and possible jail sentences I would be saving

you and your owners, Captain, I want to remind you again that I am not charging you a cent for legal advice. I wish to emphasize that it is advice only, with no element of coercion. It's a free country. Some people just love trouble, and maybe you're one of them."

The Captain stared at her, while a variety of impulses palpably warred in him. Cannibalism seemed the dominant one; he looked as if he would have enjoyed taking a good big bite out of her. But reason triumphed, and he said, in a strange, blurred voice:

"All right. Since the corner cabin is empty, I suppose you might as well be in it. But I want you to know, Miss Bly, that you haven't fooled me with all this talk about laws and such. Not for a minute—not one bit. I see right through you."

He turned away with admirable dignity. But the gesture was spoiled by a stray piece of somebody's luggage that got in his way. He kicked at it savagely, but of course only hurt his toe.

CHAPTER TWO

TO ALL THIS MR. HUMBLE HAD LISTENED WITH ENCHANTment. Himself one of those persons who are always being put upon, he had the Milquetoast's awe of bolder, uninhibited individuals; and such frank piracy on the high seas as Miss Bly had demonstrated left him breathless. So it was with both fascination and terror that he discovered her, next morning, ambushed in his cabin

and presumably plotting to attempt some kind of daylight robbery on him, next.

It was the second memorable encounter of his day. The first had come when, rising early, he went on deck to watch the last lighthouse on the Jersey coast fade behind banks of cold December fog off the after starboard quarters, and the gray sea close in all around. From looking at charts with Captain Wren he knew they were relatively not far out from land and would be nowhere on this trip: but still, the sight of nothing but water made him feel pleasantly adventurous. Mr. Humble had felt adventurous on Hudson ferries on dark nights.

Before long, another man came out of a corner cabin to stand at the rail not far away. His steamer cap was pulled low over his eyes, and his tall figure was wrapped in a smart gray topcoat with its collar turned up against the stiff dawn wind; but Mr. Humble recognized him as the much photographed and photogenic Larry Remington.

He looked at Mr. Humble briefly, nodded, and said, "Good morning."

Mr. Humble said, "Good morning," or thought he did. He couldn't be sure for the wild roaring in his ears. Such easy intimacy with a man like Remington, heir to oil millions, man-about-Manhattan, and play producer credited with a touch of authentic genius, overwhelmed him.

Then, to add to the impact of the moment, Ginnie Rowe appeared from the direction of the little lounge deck, aft of the cabins. She too wore a cloth coat about like Remington's, with a kerchief tied around her head. Without make-up, she looked pale and rather spiritless. Seeing Remington, she hesitated, seemed about to turn back. But his voice stopped her.

"Ginnie." He spoke lazily, without insistence, but his tone had an edge of command. Deliberately, with re-

luctance it seemed, she consented to approach, coming to stand at the rail between him and Mr. Humble.

"Let's take a turn around," Remington said, nodding to the narrow strip of promenade space. "I want to talk to you, darling."

"Not now, Larry, please. I'm not up to your kind of conversation at this hour." Her voice was magnificent—warm and low but with the penetrant, carrying quality usually associated only with high-pitched voices. Mr. Humble wished he had seen her play, the one thing she had ever done for a Broadway audience, two years before. The play had died quickly, but she had become a legend.

Up close, she was a surprise to him. Looking at her in the dining salon the night before, he had thought her a tall girl, but now he saw that the impression had been an illusion, due to some quality of nervous vitality that made her seem to loom. He doubted that she would be any taller than he, even with heels.

Remington looked her up and down critically, his long, handsome eyes stopping on her face. "The walk might do you good," he drawled. "You look like a hag this morning, darling."

An astonishing violence came into her dark eyes, though her voice retained its murmurous restraint: "You can't resist writing deft lines even into a bum script, can you, darling? *The Amours of Larry Remington*—the story line must be followed, at all costs."

This was a quarrel, Mr. Humble realized, no less savage because it was being underplayed, in the best tradition of drawing-room drama. In embarrassment he would have moved away, but he was restrained by a feeling that the girl wanted him to stay, that she had come to stand by him for just that reason. It seemed almost as if she were afraid of being alone with Remington.

Something strange and new—a wild impulse of knight errantry—stirred in Mr. Humble. It was just then, no doubt, that he fell so wantonly and hopelessly in love.

Remington shrugged broad shoulders, bowed his head into the wind, and went away toward the lounge deck. The girl stayed at the rail, so close to Mr. Humble that when the wind tugged at her coat it touched him. Her eyes looked out to sea, but again he had the feeling that she had sought him out, that she wanted him to talk to her. Yet with such an opportunity—with all the world before him—he could think of nothing to say.

Finally, it was she who had to start it. Facing full around to him, she began abruptly: "You're Mr. Humble, aren't you?"

"Yes, miss," said Mr. Humble, and then gnawed his tongue in chagrin. He wished he hadn't added that "miss." He wished he hadn't mumbled so, that he could talk with a suave brilliance, as sometimes he had imagined himself doing.

But she seemed not to notice, absorbed in reflections of her own. Again he had a disturbing awareness of the nervous energy she seemed to generate. It was a tangible, almost physical emanation that excited him even more than the intent scrutiny of her dark eyes.

She went on: "Somebody said you were a detective."

"Yes. Yes, I am," said Mr. Humble.

She took a breath. She started to say something, checked herself, finally resumed: "It must be an interesting occupation. All I know about it, of course, is what I've heard or read. And then, I did have a part—a bit—in a mystery play once, that had one of these hardboiled private eyes. I've wondered whether it was really like that—dangerous and exciting."

"Well," said Mr. Humble. "Well." And then suddenly he found his tongue and began to talk.

Two hours later, he lurched back to his cabin, aghast at what he had done. For two hours he had held spellbound not merely Ginnie Rowe but half a dozen others who joined them at breakfast with what was probably the choicest omnibus of mystery fiction, of the hard-boiled school, that would be compiled that year. It was the supreme oratorical effort of his life. He hadn't known it was in him.

Belatedly, at thirty-one, he was discovering the mysterious magic in a woman's eyes that can drive a man to the utmost heights or the lowest depths. Mr. Humble was not sure which he had just achieved.

In the cabin was Dorrit Bly. Absorbed in appalled self-examination, Mr. Humble was inside before he saw her. He was about to back out in alarm, thinking he had made a mistake and was in someone else's cabin. But she spoke reassuringly:

"Oh, come on in. I won't bite."

Mr. Humble went on in, in a gingerly way. It helped that Dorrit, this morning, wore a soft, pink thing with one of those low waistlines that someone must like or nobody would wear them. From her perch on the bunk she motioned him to the room's one chair, as if the cabin had been her own, then sat looking him over with critical large blue eyes.

"Well, I must say you don't look it," she pronounced finally.

"What?" said Mr. Humble.

"You don't look much like a detective. I heard you were one, at dinner last night, and I wanted to see you up close to try to find out where I had been mistaken. I always look people over closely to figure out what they're like, and I am seldom or never wrong. Do you know how I had you pegged?"

"No," Mr. Humble said.

He had been groping for some excuse for leaving, but

now he suddenly wanted to stay. No man ever walked out on a conversation about himself.

"I figured you as either some big big-shot or a plain worm—either as someone of great importance or none at all. People who look like you generally are at one extreme or the other. You know how you look."

"Yes. I know how I look," said Mr. Humble sadly. Short, scrawny—five-five, one hundred and thirty pounds, after a full meal and with an overcoat—he never weighed on an empty stomach or without a coat. Thin, dun-colored hair; nose too big, chin too small; eyes that looked timidly out upon the world from behind pince-nez glasses. There was the Mr. Humble that he had to face every morning when he shaved.

The lank, bespectacled youth who had come aboard with Dorrit sauntered into view, stopping to lean against the doorway. He wore slacks of an improbable color that needed pressing, and a shirt that had all the color subtlety of a desert sunset, and no socks.

"She annoying you?" he asked of Mr. Humble.

"Oh, no. Not at all," Mr. Humble said, of course.

"Well, say the word, and I'll haul her out by the scruff of the neck. She's always busting into places without being asked."

"Delusions of power. It's those bar-bell exercises," said Dorrit. She regarded him with a pitying tolerance which said that such as he probably were somehow necessary to the scheme of things, though for the life of her she couldn't figure out why. "This is my boy friend, Arthur Pudden," she said, as if that explained everything. "He's a horrible example of what bar-bell exercises will do to the mind. That's him you heard bumping around and breathing on the well deck, before sunup."

Mr. Humble, judging this to be an introduction of a sort, bowed. Dorrit went on, "He's afraid he'll lose me, which is why he is always butting in with these remarks

from the cheap seats whenever I make an attempt to improve my lot in life. He figures that if I went to work for you, I'd move to New York and leave him flat. That's where your agency is located, isn't it? New York?"

"Agency? Oh, yes—detective agency. Yes, of course," said Mr. Humble.

"Well, I'm not sure I'd want to make the change. New York is a great place to visit, but as a place to live give me California. Then, too, my present employers, Claremore and Kaplan, attorneys, of Los Angeles, on the whole give me reasonable satisfaction, though they do have their little whims and foibles. Maybe we could make some arrangement whereby I could continue to live in Los Angeles and just come East for the bigger crimes, the ones everyone else had given up as insoluble."

"What she means is that she's hiring herself out to work for you, whether you like it or not," Arthur explained kindly to the bewildered Mr. Humble. "She's got the idea that detective work is all a matter of prowling plush country estates and night clubs, looking for clues. I keep telling her that I've got a friend who works for a detective agency, and he says it's just darned hard on the dogs, that's all."

"I wouldn't go in for that dismal routine of walking around trying doors at night," said Dorrit. "I want to work on the cases that baffle everybody else, employing practical psychology and advanced methods of crime detection, which, combined with my phenomenal memory, would make me the wonder of all who saw me. I have trained myself for it by committing perfect crimes and then catching myself at it."

"What?" said the startled Mr. Humble.

"Oh, not literally, exactly. Mostly I just imagined them out, to convince myself that I had the basic qualification of a great detective, which is that, under other

circumstances, he might have been a great crook. I almost always use poisoning for my murders, because there are so many poisons that are difficult to detect, and they leave so few obvious clues."

She fixed a meditative eye upon Mr. Humble. "Do you know that I could give you a poison now, today, that wouldn't kill you for two or three weeks?"

"Indeed?" said Mr. Humble, almost steadily.

"Indeed. Certain gypsy tribes speaking a deformed Prakrit tongue, and therefore of Indian origin, have long possessed a knowledge of Mucor Phycomycetes, a fungus that will do just that. They administer the spores in warm water. These spores rapidly attach themselves to the mucous membranes of the throat, all the symptoms of phthisis follow, and a delayed death results. You see what that means, of course."

"Well," said Mr. Humble.

"It means that I could poison you, then be thousands of miles away before you popped off. Or I could use the interval to frame myself an alibi that would deceive anybody but an investigator of genius. Modern law-enforcement officers on the whole are efficient and a great improvement on their predecessors of a generation or so ago. But how many of them have so much as heard of Mucor Phycomycetes?"

Arthur jeered, from the doorway, "Why don't you tell them? Why not go around lecturing to police forces, to set them straight on these things?"

She considered that. "Well, I might, in time. But first I suppose I'll have to make a name for myself or they might not want to listen to me. I'm a blonde, and there's that popular fallacy that blondes haven't got all their buttons, to contend with. What I would like to do is set up as a consultant on cases involving complicated toxicological and psychological factors. I've studied and

memorized every book on the subject, to equip myself for it. Try me out, Mr. Humble. Ask me something."

"Well," said Mr. Humble, and had to stop at that.

"Go ahead. Ask me anything. Ask me who is the father of modern toxicology."

Mr. Humble asked her.

"Matthieu Joseph Bonaventure Orfila. In his *Traite de Toxicologie,* published in 1814, he propounded his important discovery that certain tissues accumulate poisons which can be recovered by chemical means. Ask me something else. Ask me why Hindu widows were required to immolate themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands."

Mr. Humble asked her.

"To put a stop to domestic poisonings. Hindu women are reputed to have possessed profound knowledge of poisonous herbs, and before the law was passed, frequently used it to win domestic arguments."

She looked at him with complacency. "You see. You can't stick me on anything. If you still have doubts, I'll resolve them when we get to Los Angeles. Pick up any paper, find a murder in it, and I'll give you the solution within forty-eight hours or forever hold my tongue. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

Mr. Humble nodded, reduced to entire speechlessness. He was seeing embarrassing possibilities in continuing an acquaintance with one of her energy and persistence. But Arthur, unwittingly, came to his rescue:

"You won't have to wait until we get to Los Angeles, Mr. Humble, to call her bluff. Just look around this ship, and you'll see mysteries enough for her to bend her brain on. For instance, there's Ginnie Rowe—that actress, if you know who I mean."

"Yes, I know. I was talking to her just this morning," Mr. Humble said.

Arthur looked at him with a surprised respect. "You

work fast. Well, you must have noticed that she's upset about something. Jumpy as a jumping bean."

"I said that first," said Dorrit. "I pointed it out to you last night at dinner."

"Anybody could see it. My guess," said Arthur darkly, "is that she's afraid of this Serena—that old fortuneteller who runs around dressed in Greek robes, with her hair down. Probably she's got something on the girl. Might even have her hypnotized—"

"You see," said Dorrit, with tolerant pity, aside to Mr. Humble. "That's the kind of thing you get from the routine, romantic, unscientific intelligence, especially after it's been enfeebled by all these bar-bell exercises. Just a wild guess, based not on reason, but on the latest B-movie it has seen. Serena is a pretty slimy-looking customer all right, but it's not she that Ginnie's afraid of, most of all. It's Larry Remington."

"How do you know?" demanded Arthur.

"Every relevant psychological factor points to it. The job of proving that would be a pushover. But while you're at it, why don't you give me work worthy of my talents, and ask me to find out why those three—Larry, Ginnie, and Serena—are on this boat in the first place? They aren't the tramp-ship kind. Larry and Ginnie are stratoliner trade; and Serena too is pretty big-time in her own racket. You wouldn't look to see her dawdling along with a bunch of rubberneck tourists, where she stood to make little or no profit."

Arthur hooked his thumbs into a sensational leather belt around his waist, and looked down at her with condescension. "Then why is she here? I suppose you can tell us that?"

"That's simple. It's so simple it's silly. If she isn't the kind to be here if she could see no profit, the only alternative must be that she does see a chance for a cleaning somehow. And the same goes for Remington and Rowe.

They all know something we don't know; but if you really want to take Arthur up on that proposition, I'll try to find out, Mr. Humble. I'll either give you the answers within forty-eight hours or never say another word about working for you? Is it a deal?"

"Well," hedged Mr. Humble. "I wouldn't want you to get into trouble. Offend anybody by prying—"

"She's always prying—she's always in trouble. She loves it," Arthur said. "Go ahead, Mr. Humble, take her up on it. She's a cinch to muff the job, and then maybe we can have a little peace and quiet."

Cornered, Mr. Humble had to assent, and the two departed, in noisy dissension, leaving him to a dismayed realization of the pledge to which he had committed himself. Of course it was possible that Dorrit would fail and so release him from his part of the bargain. But recalling the alert and efficient intelligence that looked out at him from behind those seraph's blue eyes, he doubted it.

Mixed with his uneasiness, however, was excitement. His instinct had been correct, it seemed. Ginnie Rowe was in trouble, and she had turned to him for help. True, he had bungled his chance by talking so much about himself. But it might come again.

He dreamed, that night, that he rode a white horse upward toward a tall castle, where a maiden beseeched him with white, importunate arms; a slim girl with intense dark eyes like Ginnie Rowe's.

CHAPTER THREE

BUT IN THE WEEK THAT FOLLOWED, NOTHING MUCH HAPpened that could not have been put into a weather report. The ship trudged southward through a reversal of the calendar: from December into a blustery October off Cape Hatteras, and then, gliding between the Bahamas and the Florida Keys, into a mild and indolent May. At Port-au-Prince it was summer, hot and humid enough to make Mr. Humble think he was right back in Manhattan, in July.

It was his first tropical port, and he made a fool of himself, of course, burgeoning in khaki shorts and a pith helmet, purchased on lower Broadway. The shorts exposed his knock knees, and the helmet he soon laid aside to go bareheaded, like everybody else. But he did have his moments, riding grandly in a horse carriage through narrow, exotic wooden streets, and even undertaking an expedition into the jungle.

Actually, it wasn't much of a jungle, or the trip out to it exactly a safari. With Mr. and Mrs. Stentson, from Iowa, and the ebullient Dorrit Bly and friends, he was motored out to the edge of one of the coffee plantations, and slept in an old U. S. Army pup tent, marked Inspected and Condemned, under some unremarkable trees. The drums that their native guides beat lackadaisically at intervals to remind them that they were in voodoo land failed even to keep him awake, and his

battles were all with insects of incredible size and ferocity, for which he seemed to have a unique fascination. But he enjoyed every minute of it. He had that gift, essential to the happy traveler, of being able to live a new experience on two time levels at once: not merely in the present which, on even the most epic jaunts, is likely to include long intervals of dullness, but in the future, looking back on things from an agreeably foreshortened perspective. Jolting over execrable roads in an ancient automobile asthmatic as himself, squeezed up between Mr. Stentson on the one hand and the exuberant Dorrit on the other, bludgeoned by a merciless sun and smarting all over from his combat wounds with the insects, he could still picture himself lolling back in a leather club chair and saying, with just the right offhand air: "Now one time, when I was in Haiti . . ."

Lacking this gift, Mr. and Mrs. Stentson were acutely miserable. Like many persons long married, they had assumed a remarkable similarity, both of appearance and manner. Both had long, pinched faces and thin long noses through which they talked, and mild, wistful eyes looking out from behind identical rimless glasses —the same eyes that Mr. Humble saw whenever he looked in a mirror. The attachment between them seemed only deepened by her defects of hearing and of an astigmatism that even the glasses could not correct, so that much of what was said and seen had to be relayed to her by her husband. Aside from this side trip, they had maintained an isolation from others aboard virtually as complete and impregnable as that of the honeymooning Werners.

Contrary to the Captain's dour fears, the honeymooners had as yet shown no inclination to slit each other's throats. Indeed after one decent attempt, at dinner the first night out, to act like an old married couple, they

had quit trying and permitted themselves a frank, public, mutual adoration.

This was the more remarkable because, it developed, they were having their second try at marriage. First married during the war after only two days' acquaintance, they had failed to recognize each other when he came back from overseas three years later. After two years' separation, they had decided to try again, and the experiment seemed to be succeeding.

This tidbit of gossip, along with random others, Dorrit had handed to Mr. Humble as a kind of supplement to her report on Serena, Remington, and Ginnie. Her dossier on the trio, delivered punctually within the forty-eight hours she had allowed herself, had been assembled in part by direct examination, prosecuted with the vigor and effrontery of a trial lawyer interrogating hostile witnesses, and in part dredged up from her phenomenal memory.

Remington, it appeared, had a twin reputation as a producing genius and the biggest heel on Broadway. Two years before, he had signed Ginnie out of summer stock and given her a part in one of his shows. The part was slight and the play proved too fragile for the popular taste. But the girl's intense personality had broken through the limitations of the role, and critics had pegged her as the most promising of the younger actresses.

It was a promise that had not been fulfilled; chiefly, it was whispered, because Remington refused to give her another role until she had satisfied certain romantic aspirations of his own. For helping him to achieve them he had the powerful weapon of a contract that gave him exclusive control not merely of her professional services but in effect of her private life as well. So it was possible for him to condemn her to this cruise, in the hope that the tedium of the trip would break down her resistance.

"It was Serena's idea, and she's being well paid for it," Dorrit went on. "Not only is she getting free transportation to California, but she collects full-time consultation fees as well, every day. On a slow boat like this, that can count up. I told you she wasn't the kind to do anything that wouldn't show a profit."

"Do you mean that a man like Remington consults Serena? Every day?" asked Mr. Humble, in amazement. Like most people whose acquaintance with celebrities is limited to what they read about them in the papers, he had difficulty in crediting them with human foibles too.

"Oh, she's the combined Dun and Bradstreet, Dorothy Dix, and Gabriel Heatter for him and all his set. They swear by her, even though it's been proved that she has swindled them repeatedly. But now I think he's starting to lose confidence in her. Her prescription for him and Ginnie isn't working out so well."

"You mean—well, do you mean that Captain Wren's fears aren't justified?" Mr. Humble asked circumlocutiously, of course. Dorrit looked puzzled, and he had to be more specific: "He—well, he was afraid they might cause scandal."

"They aren't lovers yet, if that's what you mean," said Dorrit, with disconcerting frankness. "I don't think they're likely to be either. Ginnie's frightened now. She knows Serena's reputation, and she won't even eat or drink anything that isn't served at the general tables, for fear it might be drugged. It's a bad setback for Serena. She's lost her reputation for infallibility. Then, to make it worse, she's been seasick almost all the way. And a seasick seeress—well, even Remington can see the lack of logic in that. I overheard the two of them having sharp words just this morning."

Mr. Humble heard that with a delight all out of proportion to any real importance it seemed to have. He was, he told himself often, a broad-minded man. He had

read the Kinsey Report and Erskine Caldwell; he held advanced views that he was sure would have shocked almost to death old Mr. Graystone or even the young Mr. Graystone, of the firm of Graystone, Graystone, and Humble, certified public accountants, Dey Street, New York. But still he felt that if he were to go in for knight errantry, it seemed appropriate that the maiden in distress should be, within reasonable limits, at least, a maiden.

And so now, sunning himself on the portside of the lounge deck, after lunch on that fateful eighth day of the cruise, he felt a tolerable content.

The ship sat, apparently motionless from the want of any reference points, in the exact middle of a big, still puddle of sea water. The green hills of Haiti the evening before had slid away behind them on the down-curving tail of a broad strip of sunset light, in the best travelogue tradition; ahead somewhere, across a wholly unislanded portion of the Caribbean, was Panama. In the warm stillness, clad only in shorts and sandals, Mr. Humble dozed; and even Dorrit, wearing straw shoes and a sarong sunsuit, was silent, for once, in the neighboring deck chair.

Yet afterward, Mr. Humble was almost able to persuade himself that he had felt a premonition of what was to come: a slight uneasiness that might have been only the prod of his plagued New England conscience that insisted that all sins, including the sin of deception, brought retribution; or it might really have been some instinct for danger, stirred to active life at Serena's séance of the night before.

Attired in a white and gold robe that was almost clean, her lank, hennaed hair framing a harridan's sharp-featured face that was made the more ghastly by ravages of her recent illness, that mystic had come late to pre-

side over an assembly awaiting her in the dining salon. And yet, seating herself at the head of the table, between Remington on one hand and the swart-faced Flavius on the other, she had an impact that commanded respect of even skeptics like Mr. Humble.

She believed in herself, he saw. She had a sincere faith in her own powers that triumphed over the absurdity of her appearance and her pretensions; and to retain a decent skepticism one had to recall that she believed in other things too that were not so prepossessing; that she believed in using those powers ruthlessly for her own advantage.

"This is not a séance," she began. Her voice, like her person, was unattractive—rough in timbre, its accent a vulgar simulation of the Continental. Yet it too had the force of complete conviction that was probably paranoiac in origin.

"The conventional séance is an invention of unscientific practitioners. At best, they are unreliable; at worst, complete quacks," she went on.

Obviously this peroration was a set piece with her, stale from many repetitions. Mr. Humble let his attention wander to the others present.

Flavius, at her left, wore a turban set with jewels so huge as to establish at a glance their spuriousness. His lean, hawk's face terminated in a lean spade beard, and his powerful body was robed in black. His part in the proceedings was not impressive. Entering with Serena, he had seen her to her seat with the grace and obsequiousness of a courtier; thereupon, he seemed to have nothing further to do than await her departure or some random command. Clearly, he was less the associate than the sycophant, the hanger-on of a charlatan abler than himself. Yet Mr. Humble wondered whether his courtliness was as genuine as it seemed; whether the gleam of light in the dark eyes when they turned on her was

the light of devotion or a flash of resentment at the necessity for such homage.

Down the table from him were Mr. and Mrs. Stentson, drab and identical as ever; she with her attention fixed on her husband, as usual, seeming to derive all her sensations at second hand from him. Opposite, between Remington and Mr. Humble, was Ginnie Rowe. Studiously Mr. Humble tried to avoid staring at her, but when once he did, he was startled. In her eyes, fixed on Serena, was much the look that would have been in them if she had been gazing at a large and dangerous snake.

At the foot of the table, bluff, ruddy, good-humoredly skeptical, was the first mate, Mr. O'Hollihan, and wedged between him and the honeymooning Werners, the young Mr. Hearn—it seemed the lot of the luckless junior officer always to be wedged into an uncomfortable position somewhere. Dorrit Bly and her two friends, Arthur and Laura, sat by themselves in a shadowed corner.

Serena was saying briskly, "Clairvoyance, telepathy—these are words only, to be replaced by a more scientific terminology. I do not gaze into crystal balls. I do not read minds. I do sometimes, when conditions are favorable—when the astral weather permits—ride the time stream into the future or into the past. Sometimes the journey is difficult and unrewarding. But again, it may be all clear as a map before me."

She permitted her eyes to close; the lids, extraordinarily heavy, shining blue against a face in which every ravaged line stood out cruel and predatory in the glare from a single light bulb in the ceiling of the little room. Her head drooped forward, her sharp chin touching the hollow of her withered neck, and the hush that followed was a tribute to the power of her personality.

For just long enough she let the hush persist; allow-

ing time for suspense to reach a little climax, but not so much that her auditors lost patience and let their attention wander. In a voice astonishingly different—resonant, clear and firm as footprints—she resumed:

"Danger. I see danger, and terror—perhaps death."

"Death for whom?" Remington spoke, his magnificent voice merry as the tinkling of little bells, and Mr. Humble thought he understood the man's interest in Serena and her mysticism. There was brutality in the man, a sadism that delighted in probing the dark corners of others' lives.

"For one present here," the seeress answered, in that same astonishing, clear voice that was almost beautiful. "It is a menace that is old, but new; remote, yet close. And implacable—"

Now, determined skeptic though he was, Mr. Humble could understand the influence that the woman exercised over those who believed in her. Here, without paraphernalia or any of the trappings customary to her kind—here in a small, bare room in the full glare of one high unshaded electric lamp—she managed to be convincing to an uncomfortable degree. Mr. Humble felt as if someone had run a finger lightly and rapidly down the length of his spinal column; and across the table, Mrs. Stentson, seeming to take alarm from the nervous gasp of her husband, gave a frightened little bleat and caught at his arm. Even that phlegmatic block of granite, Mr. O'Hollihan, stirred and coughed uneasily.

That mundane sound seemed to rouse Serena. She sighed heavily, opened her eyes. Enormous, preternaturally brilliant in her parchment face, they flicked over the face of every person in the room, finally lifting to the doorway, to fix, speculatively it seemed, upon the white-jacketed ship's steward who stood there.

She said, once more in her slurred and vulgar accent: "That must be all for now, good friends. I am not well,

and exploring the future is as fatiguing as exploring the physical world."

She rose, not very steadily, the gold of her robe coruscant in the naked light. She went on, addressing the steward: "Tell Captain Wren that I wish to speak to him in his quarters, as soon as possible."

The steward bowed, mumbled assent. A wispish man with a look of perpetual, pinched anxiety, he looked frankly frightened under that luminous glance. Remington, rising with Flavius to help escort Serena from the room, grinned at the man's discomfiture; and again Mr. Humble had the unpleasant feeling that this stalwart, handsome favorite of the gods had an appetite for the sight of terror in others. . . .

That had been all of it—surely, in its bare essentials not an impressive performance. Yet its impact upon Mr. Humble persisted through an uneasy night, perhaps accounting for the indefinite discomfort he felt now, relaxed in a deck chair in the peaceful middle of the Caribbean. At all events, he did feel a swift twinge of apprehension that verged on panic the moment Captain Wren loomed up over him.

Ordinarily a model of correct dress, the ship's master was astoundingly untidy. The coat of the white uniform to which he had changed after Haiti was unbuttoned almost all the way, and his tie and cap were askew. He approached in a dazed, drunken way, and almost went by Mr. Humble without recognizing him. Then he lurched to a halt and began talking in an unnatural, enormous voice:

"Something's happened." The energy of his utterance awakened other nappers on the lounge deck, but he seemed not to notice, going on in the same unrestrained tones: "It's one of the passengers—this Serena."

"She's ill?" asked Mr. Humble, though he knew better; guessed, with a wild alarm, what the other was

going to say, and why he had come, in such agitation, to him, Mr. Humble.

"She's dead," the Captain said. "It's—well, when we first found her, we thought it was from natural causes. But now she's claiming it was murder!"

"She? Who?" said Mr. Humble.

Captain Wren's arms flailed furiously, his voice scaling upward in outraged protest of the fantasy of the thing he was saying:

"Why, Serena. The dead woman. It's she who's claiming she's been murdered!"

CHAPTER FOUR

MR. HUMBLE DIDN'T TAKE IT IN. HE ONLY STARED STUPIDly, waiting for something more.

The Captain took a big handkerchief out of a rear pocket of his pants, and wiped his heavy, grizzled brows and the ends of his plump mustaches. He went on, in a calmer tone:

"Here. That don't make sense, I know. But that's the way it is—as if a ghost had written—"

He stopped, for the first time seeming aware of Dorrit, looking up at him from the neighboring deck chair with eyes grown suddenly luminous, tensed like a hunting dog at point. His glance went on to Larry Remington and Ginnie Rowe, both in crisp slack suits, on the shady side of the deck. They seemed merely incredulous; but a little farther away, Mrs. Stentson had sat up

from a deck chair beside her husband's with a little bleat of alarm, her mild, myopic eyes wide with alarm.

With a gesture of impatience at his own lack of discretion, the Captain inclined his head vaguely in the direction of the promenade walk to indicate that Mr. Humble should follow him. But short of the door leading to a cross-passageway between cabins, he paused to say:

"Now, here. Before I show you the corpse, I'd better prepare you for what you'll see. Otherwise, you wouldn't get it at all."

Dorrit had tagged along. He interrupted himself to glare at her pointedly, but she stood her ground.

Mr. Humble said, "You say the dead woman herself claims to have been murdered?" He was just beginning to grasp the preposterous implications of that.

"Well, maybe I put it wrong. Got the cart before the horse, so to speak," the Captain admitted. He was recovering composure now. He even thought to button his coat and set his cap straight. "Here's the way it happened. About ten minutes ago, Bates, the steward, came up to my quarters to say he had gone into her cabin to straighten up, but was unable to awaken her. He thought she might be dead, so I got Mr. O'Hollihan to go with me as a witness. We felt her pulse and gave her the mirror test. She was dead all right."

"Did you tie a string around her finger?" asked Dorrit.

The Captain turned to scowl at her. "What for?"

"It's a better test of death than a mirror at the mouth. Another good one is full saucers of water on the chest. I can show you, if you really want to be sure."

"I am sure." Captain Wren decided to ignore her, reverting to Mr. Humble. "Naturally, our first thought was of the other passengers. A death aboard might spoil the cruise for them. We decided to keep it as quiet as possible until we could turn the body over to Canal

Zone authorities at Cristobal. Understand, at that time we figured it was death from natural causes. She's been ill, you know, almost all the time she's been aboard."

Ginnie Rowe and Larry Remington came around the corner of the lounge deck, and approached curiously. But Captain Wren glared at them so menacingly that, lacking Dorrit's hardihood, they retreated promptly.

He went on, "I sent Bates for'd to the galley for ice, to help keep the body fresh. Then Mr. O'Hollihan and I went and stood outside to head off anybody that might have come to look in on her. You know—Mr. Remington, Miss Rowe, or anybody else she might have been telling fortunes for."

"She didn't tell fortunes," Dorrit said. "Her line was better than that. She claimed she could walk around in the fourth dimension at will, like Alley Oop, in the funny papers. You'd be surprised how many people swallowed that."

The Captain again decided to ignore her. "Mr. O'Hollihan was just leaving to go back to the bridge when Bates returned. He took a look at the body and then let out a yell. I saw why when I looked at her myself. When we first saw her, Mr. Humble, she was on her back, with her hands down by her sides, already getting a little stiff. But now there she was on her side, facing the door, with a pencil in her hand and writing under it—writing that hadn't been there before. It said—but here, I'd better show it to you."

He went on to the passageway between the cabins, stopping at the corner cabin, aft, on the portside. He knocked authoritatively, and the white-jacketed steward, Bates, who doubled as both cabin and messroom attendant, opened it.

Small, bald, nervous, he obviously was glad to see them. He hadn't enjoyed being left alone with a corpse.

Though larger than Mr. Humble's and better fur-

nished, the cabin had the same gaunt, peeling board walls and general air of shabbiness. To the right, as one entered, were two bunks hinged to the wall, one above the other. The upper was hooked up out of the way, and on the lower was the dead woman, dressed in one of her gold-embroidered robes and half covered by a sheet. All the muscles of her face had relaxed and sagged, so that her features looked blurred, as if seen in a bad mirror. Her eyes, still open, had a glassy shine, and her skin a slate-blue tint. She lay facing the door, with her right arm extended stiffly, the hand resting on a pad of paper upon a little bed table set beside the head of the bunk. In the hand was a pencil, and under the pencil was writing.

The Captain prompted: "Go ahead, Mr. Humble. Read it. See what it says."

It helped some that even that old sea dog's voice was not quite steady. Mr. Humble forced himself to approach the body, incongruously conscious of his near-nakedness —he wore only shorts and sandals—and bent to view the writing from an angle that would enable him to read it. This was difficult, both because his nervousness threw his eyes out of focus, behind their spectacles, and because the writing, though firm and vigorous, was eccentric, the letters abnormally elongated and written on a back slant. But presently it took on coherence under his eyes:

"Murder," it said. "Astral hand . . ."

The pencil had gone on from there to shape another letter, which sputtered off unrecognizably.

Captain Wren reiterated it: " 'Murder. Astral hand.' Yes, that's what it says. You see why we called you, Mr. Humble. You see why we didn't know what to make of it ourselves. Written *after* the woman was dead—"

He was interrupted by a sound from the passageway. Mr. Stentson stood just outside the door, drab, meticu-

lous as ever in a staid business suit, but his face pale and frightened. Behind him, vaguely, showed the honeymooning Werners.

With a muttered imprecation, the Captain banged the door shut.

"Well, it's out now," he said savagely. "Be all over the ship—a garbled report, getting worse as it goes—in no time."

He was again interrupted, by a tap at the door. He opened it with a violent ferocity, expecting to see one of the passengers. But instead the young second mate confronted him. On his rosy, pear-shaped face was a look of alarm that seemed to indicate he too had heard of the affair, though he maintained a painful severity of voice and bearing as he said:

"Mr. O'Hollihan and I are ready on the bridge, sir."

"All right, Hearn." Captain Wren looked at his watch, absently explaining to Mr. Humble: "Time to check our longitude. I'll be back in a few minutes, but feel free to proceed as you please. I'd like to retain any evidence you may run onto—though probably there's little enough, with everybody seeming to feel free to run in and out at will."

That last remark was directed straight at Dorrit, but she remained unmoved. "I belong here. I'm Mr. Humble's assistant. We have a bargain to that effect. Isn't that right, Mr. Humble?"

Mr. Humble assented, and the Captain, after a last dubious look at her, went out with the steward, leaving Mr. Humble to an appalled sudden realization of the pit into which he had fallen.

CHAPTER FIVE

UNTIL THEN, HE HAD BEEN SO EXCITED THAT HE HAD failed to comprehend what the death implied to him, personally. But now he saw all its frightening possibilities for humiliation and disgrace. He who had represented himself as the super-sleuth, the composite of all the hardboiled private eyes of all the books he had read, now was expected to back up his claim. And he didn't know what to do about it. He didn't even know where to start.

Dorrit was eyeing him expectantly. As always she was poker-faced, but her cheeks were flushed with excitement. Obviously she expected something sensational of him. Right away. Right that minute.

Mr. Humble did his best. He took out his own watch, and said, "Four minutes to three. I thought they checked longitude at high noon."

It was the gasping, instinctive effort of a stunned organism to get a little coherence into a universe that seemed suddenly to have been twisted all out of shape. Dorrit looked somewhat surprised, but she answered adequately, as always: "It's latitude that they shoot at noon. Longitude is best checked either three hours before or three hours after."

"Ah," said Mr. Humble sagely, as if that really meant something.

With her there watching him, he had to do better

than that, so he wandered, peering at things. Many times in the movies and countless times in the mystery books, he had followed a sleuth ferreting out something which, though meaningless to everybody else, turned out to be the key to everything. Yet now he realized that not only had this wealth of vicarious experience given him no real knowledge of procedure—of how to look for things—but that he hadn't the faintest idea what he ought to be looking for.

Dorrit, unwittingly, gave him a hint. "Well, I suppose this is what is meant by the long arm of coincidence. Here we were talking about poisonings, just the other day, and now we've got a real case of it on our hands."

"Poison. Yes." Mr. Humble seized upon the word gratefully. He went over and looked at the corpse again, seeing it better now, with less horror. The discolored skin, the protruding eyes and bloated features would indicate poisoning of some kind, of course.

Slim and lithe as a boy, in shorts and halter, Dorrit scuffed up beside him on straw-slippered feet to look too: toting up the things she saw, comparing them against some page from the giant file of her memory.

"Barbital," she said suddenly.

"What?" Mr. Humble said.

"We can't be sure, of course, without a laboratory analysis. But everything here seems to point to it. An overdose of barbital causes cyanosis, abnormal expansion or constriction of the pupils of the eye, and muscular collapse. The drug is prescribed for, among other things, seasickness. You see what that means, don't you?"

Mr. Humble groped for it. "Well. It might mean that this was an accident. An overdose."

"It could mean that. Or it could mean that someone wanted it to look like one. People dying by accident

don't generally write notes afterward saying they were murdered."

"Neither do murdered people, as a rule," argued Mr. Humble mildly.

"This one did," Dorrit answered, somewhat to his astonishment. He had noticed before that up to a certain point, she could be magnificently logical. Then suddenly she would remind him that she was a woman.

She resumed, having apparently decided to be logical again: "Now if we would only find the receptacle the poison came in—"

It was just then that Mr. Humble had a bit of luck. For no particular reason, he had been eyeing a little bump under a fold of the dead woman's skirt. He put a hand to it, in mere idle curiosity, and came up with a druggist's prescription bottle containing a residue of some whitish powder.

Dorrit appropriated his find, and sniffed at it. She shook a grain or two of the powder out onto the palm of one hand, and then, to Mr. Humble's alarm, put it on the point of her tongue.

"It's barbital, all right," she pronounced, after a long contemplative moment. She went to a little sink in the shower alcove, and washed her mouth. "It must be pure prescription stuff, not the diluted form you get in sleeping pills and headache remedies."

Mr. Humble tried to seem intelligent. "Then it wouldn't have taken much to kill her. The miscalculation of a small amount—"

"So you're back on that!" she said irritably. "This is going to be a regular merry-go-round if you keep insisting that she took too much just by accident, and then just by accident rolled over and wrote 'murder' after she was dead. I just wish we were sure she was dead when Captain Wren and the mate first saw her. I wish they had used some one of the two or three up-to-

date methods for determining death, instead of that old mirror-at-the-mouth method. It's particularly unreliable in any case involving an overdose of a sedative."

She broke off, delving down again into that capacious memory, staring at the pencil in the hand of the corpse. Abruptly, before Mr. Humble could do anything to stop her, she tapped it with one finger lightly, knocking it to the floor.

"Here!" protested Mr. Humble in alarm. "You shouldn't have done that. We ought to leave things just as they are. The police—"

The police. It was the first time he had actually thought of them. All along, without quite realizing it, he had been thinking of the ship as a separate little world in itself, remote from land and with all the things having to do with land. But now he was reminded that it was due in Panama next morning; and in Panama there would be police, who would want to talk to this Mr. Humble that represented himself as a great detective.

The door creaked open, and Captain Wren came back in, bulking vast and dominant in those cramped quarters. By now his composure, and with it his air of accustomed authority, had quite returned; and his eagle's eye, resting first on Dorrit and then on Mr. Humble, was a blunt reminder that their sunsuits were hardly proper attire, here behind closed doors.

He said, "I've been thinking. You'll want to question everyone that might have any remotest connection with this affair, Mr. Humble. All the passengers, of course. And me and the steward, and Mr. O'Hollihan."

Mr. Humble made a deprecatory sound, and the Captain qualified, "I don't mean you have to hold us all under suspicion—though of course you don't want to eliminate anyone from it until it's established beyond a doubt that he could have had no connection with the death. What I started to say is that you're free to use

my quarters for the questioning. They're a little larger and more private than your own."

Again his eye went over the pair of them significantly, and Mr. Humble hastened to say: "Thank you, Captain. But first, of course, we'll want to change to something more suitable."

The Captain nodded approvingly, and let them go out ahead of him, lingering to lock the cabin door and put the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER SIX

DORRIT, IN A BLUE PEASANT SKIRT AND ONE OF THOSE sweaters that fit like a third skin, was sitting on a sofa in the Captain's cabin when Mr. Humble arrived. Captain Wren was there too, at a small desk with a chronometer built into it, but he and she were not speaking. The feud between them that had started with her spectacular appearance aboard the first day obviously had reached the stage of mutual acknowledgment.

The Captain's quarters, occupying all of the deckhouse abaft the wheelhouse, were surprisingly commodious for that kind of ship. Three of the walls were paneled either with leather or an excellent imitation of it, and decorated with an interesting assortment of spears and sabers, exotic prints on silk, and an enormous pair of elephant's tusks that must have been of considerable value. The fourth wall was given over to bookshelves and a tall chart case; and on a little metal table,

screwed to the floor like every other piece of furniture in the room, was an object that drew a startled second glance from Mr. Humble. At first he thought it was one of those carved coconut heads such as he himself had picked up in Port-au-Prince, but then he saw that he had been mistaken.

The Captain chuckled dryly, seeing his startled look. "Yes, it's real, Mr. Humble—a genuine human head. Got it in Borneo. Usually when I have guests I put it out of sight. But it will hardly disturb you."

Mr. Humble sat down on the sofa and tried to look undisturbed, but his eyes kept returning to the monstrosity. This embarrassed him the more because Dorrit, beside him, seemed entirely unimpressed by it.

Captain Wren glanced at the chronometer. "Ten minutes to the first dog watch. I'm due on the bridge then, so you'll have the place to yourself. I've told Bates to come up as soon as possible, so that you can question him, and then to stand by to act as messenger for you. Summon anyone you please, in groups or singly. Did you find anything of interest after I left?"

Mr. Humble told about finding the bottle. The ship's master sniffed at it, tasted a grain of the powder that remained in it, then nodded agreement.

"Sweetish odor—acrid taste. Barbital, all right," he pronounced.

Everybody seemed to know more about these things than Mr. Humble himself.

The Captain dropped the bottle into one of his desk drawers. "I'll want to turn this over to the Zone authorities, of course, along with the one specimen of the dead woman's handwriting that we can be sure is hers. I mean her signature on a ten-dollar traveler's check she cashed with me, to get change for tips. Here. Take a look at it."

Mr. Humble studied the two signatures on the check: one at the top left corner that had to be filled in when

the check was purchased, another just under it written when the check was cashed. They were identical, and they corresponded with his recollection of the eccentric handwriting on the pad by the dead woman's bedside.

"It looks much like the writing in the murder note," he ventured.

Captain Wren retrieved the check and dropped it into the drawer, with the bottle. "To my eye they are the same, though we can't be sure of course until we have an expert's opinion. I suppose you have some theory to account for this, Mr. Humble?"

"Well," Mr. Humble said.

It is an established principle of psychology that the outer attitude influences the inner; that a scowl on the face induces anger, while a smile induces joy. For something like an hour now, Mr. Humble had been wearing the mask of a demon sleuth, and he was beginning to feel like one. Actually, he was starting to enjoy himself a little.

"Well," he repeated. "I do have a theory, of course. Or rather, a tenuous sort of hypothesis. But it's best not to commit ourselves to anything until more facts are in."

This was substantially what the best detectives of fiction always said at about this point. It was also, of course, the biggest whopper Mr. Humble had ever told, not even excluding the one that had gotten him into this predicament in the first place. He hadn't the faintest idea, of course, how anyone could manage to write things after death.

The ship had gone to rocking gently from bow to stern, caught in one of those curious, cloudless little squalls that swirl over the Caribbean in this season and punctually at this time of day. The Captain's eyes went to a chart under his hand and then to the chronometer, checking with the automatic, seaman's part of his mind, time and the ship's position, even while he was saying:

"I suppose your theory is about the same as mine, Mr. Humble. It seems the only possible explanation."

"I can conceive of no other," Mr. Humble said, and looked as knowing as possible.

"Still, there is one thing wrong with it. You've seen that too, I know. We're both assuming, naturally, that someone somehow forged the murder note. But think what that involves. There was no writing on that pad when I saw the body first, with Bates and Mr. O'Hollihan; but there was when Bates came back and looked in again. Yet, no one was in that cabin. You've seen it—you know there is no place where anyone could have been hidden. We had been all over it, making an inventory of the dead woman's possessions; and then all the time Bates was gone, both Mr. O'Hollihan and I never were out of sight of the door. No one could have gone in without our seeing him."

"What about the window?" Mr. Humble said, though even as he spoke he knew the remark was stupid.

"The window, like all the others in the four corner cabins, is twelve inches square—too small to admit any adult human being. Besides, as you'd doubtless have noticed if you'd had more time, it's securely fastened on the inside." Captain Wren sagged in his chair, passing a muscular hand across his thin, high forehead, pale in contrast with his weather-stained face. "It beats me, Mr. Humble."

It beat Mr. Humble too, but he tried again: "Here. There are some inks that are invisible until something is done to them, or a little time passes—"

"That note wasn't written in ink, Mr. Humble," the Captain reminded him gently. "And then, you're forgetting something else. When we first saw that body, it was on its back. But when we saw it again, it had changed position, and there was a pencil in the hand."

Outside, a ship's bell struck eight times. The Captain

rose, and smoothed down his white uniform coat, and put on his cap. "My watch. I'll send up Bates immediately. Good hunting, Mr. Humble."

He went out, leaving behind a silence taut and quivering, like another, tangible presence in the room. Even Dorrit for some time seemed stumped for anything fitting to say.

"Well, I must admit this looks like something new under the sun," she commented finally. "When the idea of going into detective work first came to me, I set about familiarizing myself with every crime of violence from the time of Cain and Abel to the present day, on the theory that everything that could conceivably happen already had happened, so you'd have a parallel for every conceivable problem. But I must say I never heard of a case exactly like this."

Steward Bates entered, looking still pale and flustered. Mr. Humble had him sit in a straight chair beside the desk, and himself moved to the big chair behind it, to try to add to his stature a cubit of authority. But then, with the steward looking at him expectantly, and Dorrit waiting with a poised notebook and pencil, he realized that once again he had no idea how he should proceed.

He began lamely, "Now, Mr. Bates. Please tell us all you know about this affair."

The steward gulped, made vague, uncertain gestures with his thin, pale hands. Dorrit looked up from her notebook, surprised and disapproving, and Mr. Humble, always painfully sensitive to the opinions of others, amended quickly: "Here. Let's break that down into smaller units—take one thing at a time. To begin let's have a little personal data. Your name, first. The full name."

"Why, Bates, sir." The steward spoke almost rebel-

liously, but with Dorrit's remorseless eye upon him, he went on defiantly, as if he expected to be hanged for it: "Fenwick Twindiddle Bates."

Mr. Humble twitched in sympathy. That massive constellation of Christian names was about as bad as his own: Mortimer Peabody. But Dorrit, who seemed never to be surprised at anything, took it in stride. She only asked how to spell Twindiddle.

Fenwick Twindiddle Bates had been born in Connecticut. He was thirty-two years old. He had gone to sea at seventeen because he thought it would be romantic, and he had kept going from force of habit. This was his second trip with the *Vagabond* and Captain Wren. He had never seen the dead woman until she came aboard for this cruise, nor even heard of her.

All this he related in answer to questions from Mr. Humble. Once launched, Mr. Humble made no more bad blunders or even any little slips to cause Dorrit to show disapproval again. He was discovering something astonishing: that if he had to, he could think. His kind of mind, while not spectacular, did have some merits. It was neat, mathematical; it led him neatly, mathematically, up to the climax of his inquiry:

"Now, Mr. Bates. I want to know more about your finding the body. I mean, what made you suspect that there was something wrong, in the first place?"

"Well," the steward said.

There was Mr. Humble's own "well." It told him more about the man before him than anything else the other could have said. Inbred humility, a lifelong habit of self-deprecation, of apology for living—all this was revealed in it. Sitting straight-backed on the edge of the straight-backed chair, mild eyes unsteady, the muscles of his wan face twitching in cacophony with his uneasy hands and feet, the steward looked the picture of guilt; he looked exactly as Mr. Humble knew that he himself

would have looked had their positions been reversed. If this man should turn out to be the murderer, Mr. Humble thought, he wouldn't have to remind himself to say piously, "There but for the grace of God go I." He'd feel that there really did go he . . .

"Well, sir," Bates was saying, "the reason I knew there was something wrong is that I couldn't wake her up."

"Why did you want to wake her up, Mr. Bates?"

"To see if I couldn't persuade her to eat some lunch. I was bringing her a good one, to try to tempt her appetite. I rapped, and when she didn't answer, I went in and shook her. Or shook the mattress, rather. You don't shake a person, of course. When that failed I went for Captain Wren."

"How did she look then? Was her face discolored and bloated, as we saw it later?"

"I don't know, sir. I didn't look at her. It wouldn't have been proper. Sometimes people get into—uh—undignified positions when they're asleep."

The steward's voice trailed off uneasily. The agitation of his hands and feet became more pronounced; his eyes looked everywhere but into Mr. Humble's. Something was wrong here, Mr. Humble saw, though he didn't know what, or quite how to dig for it.

He said, "And when you couldn't arouse her, you went for the Captain? Still without looking at her?"

"Yes, sir." A trace of obstinacy had come into the other's manner. His voice had a dogged defiance. "He summoned Mr. O'Hollihan, and they both came back with me. I guess he's told you about the rest of it."

"Yes, he told us," Mr. Humble said.

He had missed his chance, he saw, to get behind the steward's sudden change of manner, probe for the thing that had motivated it. He would have dismissed the man. But Dorrit intervened:

"Mr. Bates, I'd like to ask you a question or two, just to make my record complete."

"Of course, Miss Bly." The steward settled back onto his chair, and waited patiently.

Dorrit inclined her golden head over the notebook poised on one silken knee, though she didn't seem to be looking at it very intently. "Well, first, the Captain said he sent you after ice. Have you any idea how long it took you to get it and then get back?"

"I know exactly." The steward answered promptly, pleased at being given a question that enabled him to show off a little. "It was just seven minutes. I looked at my watch not only when I left and when I came back but once or twice in between. I had other duties that required my attention, and I am always very precise about time."

Dorrit nodded agreeably. The steward obviously was a man who would be precise about time. Still without looking up, she said, "Now there's one other thing. You say you brought Serena a lunch, a good one, to tempt her appetite. Did you have it on a tray?"

"Of course, Miss Bly. A bed tray, that clamps to the side of the bunk. You must have seen it."

"I've seen it." Dorrit made some marks in the notebook, though Mr. Humble doubted that she was really writing anything. "Let's see. You say you rapped, and when she didn't answer you went in and shook the mattress. Did you shake it hard? With both hands?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Bly. Quite vigorously, with both hands."

Her eyes lifted suddenly, alert and luminous. "Mr. Bates, what did you do with that tray?"

"The tray? Why, I put it—"

The steward stopped talking in the middle of a word, his mouth hanging open ludicrously. Dorrit said relentlessly: "You wouldn't have put it on the bunk, of

course. Not before you'd awakened your patient. You couldn't have put it on that little dresser at the foot of the bunk, because there would have been no place for it. The top was littered with jars of skin cream and bottles of astringents and such, all of different heights. You couldn't have put it on the bed table either, because that has a drinking glass set into it. The only other article of furniture was a chair, and one of Serena's robes was thrown down in that, and wadded in such a way that a tray would have slid right off. I know. I have a photographic memory, Mr. Bates. I can see every cubic inch of space in that cabin as clearly as if I was standing in it now, and I don't see a single place you could have put that tray, except on the floor."

Relief flooded the steward's countenance, as he grasped this straw: "The floor—well, now that I think of it, maybe I did—"

"No, you didn't. You're too good a steward—too well trained—to put a tray on the floor. A full tray, one with food on it. Not unless the food had already been eaten."

The steward went white. His eyes were wide and glassy. "Look here, Miss Bly. If you're insinuating—"

"I'm insinuating nothing," said Dorrit. "I just want to keep my record straight, that's all. You think it over, and if there's any part of that statement you want to change, I'll be glad to oblige you. As it stands now, it looks bad."

She said to Mr. Humble, "I guess we're ready for the next witness, aren't we?"

"What? Oh, yes. Of course," Mr. Humble said feebly. He had been as dazed as the steward by the swiftness and vigor of that attack.

He said to Bates: "Ask Mr. O'Hollihan to come in next, if you please."

The steward rose unsteadily, and went to the door. He paused there, turning half around as if to speak,

but then apparently thought better of it, and went out.

Dorrit reverted to Mr. Humble. "That just goes to show you. Even in a murder case, where it might mean life or death to them, people can't tell a straight story. They've got to decorate it, with a tray of food, or something."

"But why a tray of food? Why lie about that?"

"There are a dozen possible reasons. He might not have had a tray at all. He might have just said he had, to show how kind and thoughtful he was—how well he was doing his job. Or he might have served it to her earlier, but wouldn't want to admit it for fear of falling under suspicion. My guess would be that he did have a tray, but that he didn't shake the mattress as he claimed. He just rapped, got no answer, and looked in. When he saw her face all bloated and discolored, he got alarmed, took the tray back to the galley, and went for the Captain."

"But why didn't he say that, then?"

"He told you. He doesn't think it's proper to look at people—of the opposite sex, I might add—when they're asleep. He's just one of those persons who would rather hang than admit they've ever done anything that isn't quite correct. That's just a guess, of course. Maybe he's your murderer."

The steward came back with Mr. O'Hollihan, then withdrew. The mate, a big, powerfully built man with a pleasant, ruddy face, eased himself into the chair and answered Mr. Humble's questions quite amiably. His full name was Timothy O'Reilly O'Hollihan. He had been born in Brooklyn, though he didn't have the accent, and had been at sea for nineteen years, a four-year hitch in the Navy included. This was his first trip with the *Vagabond* and Captain Wren. He had been on the bridge when the ship's master summoned him

to go and look at the dead woman, and the two of them had stopped for Flavius on the way.

"How did he look, this Flavius?" asked Mr. Humble. "I mean, did he seem nervous or flustered?"

"He looked just like he always does. You know, all hopped up. I'm not so sure that he isn't a snowbird, though I figure it's none of my business unless he gets out of hand. No, he didn't look excited, Mr. Humble. Just the opposite—he didn't seem at all interested, either when we summoned him or when we had established that the woman was dead. He said something about there being no death, but only a change from one plane of existence to another, and then went back into his cabin. It's right next to hers, you know."

"Then what?" asked Mr. Humble.

"Then Captain Wren and I made an inventory of the dead woman's effects. We didn't move anything, of course, or touch things unless it was absolutely necessary. After that, we talked things over and decided to keep the matter as quiet as possible. We sent Bates to the galley for ice, in which to pack the body, and went out ourselves, shutting the door after us. It was my watch, so I started to go back to the bridge. But then Bates came back with the ice, and looked in, and let out a cry. I couldn't blame him when I saw what he'd seen. The corpse had moved, and there was that writing on the pad."

"You're sure there was no writing on it before? You'd looked at it?"

"I not only looked at it. I used a page off it to make my list of the dead woman's possessions. I've got it right here."

The mate took a sheet of paper out of the side pocket of his white uniform coat, not quite so well pressed or clean as that of his captain. He handed the paper to Mr. Humble. "You'll notice she had jewels and money

—quite a large sum in big bills. So the motive wasn't robbery."

Mr. Humble studied the list, interested less in the actual inventory than in the handwriting and what it revealed about the man before him. Begun largely and with spectacular flourishes, it degenerated on the reverse side of the page to a crabbed, slovenly script. An expert in handwriting analysis would have seen much of interest in it, he thought: a nature impulsively bold and generous, then abruptly mean and cautious.

He thought that at the same time that his brain was busy with another line of speculation. Again he had the feeling that something was wrong with the testimony, and now, made wiser by experience, he did not hurry. He sat pretending to study the list until he thought he had things straight in his mind.

"Mr. O'Hollihan," he said, "you say you sent Bates after ice, and then left the cabin yourselves—you and Captain Wren—and closed the door. I take it you didn't stay in there long after he had left?"

"We went right out with him. We stood and talked a minute, then I started off to go back to the bridge. But before I got very far—"

"It would have had to be more than a minute that you talked, Mr. O'Hollihan. It would have had to be six minutes, or nearly seven, if what Bates tells us is correct. He said he was gone for seven minutes, by his watch."

For just an instant, the mate lost his look of easy good humor, his thick dark brows drawing together over Irish-blue eyes that were suddenly stormy. Then he recovered his composure, and answered easily, "Well, it could have been longer. We did quite a bit of talking, come to think about it."

"What did you talk about?"

Again that invoked a scowl, quickly erased. "Well,

we talked about the death. He told me not to say anything about it to any of the crew or passengers. Then we talked about Flavius—agreed he was a screwball, for fair. Yes, it could have been six or seven minutes that we stood there talking."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Hollihan," said Mr. Humble. He wasn't satisfied with the man's answers. They looked wrong somehow, like a doctored set of books; though again he didn't know how to go about probing for it.

He said, inspired: "I won't keep you any longer. But maybe Miss Bly has something to ask for her record, before you go."

"There is one thing," said Dorrit. She flipped back a page or two of the notebook, and looked at it. "You say you used a sheet off that writing pad for your inventory?"

"That's right, Miss Bly." The mate spoke indulgently, smiling at her with real pleasure. Obviously he was a man who didn't at all mind talking to a blonde, even about a murder. But the smile went off his face abruptly, when she said:

"What did you use for a table, Mr. O'Hollihan?"

"Table? Why—I didn't use a table. I used the pad. I—" She lifted her eyes to stare at him intently, and he jumped up, flushing violently: "Here. What are you trying to insinuate? That I wrote that murder message on the pad while I was making my inventory?"

"I'm not saying a word," said Dorrit. "How would I know what you wrote on that pad? How would I know, even, that you and Captain Wren wouldn't be silly enough to stand out in the passageway gossiping about Flavius, like a couple of old hens at a tea party, when you knew he was right in the next cabin, and the walls were so thin he could have heard every word? I just work here. I'm just trying to get my record straight. So far it doesn't look very good, but maybe that's just

me. I'm a blonde, and everybody knows that blondes don't have all their buttons."

The mate stood rooted, looking down at her in a horrified way, like a man who has picked up what he thinks is a nice little kitten that turns out to be an energetic tiger cub. Then he made a futile, frustrated gesture, and strode out, banging back the door so hard that it rebounded and stood half ajar.

Bates peeped through it. "Who next, sir?"

"What?" said the bemused Mr. Humble. "Oh, the passengers now, I guess. This Flavius first. Then maybe Mr. and Mrs. Stentson."

The steward departed, and Mr. Humble returned his attention to Dorrit. "Don't you think we ought to change places, Miss Bly? You should be sitting here asking the questions, and I over there with that notebook."

"Oh, I'm used to that," she said tolerantly. "It's nothing new to me to be in a subordinate position to intelligences inferior to my own. It's a man's world."

Mr. Humble had his own ideas about that, but he thought it as well not to air them at this time. He said, instead: "That was a good point, about the writing pad. But what does it prove? Even if Mr. O'Hollihan had forged the murder message, how would he have managed to put the pencil in the dead woman's hand, roll the body over, and place it just so that she would look as if she had written it herself—all while Bates and Captain Wren were in the room with him?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Dorrit. "I told you that in all the annals of crime I never heard of one like this. All it does prove is how hard it is to get at the facts of anything. Nobody we'll talk to will be telling the truth. Not the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"But why? Why should everybody be lying?"

"They might not be lying, exactly. They just won't be telling the whole truth. There are a hundred possible

reasons. It might be inconvenient or embarrassing, or they might not think it was important, or they might have forgotten. I've seen it in a law office, any number of times. You must have too, in your business."

"Yes. Yes, of course," said Mr. Humble hastily, reminded of his role; and reminded too that his own record for truth-telling wouldn't bear too close scrutiny.

He decided to change the subject. "This Flavius. What do you know about him?"

"Nothing, to speak of. And you won't either, when you've finished with him, if he condescends to show up at all. I tried pumping him when I was assembling all that data to win my bet with you, and I didn't get to first base. All I know is that he's from some place in the Middle West."

"How do you know that?"

"His accent shows it, when he forgets himself and isn't talking that phony foreign patois. Why did you ask for Mr. and Mrs. Stentson after him?"

"Well—no particular reason. I suppose you think I should have gone on to the next most suspicious character, other than he. But I already have her under observation."

"Her? Who?" said Dorrit, mystified, for once.

"Why, you, Miss Bly," Mr. Humble said, enjoying his little triumph. "Logically, you know, you're highly suspect. You were talking just the other day about poison murders and all your perfect crimes, and now we have one on our hands. Of course it might be just a coincidence."

She considered that with a surprising reasonableness. "You're right, of course. I'd certainly suspect me, if I were you; though I wouldn't start by questioning me in person. I'd get hold of my friends, Arthur and Laura, and grill them first. But go ahead and give me the business now, if you want to."

"No, Miss Bly." Mr. Humble spoke very seriously, framing an essential creed. "Life isn't quite like mathematics—it isn't that neat and orderly. But it does have one point of resemblance. You've got to accept some axioms before you can proceed with it at all. And one axiom I will insist upon here is that neither you nor your friends had any connection with this crime."

"Why?" asked Dorrit. Her face, as always, was sphinxlike, but her eyes were very blue and soft.

"I couldn't tell you why. It's just something I know. So let's not waste time on that. Who would you say would be the most likely suspect after Flavius?"

"Why, the one who had the most motive. The only one, so far as we know now, who had any kind of a motive at all. Think back on what I told you about her and Larry Remington and Serena, and you'll see that she had a reason to hate and fear Serena—maybe enough reason to make her think it justified murder. I mean Ginnie Rowe, of course."

CHAPTER SEVEN

THAT ANSWER WAS LIKE A FIST BETWEEN MR. HUMBLE'S eyes; jarring him the more because it echoed a thought that had lurked unacknowledged in his own mind.

He did not care to probe for the reason why this should be a matter of such concern to him. He didn't like to appear ridiculous, even in his own eyes, and he

was relieved that the steward came back just then, providing a diversion.

With him were Mr. and Mrs. Stentson. Flavius, it developed, had refused to come, saying he was preoccupied with some thought-vibrations that would clear up the mystery.

The death obviously had distressed Mrs. Stentson deeply. Dressed about as usual, in a stiff gown of pale lavender that made no concession either to the informality of shipboard or the change in climate, she was pale and nervous. Mr. Humble was tactful with the pair, seating them on the sofa, chatting with them rather than questioning them, keying his voice carefully so that Mrs. Stentson would get most of it too, until gradually they relaxed and became quite talkative. They hailed from Des Moines, Iowa, and they were going to California, perhaps to stay if the climate was everything they had heard it was. This was their first sea voyage, undertaken only after considerable soul-searching and some prolonged direct-by-mail wooing from the steamship company that operated the *Vagabond*, though they had taken a Great Lakes cruise to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon, twenty-five years before. They had no children. They knew Serena, but only from one encounter in the ship's salon several days before.

"Did you talk much with her?" Mr. Humble asked.

"No." Mr. Stentson was the spokesman for the pair, though after each remark he would look at his wife, as if for approval. Again Mr. Humble was struck by the resemblance between the two. Not only did they look alike, but one could guess that they had come to have identical minds. His starched collar, conservative dark gray business suit, and stern black congress-last shoes reflected the same unimaginative or uncompromising tastes that one saw in her.

He went on: "We wanted her to tell fortunes, or

rather, give a demonstration like she did last night, but she didn't feel well enough. She did play that game, though."

"What game?" Mr. Humble asked the question idly, but it got an unexpected answer:

"Well, we started with cards—bridge. But neither Mr. O'Hollihan nor Miss Rowe was very good at it, so we got onto that murder game."

"A murder game?" Mr. Humble tried to be casual, but his voice betrayed him. It scaled upward in excitement.

Mr. Stentson looked uneasy again. Both he and Mrs. Stentson seemed to be that kind of person whose whole aim in life is to remain inconspicuous, recoiling in alarm from anything that would bring him into prominence. This time he looked at her before speaking, instead of after, answering slowly: "It was nothing much. Just a coincidence, I suppose, in view of—what has happened. Somebody would tell a murder story, and then everybody else would write his answer, and the one that was closest to it won. That was all there was to it."

"Who told the stories?" Dorrit asked.

She had moved to the straight chair by Mr. Humble's desk, to give the pair the couch. Both looked at her with surprise, Mrs. Stentson's myopic eyes blinking painfully behind their glasses, as if they had not noticed her before.

Mr. Stentson answered: "Well, everybody was supposed to tell one, but some couldn't think of any. I couldn't, myself, after all I've heard about or read in the newspapers. It's like these parlor stories. You hear hundreds, but when it comes your turn to tell one—"

He broke off, flushing, fearing he had been indelicate. Mr. Humble expected Dorrit to say more, but she did not; and after a few more routine remarks, he himself

seemed to have exhausted the pair's possibilities, and he let them leave.

The steward came back in to say: "Who now, sir?"

"Well." Mr. Humble looked at Dorrit. "There's those Werners. But I doubt that we'd get much from them."

"You'd get a love story. All about how they married in haste before he went overseas, and then didn't even know each other at the railroad station when he got back three years later, and had to take two years to get acquainted all over. It's a good story, but it has nothing to do with this case. Aside from that, they don't know what day it is or where they are. Just ask them."

Mr. Humble decided that the experiment would be unnecessary. He said, "You yourself can talk to your friends, Arthur and Laura, and find out whether they heard or saw anything that might be of interest. That leaves just Mr. Remington and Miss Rowe. Which one would you call first?"

"I'd call them both together," Dorrit said.

It was a shrewd suggestion. Mr. Humble realized that the moment the two came in: two young, beautiful people who should have been in love with Olympian recklessness and absorption, but who instead hated one another with a cold, coiled hatred that made itself felt before a word had passed between them. Remington had changed to a white mess jacket and black evening trousers—Mr. Humble had one of those jackets too, but he knew that never in the world would he look like that in it. Ginnie Rowe wore pink, and it was her color, adding a flaming quality to her dark-haired, dark-eyed beauty.

As always, an electric tension came into the room with her. Mr. Humble was so overcome that he entirely forgot his manners, and it was Dorrit who had to show her to a seat on the couch. Remington remained standing, leaning against the doorway, and looking with a

sardonic amusement at Dorrit, returning to her chair to poise the notebook on one slim knee.

"Well, well. All the conventional mystery props, right down to our little Portia—or should it be Della Street?" he jibed. "We haven't got a chance, Ginnie. We may as well tell all."

"I wish you would," said Mr. Humble. "I'd like to have you answer all questions seriously and as accurately as possible, if you please."

He was discovering a surprising dignity within himself, an instinctive bristling reaction to the other's ruthless mockery. A Larry Remington with a touch of gentleness and humility would have been something wonderful. But this young Olympian who had everything but humanity outraged every instinct in him.

He said, "I understand that you knew the dead woman quite well, Mr. Remington? Better perhaps than anyone else on board."

"I'd hardly say that." Remington too had a magnificent voice for theater, and he used it with theatrical skill to give his words an overtone of innuendo more significant than anything he actually said. "Ginnie, here, has had an opportunity to explore her personality on a different, slightly lower level. And that's always more revelatory, you know."

"I've had words with her, if that's what you mean," the girl said.

Now there was no doubt about the animosity between the two. It flared, relentless and acknowledged, in the glances they exchanged.

Remington explained casually, "Ginnie believes in the institution of matrimony. I don't. She'd like to see me burned at the stake for heresy."

Mr. Humble said, "That's interesting, but hardly conclusive, Mr. Remington. I understand that you've had an argument or two with the dead woman, yourself."

"Who told you that?" The other straightened from his easy slouch against the door jamb. His long handsome eyes, of that baffling protean mixture of blue and brown and green, lost their cool insolence, narrowed menacingly.

But for once Mr. Humble did not quail before a threat of violence. He was that most atavistic of human beings now, a man defending a woman he finds desirable. He said, "I'll tell you that if it becomes necessary, Mr. Remington—if your life or liberty should depend on it. But for now, I'll ask you to take it as it stands and co-operate, for a change. I want you to tell me how long you've known the dead woman, what you know about her, and anything else that might be helpful in throwing light upon her death."

"I'll answer that, providing it's asked me by someone qualified to ask it—by a police officer," said Remington. "Show me your authority to conduct this investigation, Mr. Humble, and I will co-operate with you."

Mr. Humble felt a sick sensation of trapped helplessness at this first challenge to his authority. But Dorrit came promptly to his rescue.

"I can show you, Mr. Remington. Captain Wren, in my hearing, delegated Mr. Humble to conduct the inquiry; and the captain of a vessel at sea has full police powers, with authority to deputize them to anyone he pleases. It's all right there in that volume of navigation laws on the shelf. I can show you the sections covering it."

" 'I never knew so young a body with so old a head,' " Remington quoted. "You needn't bother, Portia. I'll take your word for it."

He spoke with an attempt at amused irony, but the effort was not entirely convincing. He too knew a tiger cub when he saw one.

He reverted to Mr. Humble: "All right. I've known

the dead woman for about two years. I got acquainted with her at a sort of séance in a Greenwich bistro—though she'd have snapped your head off if you'd used that word 'séance.' She always insisted, you know, that her performances were a kind of boat ride on the time stream—travel in the fourth dimension."

"Did you believe that?" Mr. Humble asked.

Remington considered that, his lean bronzed face wholly serious. "I don't know. I could never quite make up my mind about her. She did some amazing things; though whether they were things any clever magician couldn't have duplicated, I'm not prepared to say. She was at least amusing. And amusing people are so rare that you don't bother to check on them too closely."

"Did you give her much money?" Mr. Humble said.

Remington laughed jeeringly, without sound. "You don't seem to know me, Mr. Humble—my reputation. I never give anybody much money. I belong to a special species, the Very Rich; and Fitzgerald was right about us. We can't be like other people. We can be chumps or we can be heels—and I never did admire chumps. I'm notoriously stingy. I give dime tips. I hire people for as little as I can pay them, and I get my money's worth, always, out of any relationship. Ask Ginnie, here."

"I see," said Mr. Humble.

He really did see. He saw all of Larry Remington's life as if it had been revealed to him by a lightning flash. And the spectacle was not pretty.

He said, "I'm going to tell you something, Mr. Remington. I'll ask you not to repeat it, though I'm afraid most of the other passengers already know or have guessed it: Serena was found dead of an overdose of barbital. There are some indications—or at least an attempt was made to indicate—that she started to write about the manner of her death after she was dead. From

what you know about her, would you say such a thing was possible?"

Remington considered that very gravely. He answered, with none of his usual flippancy: "It's not only possible, in my opinion. It's exactly what she said she would do."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Humble.

"She was always saying that if anyone tried to harm her and succeeded—killed her—that she would revenge herself. Reveal her murderer, after death."

"Why should she say a thing like that?"

"She had enemies. Anyone in her racket has. Actually, I suppose it was a racket, though whether she was a complete quack is another matter. From what you tell me I'd say she'd proved she wasn't."

"Are any of those enemies aboard this ship?"

"Not that I know of. Unless—" His eyes drifted to Ginnie Rowe. "Darling, you weren't exactly a friend of hers, were you?"

The girl spoke with sudden energy. "I think it's time that I said something and disposed of these insinuations. They aren't funny. They aren't clever or fair, or intended to be. They're like the things adolescents write on walls and sidewalks. They're obscene and untrue and malicious."

"By all means, say anything you like, Miss Rowe," said Mr. Humble. He could have shouted for joy.

"It is true that Serena and I didn't get along. I didn't like her particular kind of racket. I don't like any racket that trades on the deepest and most sacred of human emotions, the grief that people feel for loved ones who have died."

"You can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl," Remington interjected casually. "Ginnie's from a crossroads in Vermont, and she's still a small-town kid at heart. Believes

in Santa Claus—the kind that comes in a red suit, with reindeers—and in one true love, and big round phrases like 'the most sacred of human emotions.' "

Ginnie went on, as if he had not spoken: "I did have another reason for disliking her. She was advising Larry here, who never believed in Santa Claus but does believe in every quack mystic that comes along. Her advice was vicious, and it concerned me. I didn't like that, and I told her so. But I did not kill her. Is that plain enough, Mr. Humble?"

"Quite plain, thank you, Miss Rowe," said Mr. Humble.

His blood was singing. He felt more than a little adolescent himself, though not in the way of Remington—not like writing things on walls and sidewalks.

Dorrit was wig-wagging vigorously with her notebook. In large block letters she had written something on it. Mr. Humble blinked away his emotion, and read: "THE MURDER GAME."

"Mr. Remington," he said, "one of the passengers was telling us about a murder game that Serena and some other passengers were playing a few days ago. Did you participate?"

"I was there, but my participation wasn't specially noteworthy. Neither, I might add, was anyone else's. I'm afraid you'd be wasting time, trying to make something of that game, Mr. Humble. Nobody killed anyone else, or threatened to. Nobody even told a very good story. Except—"

He turned narrowed, handsome eyes upon Ginnie. "Darling, you told one. It didn't shape up as much at the time, but in view of what's happened, it's interesting. It might even sound prophetic."

"I thought you'd bring that up, Larry," she said calmly. "I synopsized the plot of a very bad mystery melodrama that I played in once, Mr. Humble. It had ghosts

walking around all over the place, and the butler was unmasked as the murderer, in the end. That will give you an idea."

"Not the butler, darling." Remington's voice was like the trilling of little bells. "The ingénue—don't you remember? It just seemed to be the butler. I missed guessing the solution because it broke all rules for theater. But then, life isn't always good theater, is it? It breaks the rules sometimes."

Six bells sounded, signaling seven o'clock, the dinner hour. Mr. Humble rose. "I'll not keep you two any longer, except to ask—Mr. Remington, do you have any ideas about who killed Serena?"

The question was perfunctory, but the answer almost knocked him back into his chair:

"Why, yes," said Remington. "She told me."

"She told you? Then, who—"

"She told you too, Mr. Humble. You and everyone else in the salon last night." Remington spoke casually, smiling a little, enjoying Mr. Humble's complete mystification and discomfiture. "Don't let it throw you, Mr. Humble. You'd have had to know her as well as I, to get it. I and one other person, who perhaps knew her better—much too well for her own comfort."

Again his eyes drifted to Ginnie Rowe, with an unmistakable insinuation. Mr. Humble went forward but only to bow them out, succeeding, he thought, in looking cool and inscrutable, though never in his life had he been nearer an active, and probably futile, attempt at mayhem.

Dorrit's voice cut through the confusion in his mind. "You've got a lot of axioms, haven't you, Mr. Humble?"

"What?" he said.

"You don't believe that any good-looking woman could be guilty of murder. Especially not one who is still

a country girl at heart, and believes in Santa Claus and one true love."

Mr. Humble faced up to her with astonishing courage. "Look here, Miss Bly. If you're implying, too, that Miss Rowe is guilty—"

"There it is again," Dorrit said, with fatalism. "I just make a statement of fact, and everybody jumps down my throat. Even you."

She went to the door, but turned there, sensational in the sweater, to say dreamily: "But oh, what a field day a psychologist would have with that synopsis of hers. He'd see a conventionally minded girl, frustrated in her desire for marriage, building up a homicidal hatred for the one she thought responsible—"

"That's enough, Miss Bly. That's quite enough, if you please," said Mr. Humble. "I do not believe that Miss Rowe killed Serena."

"I never said she did. But I will say this. If this affair followed the regular mystery-story pattern, she'd be the next to go. It's always the most likely suspect who gets bumped next, you know."

He had noticed before that Miss Bly's idea of humor was somewhat on the grisly side.

That remark stayed in his memory through an evening that otherwise yielded up nothing new or pertinent. And returning to his cabin, at about midnight, he had an impulse to stop at Ginnie's door and stay there all the rest of the night, guarding her life with his own. But he was a product of civilization; he was afraid of what people might think of him, and so he went on to bed.

Contrary to his expectations, he fell asleep at once, awakening only to a peremptory knocking at his door. He sprang up in alarm, sure that his fears of the night before had found realization.

CHAPTER EIGHT

BUT IT WAS ONLY BATES, COME TO ASK HIM TO BREAKFAST with Captain Wren.

The ship's master sat at a card table covered with a white cloth that was almost clean, and dominated by a big silver platter heaped with eggs and Viennese sausages from a can. His manner indicated that he had something weighty to discuss, and after some polite conversational sparring, he broached it:

"We're due in Cristobal in about two hours, Mr. Humble. Now, I'm going to suggest something to you. Mind, it's just a suggestion that you can accept or reject as you please."

He slid a second helping of eggs and sausages onto his plate and attacked them with an enthusiasm that Mr. Humble could not share. The reminder about Cristobal had spoiled his appetite.

"People in general are a peculiar lot. And on a ship like this, as I've told you before, you get them at their worst," the Captain went on, speaking with a full, working mouth. "You can look for all kinds of eccentrics, and it isn't outside the bounds of possibility that the murder note we found was somebody's idea of a joke. It would be a pretty poor one, but I have known people who would think a thing like that was funny."

"But how could such a prank have been worked? How could the body have been turned over and the note

forged while you and Mr. O'Hollihan and Steward Bates were right there?"

"I don't know. But there has to be some explanation, and it could just as well be that somebody did it for fun."

"Well, but the woman died of poison," Mr. Humble protested. "That could hardly come under the heading of fun."

"No, but it could have been an accident, an overdose of sleeping powder. That happens every day." Captain Wren poured coffee for himself and Mr. Humble. He drained his cup in one mighty draught, and wiped the ends of his plump, grizzled mustaches, then sat back to make his real point. "Understand, I don't say that is what happened. I only suggest it as a possibility; and since nothing to the contrary has been proved, I don't see why we should allow ourselves to be inconvenienced for the possible benefit of someone with a perverted sense of humor. We're picking up no cargo at Panama. Normally, we'd go right on through the Canal without stopping for anything, unless it would be some unusual traffic condition. But if we get involved in a murder investigation we might be held up for days, even weeks. I don't think the passengers would like it, and I know I and my owners wouldn't. It would knock all the profit off the trip."

Mr. Humble nodded tentative understanding. A ray of hope was beginning to pierce the dour clouds of his anxiety.

The Captain went on, "Now, I've radioed ahead, of course, that we have a death aboard. But I didn't add any details because there were none to add. A medical examiner will come aboard to look at the body, and probably will take it away for disposition—I've been unable to contact any relatives, and that snowbird, Flavius, is of no help. But here's my point, Mr. Humble. If my

report to the authorities seems to indicate that the death was accidental, there probably will be no inquiry and no delay. And on the facts we have now—the facts, mind you, not surmises or theories—there is nothing to indicate that it wasn't."

"But the note? What are the police going to say about that?"

Mr. Humble argued feebly, from a sense of duty rather than any real desire to make his point. He hoped the Captain would say what, in fact, he did go on to say:

"I've thought of a way to handle that, without either seeming to suppress vital information or involving ourselves. I could remove the note from under the dead woman's hand, put it in an envelope with the traveler's check I showed you, and ask the police to have the two compared by their handwriting expert. We needn't tell them why we want the comparison made. I'll ask them to radio a report on it, and by then maybe we'll have made enough progress to be able to tell whether the note was part of a hoax or something more serious. You see my point, don't you, Mr. Humble?"

Mr. Humble saw more than his point. He saw reprieve for himself from exposure and disgrace. True, it was reprieve, not a pardon. Sooner or later—when the ship touched at San Pedro, at best—he would have to account for himself. But he was grateful for the postponement.

Still, he saw difficulties. "What about the rest of the passengers? All of them must know about the murder note by now. Some will be sure to talk."

"Let them, as long as they don't do their talking to the police. I'll have Mr. O'Hollihan caution them." The Captain was showing the same relief that Mr. Humble himself was feeling. He seemed to have expected more opposition. "I'm glad you see this sensibly. It would be different if we were bound to foreign ports, or if anyone

were getting off. But all passengers are booked to our final port of call, and before we reach there I hope we'll have been able to get to the bottom of the matter."

"Will I have to say anything to the police?"

The Captain considered that. "No, I don't see why I'd have to mention you or your part in the inquiry, at all. Not, of course, unless you insist."

"I'll not insist," said Mr. Humble, and attacked his eggs with sudden relish. He ate four.

The sun was up when he descended to the lounge deck. The sea had a brilliant sparkle, but the sky, not yet brassy as it would be in midday, was a soft moist blue, like an overturned, freshly washed pewter bowl.

Mr. Humble took off his shirt and shoes, and stretched out in a deck chair with a bottle of suntan oil at hand. Dorrit joined him presently, and then Ginnie Rowe.

The tension seemed to have gone out of the girl. In pink satin shorts and a matching, sleeveless shirt, she looked young and ingenuous and even happy. She said a few companionable words, and then sat silent while Dorrit talked.

Mr. Humble had feared that Dorrit might talk about the case, but she seemed to have forgotten it in a larger conception. This was nothing less than a scheme for amalgamating all existing private-eye agencies into one super-colossal system that would make the Pinkertons and Burnses and such people look like one-man outfits. Dorrit was a native Californian.

Presently, in company with the other passengers, all three of them went to the forepeak to look at the thread of horizon green that represented Panama. Soon they were able to make out a fringe of surf breaking against a low tropical shore topped with flexible cocoa palms; and the pink walls of the government buildings at Cristobal were just massing up behind them when Mr. O'Hollihan summoned all the passengers to the salon.

Normally bluff and pleasant, he was surprisingly gruff and incisive now. Police would come aboard to take away the dead woman, he said, and anyone who wished to do so might make a statement to them. But such indiscriminate gossip would mean that the ship and its passengers might be held in the Zone for an indefinite period. The alternative was that all the passengers remain in their cabins or on the lounge deck and say nothing. He conveyed the Captain's regrets that any such restrictions should be necessary. On other trips it was the policy to let everyone get off and take the railroad over to Panama City, allowing them several hours to see the sights. But under the circumstances that could not be permitted now.

A protest came from an unexpected quarter. Mr. Stentson said, "But, Mr. O'Hollihan. We'd made up our minds to get off—cut our trip short—Belle and I."

"We can't permit it. Not without an investigation—not unless you have some urgent reason."

"We just want to get off, that's all." Mr. Stentson spoke with an agitation, reflected in the face of his wife, that seemed all out of proportion to any apparent cause for it; and the thought that came to Mr. Humble was the same that must have been in the minds of others who eyed the pair indignantly. If I had committed a crime, he told himself, I'd probably want to get off too. I'd have the feeling of trapped terror they both show. . . .

The conclusion offended him. It had no basis in logic or common sense. He was glad that the mate seemed to agree, saying soothingly: "I can see why you might feel nervous, after what's happened, both you and your wife, Mr. Stentson. And there is no way that we can prevent your getting off if you feel you must. But I do ask you to reconsider. For you to leave the ship would mean that not only you but everybody else would have

to be held under police surveillance. It would impose a hardship on us all."

The pair conferred voicelessly in that odd way of theirs; then to everyone's relief, Mr. Stentson said: "Well then, we'll stay. We don't want to be a nuisance to people."

The ship had picked up its pilot and was waddling across the green duck pond of Limon Bay when Mr. Humble got back out on deck. From that angle of approach, the town was almost entirely obscured by two long piers, backed by squat, pink-stuccoed warehouses. On one of the piers, the one toward which the ship was pointing, were two khaki-clad policemen and a fat man in a white linen suit, carrying a doctor's instrument case.

The sight of the policemen destroyed Mr. Humble's composure. He fled to his cabin and cowered there, chilled and shivering in spite of the increasing heat. It seemed unthinkable to him now that the police would accept the Captain's story of accidental death. They would see through it immediately, and press their investigation all the more severely because of the attempt to deceive them. And they would be especially severe with him, Mr. Humble, for claiming to be a detective.

He knew exactly how they would go about sweating the truth out of him, of course. He had seen it often enough in the movies: the single glaring drop-cord light, high center; the vague shapes of inquisitors bulking up from all the shadowed edges; a cold, merciless voice like the voice of Jove dropping down from somewhere close but veiled in darkness, upon a victim wilted, sagging, though still defiant in a picturesque way. Mr. Humble doubted that he would remain defiant long, and he was quite sure he would not be at all picturesque. Just lying there on his bunk thinking about it reduced him to a sodden mess.

At intervals through the thin walls he could hear alien

voices and evidences of activity in the passageway, and he guessed that the body was being moved. Then came a long silence that was even more frightening. It was with incredulity, some two hours later, that he heard the ship's engines begin to turn again, felt the vessel start to get under way. From the porthole he saw the dock and its sheds receding, glimpsed the town's bland pink and white houses, fronting on curving, palm-fringed asphalt drives, sliding in like a theatrical backdrop to replace them.

He changed to fresh white linen trousers and a gaudy sport shirt, and ventured outside. In the passageway he saw Captain Wren, alone, locking the door to the dead woman's cabin.

The Captain regarded him with approval. "Smart of you to keep to your cabin, Mr. Humble. There's the off-chance you might have been recognized. I suppose you sleuths mostly know each other, as we seamen do."

"They've gone now—the police? Everything went off all right?" Mr. Humble asked.

"Without a hitch. There weren't even any questions when I gave them those specimens of the dead woman's handwriting. We can expect a report in a few days by wireless. Meanwhile, you can keep working on the case, so that we'll know better what to tell the police at Los Angeles."

Mr. Humble agreed to keep working on it, though Los Angeles and its harbor of San Pedro seemed so remote as to be almost inconceivable: eleven days, average run, the Captain told him. And to a man reprieved from death, eleven days is an eternity.

He went on to join the other passengers, watching from the lounge deck the ship's leisurely progress through the Canal. Most grew bored after a couple of hours, complaining that when you had seen one lock or ditch, you had seen them all. But Dorrit stayed on

with Mr. Humble, and then, a little after noon, Ginnie Rowe came out to join them.

The girl could be restful as well as exciting, he discovered. Mr. Humble forgot that she was, of course, far out of his reach. He entirely forgot that by all rights he should have been probing her to see whether she had anything to do with Serena's death. He talked to her as he had talked to no one since he was a child, freely and intimately, and without trying to make too much sense.

Dorrit fell silent gradually, looking at him in wonder for some time, then got up and went away. Others deserted the lounge deck too as the afternoon waned, and he and Ginnie saw the slow approach of Panama City, limned by a sunset afterglow that was like a dawn, alone together. They missed hearing the dinner bell, and someone tittered significantly when, flustered and apologetic, they finally were summoned into the dining salon.

He had one more bad moment when the ship tied into the dock at Balboa for the night. But when he awakened next morning, it was under way again, gliding past a chain of island Gibraltars, with stern swarms of planes hovering over them. An hour later, meticulously shaved, bathed, pomaded, and dressed in a slack suit so dazzling that he had never dared wear it before, he went on deck to find that they were once more at sea, with no land visible anywhere, nor any policemen.

Left to himself, Mr. Humble probably would have missed his chance with Ginnie. Like all shy people, he had learned excessive caution from the searing experience of putting too high a valuation on relationships that other, more extroverted persons took lightly. She too was cut to the same cautious pattern, and their greeting, on the morning following their conversational debauch, was as frigid as both could make it. But Dorrit

repaired the damage by impressing them both, willy-nilly, into her sports tournament.

That tournament was her outlet for the energies which had been absorbed until then by the mystery of Serena's death. Her aim in promoting it seemed to be twofold: to win every game herself, and to keep everyone aboard rushing frantically about from one activity to another all through the following week. She failed with only one passenger, the aloof and brooding Flavius.

"My girl friend Laura and I called on him first," she confided to Mr. Humble. "He just closed the door in our faces without saying a word. I went back later with my boy friend Arthur, but he wouldn't come to the door, and when we opened it ourselves, he just sat and glared at us. I returned to try a third time, but he had the door locked and bolted."

She concluded reasonably, "You know, I don't think he wants to play any games."

But no one else had such hardihood and resolution, and the week marched to its triumphant climax of an award dinner. In lieu of loving cups, Bristol-board plaques tastefully inscribed and decorated by Miss Bly were to be presented; and most of them would revert, with appropriate oratory, to their creator. The one person who might have given her a battle, the athletic Remington, had been confined to his cabin all through the two days of the finals, suffering from, of all things, seasickness.

A compassionate man, Mr. Humble usually was highly solicitous of others' ills—he was one bachelor who actually was always going out somewhere to sit up with a sick friend. But Remington's illness only invoked in him a shameless, smug satisfaction. The fact that this fair-haired darling of the gods could be subject to such a plebeian ailment, one to which he himself happily was immune, emphasized a tremendous truth the voyage was

revealing to him: that all people, high or low, fundamentally were about alike.

Then too, with Remington out of the way, he had a great deal of time alone with Ginnie. At sports she was as bumbling and unteachable as he; and promptly and decisively beaten in every game they played, with everyone, they became comrades in ignominy, compatriots in an alien, barbaric land.

Their intimacy meant more than companionship to Mr. Humble. It gave him that subtler gift of a woman's favor, a confidence, a belief in himself such as he had never known before.

Aside from his success with her, there was nothing to warrant this. With his attempts to get at the truth of Serena's death he had had small success. Except for Mr. Stentson, no one had seemed able to tell him anything more of consequence.

The man had been diffident, constrained, seeking Mr. Humble out on the forecastle head one day. Verbosely, with stuttering circumlocutions, he explained that he had waited his chance to get Mr. Humble alone because he feared that a discussion of the matter he had in mind might make his wife ill. She had been feeling none too well, he said, on the whole trip.

"That's why I didn't mention it to you before, when you questioned us in the Captain's cabin," he said. "That, and because it may seem silly or unbelievable. Yet I wouldn't feel right if I didn't tell you, for whatever it is worth."

"Please do," said Mr. Humble.

The other puzzled him. Superficially, he was entirely the good, commonplace, plodding man. Yet underlying this was a hint of some enormous, scarifying experience that had aged him prematurely, as it had his wife; and the impression was heightened now, as he began to

speak in a slow monotone that nonetheless had a quality of extraordinary tension:

"Well—I'd better start at the beginning, I guess. Belle and I were married twenty-five years ago. It was my first marriage, but not hers. She'd been married before when she was quite young—seventeen—to a hired hand of her uncle's, a wandering stranger. It didn't turn out well, and she left him, to go back and live with her folks. Eventually, she managed to get the marriage annulled and married me. But Axel—Axel Renning, her first husband—didn't like it. He threatened her."

"Threatened her how? With what?" Stretched out in shorts in a deck chair, with the sun strong on him, Mr. Humble felt good and relaxed and at peace with the world. But the other's answer brought him bolt upright:

"Well—with death. Death by an astral fist, Mr. Humble!"

"What? Astral fist?" said Mr. Humble.

The other nodded, his thin face twitching, his Adam's apple moving up and down nervously in his scrawny neck. Obviously this was hard for him, but he plodded on doggedly:

"He was a very peculiar man, Mr. Humble—a fanatic, in many ways. It was his odd beliefs, as much as anything, that made their marriage impossible. It was a relief to me when he left that part of the country, and I'll admit I was glad when I heard he was dead, though I suppose I hadn't ought to say it. But Belle wasn't. You see, he'd predicted his own death, and told her he'd return from it to strike at her. You can see how that would make her nervous—especially those times, afterward, when she thought she saw him."

"You mean she thought she saw him after he was dead?"

Mr. Stentson's discomfort increased. His hands and shoulders twitched along with his twitching face, but he

went on, in the same dogged monotone: "It happened twice. Once at a circus in Des Moines, again in New York once. That last time was six, nearly seven years ago, and she'd started to forget about it. But this murder has upset her again, and I guess you can see why. All this talk about an astral hand—it's made her remember Axel's threat."

He shook a somber head. "It's a shame. This trip hasn't turned out well in any way for her, after she'd looked forward to it so, for months. Ever since she started getting those circulars."

"What circulars?"

"Why, the letters and promotional material put out by the shipping company that operates this ship. They came at just the right time, when we were planning to sell out my business and celebrate our silver anniversary with a trip of some kind. I guess you got them too, Mr. Humble?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course," Mr. Humble said, though he hadn't. He had gone to a travel bureau specializing in vagabond cruises, and the bureau had assigned him to this ship as the first on which accommodations were available. But he didn't like to admit that to Mr. Stentson. It would have made him feel inferior, somehow. It was one of those pointless little lies that people tell, as Miss Bly had pointed out, for no particular reason except that they find it inconvenient to tell the truth.

Yet it was unfortunate that, if he had to lie again, he chose to do it at that particular time. It had closed the conversation prematurely, diverted him from asking questions he should have asked. Thinking back over it now, as he dressed for the award dinner—in white mess jacket and satin-striped black trousers, if you please—Mr. Humble thought of several things he should have probed for. How, for instance, did Mr. Stentson know that this Axel Renning was dead? Had he just been told

that, or had he seen the body? And those times Mrs. Stentson thought she saw him—had she been alone, or had others thought they saw him too? A real detective or a Dorrit Bly would have asked those questions and many more. They wouldn't have let themselves get sidetracked by feelings of inferiority just because they didn't get some circulars that probably were sent out at random, through mailing lists. . . .

He had reached that point in his reflections, standing before the meager mirror over his little bureau, trying to tie a bow tie in the failing evening light, when the knock sounded on his door. Mr. Humble had never been given to imagining himself intuitive. But this summons seemed to have an ominous quality, so that he felt his throat tighten and his mouth go dry even as he went to answer it. And the moment he threw open the door he knew his apprehension had been justified.

Captain Wren stood there. Again he was disheveled, obviously distraught, as he had been when he came to announce the death of Serena; and again he began talking in a furious, unnatural voice:

"I'd like to have you come with me, Mr. Humble. There's been another—incident."

"Incident?" Mr. Humble said.

"Another death." As always, when confronted with a situation that had no precedent in his experience, the Captain spoke with too much outraged violence. Mr. Humble heard startled doors opening on both sides of the passageway.

He said, though the question was unnecessary, though toting up in one swift calculation everything that had been impending for days now, he guessed the answer: "Who is it, Captain?"

Captain Wren said, "It's Mr. Remington. It's the same thing as before. Bates couldn't wake him. And he's been ghostwriting too. Writing after he was dead."

CHAPTER NINE

MR. HUMBLE JUST STOOD THERE, IN SHIRT SLEEVES, ONE hand grasping one end of the black bow tie he was going to wear with the mess jacket, the other making feeble, pointless little gestures. The Captain had to speak to him again, quite sharply, before he came to himself and made ready to follow.

He finished tying the tie. In his preoccupation he did it quickly, in a matter of seconds, though when he was consciously trying it sometimes took as long as fifteen minutes. He brushed down his sparse brown hair, vaguely conscious of his white, scared face and startled eyes, in the mirror; he put on the jacket and buttoned it carefully. These routine acts made him feel better, gave him time to roll with the blow.

Two of the cabin doors at the after end of the passageway stood ajar. Behind one he glimpsed the startled faces of Mr. and Mrs. Stentson, both red as new moons from unaccustomed exposure to the sun. The other partly opened door, opposite, was Ginnie Rowe's, though she was not in sight.

Remington's cabin was one of the two corner cabins forward, across from the one Serena had occupied. Like hers it was larger and better furnished than most, and had a small window looking down on the well deck.

Dorrit, in a green dinner gown decorated at one shoulder with a small red bird on the wing, was already

there, talking to Bates. The Captain eyed her angrily, then swung on the steward.

"I thought I told you to let no one in here," he said harshly.

"I told her that, sir." The wispy, hatchet-faced Bates came forward promptly, obviously relieved at having a superior there to assume responsibility, even at the cost of a reprimand. "I said my orders were to let no one enter, but she argued that you had gone after Mr. Humble, which was the same as going for her, since she was his lawfully designated associate. She quoted law for it."

"My position is legally quite sound," said Dorrit. "Master and servant are considered as one both at common law and in numerous statutes, judicial opinions, and pronouncements of standard legal authorities, Captain. I can quote them all to you word for word if you want to stand there and listen in a calm and fair-minded manner."

"I don't doubt it," the Captain said dourly. He motioned Mr. Humble on in, closing the door after him. "But I'd rather you'd tell me, in your own words, if you please, how you knew there was anything wrong here and that I'd gone after Mr. Humble."

"That was easy—a simple process of deduction," said Dorrit. She seemed to take the question as a tribute to her acuteness. "Mr. Bates's stricken face when he was hurrying to the bridge to summon you aroused my suspicion, and your loud voice commenting on the discovery of the body confirmed it. I see there's been another poisoning and some more ghostwriting."

"A simple process of deduction, I presume?" the Captain said, with heavy-handed sarcasm. "Now maybe you can go ahead and tell us what kind of poison it was, and how the writing got there?"

She appeared to miss the sarcasm, going over to the bunk to look down with serious concentration at the

dead man. Clad in blue silk pajamas, he lay in just the same position as Serena when Mr. Humble had first seen her after her death: turned toward the door, with one hand, of a delicacy remarkable in so big a man, gripping a pencil. The pencil's point rested on a notebook on the little bed table, and under it was writing.

The dead man's face chilled Mr. Humble. Remembering its healthy, virile good looks in life, he was the more shocked now at its evidences of a violent death. Unlike Serena's, his was knotted into the pattern of his final agonies, each feature standing out with the equal prominence usually achieved only in papier-mâché masks.

Dorrit stooped to sniff at the dead man's blue lips, then straightened to put one finger lightly on the pencil in his hand. As before, with Serena, the touch was sufficient to dislodge it.

Captain Wren sprang to retrieve the pencil, coming erect to glare at her. "Here! What do you think you're doing?"

"You asked me a question, and I'm trying to assemble enough data for an intelligent answer," she responded, unmoved.

She went on to look around the cabin, ignoring the steamer trunk and the clothing and personal effects scattered carelessly about, but pausing before a shelf in one corner. On it were books, a small camera of expensive make, some film and bottles and a flat enameled tray. She studied the arrangement for a while, sniffing at the tray and bottles, and then turned back decisively to the Captain.

"I can't tell you with complete certainty what poison was used," she said. "Nobody could from a mere cursory examination like this. But if I believed in gambling, which I don't, unless you're standing on the right side

of the table, where the odds are with you, I'd bet that it was potassium binoxalate."

"What's that in English?" the Captain asked.

In spite of himself, he was beginning to regard her with the faint awe which everyone sooner or later shared. Preposterously camouflaged under that seraphic blond exterior, it was clear, was an intelligence which, though it might be restricted in scope, within those limits was superbly efficient.

"In English it's the same thing. It's a fairly common preparation used to remove ink stains, clean wood, and develop photographs."

"Mr. Remington took a lot of pictures, mostly of the candid kind," the steward volunteered. "He developed his own films too, though he used to say the pictures probably would turn out better if he didn't."

"Just how the poison might have been administered is more puzzling," Dorrit went on. "It would have had a very disagreeable taste. What has Mr. Remington been having to drink, Mr. Bates?"

"He took coffee this afternoon at about two. Then an hour or so later, I brought him a glass of sherry. That's about all he's been taking for several days now," the steward answered. He still looked frightened, but he had not the look of wild terror that Serena's death had stamped on him.

"Well, potassium binoxalate might be noticeable in sherry, but it would only improve the taste of that coffee we've been getting," Dorrit said, with her terrible frankness. "That answers one half of your question, Captain. The other half, about how the handwriting got there, is a little tougher, but one thing is certain. The pencil was put into the dead man's hand after he was dead. The same was true of Serena."

"How do you know that?" the Captain asked.

"Because a slight touch was enough to dislodge it. If

the fingers of a corpse do not grasp an object tightly, the body was in death when the object was placed there. That's an axiom of investigative procedure. Isn't that right, Mr. Humble?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course," Mr. Humble said.

This was his cue to assume his proper role of controlling or seeming to control the inquiry. With gratitude he realized that Dorrit might have been holding the center of the stage not merely to show off, but to give him time to collect himself and cut a better figure.

He must have looked pretty bad, he knew. Worse than at the first death, because now he had the dreadful feeling that he was in a sense responsible. All along he had felt, without ever allowing himself to admit it, that there was something wrong about leaving Panama without clearing up that first mystery, and now he knew what it was. When you ignored a murder, you ignored the murderer too. And a murderer aboard a ship might murder again. And again . . .

But he had to try to conceal his agitation, so he went over and examined the dead man carefully, then bent to read the writing. It said:

"Murder. Astral . . . ," then stopped on a half-formed letter, just as had the first murder note.

He went on to examine the rest of the room: shower alcove, trunk, hand luggage, walls and floor, the window fastening, even the dead man's shoes and the pockets of his clothes. He found nothing of significance, of course. He expected to find nothing, because he had no clear idea what he was supposed to be looking for. But the procedure did make a better impression than standing still doing nothing.

Finished, he turned on the steward. "I take it, Mr. Bates, that you were the one to find the body again?"

"Yes, sir." The man answered promptly, though Mr. Humble could see that the question made him intensely

uneasy. Yet any significance this might have seemed to have was destroyed by the same thought Mr. Humble had had in questioning him before. It's exactly the way I should look and feel in his place, he thought. Maybe it is about the way I do look now. . . .

The steward went on, "It was almost the same as it was with the other death. About fifteen minutes ago, at just six-thirty, I took a glass of sherry and some canapés to him. He was fond of melted cheese on zwieback, and I thought it might tempt him to eat. I knocked, and when he didn't answer, I looked in."

"Was he usually hard to arouse?" asked Mr. Humble.

"No, sir. Usually the lightest tap would bring an answer. When I got no response this time it made me think of what had happened before. I put my head in and spoke. I spoke twice, and I'm afraid the second time I must have spoken too loudly—almost screamed—because it attracted the attention of one of the passengers."

"Which one?"

"Mrs. Stentson. She was just coming out into the passageway in a bathrobe, going toward the general bathroom, aft. She stopped and asked me if anything was wrong."

"And I suppose you told her?" Captain Wren growled truculently.

"No, sir. That is, I don't remember that I did." Captain Wren obviously terrified the steward. Under his awful eye the man wilted, visibly paling at the edges and drawing inward, like a cut flower under a strong sun. "I was confused—I don't know exactly what I said."

"You told me you asked her to stand out in the passageway and let no one into the cabin until you returned with me."

"Yes, sir. I did tell her that. But that was after I had collected myself—had time to think."

"It doesn't show much brain power," the Captain

said brutally. "No passenger should have been allowed in or near the cabin. Now she's under suspicion—no doubt without any justification—of having written that note."

"No, sir," the steward protested. "She couldn't be suspected of that, because she didn't do as I asked. She was so frightened she couldn't even answer, and she flew back into her cabin. She wasn't here at all when I returned with you."

"Wait a minute," interposed Mr. Humble. "Do you mean, Mr. Bates, that there was no writing on that notebook when you saw the body first, but that there was when you came back with Captain Wren?"

"Yes, sir," the steward said.

From behind his back, Dorrit was making frantic signals at Mr. Humble, but they were unnecessary. He already had seen the flaw in the other's testimony: "But Mr. Bates. You said you didn't enter the room, just put your head in. How did you know there was no writing?"

"Because I looked, sir. I remembered what had happened before, and I looked for that particularly. The page was blank then, but when we came back, there was this writing."

Mr. Humble went to the door. He didn't bother to open it. He stood as close as possible to the edge at which it opened, and squinted at the notebook. He said gently, "Mr. Bates, my eyes, with glasses, are pretty good. They're corrected up to twenty-twenty vision. But I can't see from here whether there is writing on that notebook or not."

The steward was stunned. He passed a hand over his thin flat hair and tried without success to speak. But unexpectedly Captain Wren came to his defense:

"The light is different now, Mr. Humble—much weaker. A half hour ago there was sunlight coming through the window. Anyhow, I can't see that it's a matter

worth arguing about. The significant thing is that the body changed position sometime in the interval between the time Bates first saw it and his return with me."

"Is that just what Mr. Bates told you? Or is there corroborative testimony?" Mr. Humble insisted.

"You'll have to take his word for it, I'm afraid, Mr. Humble. No one else that I know of saw the body until I came."

Six bells sounded, signaling seven o'clock, the dinner hour. The steward tensed like an old fire horse to an alarm, looking beseechingly at the ship's master, who said: "All right, Bates. You may go and start serving dinner. There'll be no award ceremonies, of course, under the circumstances. It's probably both useless and unnecessary to caution you to say nothing about this to anyone else. Thanks to your blunder with Mrs. Stentson, it's probably all over the ship."

The steward started to say something, then closed his narrow, thin-lipped mouth, and went out. The Captain turned to Mr. Humble. "I'll ask you to dine with me in my quarters, so we can discuss this further."

He started off up the passageway, but Mr. Humble rebelliously stayed just where he was, facing the other out when he turned to see why he was not followed. The Captain's eyes went to Dorrit, waiting defiantly too, and to that stubborn united front he yielded grudgingly. "Well, all right. Miss Bly is welcome to come too, if she likes."

CHAPTER TEN

CAPTAIN WREN'S OWN TESTIMONY WAS BRIEF AND OF LITtle consequence. Summoned from his quarters by the steward, he had found the body just as Mr. Humble had seen it, and had satisfied himself that the man was dead, this time by tying a string around one of his fingers.

Over coffee and from around one of the three vile cigars that he permitted himself daily, he launched into a surprising discussion of the supernatural.

"Understand, I'm not what you'd call a superstitious man, in spite of being a sailor," he said, with the tight-lipped grimace that was the nearest thing to a smile that he ever allowed himself. "But I have always been interested in the occult, not because I think it's something that can't be explained, but because I believe that with a different approach perhaps it can. If we fail to see reason in some things it's more likely because we haven't advanced far enough in our thinking to understand it, rather than because it is illogical in itself."

"History shows that numberless things considered supernatural to the people of yesterday are commonplaces of today," said Dorrit, electing, without invitation, to participate in the discussion. "To some of the Indians of the Niagara area that great waterfall was the abode of gods, and all the ground around it taboo; yet today we use it to turn turbines. The same could be said of almost all the natural forces man has harnessed to his use."

Captain Wren received this contribution without enthusiasm. It isn't pleasant always to be topped, especially when the competition comes from such an implausible source. He went on, pointedly ignoring her: "I've read up on the subject off and on for years. It's what you might call a mental hobby of mine. I've compiled hundreds of amazing and unexplained occurrences, from the earliest days to the present. I've always thought I might make a book of it sometime, and get it published."

"Somebody named Charles Fort beat you to it by about thirty years," said the irrepressible Dorrit. "His manuscript, bearing the singularly ill-chosen title of *The Book of the Damned,* appeared in 1919. It dealt with all such curious and apparently inexplicable occurrences as rains of blood over wide areas of the earth's surface, and showers of bullfrogs and periwinkles in places where they had never been seen before. The phenomena that he records were authentic enough, but some of his attempts to account for them seem rather farfetched. For instance, he attributed the rains of blood to battles between air fleets from hostile planets, converging in space over our little earth."

Captain Wren took a big drink of hot coffee, to cool himself. He said evenly, "This is all very interesting, Miss Bly, though hardly what I had in mind. I was thinking of things more directly related to the problem we have here, of ghostwriting and the like. There are even cases on record of ghost poisoning. For example, at a banquet given by one of the doges of Venice, the wine in the cup of one of the guests was seen to bubble and swirl as if stirred by an unseen hand. A few minutes later, the guest fell dead, instantly stricken by a sip of it, though no one else present at the feast was affected."

"That story is entirely apocryphal, though often cited as fact in even some of the better-documented his-

tories," Dorrit said. "It is told not only of a doge of Venice, but of the Medicis and various other poisoning princes of the later Middle Ages. It seems to have had origin in an ancient Sanskrit tale that has recently come to light. It's funny how fiction can get itself so solidly established as fact that it can deceive all but the most diligent of researchers."

The Captain had taken on a purplish look. He puffed energetically at his malodorous cigar, but the rich, ripe hue of his irritation remained.

Mr. Humble made haste to intervene:

"I see what you mean, Captain, in spite of the—uh—apocryphal nature of the example you gave. I've read a lot of true, unsolved mysteries, some of them almost unbelievable. For example, there is the case of the man who was arrested and tried for a brutal ax murder. There was all kinds of evidence to prove that he was alone in the house with the murdered woman at the time of her death, and that he alone had access to the murder weapon. But counsel got him off by proving that though the whole room in which the murder was committed was splashed with blood, no blood stains had been found on the accused man's clothing. Now how would you explain that?"

"It's not so tough," said Dorrit. "All you have to do is hark back to the case of Crown *v.* Heywood, *circa* 1757, to find an exact parallel. The accused was shown to have taken off his clothes while he wielded the ax, putting them on again only when his deadly work was finished."

"Excellent, Miss Bly," the Captain said, with his soggy sarcasm. "Now all you've got to do is clear up our own little mystery. You will have no trouble, I am sure, in telling us—doubtless by reference to the case of Whoozis *v.* Whatzisname, *circa* something-or-other—just how a corpse could write a murder note. In handwriting that the experts pronounce genuine, mind you."

Dorrit momentarily was squelched. "Well, I must say it is a puzzler. I thought I'd heard them all, but to save me I can't think of a parallel for it anywhere. If it was just this last death, the explanation would seem obvious."

"You mean it would seem that Bates did it?"

"You'd assume that as a working hypothesis, at least. The handwriting hasn't yet been proved to be Remington's, and the position of the body before your arrival and ours so far rests on his unsupported word. And now that I think of it, I don't remember that he ever did say the body had changed position. You said it for him."

"I repeated what he told me before you arrived. You can ask him if you like. But I want to point out to you that even though this time the whole thing rests on his word alone, the other didn't. With Serena, I was standing right outside the door talking to Mr. O'Hollihan, and there was no possibility that anyone could have been concealed in that cabin."

The Captain shook his shaggy, grizzled head, his eyes, pale and piercing in his weather-beaten face, taking on a look wholly alien to them, of superstitious dread. "And yes—someone or something had to be in that cabin. There's no other way to explain it, unless you accept the word of Serena herself about riding the time stream—grant her the ability to return after death."

Mr. Humble, by now, was desperate enough to clutch at anything: "What's this, exactly, about the time stream and the fourth dimension and so on, Captain? I've never quite understood it."

Captain Wren started to speak in his customary, impulsive, dogmatic fashion, then stopped, looking nervously at Dorrit. He began again, but without assurance, like a poker player putting down a pair of kings, say, in a showdown with an opponent who always seems to hold aces: "Well. The theory is, as I get it, that there's

a sort of time stream, and you can go either way on it, under certain circumstances and if you know how. You go one way, into the past, and that's memory. Go the other way, into the future—that's clairvoyance."

He paused, looking at Dorrit dreadfully, but for once she had nothing to add; either because there actually was a thing or two she didn't know all about, or because she had decided he had been punished enough for trying to snub her. Heartened, he went on: "It's considerably more complicated than that. Take the theory of coexistence which asserts that everything that has ever happened is still there just as it happened and everything that is going to happen is already there just as it will happen. But that stuff's beyond me."

"You seem to know a lot about it," Mr. Humble commented.

"It's always interested me. Not because I'm superstitious, mind you, but curious. I've even gone to séances—I'm sorry that I missed Serena's one performance aboard here. I understand that it was quite amazing, that she practically named her murderer in advance. Or so at least Mr. Remington claimed."

"He said that, though no one else present could seem to see it. He said you'd have to know her as well as he to understand." Mr. Humble paused, with a coffee cup halfway to his mouth, the contents slopping over from the impact of the thought that came to him. "Here. That could be the motive—not only for his death but Serena's. Maybe she knew or guessed something incriminating about someone aboard, and that séance was her way of saying so. She'd want money for her silence. But with Remington, if he guessed it too, it would be sport; a cruel pleasure—"

Captain Wren interposed gently, "Motives—that's the detective instinct in you, of course, and for ordinary deaths it's well enough. But of what use is speculation

about motives here, where none of the rules apply? There's more than meets the eye in both these deaths, Mr. Humble. What it is I don't know. Maybe we've seen it fifty times without realizing it. Maybe it's unseeable in the sense that we usually see things. But that's your problem. I'm leaving it to you."

He wiped his broad mouth and the ends of his plump mustaches with a napkin, and stood up. "I've got to go now and put an account of this latest death on the radio. I guess you know what that's going to mean?"

"Well," said Mr. Humble; and then his head began to swim as he realized just what it would mean.

The Captain nodded somber agreement to the look of alarm that must have been on his face. "That's right. Publicity. Nationwide, scarehead stuff. One death—Serena's—wouldn't have been big news. But this one is; not only because the victim is so prominent, but because it's exactly like the other. In both, the circumstances were sensational, just the kind to lend themselves to flamboyant treatment. I can see how the papers will handle it. They'll call it the 'Murders in the Fourth Dimension'—something like that."

"You've got to radio everything? Even about the murder notes?"

"I'm afraid so. I can't suppress vital information any longer, Mr. Humble. As it is, you and I are likely to be in for a rough time of it in Los Angeles. The police there won't like it because we didn't give all the facts of the first murder to the Zone police. You know how they are about such things."

"Yes, I know," said Mr. Humble, with miserable conviction, if not with complete accuracy.

But if the prospect of publicity terrified him, it had an exactly opposite effect on Dorrit.

"Well, here's our big break," she said, entranced,

when the door had closed behind the Captain. "All we've got to do is crack this case, and we'll be headline heroes from coast to coast. The firm of Humble, Graystone, and Graystone, detectives, will be on every tongue."

That did it. Mr. Humble cracked, yielding to an impulse that had nagged him from the first, to confide in her. He said, "Miss Bly, I've got something to tell you—a confession, if you want to call it that. I'm not what I'm pretending to be, at all."

She looked at him with her golden brows drawn together in a puzzled frown. "You mean you're not just a mere passenger on this ship? That you came on a secret assignment, or something?"

"No, Miss Bly." Mr. Humble had that quality often found in timid people, that in despair he found a magnificent, fatalistic kind of courage. He spoke calmly, even with dignity. "I mean I'm not a detective at all. There is a firm of Graystone, Graystone, and Humble, but we're accountants, not detectives. I never saw the inside of a detective agency or a police station in my life. Everything I know about crime and its detection came from books or the movies. I'm a complete fraud."

He had expected almost anything. It would not have surprised him if she had rushed out forthwith to denounce him to the Captain and the passengers. He had anticipated at least her icy contempt. But to his amazement she was looking at him with what seemed almost admiration.

"Why, you little devil!" she breathed. "You priceless little Munchausen. Of all the slick con artists—why, you even fooled me!"

"Eh?" said the startled Mr. Humble.

"Believe it or not, that's quite a trick. I work in a law office, and I've seen plenty of gumshoes, both on the public payroll and on their own. I know how they op-

erate. It is true that I had my doubts about you once, right at the start."

"You mean when I first undertook to investigate Serena's death?"

"That's right. It was plain that you had no idea what you were doing. But the death had so many screwy angles that anyone else might have looked as bad. And then the way you rounded into form afterward—I've seen plenty of people who call themselves detectives who wouldn't have done nearly as well."

Mr. Humble said "Thank you" gratefully. She went on, "The only thing that surprises me is that you kept up the bluff this long. Some people would have cracked the minute they saw that first body. Whatever made you tell such a whopper in the first place?"

He thought that over. "Well. It was desperation, I guess. I've never been able to talk to people much. Really talk to them, I mean. I get as far as telling them my occupation, and then that seems to end it."

"What's wrong with your occupation?"

"Nothing, except that it doesn't seem to interest anybody. And then there's nothing about me, as me, to interest them either. I wanted things to be different on this vacation. I wanted to make it a good one, something I could remember always, and I knew I couldn't do that just by a change of scenery. I had to change myself too. Only, I guess I went about it in the wrong way. I see that now, when it's too late."

"It's never too late to mend," she said sententiously. "You are out on a limb, all right. But that's not the same as saying you have to sit right there and saw it off."

"You mean I should tell people I've been lying? That I'm not a detective?"

"No. It's too late now, for that. What you have got to do is back up your bluff—find the solution to these deaths before we get to San Pedro."

"How would that change anything?" he asked. "You heard what Captain Wren said about radioing the police. He'll wire about me too, and they'll investigate. They'll find out I'm a fake before I ever get there."

"Maybe. But you'd be a successful one; and nothing succeeds like success, especially in Los Angeles. I know. I live there. You prove that you are a detective of the first water, and nobody—but nobody—will bother to remember that you weren't always one."

Mr. Humble fell silent, contemplating that. It opened to him a new vista of hope. But then dark clouds of doubt obscured it again.

"I can't," he groaned. "Maybe some people could. Smart, tough, resourceful people. But I'm not that kind. I'm not Superman. I'm just an average person, if that's not flattering myself too much."

"You could be a lot of worse things. Were you in the Army or Navy or shipyards or anything, in the war?"

"I was in the Army. But that doesn't mean anything. At the time they took me, if the body was warm you were in."

"I know," she said. "But let me tell you something. A lot of other average men went into that Army, too. They were asked to do a big job—bigger than the one you've got to do here. They had to beat a lot of supermen. There were plenty of people who thought they couldn't do it. Some of them didn't think so themselves. But they did it. Grocery boys and soda jerks got into planes and tanks and took them all the way to Berlin and Tokyo. That average man looked pretty good, on that one."

"Well, but that was different. They had a big incentive. They weren't just backing up a silly little bluff."

"That won't be all you're doing either, now. Forget about your own predicament, and think about this case. As things look now, who would you say is the most

logical suspect? Who hated Larry Remington most? Who stood to profit most by his death?"

A flame of anger warmed him. "Look here, Miss Bly. I don't like what you're implying."

"Neither do I. But it's just what the police of Los Angeles will ask, if it comes to that, and you may not like the answers they'll think up. Now do you see why you have an incentive?"

"Yes. Yes, I see," said Mr. Humble.

Again, for a soaring instant, he was the knight errant riding to the rescue of the maiden in distress. In a fine fury of determination, he started to leave, but then stopped, reminded of one more thing he had to say if he were to achieve complete honesty:

"Miss Bly, I told you I was in the Army. Well, I was. But I didn't shoot down any planes. I never saw the inside of a tank. They put me in Finance, and I was stationed on Fulton Street, in New York, all through the war—not two blocks from the place where I had always worked."

Again her reaction was surprising. She only stared at him a moment in wonderment, and then said: "I never thought I'd live to see this. One man who was assigned just as he should have been. I was in the Army too, and I'd have bet anything they couldn't do it!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MORNING BROUGHT A VIEW OF A GAUNT BROWN COAST OFF the starboard side that Mr. Humble learned, to his momentary alarm, was Cape San Lucas, at the tip of the Baja California peninsula. To his relief, however, he learned that their destination was still some sixty hours off. He had forgotten that there were two Californias, both embracing considerable latitude.

His position now, he felt, was much like that of a man in one of those melodramas that trap a character in a burning building with enemies waiting just outside to shoot him. Aboard ship he was acutely uneasy, rubbing elbows as it were with a murderer. But he disliked thinking about what might happen to him when he got off it.

With questioning the passengers he had little luck. Most could tell him nothing they had not told him already; and the two he wanted most to question were inaccessible. The brooding Flavius, impervious alike to entreaties and threats, maintained his isolation; and Ginnie too all day kept to her cabin, not even appearing for dinner.

Captain Wren saw in that grounds for suspicion, supported by radio messages from the Los Angeles police. Their response to his report of Remington's death had been prompt and vigorous. They were assembling detailed information on every passenger, and already had

unearthed one piece of information that seemed significant. In the previous fall, Ginnie Rowe had been sought for the lead in another producer's play, but Remington had refused to lend her. Defeated in a court action to get her contract invalidated, Ginnie had made some bitter remarks for publication. The police message did not comment, but obviously they scented a motive there.

The Captain said, over dinner coffee in his cabin: "I'd suggest you talk to her, Mr. Humble, as soon as possible, see what you can dig out of her. I've noticed you've won her confidence—a smart move. It may be that she'll forget herself, let something slip that will give us just the clue we need."

"I've talked to her because I've enjoyed her company," said Mr. Humble warmly. "She's an intelligent, attractive girl, and a shy and lonely one."

The Captain's eyes were sharp and probing, fixed on him from under shaggy, graying brows. "She's an actress, Mr. Humble. Let's not forget that."

Mr. Humble resented the implication violently. But as soon as he could decently get away, he went to find the girl and talk to her.

He tried first at her cabin. The door was ajar and a light on, but he had no answer to his knock. He went back to the salon, on the way passing Mrs. Stentson, going forward toward the well deck. She looked bad, he noticed, her pinched face ghastly even under its new sunburn, her eyes dark and haunted. She too had kept to her cabin most of the day.

In the dining salon, Dorrit, with Laura, Arthur, and the young Mr. Hearn, were playing Hangman. The game required one player to think of a word, which he designated by a number of dashes equal to the number of letters in the word. The others then had to try to guess the word, one letter at a time. When they guessed right, the letter was put down over the appropriate

dash; when they failed, a part of them was hanged in effigy on a crudely drawn gibbet, starting with their heads. It was considered a great triumph when one player was able to get all the others hanged right down to their shoe tips.

To Mr. Humble it seemed a singularly unfortunate form of entertainment, under the circumstances, and he wandered off down the passageway between the cabins again. Ginnie still was not in her cabin, and for want of anything better to do he went back aft to the lounge deck and on up a companion ladder to Captain Wren's quarters.

Steward Bates was there alone, cleaning up. The Captain, he said, was still on watch, but Mr. Humble was welcome to wait for him.

Mr. Humble declined. He had a horror of invading another's privacy, even on invitation. But about to leave, he stopped and turned back, reminded.

"I'd like to ask you a question or two, Mr. Bates," he said.

The steward, stooping to dust the sofa, lifted his head in quick apprehension. "Yes, sir. Anything at all," he said, but his voice too was uneasy.

Mr. Humble sat down, waiting for the man to finish his work. But he seemed determined not to finish, deliberately dawdling.

"Go right ahead, sir," he prompted finally. "I can work and talk at the same time."

He wanted occupation for his hands, an excuse to evade his questioner's eye, Mr. Humble guessed. He began carefully: "The trouble is, I don't know exactly what I'm after, Mr. Bates. I'll just have to fish around. There have been poisonings on this ship, and the poison must have been administered in either the food or drink. So let's start with that. All food, I take it, for both crew and passengers, is prepared in the same place?"

"Yes, sir. In the galley just abaft the crew's quarters, for'd. You must have seen it in passing."

"I have," Mr. Humble said.

He had seen the cook too, he remembered; a squat man, with a swart, dour face. He said, "That cook—there's only the one?"

"Yes, sir. His name is Antonio Rodriquez. A Portugee, I believe. He did have an assistant, a young fellow, but the man quit on the last trip and we didn't sign another."

"Any particular reason for his quitting?"

"Not that I know of, sir. Cooks in general are a migratory lot. Few stay as long as Rodriquez—three voyages—especially on a ship like this."

"What's wrong with this ship?"

The steward looked up in alarm, glancing at the cabin door as if he expected Captain Wren to come storming through it on the instant to avenge this insult to his command. "Nothing at all, sir! Not as a ship. I just meant that to a cook it isn't like the larger vessels that have all the conveniences and straight eight-hour shifts for the kitchen help."

Mr. Humble nodded understanding. "Now, I want to ask you a question, Mr. Bates, that may seem pretty silly. Do you know any reason why this cook should have disliked either Serena or Mr. Remington? Any reason at all, no matter how farfetched or trivial it might seem?"

The steward's look of amazement was entirely convincing. "No, sir. Of course not. He didn't know either one of them, naturally."

"Thank you," said Mr. Humble.

That seemed to dispose of one phase of the inquiry, of which he had expected nothing anyhow. He thought a moment, and then said, "Now, about the way the food is served. Do you handle all of it that goes out of the galley? And all the drinks too?"

"Oh, no, sir. There is a man to serve the crew; and then a great many of the passengers help themselves to snacks, you know, or carry trays of food to those who want to lie abed or are ill. Then, for the hours I am off—between two and four in the afternoon and after eight at night—anybody that wants a drink can get it out of the galley sideboard and just leave a chit for it."

"Did any of the passengers carry food or drinks to Mr. Remington?" asked Mr. Humble, though he held his breath, knowing just about what was coming:

"Why, yes, sir. Miss Rowe often did, after he was taken ill."

"Miss Rowe, yes. Anyone else?"

"Well—Mr. O'Hollihan, sometimes. On a ship like this, with a small crew, and carrying both freight and passengers, everybody has to take on some duties that aren't strictly part of the jobs for which they were signed."

"I see," said Mr. Humble.

He wished it might have been anybody but Mr. O'Hollihan. That powerful, trigger-tempered Celt might conceivably beat a man to death in a brawl, but the idea of his poisoning anyone to death seemed absurd. Mr. Humble thought that, then realized with horror that subconsciously he had been seeking an alternative to Ginnie Rowe as the chief suspect. He too, then, was beginning to doubt her.

He forced that appalling thought out of his mind, and went back to his fishing. "Mr. Bates, after the first death—Serena's—Miss Bly and I questioned you, and some of your answers were a little confusing."

"Confusing, sir?" The steward became furiously busy with the dusting.

"I'm being polite," Mr. Humble said. "You said you brought a tray of food to Serena, then shook her mattress with both hands, though there was no place that

you could have put the tray. I don't know that it's important. I can't honestly see what difference it makes. But I wish you'd tell me now what, actually, you did do."

The steward kept to his dusting a moment, then suddenly lifted his head, to say with a kind of desperate dignity: "I brought a tray of food, but I didn't shake the mattress. I looked at her, and she looked so bad—her face blue and bloated—that I knew she was dead. I took the tray back to the galley, and went for Captain Wren."

"Why didn't you say that in the first place?" Mr. Humble asked, but then added: "Never mind. I think I understand. Thank you, Mr. Bates."

He went out, and stood by the rail, close to the cabin door. From there he overlooked not only most of the ship, but a broad expanse of sea. Distantly, a few points to starboard off the bow, a light flashed at precise intervals. It touched upon a vague figure on the ship's forecastle head; a lookout, he supposed. Nearer, on the well deck, was another figure, entirely anonymous in the darkness; and then, through the side window of the wheelhouse, he could just distinguish the helmsman, silhouetted thinly, vague as a shadow, against the dim light of the binnacle lamp. It occurred to Mr. Humble suddenly that his knowledge of the ship's crew other than the officers and Steward Bates was as indistinct as that. Yet these men had lived too; knew joys, pains, fears, hates. Fears or hates powerful enough perhaps to drive a man to murder.

The thought increased the uneasiness that had plagued him ever since Remington's death; dread not so much of what had happened as of what might be going to happen. Somewhere aboard here was something evil, that struck silently, in cunning stealth, and then withdrew, coiling perhaps to strike again. And on the heels of that thought came another, that stirred a

sharper terror in him. Twice he had knocked at Ginnie Rowe's door, but though it was ajar and the light was on, he had had no answer.

He had just turned from the rail to go below and try again, this time with more determination, when the scream sounded: a woman's cry of terror, seeming to come from almost under his feet.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MEN'S REACTIONS TO ANY SITUATION ARE CONDITIONED by their way of living. Conditioned to an environment in which a scream meant nothing much except that some girl was trying to advertise her femininity, Mr. Humble came close to ignoring this scream altogether. He went, in fact, almost back to the companion ladder before it registered vividly enough upon his senses to halt him.

He whirled, facing back to it. But even then he had no clear idea of what he ought to do or even in which direction he should move. The scream might have come from anywhere below; and it was not until he heard excited voices from the well deck that he guessed its point of origin.

He scurried back around the wheelhouse and down the forward companion ladder of the deckhouse to the well deck. Two men, he saw, were ahead of him, bending over a figure prone near the port rail. One of the men he recognized as Captain Wren, the other as Mr. Stentson.

Mr. Humble said: "What's happened? Who is it?"

He had been so sure it was Ginnie that the Captain's answer startled him:

"It's Mrs. Stentson. She's fainted. Something must have frightened her."

His outraged voice and his face, showing even in the darkness his bewilderment, said much more than that.

A sailor bulked up abruptly in the darkness, bringing a bucket of water. Stentson, kneeling, with one arm supporting his wife's head, dipped his fingers into the pail and let water drip slowly upon her. She sighed, moved her head from side to side, then opened her eyes. Poor though the light was, Mr. Humble could see in them a residue of the terror that had felled her.

Mr. Stentson said imperatively: "Belle. Belle, are you all right?"

She seemed not to hear him. Her eyes fixed with dreadful fascination upon a point in space, she gasped: "Him! I saw him!"

"Him? Who?"

Captain Wren's voice was sharp, compelling. But Stentson made a gesture of dissent. "Please. We can discuss it later. But now, I'd like to get her to bed."

The sailor who had brought the water helped him to get the stricken woman to her feet. Walking weakly, she moved between them to the passageway.

Captain Wren looked after them, scowling heavily. "Something damned queer about this. What could she have seen to have scared her like that? And what was she doing out here on the well deck?"

His eyes turned on Mr. Humble suddenly. "Where were you when you heard the scream?"

"I? Why, on top deck, waiting for you."

The Captain's eye traveled upward, estimating the angle of sight to the bridge. "Then you could hardly have seen what happened?"

"No, I didn't see a thing. I just heard a scream, and came as soon as I had figured out where it came from."

"And the lookout—that sailor—saw nothing either. That leaves us with no witnesses, it seems." The Captain was frowning heavily. Abruptly decisive, he started for the passageway between the cabins.

The lookout, a wide-shouldered blond youth in pea jacket and dungarees, was just leaving the Stentsons' cabin. The Captain said to him, in passing, "Get right back on watch, Mills," and went on to knock at the Stentsons' door.

Mr. Stentson responded, but he did not open the door to them. Instead he stood in it, blinking out at them vaguely from behind his glasses.

The Captain said, "I came to ask if there is anything I can do, Mr. Stentson. I have a little knowledge of medicine, and if there's any danger of hysteria or shock—"

"No, thank you, Captain." The man spoke politely, but his position in the doorway was sentinel-like, unyielding.

Captain Wren was looking hard at him. "Well, you're the judge of that, of course. But I want to remind you that we've had a couple of deaths aboard which we are anxious to clear up. If she knows anything, has seen anything that would throw light on them, we want to know it as soon as possible."

Just across the passageway a door came open, and young Jack Werner, in blue pajamas, his dark hair disheveled, looked out. From the salon Dorrit came out, followed by Arthur and Laura and Mr. Hearn. The door to Ginnie Rowe's cabin was closed, and the light was out.

Stentson said, "You can question her just as soon as she's well enough to talk, Captain. But for now, I'll have to ask that she have a little privacy."

"All right, then." Captain Wren turned a pointed stare upon the Werners, and they withdrew hastily, closing their door. His eye went on to rake the eavesdroppers from the salon, and Dorrit's three companions promptly deserted her, though she, of course, only approached curiously.

The Captain reverted to Stentson. "I don't want to alarm you, Mr. Stentson, but until we know what we're facing here, I ask that you take precautions. Keep your door locked tonight—"

"Keep our door locked—against *that!*" Stentson said; and suddenly exploded into high, hysterical laughter.

Captain Wren stared at him a moment, then turned away, gesturing Mr. Humble to follow, aft and up to his quarters. He was too shaken to protest even with a scowl when Dorrit came along too.

He sank heavily into the big chair behind his desk, absent-mindedly fumbling out of an ivory box before him one of his horrible stogies, in his preoccupation breaking his stern rule to smoke only after meals.

"Well," he said somberly. "No question about it now. We've got something strange and terrible aboard here. That woman saw someone—something—out there on deck that scared her nearly to death."

"Yes, she saw something," Mr. Humble agreed. And Mr. Stentson too either had seen it or guessed what it was: something so dreadful and strange that no door could shut it out.

"I'll do what I can," the Captain went on, seeming to read his thought. "Keep men on watch, especially around the cabins. But the trouble is, we don't know what to look for. It's too bad there wasn't a witness to what went on there on the well deck—what scared her so. You're sure you saw nothing, Mr. Humble?"

"Not a thing. But, here. Your lookout man might

have. The one stationed on the forecastle head. Have you talked to him?"

The Captain straightened in his chair. He took the stogie out of his mouth, very deliberately, his eyes growing hard and small. "My lookout wasn't stationed on the forecastle head, Mr. Humble. What makes you think he was?"

"Why, I saw someone there. Every time the light flashed I could see him."

"It wasn't my lookout that you saw. He was in the bridge wing with me—he came down the companion ladder right at my heels, when the scream sounded."

Dorrit spoke up: "Couldn't it have been some other member of the crew?"

Captain Wren was too perturbed to show his usual resentment of her interruptions. He answered, "I don't think so. They've all been ordered not to prowl around outside certain limits after dark, unless their duties require it. It must have been one of the passengers, Mr. Humble, and perhaps you'd know which one. Anybody not otherwise accounted for—who was neither in his cabin nor in the salon with Miss Bly?"

"No. No, I don't know of any," Mr. Humble said, lying sturdily. He did know of one passenger who hadn't been in her cabin or otherwise accounted for, just a few minutes before the scream sounded.

Captain Wren was scowling murderously; and it came to Mr. Humble, seeing him then, that in another age he would have been another kind of ship's master altogether: the hell-ship skipper, the expert user of the cat-o'-nine and the manacles. "That Flavius! We've been too indulgent with him. I'll look in on him again tomorrow, and he'll talk, for once. I promise you that."

His spasm of rage passed as quickly as it had come, and he went on to talk of other things. A radiogram had just come in from the police of Panama, the second he

had had from them. The first had said that the handwriting on the murder note in Serena's cabin corresponded with the writing on her traveler's check. This second message stated that strong deposits of morphine as well as barbital had been found in the dead woman's stomach.

Mr. Humble nodded sagely, though he was only superficially attentive, his mind squirming under the thoughts that had assailed it. Returning to his cabin an hour or so later, he went softly, stopping before Ginnie's door. At first he heard nothing, but then he became conscious of the regular beat of footsteps, above the low humming of the ship's engines; steps rapid and uneasy, the pacing of one whose mind is not at rest.

He was grim, going on to his cabin. Axioms were useful as a working basis in mathematics and in life. But even in mathematics, he remembered now, their authority was not unassailable.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TIME, TAKING THE STRANGE SYMBOL OF A VENUS CLOCK, like the monstrosity that had adorned the parlor of the dragon aunts who had reared him, dominated Mr. Humble's dreams that night. And time was the first thing he thought of when he awakened to observe the high sun looking through his porthole. Time was assuming a fearful importance now; it seemed to be closing him in, like a slowly shutting door.

Outside, the sea was calm, the air still as balmy as it had been off Panama. In sea-green slacks and another of those violently colored sport shirts that he would never have dared wear at home, he took a breakfast of coffee and some nauseating powdered eggs on the lounge deck.

From Steward Bates he learned that Mrs. Stentson was still sleeping after a bad night, but her husband had said he would want to talk to Mr. Humble as soon as he could leave her.

Mr. Humble held his nose and ate his eggs, then went around to the portside promenade strip, to get the sun. And there he ran into Ginnie Rowe.

Her appearance astonished him. Unreasonably, he had expected some great change in her: ravages of grief or fear; even a sinister look that would reflect the somber doubts of her that had invaded his mind. But stretched out in a steamer chair, her dark hair blown back from a forehead smooth and round as a child's, she was the complete ingénue, tasting with a lazy delight the day's warmth and fragrance.

Her frank pleasure at seeing him both delighted and embarrassed Mr. Humble, as did her unusual loquaciousness. Remington's death, it was evident, had shaken her deeply, and she had to talk about it.

"It's impossible to think of him as dead," she said. "He was so alive—so burning with violent ambitions. That negligent, playboy attitude of his was just a pose. You should have seen him sometime when he was building a show. He was all creative artist then; he was God making the world in six days. Only, on the seventh day he couldn't rest. On the seventh day he was likely as not to destroy what he'd built up in the other six."

The imagery was a little too complex for Mr. Humble. He said experimentally, "You mean he'd start things, and then not finish them? Leave it all dangling?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes he would do that—just walk off and leave it. But more often it was worse, it was wanton, deliberate destruction. I'll never forget what he did to *Three on a Raft.*"

Her mobile face had changed. A moment before it had been young, appealing. Now in an instant it was stern and bleak. She said, with a low-voiced intensity that had more impact than any violence of expression: "It was a fragile piece, essentially, like most of the things he did. I think he chose slight vehicles because they were more of a challenge to the Remington genius, like a handicap at polo. Or no—it was more like a small boy betting that he could lick any kid in the block with one hand tied behind him."

Mr. Humble groped back into his random reading of the theatrical columns of newspapers: "*Three on a Raft* —let's see. That never got to Broadway, did it?"

"It never got anywhere. It just got to the point where something good, maybe even wonderful, seemed about to come of it. We felt that, all of us. You do feel it with a show, you know; that is, if you've really got a show. If you haven't—"

She interrupted herself to say, "When I think of the times I've torn my heart out trying to give life to something that had no life. And then to see one of the few things that ever did have life for me destroyed—"

Mr. Humble said, "You've been in the theater for quite some time then, Miss Rowe? Remember, I'm not of it myself, or I'd probably not have to ask."

"I was born in the theater. Literally. My mother was playing an Aunt Jemima, and carrying me saved her the trouble of putting pillows in the front of her dress. Ask any of the old-timers, and they'll tell you she was a better actress than a lot of people whose names you've heard; but she made a mistake. She fell in love with an incurable ham, and married him. He couldn't

fly where she could, so she stayed down to his level—tent shows, the straw-hat circuit. I made up my mind long ago that I'd never fall in love. Not with an actor, at least. Not with some ham who would keep me back."

It was a new side of her that she was showing Mr. Humble now; with every word building up a portrait that frightened him. But he felt that he had to know her, to resolve, one way or another, the doubts that tormented him, and he said: "But I thought you came from some small town—some place in Vermont."

"That's right. I was born in the theater, but not raised in it. My parents died of an act of God when I was four, and I was brought up by relatives who thought the theater was the road to Hell. For twelve years I never even saw a stage. Then, when I was in high school, they gave me a silly little part in a thing called *Uncle Abner's Will.* And that did it. That was all it took."

"Somebody saw you? Some talent scout?" hazarded Mr. Humble, out of the depths of his romantic ignorance.

Her face relaxed in a gamin grin. She put a hand over one of his, and patted it, in affectionate scorn. "My God, boy—talent scouts don't catch high-school plays. Not the kind called *Uncle Abner's Will;* not in Bennington, Vermont. Nobody saw me, not even the audience. They were all looking at little Mary Holmes, who was so cute in her new pink dress, with that lisp of hers, and at the male lead, who was captain of the football team besides. All that happened was what happened inside me. I knew from the minute I went out on the stage that there was what I had to do all the rest of my life. I was scared to death. I was stiff from stage fright, as I've been ever since, as I always will be if I live to be a hundred. But I felt exalted too, and glorified. I was living. I was living in a couple of hours everything that anyone else can live in a lifetime. I knew that I had to be an actress, that nothing else would do for me. I

wasn't just another stage-struck kid. I knew what the theater was. I knew there were a thousand failures for every success; I knew all about freezing and starving and waiting on your knees in the smelly anteroom of somebody who hasn't got a play, who doesn't intend to get one, who just wants to act like another Belasco, on a dime. And I knew too that there would be men like Larry Remington."

The gamin grin was gone now. Her face was the oldest and saddest face on earth. "I knew all about him before I ever saw him, before he picked me out of summer stock in Connecticut. I knew what he had to have. Talent, yes. Extraordinary talent. He wasn't just going around picking up cheap dates. But he had to have submission too. He had to beat you right down into the dirt, so that there would be no question about it that you weren't merely Larry Remington's discovery but his chattel, too, his slave. And then when that was clearly established, he would destroy what he'd made, as he destroyed *Three on a Raft.* I started to tell you about that. I'll tell you now so that you can see it."

She told him, and he saw it as clearly as if it had been re-enacted under his eyes. It was the third week of rehearsal, and the company was beginning to feel the strain. Under the single glaring light bulb that illuminated a gaunt stage in an empty theater, their faces looked spectral and haggard as Remington whipped them on, feeling, with them as his fingers, for the things he sensed were there, behind the fragile structure of the play. He had an instinct for such things and a sure intuition for timing their emergence; and suddenly the others all began to feel it too.

Lines that had been graceful but without force began to acquire impact. A vehicle that had skimmed the polite surfaces abruptly gouged down deep below them, bringing up immense discoveries of gold and dross: of

things that were dark and terrible, but possessed of a flaming beauty too. The climactic scene that had been merely competent in the reading and the rehearsals until now suddenly was charged with tension—crackled with theater. They played it without lighting, without costumes or scenery, with nothing but bare walls and random plumbing fixtures for a backdrop, but it came alive for them, it swept them up out of the routine of rehearsal and the routine of their lives into the stratosphere of artistry, making them gods who looked down upon the human spectacle and re-enacted it as great gods would, with a proper attention to point and perspective—to dramatic values. They finished limp but exalted, knowing they had fashioned something big and grand; and being actors and exhibitionists, they looked for applause to the one person who was at hand to give it to them.

But Remington only snapped the script book shut, and said in a voice merry as the tinkling of little bells: "Okay, kids. That was good. That was away over your heads. It's probably the best performance some of you will ever give; and it's too bad there wasn't someone here besides me to see it, because it will be the last. Come in tomorrow and pick up your wages. There'll be two weeks' mad-money for everybody, of course."

"He killed it," Ginnie said tonelessly, now. "He murdered it, just like that. He'd had his fun out of it, and that was all he cared about. The expense could be written off his income tax."

She tried for exact expression of what she had felt: "You see, Mr. Humble, there are two kinds of people who do things like that. There are the perfectionists, who are never satisfied, who get more dissatisfied as a thing improves, because it gets so good they always wish it could be a little better. Hams—people trying to make a living at work they like reasonably well—hate them,

but give them a grudging respect, because they're trying for something that nobody ever gets, but still trying. That's one kind. Then there's the other kind like Larry, who breathe life into things and then kill them for the fun of killing something. The better it is, of course, the more fun there is in killing it. There wasn't a person in that theater who didn't feel like killing him for what he had done to the play and to them. Do you understand that, Mr. Humble?"

"Yes. Yes, I understand it," Mr. Humble said.

He was aghast at himself, because he felt that here was a confession, if ever there was one, and yet he did not feel at all horrified or dismayed. He felt instead like applauding, giving to a performance that had the inexorable quality of great tragedy its due.

She went on, in the same tight, tired voice: "That was one reason why he killed it, to get a little fun out of killing something good. But it tied in nicely with another thing he had in mind, to kill me. He wanted to bring me down with the one weapon that will bring down anybody in time, by keeping him out of work. Mr. Humble, do you know what it means to be out of work?"

"Yes," said Mr. Humble. "I've been out of work a couple of times. Once when I first got out of college; another time when I lost a job because somebody put the blame for his own mistake on me. It's not pleasant."

"No, it's not. But you at least could go around looking for it. You could read the ads and sit in employment offices and hope that tomorrow or next week things would be better. But I couldn't. I was under contract to Larry Remington. A long-term, iron-clad contract that wouldn't let me work for anybody else—and he wouldn't let me work for him. It's no fun to be an actor, and not be allowed to act."

With a sure instinct for effectiveness, she kept to that

monotone—underplaying it. "Other kinds of artists are luckier. Cast away a painter on a desert island, and he'll draw pictures with one finger in the sand. A writer can write even though he knows nobody will ever read it. But the actor has to have an audience. Without it there just can't be a show, any more than there can be sound without an ear to hear it. I was dying of unemployment, Mr. Humble. I mean that literally. There were times when I couldn't talk, couldn't think, couldn't move a muscle—little intervals of death. I couldn't have stood it much longer."

"Miss Rowe," said Mr. Humble. "You needn't say any more. If anyone ever had a right to kill, you had a right to kill him."

She turned upon him a face amazed and outraged. "You think I killed him?" He could say nothing, stricken dumb by his own astonishment, and she stood up, the radiation of her nervous energy striking him with a force that was almost physical. She said harshly, "I'm sorry. I'd forgotten you were a detective. I thought you were a friend."

She was away before he could try to stop her, think of anything to say. Somewhere, he saw, he had gone wrong in reading her—missed a line, or misinterpreted one. She had not killed Remington; she had not killed anyone. That was no longer a mere axiom but a truth, tested in his own peculiar laboratory, though he doubted that it would be acceptable as such to anyone else on earth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BUT DORRIT, FOR ONE, SEEMED TO AGREE, HEARING HIM out a little later; though she did take a serious view of the blunder of his curtain line.

"That was pretty bad," she said severely. "You should never have let her know you thought her guilty, even though you did."

"But I didn't think it," Mr. Humble protested. "Not actually. Not for more than a minute there, when she seemed to be confessing."

"You should have pretended not to believe her even if she really had confessed—even if she'd been standing on the gallows, convicted by a jury of her peers." Oblivious of his shudder, she went on happily: "I'll tell you something, Humble. It's kind of Something That Every Young Man Should Know. You'll get along a lot better with women—any woman—if you'll just put in a little work at being a better liar."

"I thought I'd done pretty well in that department," Mr. Humble said.

"Oh, I don't mean you've got to keep going around claiming to be a private eye and things like that. You don't have to lie about yourself to interest a woman. But you should learn to lie a little about her. You've got to pretend that it's not only out of reason to suspect her of being anything but fine and noble, but absurd to suppose she doesn't look like Aphrodite made up for techni-

color even when she's got a red nose from a cold in the head."

"But what would be the use of that?" Mr. Humble protested. "She'd just have to look in a mirror to see different."

"She wouldn't have to look in a mirror. She'd know without looking that you were a liar. But she'd love you for it. You'd be surprised at the results you'd get. You try it with Ginnie. And don't let down right after you're married. Keep it up."

"Married!" said the flabbergasted Mr. Humble.

The thought of marrying Ginnie had never occurred to him. He had assumed, without exactly thinking it through, that their acquaintance would end with this voyage.

He protested weakly, "Why, that's absurd. She'd never marry me, a girl like her."

"Why not?" said Dorrit. She had a look in her eye that he had seen before in the eyes of matchmaking females. Only, always before the girls who had been earmarked for him were obvious culls—simperers or gaunt martinets, butterballs or string beans, not sufficiently appetizing to be thrown on the general market, but apparently considered good enough for him.

He rallied enough to answer: "Well—there's nothing about me to interest her. Not in that way."

Dorrit appraised him with an entirely dispassionate eye. "I'm not so sure. It is true that at first glance you don't look like much. But you grow on one. You'd make a good husband, I think."

"Not for her. You're being absurd, Miss Bly. She'll want someone of her own kind, talented and glamorous."

"If I'm any judge, she's had enough of glamour boys," said Dorrit. "Remington was one, you know. It is true that she isn't exactly the domestic type, but I'm not so sure that's what you ought to have anyhow. You've got

that craving for excitement and adventure; but it might be better for you to get them vicariously through her, in return offering her a shoulder to cry on when she's feeling tired or defeated. I'll think it over, and possibly sound her out, and let you know what I've decided, well before the cruise is over."

She started off briskly, reverted to say: "Did you ask her where she was last night when the excitement started?"

"No," said Mr. Humble, with sudden spirit. "And what's more, I don't intend to. I've made mistakes enough in that direction, Miss Bly."

Dorrit nodded sage agreement. "You're learning," she said complacently, and hurried off to deal with some other of the numerous affairs that always seemed to be demanding her immediate attention.

Mr. Humble strolled, so shaken by the thing she had suggested that he almost forgot about the murders. But he was reminded by the appearance of Mr. Stentson, wanting to talk to him.

The man showed the effects of anxiety and sleeplessness. His thin, lined face had a grayish pallor, and he gave the impression of one continually looking over his shoulder, stalked by a nameless dread. To be sure of privacy, he and Mr. Humble took chairs to the extreme forward end of the promenade strip. There the high sun was reflected with such merciless severity off the cabins' outer walls that everyone else was avoiding it. But Stentson seemed indifferent to heat and all else in his preoccupation with what he had to say.

"Belle is better now, but still very nervous," he explained. "I expect she will be until we're off this ship. The shock last night was a severe one, and maybe you'll understand why if you'll hark back to what I told you a few days ago."

"I remember that," Mr. Humble said.

He recalled what the other had said about Mrs. Stentson's first husband, Axel Renning, who had vowed a weird, occult revenge. Fantastic then, the tale seemed to have a dreadful plausibility now.

Mr. Stentson produced a large wallet. From one of its compartments he selected, with the deftness of a man consulting a well-kept filing cabinet, a small, faded photograph. Obviously he was a man of neat habits. Even now, when his distress might have given him an excuse for untidiness, he was dressed carefully as ever in a well-pressed gabardine suit of conservative cut and pattern, with a starched collar and knitted tie. He was the only man aboard who had not long since forgotten that he owned a hat.

He handed the photograph to Mr. Humble. "Here. This is a picture of Axel. It will tell you a lot more about him, I think, than anything I could say."

Posed in the rigid attitude favored by photographers of a past generation, the photograph did have the naked honesty of a likeness made for a passport or driver's license. It showed, in full face, a man with a long narrow countenance, thin mouth, thin long nose, and a remarkably high and narrow forehead. Most extraordinary were the eyes. Faded though the picture was, and indistinct in many of its other details, those eyes looked out of it with an uncompromising intensity that revealed the fanatic—the unbalanced individual whose personality would just border on the insane.

Mr. Humble had the momentary feeling that he had seen the subject in the flesh, then realized that it probably was an illusion. He had seen the man not once, or here, he decided, but many times in newsreels and news photos. This man was the kind who spawned queer vicious creeds or senseless wars; who sang his hymns of hate, ignored, in parks and ramshackle board tabernacles

of healthy nations, or to heiling millions from the chancelleries of nations that were sick.

"I don't think I have to tell you that he made Belle very unhappy," Mr. Stentson was saying, in his patient monotone that still conveyed a hint of the indignation that must have persisted over all the years intervening. "I think you can see just from the picture that he would be a very mean and vindictive man. I told you he threatened to come back after death, to revenge himself on her. He wrote her a letter about it, a wild crazy thing, saying he would become a part of the cosmos and stalk her to her grave, from out of the astral plane—things like that. You can understand why the first murder aboard here upset her so, and this second one even more, especially since there had been more ghostwriting—astral writing, some of the spiritualists call it. She's been in a bad state of mind; and that's why I can't be sure about last night—whether she really saw what she thought she did, or was so overwrought that she may just have imagined it."

"I wish you'd tell me about that, right from the beginning. When she left you, just where she went, who she may have seen on the way—all the details. It may be important," Mr. Humble said.

Stentson's head nodded on his thin neck, like a heavy flower on its stalk, in acquiescence. "I'll try. Let's see. An hour or so after supper—dinner, I mean—she complained of feeling sick. Just a headache and an upset stomach, I guess, probably from the excitement, but it scared me. I went to look up Steward Bates."

"Why did you want to see him?"

"To find out if anyone else was feeling sick. I thought it might be something in the food. After what's happened aboard here, you think about things like that."

"Yes, you think about it," Mr. Humble agreed, feeling a retrospective uneasiness in his own stomach.

"He said no one else was affected. I talked to him a couple of minutes, maybe a little more, then went back to our cabin. Belle wasn't there, and I sat down to wait for her. I waited maybe ten minutes, then got up to look for her. It was right then that she screamed."

"Where were you at the time?"

"In the passageway, just outside our cabin door. If I'd been inside, I might not have heard her at all. I understand that no one else below decks did. I ran out onto the well deck, and got to her at about the same time as Captain Wren. We—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted Mr. Humble. "You say you heard the scream and ran out on deck. You went forward along the passageway, I suppose, to the door opening onto the deck and down the companionway. Is that right?"

"That's right," Mr. Stentson said.

"You didn't stop anywhere? Or even hesitate?"

"Why, no. Of course not. I was alarmed—" The other broke off, an intelligent comprehension showing in his mild eyes behind their glasses. "Here. I see what you mean. Yes, I suppose I must have hesitated. I heard the scream, and it was Belle's, but it was hard to tell just where it came from. I must have stood there a moment, figuring that out."

"How long is a moment, Mr. Stentson?" The other looked bewildered, and Mr. Humble explained, "I ask because I hesitated too, for the same reason, but I couldn't say how long exactly. Not in seconds or fractions of seconds."

"Well," Stentson said, but foundered on that.

Dorrit had been right, Mr. Humble saw, in predicting difficulties in getting accurate testimony. Men's senses refused to register things in neat mathematical quantities. That factor of time was important here, he felt. Why, he didn't know. He was following intuition only,

sure that if he could get that incident on the well deck into proper focus—measured correctly—he might have something worth looking at. But it had to be fine, split-second measurement, and he couldn't pin Stentson down to that. He couldn't even pin himself down to it.

He tucked that unsatisfactory conclusion into the back of his mind for possible future reference, and tried another tack. "Mr. Stentson, when you rushed out to find your wife, who was there with her?"

"Why, Captain Wren and the lookout—that young sailor. He got there, from the bridge, about the same time that I did."

"He came right on the heels of Captain Wren?"

"I don't know. I suppose so. Then you came, of course."

"And you saw no one else? In the passageway or on the forecastle head?"

"No. I don't say there couldn't have been someone. But I was upset. I was looking for Belle, and not noticing much of anything else."

Mr. Humble nodded absently. He had the feeling he had had once or twice before in questioning people: that he had missed something, or permitted something that might have been of importance to pass unchallenged. He tried tracking back over the conversation, but it still eluded him.

He said, "Now I wish you'd tell me about Mrs. Stentson. Start right from the beginning, when she left her cabin. You've talked to her about it, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes. We've been all over it three or four times. But I still don't see—"

Stentson stopped to remove his gold-rimmed glasses and wipe them, as if he thought that might help him to see it. He put them back on with deliberate care, and then folded the handkerchief precisely as a diaper, put-

ting it back into the breast pocket of his coat with three neat points protruding.

"Well, here," he said. "She started out to get a breath of air. She looked in at the salon, but Miss Bly and some others were there, making a lot of noise, so she went the other way, to the well deck. She stood there a while by the port rail, and then she heard a voice—Axel's voice—speaking to her. He said, 'Belle! Belle!' She turned around—and there he was."

In spite of the heat and Mr. Stentson's quiet monotone, Mr. Humble felt a chill go through him. He said in a voice not quite steady: "You mean that Axel really stood there? In the flesh?"

"That's what she says. You can call it hallucination, if you want to. Her eyes are none too good, you know, at certain ranges, and her nerves were on edge. But she is sure she both heard and saw him. It's exactly like the other times."

"Those two other times you told me about before? Once at Des Moines, another time in New York?"

"That's right. I wasn't with her either time. Not right with her. Then, by the time I had her calmed down, and could look around, there was nothing to see."

"Do you think there really was something to see? That it wasn't just her imagination?"

"I used to think it might be just imagination, until lately—until these murders. But they aren't imagination, Mr. Humble. Two people have died; and then there are those notes, talking about an astral hand."

Mr. Humble nodded, his mind going on to his next question. It was one that he disliked asking, because he knew that whatever the answer, it would be disturbing:

"Mr. Stentson, are you quite sure that this Axel Renning did die? Had you any proof of that?"

"I see what you mean," the other said. "I've thought about that myself. I went over it all in my mind last

night and this morning, trying to think we might have been mistaken all this time. But I couldn't convince myself."

Mr. Stentson took out his wallet again. With fingers that trembled a little now, he found another document and handed it to Mr. Humble. "There it is. A photostatic copy of his death certificate, showing that Axel Renning died twenty-four years ago, at Red Lake, in Canada."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TWENTY-EIGHT HOURS NOW. SO THOUGHT MR. HUMBLE, dining with Captain Wren, and digesting his host's last remark, that the *Vagabond* at her present good rate of speed would get into San Pedro well before midnight of the following day. Something up to twenty-eight hours to crack the case, save himself from disgrace and Ginnie Rowe from trial and conviction in the newspapers.

On the Captain's desk were radioed inquiries from three of the press associations. They were trying to be fair. They asked facts that they could use instead of surmises. But if facts were not forthcoming they would have to use surmises, and Mr. Humble could guess about what those surmises would be. They would have been the same that he would have made himself if he hadn't known Ginnie so intimately, and they would condemn her forever in the public mind.

Along with them were more messages from the police

of Los Angeles and the Canal Zone. The latter were hot on the scent of murder now and aggrieved that facts had been withheld from them. The Los Angeles police, less choleric, said merely that detectives would meet the ship at San Pedro and that Captain Wren should take all possible precautions against anyone escaping from it.

That exasperated him. "Precautions? Against a ghost —a man dead for twenty-four years? If we're to believe Stentson, that's what it would amount to."

"I'm not so sure that we have to believe him," Mr. Humble said. During the hours that had elapsed since his conversation with the other, he had had time to assess it better. "This matter of death—you're entitled to say positively that a man is dead only under a special set of circumstances. You ought to have seen and identified the body yourself, beyond a doubt, and you ought to have the word of a physician or other duly qualified person that death is present in it."

"But that's what a death certificate is. A statement signed by a physician—"

"Not this one. There was no M. D. after the name of the man who signed it. That in itself might not be so important, since a body—some body—must have been found, to justify a death certificate. But here is the real point. At Red Lake, Canada, in that year, there was quite a little gold rush. I'm indebted to Miss Bly for that information. She remembers it."

"I wasn't aware that she was old enough to remember that far back," the Captain said, with faint irony.

"She isn't, of course. But she remembers lots of things that predate herself—she remembers everything she ever read or heard. Well, in a gold rush, all kinds of strangers come into a place. Few know the others very well. Now, suppose a man wanted others to think he was dead. Mightn't it be possible for him to come forward and identify some dead stranger as himself? That has been

known to happen, many times, in similar circumstances."

"I suppose you're indebted to Miss Bly for that pearl of information too?" the Captain said.

His tone held a sneer. Mr. Humble reddened, but answered sturdily: "Yes, I am. It's one possible explanation. I'm not saying it's the only one. I'm not even insisting that Axel isn't dead. But I do say the proof isn't as conclusive as the Stentsons seem to think it is. Let's try to forget it for the moment, and go at things from another angle—look for one tangible thing that may have great significance."

"What's that?" The Captain was sharply interested, his eyes intent over the rim of his coffee cup.

"A ring. A big wrought-gold ring of special design, that Axel always wore. Mr. Stentson told me about it, described it so well that I think I'd know it anywhere."

The Captain put down his coffee cup very precisely into his saucer. With the instinctive caution of the old seafarer, he nudged the saucer over against the table's storm board, raised slightly against the mild rolling of the ship. Here, well up the Lower California peninsula, they were encountering choppy waters, along with a northerly wind that reminded them they were out of the tropics and facing back into the winter they had fled twenty days before.

He said, "I see what you mean, I think. If anybody aboard is wearing a ring like that, we'd certainly want to ask him some questions."

"He might not be wearing it. But he'd have it, I think. It's associated with some strange little mystic cult to which he belongs. The symbol of the order is a palm wreath around a blazing beacon. Axel had his initials worked into his ring, so there would be no mistaking it for someone else's."

Captain Wren nodded his grizzled head. His thick brows were puckered; he was thinking busily. "All

right. We'll look for it. The passengers first, of course, starting with Flavius. I looked in on him this morning, you know."

"Did you get him to talk?"

"He talked," said Captain Wren. His voice was mild and even, but on his face showed for an instant a gleam of the savagery Mr. Humble had seen in it the night before. "He was glad to talk before I was through with him. There are ways to handle stubborn fools like that, you know, Mr. Humble. Unfortunately, we're so hedged about with rules and restrictions that a captain can't be master of his ship nowadays, not in the sense that he was in the old days. But with lives at stake I figured I was justified in forgetting my manners, for once."

"What did you find out?" asked Mr. Humble, not very steadily. He was thinking that if the Captain found out about his own deception, he might feel justified in forgetting his manners again.

"Nothing of any great importance, unfortunately. He had an alibi for last night. He was in the men's bathroom with young Jack Werner when the scream sounded. As for the rest of it, he's just a cheap little mountebank, scared to death because he fears Serena's death will involve him with the California police. I'll go over his cabin with a fine-tooth comb tomorrow, and if I find anything, I'll let you know, of course. But here's something we may have been overlooking, Mr. Humble. So far we've been giving all our attention to the passengers, but what about the crew?"

"Do you think any of them might be reasonable suspects?"

"I wouldn't know. Aside from my mates and the engineer and Bates, I hardly know them at all. Aboard ship, Mr. Humble, there's a bigger gulf between the captain and his men than there is between a general

and the privates in his army. And the same goes for them and the passengers."

"I know. I was thinking of that just last night. I've been aboard here nearly three weeks, and I couldn't give you an accurate description of one seaman. I've never really looked at any of them."

"I might arrange to give you a look at them—a professional look, you might say. I could have lifeboat drill tomorrow, one for the men off watch in the morning, another for those off watch in the afternoon. Some you'd be able to eliminate immediately as too young or too old. The few who do fall within the age group to which this man, Axel, would have to belong—forty-five to fifty, I'd say—you'll want to look over carefully. Quarter their faces, so to speak."

"Do what?" said Mr. Humble.

The Captain looked at him in some surprise. "Maybe I got that wrong. Maybe technically it's called something else. But you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes. Yes, of course," said Mr. Humble, making a mental note to look up Dorrit and find out what he really did mean.

"I've been looking over the crew's papers," the other went on. "There aren't over two or three who seem to come within that age bracket, though you can't tell just from papers. I'll point them out to you at the drill tomorrow."

"Here's something even more important than age," Mr. Humble said. "Do you know—would the men's papers show—whether any one of them had been born in Iowa, lived there until he was twenty-six or twenty-seven, then left it about twenty-five years ago?"

In the act of refilling Mr. Humble's coffee cup the Captain paused to look up over the urn in a startled way. He said, in a tight, careful voice: "Well, yes. There is one."

"Then that's the man I'll especially want to see tomorrow."

"You've already seen him," the Captain said, still speaking with that unnatural caution. "It's not one of the men. It's my mate, Mr. O'Hollihan."

Mr. O'Hollihan. He who had said he had been born in Brooklyn, but whose papers said he was born in Iowa. Sitting by himself in the salon, a little later, Mr. Humble contemplated a mental image of the first mate with a growing despair. He doubted that however you looked at it, whether by quartering or any other method he might be presumed to know as a detective, that pleasant ruddy Irish face could be matched with the face that had looked out at him from that photograph.

And yet, people's faces did change. There were, for example, the Werners, who had married in haste and then hadn't even known each other at the railroad station three years later. Three years. Twenty-five years could alter people beyond all recognition.

But, said his writhing mind, the face of Axel Renning hadn't changed. Not if he were to believe Mrs. Stentson —not if there was anything to her story at all. Each time she had seen it—fifteen years ago at a circus in Des Moines, seven or eight years later in New York, and then last night—the face had been recognizable. Like everything else connected with this mystery that fact seemed to contradict all the others, so that none of them added up to anything.

At a table across the room Ginnie Rowe and the young Mr. Hearn and the Werners were playing cards—the Werners were beginning to get around and notice other people a little, now. Ginnie was being extravagantly attentive to the young officer; and Dorrit, coming in presently with Arthur and Laura, had a comment to make on that:

"Ginnie may be a ball of fire behind footlights, but she's certainly hamming this," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Humble, in sincere bewilderment.

Dorrit, lustrous in a blue evening gown, sat down by him. In all the world there is nothing lovelier than a blonde in blue. Arthur and Laura went on to watch the card game.

She chose not to answer him directly, saying instead, "I've been giving her and you a personality analysis to determine how well mated you would be. I tested each of you with a standard set of questions, and arrived at a surprising conclusion."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Humble. He burned, of course, to know what that conclusion was, but he chose, perversely, to seem indifferent. "I may be just forgetful, Miss Bly, but I don't remember that you ever asked any standard questions of me."

"Oh, it wasn't necessary. I knew you so well that I could anticipate your answers to everything. For instance, who would get breakfast at your house on Sunday mornings, if you were married?"

"Why, I don't know," Mr. Humble floundered. "I suppose I—well, I rather like to cook when I have nothing else to do."

"That's just what I answered for you," Dorrit said triumphantly. "And the answers to everything else were as much a foregone conclusion. With Ginnie I wasn't so sure about several things, so I quizzed her at dinner, though of course she never dreamed what I was getting at. The result is a personality picture that gives you exact foreknowledge of the success or failure of any marriage you may contemplate. It can't miss."

Again she waited expectantly, but again Mr. Humble chose to be coy. He said, "Miss Bly, there is one standard

question I've been wanting to ask you for a long time. How, in a few short years, could anyone acquire so much knowledge as you? You seem to be an authority on everything."

"It's not so tough," said Dorrit. "Quoting Thomas Huxley, who is almost as quotable as Shakespeare, any literate person can become the second greatest authority in the world on any conceivable subject just by spending one day in the library. The difference is with me that I don't have to go to a library. I remember everything I ever saw or heard, so it's all right there on tap whenever I want it."

"I can believe that, Miss Bly. And now, while we're on the subject of memory, maybe you can remember something about quartering faces. It's a way of looking—"

"I know all about it," she said, of course. "Haven't you ever happened to notice the way a plain-clothes man or even some harness bulls look at you? They don't look at your face as a face. I mean, they look at separate parts of it. They cover up all the other parts while they look at just one section at a time."

"Cover them up? How?"

"Why, mentally. They're trained to it by laying down squares of cardboard over portions of the faces in rogues' galleries and then looking at essential things in the area left uncovered. They don't look at eyeglasses, mustaches, beards, or fleshy contours. They look at the eyes, the bone structure and basic proportions—the things that can't be disguised or changed, that don't change much with time."

Mr. Humble began to get excited. "I'm glad you told me that. I'm going to have a chance to look over the crew at lifeboat drills tomorrow. Now I'll know what to look for."

"Don't expect too much. It takes years to get proficient in looking at faces in that way. Who thought of this drill? Did you?"

"No. Captain Wren. And he told me something else that may be important."

He related what the ship's master had said about the mate, and she commented: "Well, that's something to think about. Now if you should happen to find a ring like the one Axel wore, in Mr. O'Hollihan's quarters—"

"You don't mean that I should search his cabin?" he asked, chilled. But she went on implacably:

"You could do it with least risk tomorrow night, when everybody will be at dinner here in the salon. I've talked Captain Wren into letting me handle the arrangements. It will be a kind of homespun version of the Captain's dinners they give on the big liners the last night at sea. Mr. O'Hollihan will be there too, so you should be reasonably safe from interruption. Only, remember one thing, Humble. From now on, watch yourself."

"What? Watch?" said Mr. Humble.

"You're getting pretty warm, on this manhunt, you know. I think you'll have it all figured out before we dock. And maybe there's someone else aboard who thinks so too."

"You mean—the murderer?"

Mr. Humble was trying, but that voice of his would give him away. The words came out as a hoarse croak.

She patted him affectionately. "That's really why I'm giving the dinner—to allow you to announce your solution in the grand manner. You'll have everybody assembled there. Not only the passengers, but the crew as well—any of them you might single out for suspicion at tomorrow's boat drills. It will be a chance for them to pick up a little change, acting as waiters."

She patted him again, then looked over at the card

table. "Well, I guess I'd better lay off now. I've needled her enough. Any more might be overdoing it."

"What? Needled who?" said Mr. Humble.

Dorrit eyed him with a tolerant pity. "Haven't you noticed? She's actress enough to register something she doesn't feel, maybe. But neither she nor any other woman ever got good enough at it to cover up what she does feel. Not a thing like jealousy, anyhow."

"Miss Bly, you're being absurd," Mr. Humble said, though now that it was pointed out to him, he did realize that Ginnie had been talking too much, laughing too stridently, too blatantly flirting with the young Mr. Hearn—in short, showing every symptom of the thing Dorrit had ascribed to her.

Dorrit nodded her golden head, in sage confirmation of his thought. "I've seen grade-school girls who had more finesse than that."

She rose, but lingered to ask: "Don't you want to know my conclusions about your chances for a compatible marriage?"

But Mr. Humble did not answer. Ginnie had risen too, quite hastily, to go out toward the lounge deck, on the way giving him a look about as subtle as any grade-school girl's first effort, and he incontinently followed her. After all, there are some things that a man has to find out for himself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FOURTEEN OR FIFTEEN HOURS NOW. SO THOUGHT MR. Humble, again awakening late, though this morning time was not quite his first thought. In the moment he had lain between sleep and consciousness he had lived over again his hours on the after deck with Ginnie, the night before. They had answered quite adequately that question about compatibility.

It was a relief to learn from Steward Bates, at breakfast, that no one else had died in the night. Everybody, in fact, seemed in excellent health and tolerable good spirits. Even Mrs. Stentson was up and about on the promenade strip with her husband.

Mr. Humble spoke to them in passing, but did not stop. Illogically attired in thin slacks and a heavy red woolen sweater, for warmth, he strolled until Captain Wren summoned him up to topside for the boat drill.

Theoretically, all passengers were supposed to participate in these drills, though no skipper in his right mind would have dreamed of trying to enforce the regulation on any American ship. The exercise was carried out with only one boat and with Mr. Humble as the only lay witness.

In the detail of off-duty sailors that Mr. Hearn summoned up from the forecastle for assembly on the after deck were two men whose apparent ages might have approximated that of Axel Renning. One was a seaman

named Swenson, another a fireman named de Graf. Neither, according to his papers, was a native of Iowa.

"Understand, that doesn't rule them out," the Captain cautioned. With Mr. Humble he stood a little way off, watching the young second officer coerce the men into a ragged double rank. "Half the seamen of that age probably are traveling under papers not their own. Now things are stricter; but I can remember when you could always pick up some broke A. B.'s papers for a dollar or two."

"Then I suppose you'd assume his name? And his background as well?"

"While at sea, at least, you would. Either man could have been born Smith or Jones—or Renning—and been brought up almost anywhere."

Mr. Humble settled upon the tall, stalwart Swenson, attired in the dungarees and pea jacket that seemed the standard uniform for seamen and firemen alike, and tried quartering the man's face. He was ably aided by the Captain, who kept the men standing still under pretense of giving them instructions, but even so, the undertaking was unexpectedly difficult. To cover mentally parts of a face while you looked at the other part, ignoring everything but bone structure and basic proportions, did take training and experience. Desperately though he tried, Mr. Humble saw nothing but a middle-aged Scandinavian sailor, with no resemblance to the young fanatic who had looked out at him from that photograph.

He had just time for a glance at de Graf, a darker-skinned, thinner man with a brown mustache and intense eyes, before Captain Wren concluded his talk, and the men fell to their work. Two pulled pins out of the blocks at fore and aft ends of the lifeboat, permitting them to swing down flat upon the deck, out of the way, while others stripped off the boat's canvas cover-

ing and worked a hand crank that turned its davits outward, so that the boat cleared the side of the ship. They would have liked to quit at that, but the Captain insisted that they test the fall ropes by lowering the boat part way.

He turned to Mr. Humble: "Like to ride it down?"

Remembering Dorrit's warning, Mr. Humble hesitated. But he felt shame when the Captain preceded him, climbing into the boat's stern sheets.

Mr. Humble got into the bow. Some of his apprehension must have lingered, showing in his face, for the other grinned, in his sparse, tight-lipped way, and jibed:

"You can swim, I hope?"

"N-no," said Mr. Humble. He had been afraid of water ever since one of his dragon aunts, with theories about child raising, had tossed him off the deep end to sink or swim, at the age of three. Mr. Humble had sunk.

But luckily, he was not required to swim. The boat descended easily, its movement regulated by a sputtering donkey engine, until the Captain signaled a halt. A rope ladder was lowered, and he and Mr. Humble got back up quite handily.

They lunched together in the Captain's quarters, and the ship's master showed him more of the radio messages that had come in. One news association was demanding confirmation or denial of rumors that Ginnie Rowe had confessed the murders. The other, with a leaning toward the bizarre, wanted data about Flavius and the ghost-writing.

"They'll make a circus of us," the Captain growled. "The ship will get a reputation as a ghost carrier, and I'll never get another passenger aboard—I'll be lucky to even get a crew."

Yes, thought Mr. Humble; and he himself would be

lucky if he ever got another client, and Ginnie if she ever got another job. Good reputable business houses didn't want their audits handled by a man with a coast-to-coast reputation for falsehood, or play producers want actresses suspected of poisoning another producer because she didn't like the contract she had signed.

He said, suddenly decisive: "I'll tell you what to tell them, Captain. Say that if they'll just hold off a few hours more, until we dock tonight, we'll have the facts for them. The complete story and the murderer."

Captain Wren lifted a piercing glance to him. "The murderer, Mr. Humble?"

"I give you my word I'll have him for you by then." In for a penny, in for a pound, thought Mr. Humble, and tried to look as a last-dollar gambler should look, iron-faced, inscrutable; though under the Captain's eyes, it wasn't easy. The ship's master had his hell-ship look again; he would be a bad man, it was plain, with whom to break an agreement.

From the after deck Mr. O'Hollihan beckoned peremptorily when Mr. Humble went back outside. Assembled by the starboard lifeboat was the other half of the crew, all with the same sullen look as their first officer. This drill, unusual for a ship's last day at sea, had cut into their rest time.

In the group was one man of an age to interest Mr. Humble, though his short stature seemed to eliminate him as a suspect—Axel had been well over the average height. As an excuse for studying him the drill would have been a failure anyhow, since the mate wasted no time with a lecture, setting the men immediately to work. Only with the boat ready to be lowered, he seemed to remember Mr. Humble's presence, and turned on him.

"Get in," he said.

It was a command, and a surly, dogmatic one. Mr. Humble got in.

Even before he had gotten well settled into the bow, the thing happened. But some premonition of it must have touched him, for, in the act of seating himself, he paused to look around with that strange clarity of vision that seemed to be an attribute of alarm. He saw the mate gesturing the man at the donkey engine to start easing off the fall lines, his ruddy, round, snub-nosed face sullen, his eyes fixed on Mr. Humble with what seemed a personal animosity. Mr. Humble saw too the stolid sailor, Swenson, leave off puttering around with some paint work, to watch. And, with the boat starting to lower under him, unsteadily, with complaint, like an ancient elevator, Mr. Humble saw in the bridge wing Captain Wren and the young Mr. Hearn, and, looking up from the lounge deck, Ginnie Rowe and Dorrit and Mr. and Mrs. Stentson.

He saw them all with an enormous, etched clarity, so that every feature, every detail of their appearance was impressed upon his memory. And then the lifeboat was lurching under his feet. Its bow rope snapped, its nose pitched down. One of its spare oars, too lightly lashed, came loose and flew at him like a projectile, striking hard against the calves of his legs.

Thrown against the coaming by the bow's downward plunge, Mr. Humble was knocked completely off balance by the blow. He went overside, and the water's surface pinwheeled under him, along with the surface of a sky malevolent under scudding gray clouds, then reached upward to strike him like a brutal fist.

Stunned, he never had any clear recollection of what followed. He sank, he knew, tasting a great deal of bitter water; he rose and clutched at something that clutched at him in turn. Then a giant hand was clawing

at him to pull him down again. But before his senses left him entirely he saw something enormously exciting to him even in his peril: he saw, imprinted on the retina of his own mind, the face of Axel Renning.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I DON'T KNOW WHO IT WAS—WHICH MAN," HE SAID TO Dorrit. "I can't attempt to explain it. All I know is that it was one of the faces I saw so clearly just before I fell."

"And you saw it just like the photograph?" she asked.

"Exactly like it. The same gaunt lines, the thin, cruel mouth, the eyes. Especially those eyes. Fanatic's eyes—or a murderer's."

He sat propped up with pillows on his bunk, in dressing gown and his best pajamas of cerise silk, talking to her alone. At any other time he would have been afraid of scandal, but his new status as an invalid seemed to make it all right, even with the door closed. Everybody else had called, in the three or four hours since he had been fished, half drowned, out of the sea with a life belt one of the sailors had tossed down.

To his astonishment Mr. Humble found himself pegged as a hero, for no apparent reason. He suspected it was because people were grateful for giving them something more to talk about.

Ginnie had stayed with him nearly an hour, leaving only, with dignity, when Dorrit came. Plainly she regarded Dorrit as a rival, and that blond Ulysses had

done nothing to discourage the notion. Mr. Humble wished he had not been actively sick from time to time so that he could have cut a better figure in this pleasing situation. He had the melancholy conviction that no other like it would come his way again.

He went on, groping for something that would seem to make sense: "That doesn't sound reasonable, I know. To say that I saw Axel exactly as he was in a photograph taken twenty-five years ago seems fantastic. But still, I can't persuade myself that it was all hallucination."

"I don't think so either." Dorrit was unusually grave and well-mannered, for her; perhaps trying to match her personality to her dress, which was black and commodious, in a definitely dignified way. "You were looking for that face. You had it impressed on your subconsciousness so firmly that in a moment of crisis you saw it as such, looking beneath all its superficial aspects. That's psychology."

Mr. Humble accepted the explanation, in lieu of anything better. "The thing I remember most vividly is the eyes. And eyes, I suppose, are the one feature that can't be disguised, that won't change much through anyone's life. But why can't I remember whose they were?"

"Maybe because you don't really want to. Your biased conscious mind rejects the conclusion that your more dispassionate subconscious has formed, until some moment of great tension or crisis, when the latter takes command."

Mr. Humble accepted that, with reservations, and decided to change the subject. "By the way, what happened, anyhow? I haven't had a chance to find out."

"The fall rope at the bow of the boat was frayed or cut, so that it broke as soon as the defective portion passed through the davit. That threw you into the water, and you'd have drowned if that sailor hadn't made such a lucky cast. The life belt settled right over your

arms while you were threshing wildly, so that he practically had you on a hook."

She rose; a smallish girl, actually, but so beautifully proportioned that she looked tall. "Well, I've got to get on with my preparations for the dinner tonight. For a tub like this, it's going to be a gala affair. There'll even be champagne, of the cheaper brands. A cocktail party, starting at seven, will precede it. That will be your chance."

"My chance for what?" asked Mr. Humble.

"To search Mr. O'Hollihan's cabin. Remember? It's the first to the right off the passageway to the forecastle in the poop structure, aft. It won't be locked."

"How do you know?"

"No seaman ever locks a door aboard ship. I've got Mr. O'Hollihan's promise that he will be at the cocktail party, so you shouldn't be disturbed."

She patted Mr. Humble's thin shoulder maternally. "But do be careful. Remember, a man's home is his castle, and that means his room or cabin or any other place of his temporary or permanent abode. Numerous statutes, including the fourth amendment to the Constitution, give him the right to be secure in it and in his papers and effects against searches and seizures not supported by a warrant; and he may defend it even to the taking of the life of anyone attempting to invade it—45 Utah Reports, 308; 134 Indiana Reports, 46. In other words, Mr. O'Hollihan could beat you to a pulp or even kill you if he caught you there, and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it."

On that cheerful note she went out, leaving him to a chilled contemplation of what was ahead for him. For the detectives of fiction through whom he had lived dangerously, breaking and entering had been quite a routine performance. Nobody ever seemed to have told

them that the occupant could beat them to a pulp or even kill them, with impunity.

Through the rest of the afternoon he stayed propped up in bed, trying to think things out. Superficially, the murders seemed as much a mystery as ever, presenting nothing but a random collection of unrelated and even contradictory facts. Yet deep down, he felt, was something that had firmness and coherence; though getting at it was like trying for an apple in a tub of water with your teeth, as in one of the party games he had played as a child. You just thought you had it, and then it bobbed away from you.

Five bells were striking, for half past six, when Steward Bates looked in. To his astonishment, Mr. Humble asked for chewing gum. He held severe views about drinking to gain false courage, but he had found that a robust chew of gum gave him practically the same feeling of derring-do. And he needed derring-do for the adventure that lay ahead.

A half hour later, wearing a dark suit and soft-soled shoes, with three sticks of gum tucked into one jaw, he put his head out of the door experimentally. No one was in sight, and it was evident from the noise from the salon that the cocktail party had started.

He went aft circuitously by way of the cross-passage and the promenade strip. He met no one. Darkness, relieved only by the hooded glimmer of the port and starboard lamps and one distant beacon off the starboard quarter, had settled upon ship and sea. Mr. Humble groped down a short companionway from the lounge deck to the after deck, pausing under a cargo derrick to get his breath and look around.

The sea had quieted, lying flat and dark as far as he could see. The sky was scoured clean of the clouds that had obscured it that afternoon, though a thin mist lay between the ship and the distant, blurred lights of some

town—Tia Juana, he guessed, on the Mexico-California border. Somewhere on the ship, he knew, were vigilant eyes—of the helmsman, the lookout, and the watch officer, Mr. Hearn. But they would be all looking forward, not aft, at him.

He put still another stick of gum into his mouth, and, thus fortified, went on to the poop house. In its corridor a light burned, and from the far end he could hear voices, doubtless those of off-watch sailors in their forecastle. But remembering Dorrit's instructions, he did not hesitate, turning directly to the first door on the right and pushing it open.

The cabin was dark, of course. He felt for the light switch, finding it just where he looked first, in the same place as in his own cabin. The light revealed a room much like his own, only considerably more homey, cluttered with all those things a man accumulates when he intends to stay a while in a place, instead of merely using it in passing. There was a good big table, backed with photographs and littered with pipes and writing materials; a bunk glorified by a spread of Canton silk; a tall wardrobe, obviously handmade, against one wall.

These things all had a friendly, reassuring look. Yet he realized that they added to the difficulty of his task. With so much to be examined, he might search all night. So small a thing as a ring could be concealed anywhere: in the back of a picture, the lining of a necktie, the toe of a sock.

Well then, he told himself, he had to use his head; deduce the ring's most likely hiding place by exercising his reason, for a change. From his knowledge of the mate, he tried to estimate the other's intelligence, coming to the not wholly flattering conclusion that it might be about the same as his own.

All right, then. Where would he himself hide such a thing? First, perhaps, he would have the wild idea of

putting it in plain sight somewhere, because he had heard that the best hiding place is the most obvious one. But he wouldn't quite have the nerve for that, and he doubted that the mate would either. Nor would he try to conceal it too elaborately, because he would know that any really determined search would turn it up, and the fact that it had been so cleverly concealed would weigh against him. No, he would put it out of sight somewhere, but in such a way as to make it seem he attached no especial importance to the thing.

He thought that, and then he looked at the top of the wardrobe. Pushed well back from the near edges was a shoe box, and near the wardrobe was a straight chair with a firm metal seat. Mr. Humble stepped up onto it, and groped for the box.

As he had expected, it contained not shoes but a collection of odds and ends. Needles and thread, buttons, screws, nails, safety pins. And then, at the bottom, a ring.

The ring was large and heavy, made of wrought gold. Superimposed upon a device representing a blazing beacon, encircled with olive leaves, were the letters "A. R." Mr. Humble had just time to observe that when he was interrupted.

The door to the after deck, creaking open on rusty hinges, warned him. It could have been anybody, of course. Maybe if it had been anybody other than the mate himself, Mr. Humble would have done just what he did; though he always chose to doubt that, crediting himself with a sixth sense. He dropped the ring into his coat pocket, and put both elbows on the top of the wardrobe, wriggling upward to a precarious eminence upon it just as the cabin door began to open.

It opened slowly, without sound. A face, anonymous in the band of shadow between the lighted corridor and the lighted room, showed obscurely in the opening, ad-

vancing itself warily to acquire identity as the face of Mr. O'Hollihan.

Puzzled at seeing no one, he came on in, a big, ruddy man in a freshly pressed blue uniform, his head bare, his face dark with suspicion. In those cramped quarters he came so close that Mr. Humble could have reached down and touched him. But though he explored all the rest of the room, even stooping to look under the bunk, his eyes never lifted to the wardrobe top.

On a sudden thought he whirled and hurried back into the passageway, glancing both ways along it. Then he threw open the door to the cabin opposite, looked inside, and went on to look into the two other cabins. In a few moments he was back, but only to turn off the light and close the door. A moment later, the door leading to the after deck creaked shut behind him.

Until then, Mr. Humble's deportment had been admirable. He had not moved a muscle; he had hardly breathed. But the darkness threw him into a panic, and he came down off his perch with a haste and recklessness born of panic.

The light of the passageway restored some sense to him, and he stayed quiet a full minute or two before venturing to open the outer door and peep out. No one was in sight, and he hurried across the dark after deck up to the promenade strip and back around by the forward catwalk to his own cabin.

There he stood a while getting his breath back and looking at himself in the little bureau mirror. He was pale and disheveled, grimy from the dust of the wardrobe top; his eyes still bugged, in a frightened stare, behind their glasses. Yet, he felt fine. He felt better than he ever had before in all his life.

For virtually the first time in his life he had been in a dangerous situation that required him to make a crucial

choice, and he had chosen wisely. He had done things just right, to get what he sought and then avoid destruction. It proved that he could think fast and accurately when he had to, and he felt as men feel who have survived their first battle or seen their first child into the world; he felt that he had established his claim to being something of a man. When Steward Bates knocked to ask on behalf of Captain Wren if he was coming to the dinner, Mr. Humble answered with a decisive affirmative, facing with serenity the final ordeal of his adventure.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DORRIT HAD KEPT HER WORD, ASSEMBLING IN THE SALON not merely all the surviving passengers but, to act as waiters, those two seamen Mr. Humble had singled out that morning.

Lavishly festooned with colored paper, the lights all subdued with colored shades, the room had the garish brilliance of one of those basement bistros that say they are for ladies, too. There were even paper horns and paper hats laid at each plate at both of the dining tables.

It was immediately evident to Mr. Humble that everybody had been having a good time. The Werners tooted paper horns in his ear, as he passed them, and even Steward Bates, convoying him to a place at the foot of the Captain's table, had a flushed, slightly topheavy look. Only Captain Wren sat grim and silent, and in his

eyes, intent on Mr. Humble, was a look that Mr. Humble found disturbing. The thought came to him that the Los Angeles police by this time must have radioed their report on all the passengers, including himself; that his past at last must have caught up with him.

Once such a fear would have unnerved him. But just within the past hour or so he had discovered something. He had discovered that he was a part of the human race, with all the capacity of the race for fatuous error and with all its capacity for implausible achievement too. With a good appetite he ate his way through hors d'oeuvres and soup, a fish course, an entree of roast beef, a dessert course of chocolate mousse. Then while the steward and his two sailor helpers were handing around coffee and opening champagne bottles, the Captain rose to say:

"Mr. Humble has promised me that he would have the solution to our little mystery before we dock tonight. There are only a couple of hours left—I presume you've got it right here with you, Mr. Humble?"

Mr. Humble stood up. He fished the ring out of his vest pocket, and put it down on the table in front of him.

"Yes. Yes, I've got it," he said.

He spoke into an abrupt silence. Boisterous though most of the passengers had been a moment before, they had quieted at mention of the thing all of them were trying to forget.

Again, as in all his other moments of crisis, Mr. Humble was possessed of abnormal clarity of vision, so that he saw everyone in the room distinctly as if they had been arrested in movement and frozen for his deliberate contemplation. At the mate's table were Dorrit, Arthur, Laura, and the Werners, with Mr. O'Hollihan at the head, and so facing Mr. Humble directly. His eyes were

fixed with astounded fascination upon the ring. His wide mouth opened and closed soundlessly, and he half rose, then sank back again into his chair.

At the Captain's table, at the Captain's left was Flavius. He wore a rusty black sack coat over a silver blouse, and the red and white stones, too big to be genuine, in his plump white turban looked tarnished. His swart, hawk's face was immobile, but his jet eyes were unsteady. On the stumpy hand that rested on his wine glass was a ring identical except for the initials with the ring Mr. Humble had put down.

On the other side of the table were Ginnie Rowe and Mr. and Mrs. Stentson. Both the latter were dressed in their best: he in a rusty tuxedo, she in a stiff blue gown, off the shoulder at one side.

Ginnie sat where the most desirable or notorious woman aboard any ship usually does sit, at the Captain's right. She had chosen to present herself tonight as a plain bird, in a high-necked, dove-gray wool dress with red trimmings, that made her look her age or even a little younger—that made her look about eighteen.

The Captain said, "You've got it, Mr. Humble? You mean you know the murderer?"

"No," Mr. Humble said. "No, I don't know that. Not yet, Captain. But I do know everything that is essential to figuring out who he is. The facts are all in now. It's possible to draw up a balance sheet and see what the totals indicate."

"Balance sheet? Totals?" the Captain said. "You talk like an accountant, not a detective, Mr. Humble. What did you say your occupation is?"

No doubt about it now: the Captain did know the truth about him. But Mr. Humble was past being crushed by that knowledge. He said quite steadily: "Maybe so. Maybe I do sound like an accountant. But let me remind you that mathematics is behind all good

straight reasoning. It's especially important here because we've been handed a doctored set of books. Everything the criminal has shown us is just what he wanted us to see, not what was actually there. Once we've disposed of these misleading factors maybe we can get at the truth. Maybe it will be very simple and obvious."

"Do you think you could see it even then?" asked Captain Wren, openly sneering. But Mr. Humble was unmoved:

"Yes, I think I'll see it. To start, let's dispose of the notion that there was anything supernatural about the two deaths and the writing afterward. To proceed at all, we've got to accept certain rules or axioms; and one of them is that when a person is dead he's lifeless. He doesn't change position; he doesn't write notes saying he was murdered. This leaves us with two possibilities. One is that neither Serena nor Mr. Remington was dead when first found."

"We've been all over that," the Captain interrupted testily. "They were dead. I'll stake my reputation on that."

"And I'll take your word for it. So that leaves us with only one possible explanation. The writing found under Serena's hand, and Remington's too, was done before their death. I don't know when, and I don't know why they should have done it. But it had to be that way."

Ginnie spoke up excitedly: "I know! It was that murder game. The game we played in here before Serena's death—don't you remember? Somebody would tell a mystery story, and then the others would try to guess the solution—whether it was murder, suicide, or natural death, and if murder, how it was done."

"Oh, yes. I remember you and Mr. Stentson told me about that. But I don't quite see—"

"We *wrote* the solutions—don't you see? I don't know what either Larry or Serena put down. But it seems like-

ly they'd guess something supernatural—an astral hand, you know. Their minds ran that way."

"Yes," said Mr. Humble. "Yes, that would account for it. The murderer could have gotten hold of what they wrote, afterward—what did they use to write on?"

"We all used just anything that was handy. Serena used one of those pads she always carried, and Larry used a notebook."

"That would explain it. The murderer would have seen in it a way to confuse us—or maybe he even planned the game with just that end in view. Miss Rowe, who suggested that game in the first place?"

The eager light faded out of Ginnie's face. She flushed violently, and Mr. Humble guessed the answer even before the hawk-faced Flavius spoke:

"I can tell you that, sir. Miss Rowe herself suggested it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"WELL," SAID MR. HUMBLE. "WELL, ALL RIGHT. THAT'S INteresting, though hardly conclusive. Let's leave it a minute, and look at another aspect of the case."

He had made a mistake, he saw; not merely putting Ginnie in a bad light, but taking a wrong turn at just the moment he had been close, very close to something important. To get back to it now he would have to retrace his steps and try from another direction.

Again he had that feeling of having bitten into the

truth without being able to hold it. To retain it, he saw, he would have to get it firmly up against things that were more commonplace and substantial, as you would capture an apple with your teeth by nudging it firmly up against the side of the tub in which it floated. His discovery of that simple principle as a child had made him a nine-day wonder. It had been his only claim to distinction.

This he was thinking with the reasonable top part of his mind. But another part, the intuitive subconscious, was recoiling in alarm from the thing it vaguely perceived. It was too monstrous. It was more terrible than anything that had preceded it because it was still to come, it was poised over them all like a madman's hand.

He pushed that thought as far back into his mind as possible, and went on, with determination: "Now, we've seen that a resort to the supernatural isn't necessary to explain either death. And looking at the deaths themselves, they are unremarkable enough. Both were caused by common poisons, apparently the first that came to hand; one by an overdose of sleeping powders, another by oral induction of a fluid used in photography. Either or both might have seemed accidental or a suicide except for the attempt to make them seem of supernatural origin. That proves the existence of a mind that planned them—of a murderer. At first glance, it looks as if he made a mistake in doing this. But I don't believe it was a mistake. I think he knew the risk he ran, that the supernatural angle would be the first thing to be doubted and investigated. But he had to do it that way to achieve his purpose."

Mr. Humble looked down at the ring on the table, nudging it around absently with one finger. It had told him a great deal already; it was suggesting something

to him now that he tried to get into words, so that he could hold it up and look at it:

"That purpose—it's what's made these deaths so puzzling. Not motive, understand. There always was plenty of apparent motive. I've seen that all along, spoken of it. Serena was killed because she knew or guessed something embarrassing to the murderer, and said so in a veiled way at that séance. Remington was killed because, knowing her, he guessed the secret too, and perhaps was using it to amuse himself—he was that kind. But the end purpose—the reason why the deaths were staged in just that way—to understand that, we've got to understand the murderer. He wasn't a normal person, you see, but a schizophrenic, a dual personality. And that gave him a duality of motive, too. Mr. Stentson—"

The man looked up, startled. Mr. Humble said, "I'd like to ask you for a little more information, if you please. If you consider it too personal or painful, you can stop me. But I wish you wouldn't. I wish you'd help me, so that we can get to the bottom of this thing."

Mr. Stentson looked at his wife; she nodded slightly. He answered, his voice not quite firm, but his faded blue eyes resolute: "All right. We're old people now, Belle and I. Old enough not to have to worry about our reputations, I guess."

"Then what I'd like is a little better picture of Axel—Mrs. Stentson's first husband. Not that photograph, though that's revealing too. But a better idea of what he was like inside, what he believed and thought—the essential man, the thing that doesn't change with time."

"The essential man?" Mr. Stentson spoke slowly, carefully. "Well, that's not easy. But I guess you could get close to it, put it into one word—fanatic. He had those views that he called religious, though they didn't correspond with those of any real religion on earth, about sin and punishment. To him everything that was fun

was sinful. I think the one thing he never forgave, the time he came to see Belle about the annulment, was that he heard her laughing—enjoying herself. In his eyes that was mortal sin, and had to be punished."

"And he decided it was up to him to punish it?"

"That's right. He couldn't trust God to do it, you see. God might have been unreliable—God might even have had different ideas. So he had to play God, himself. He'd always had these theories about the supernatural. He'd hammered them into Belle's head during the three terrible years she lived with him, and that suited his purpose just right. He—shall I tell them what he said in that letter he wrote you, Belle?"

She nodded acquiescence, and he went on: "I can quote it word for word, that letter. Like Belle, I've lived with it for twenty-five years. He wrote her that he was going to die. It had all been revealed to him, he said. It was Providence, making him the instrument of his vengeance for her sinfulness, so that he could return after death to kill her. He said, 'You will not die at once. You will have warnings, many of them; deaths of vile creatures close to you, steeped in iniquity like yourself. Do not try to escape it. From the living there might be escape, but never from the dead. I shall be universal, omniscient, all-powerful—a part of the soul stuff of the cosmos. You will see me sometimes, hear my voice. You will die a thousand deaths before at last I decide to kill you.'"

Stentson's voice drooped and failed, but then resumed quietly, unemphatic as ever: "Right after that—only a few weeks—we got word that he was dead. You can see how that affected us. How every minute of every day—how any time that anyone we knew passed on—"

"Yes, I can see how that would be," said Mr. Humble. "And I can see too what kind of man it would be who would condemn you to a fear like that. He would be a

man who not only would murder the one he thought had wronged him, but others. He would murder them for two reasons. First, he would murder them because they got in his way, because they threatened him with exposure as Axel Renning, who didn't die at all, who still lives and is aboard this ship—a rational reason, if any reason for murder can be truly rational. Then the other reason: that's harder to understand unless you keep in mind the kind of man he was."

Mr. Humble picked up the ring with thumb and forefinger and tried it idly, for size, on the second finger of his hand. It was much too big, of course, though that didn't mean anything in particular. A ring too big for him might have fitted perfectly almost any other man there.

He went on, "Another reason why he murdered Larry Remington and Serena and planted those murder notes was to increase the terror for the real object of his hate—to make her die a thousand deaths before he struck her down. So, you see, there have been two murders aboard this ship because there is to be a third. And that murder has to take place here and now, right while we're talking about it."

CHAPTER TWENTY

THAT LAST, AWFUL SENTENCE WELLED UP FROM SOMEwhere deep in Mr. Humble's mind, flowing out of him without conscious volition. He was aware of the import of what he had said only when he saw its effect upon his audience:

White faces, startled eyes; shock so profound that it stopped breath and movement. Mrs. Stentson crumpled in her chair, starting to slide off it until supported by the arm of her husband.

Captain Wren spoke a word of sharp command to Steward Bates, who hastened to open the brandy bottle he indicated. The steward poured a wine glass full, and gave it to the fainting woman, who sipped it weakly. Color returned to her cheeks, though her eyes retained their terror.

The Captain reverted angrily to Mr. Humble: "Is it necessary for you to try to frighten everybody to death? That last remark—it's senseless."

"No, it isn't," Mr. Humble said.

He struggled for more exact and plausible expression of the thing he felt. It was the thing that had been in the back of his mind all the time he had been talking; the sure foreknowledge that the crimes in themselves had been incomplete, that they had to be capped by another. He had evaded seeing it before because it was

monstrous and terrifying, but he had to see it now; he had to bring it out where everybody else could see it too.

He said, dropping his words down, small and thin, as if from a great height into a panicked stillness: "There is to be another murder, and it has to be committed here and now. I don't know just how the murderer plans to accomplish this. Probably his plan is quite clever. Maybe it is so clever that he thinks he can carry it out right with all of us watching him, even looking for it and forewarned. We know from what he has done already that he is a shrewd monomaniac who not only has planned this crime for years but has the wit to improvise brilliantly when opportunity offers. And yet, I think he made some mistakes that may enable us to defeat him. One—the biggest, maybe—was with this ring. He shouldn't have put it where he did. Of all possible places he chose the one place that would convict him as surely as if he had signed a confession."

This was the thing he had been nibbling at before, when he first started talking. It had escaped him then, but he had it now, so firmly that he knew it never would get away again. He had the answers—he had the murderer.

A sailor came in just then, and spoke to Captain Wren:

"We're in the channel, sir. Mr. Hearn said you asked to be told."

"Tell him I'll be right up," the Captain said, explaining to the assembly: "The outer Santa Barbara channel. An hour out of San Pedro. Go on, Mr. Humble. Give us the murderer. Whoever he is, I promise you he'll be handled properly."

The contempt that had been in his eyes was all gone now. They were hard and small, flickering over the faces before him, as if to anticipate Mr. Humble's answer.

Mr. Humble said: "I'll show you, not tell you. I'll show

you how it couldn't have possibly been anybody else. Let's go back to that first murder. It's the only one we need to consider, because it set the pattern for the second, and was to have patterned the third one, too. Let's look again at a puzzling aspect of it that we've left unexplained. We've shown that the murder note was written by the victim herself, when she played that murder game. We've shown that the murderer got hold of it and saved it, probably with the idea of using it even then in his mind; the séance scene just forced his hand, scared him into committing the crime sooner than he had intended—before the ship got past Panama and the Zone police. Substituting the pad on which the note was written for the one on her bed table wasn't much of a trick. It could be done in an instant. But that wasn't all. He had to put a pencil in her hand, turn the body over, and make it look as if she'd written it after death. That couldn't be done in a hurry. It couldn't be done while people were in there watching. That leaves us with only one possible conclusion. It was done afterward, when the cabin was supposed to be empty; while two people, according to their own statement, were outside, talking. . . . You, Mr. O'Hollihan, were one of them."

The mate's eyes looked back into his, angry and defiant. "Sure I was. I told you that. What of it?"

Mr. Humble looked at the ring again, rolling it around with one finger tip. "It was a big lie, Mr. O'Hollihan. There weren't two people out there, able to see anyone who went in or out. I know that now. I knew it the minute I found this ring in your cabin."

The mate sprang up, his square jaw set in hard lines, his eyes stormy. "So you were the one in my cabin tonight? Snooping there—"

"Yes, I was in it, Mr. O'Hollihan. And I found this ring. It was in a shoe box, along with a lot of other odds

and ends of yours, on top of your wardrobe chest. That was a big mistake, putting it there, Mr. O'Hollihan. Not your mistake—but Axel Renning's."

"Axel . . . ?" The mate, in the act, it seemed, of hurling himself bodily on Mr. Humble, was checked, blinking his bewilderment.

"Axel Renning, yes. It's he who planted it there, of course, to involve you. He knew I was going to search that cabin, and he figured my mental processes quite well—he figured that might be about the first place I would look. But still, it was his big mistake, because it happened that you came back while I was still in the cabin, to look for the prowler you knew was there. I don't know how you knew—"

"I saw the light. I was suspicious," the mate mumbled. He was still confused, uncertain.

"All right. You saw the light and came in to investigate. You looked everywhere except in the one place you would have looked if you'd been Axel Renning—if that ring had been yours and you had hidden it there. You didn't look on top of the wardrobe, or you'd have seen me. But there is something else you didn't do, Mr. O'Hollihan. You didn't tell the truth—the whole truth—about your movements after you found Serena dead. You said you and Captain Wren left when Bates did, and stood outside the cabin door talking. But you didn't. Not all the time Bates was gone. Not for seven minutes."

"Well," said the mate. He stammered it, his red face growing redder. "I did leave for a minute, to go to the shower room. Maybe a little more than a minute. Maybe two or three."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"I would if you'd been alone. But I didn't want to go into that in front of Miss Bly. Seeing the body made me sick. I was sick to my stomach. I didn't like to talk about that in front of a lady."

"I see," said Mr. Humble. He too might have been the same. He too mightn't have wanted to go into that in front of a lady.

He said, "That changes things a lot. It left not two men there, but one. It gave him plenty of time to slip back into the cabin and fix things up as we saw them. You would have thought of that, Mr. O'Hollihan, if it had been anybody other than the man it was—I would have thought of it. But neither of us suspected him, though logically I guess he was the one we should have suspected first. He was the one with the most opportunity, you see. He could go anywhere, do anything, ask any kind of questions, twist things around to suit his own purposes, without arousing suspicion. He could play God, omnipotent, omniscient, just as he said he would in that letter he wrote twenty-five years ago. Aboard ship, you know, the captain almost is God—a law to himself—"

And there Mr. Humble stopped talking; looking again into the face of Axel Renning. Prepared for it, he was able to see it better now, more analytically, and fix and localize it. The shaggy head, the lumpy nose broken in some fight, the fleshy lines—these were irrelevant, these had been blurred and altered by the years between. But the eyes, with their merciless fanaticism, had not changed; and it was they which gave to the face before him identity with the face he had seen in that photograph.

But it was not that which froze Mr. Humble's tongue. It was the sick realization that he was too late. For the eyes were fixed not on him but on Mrs. Stentson, and in them was a look of maniacal triumph. She had risen, slowly, unsteadily. Shaken by some intolerable spasm of agony, she swayed a moment, frail, blue-veined hands clutching her abdomen. Her choked cry of pain and

terror mingled with the wild, exultant laugh of Captain Wren.

"Good work, Mr. Humble!" he jeered. "Fine, shrewd reasoning. A third murder, you said—committed right while you were talking about it. Well, there it is!"

Mr. Humble leaped for him. But fortunately for him, others anticipated him: the two sailors, the mate, good, uninhibited rough-and-tumble fighters, who subdued their man even in spite of the well-meaning efforts of Mr. Humble and Steward Bates to get in their way.

That over, Mr. Humble had a chance to look around and observe something astonishing. Mrs. Stentson, collapsed into the arms of her husband, apparently mortally stricken, suddenly had returned to life. With mild, myopic eyes, she looked anxiously to Dorrit and Ginnie Rowe.

"Did I do all right?" she asked.

"Duse as Camille was never better," Ginnie assured her. "You missed your calling, Mrs. Stentson. You should have been an actress."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"IN A WAY, IT WAS GILDING THE LILY, THAT ACT OF MRS. Stentson's," Dorrit admitted to Mr. Humble. "You had him trapped without it. But we couldn't be sure when we planned it that you would do so well."

"Then you've known for some time that Captain Wren

was the murderer? You and Ginnie and Mrs. Stentson?" he asked.

Still a little dazed, not merely from the excitement of that denouement, but from being made the intermittent target for some hours now of photographers, reporters, and numerous real detectives, Mr. Humble sat with her in a room otherwise uninhabited on one of the upper floors of the Los Angeles city hall. His ordeal with the police seemed to be about over, and it looked as if he weren't going to be put in jail or beaten to a pulp or even lectured severely. Indeed, everyone had treated him with considerable deference, saying he had handled things admirably. It did seem that nothing succeeded like success, especially in Los Angeles.

Dorrit answered, "No, we didn't know it for sure. Ginnie was on the forepeak that night when he came up behind Mrs. Stentson and scared her so. It was so dark that Ginnie couldn't be sure, and her evidence never would have held up in court, but it did give us something to work on. I reasoned, just like you, that there was to be another murder, and that it had to take place at that dinner, so I switched brandy bottles on him. The brandy she drank was perfectly good, but the bottle I swiped while pretending to be trimming the salon was poisoned. The toxicologist here says it was loaded with enough laudanum to have killed fifty people."

"But how did you know what bottle would be poisoned?"

"It was a triumph of reasoning. I just wish some of those people, like my employers, Mr. Claremore and Mr. Kaplan, who for years have stood lost in admiration of my phenomenal memory, but are always saying I have little or no powers of ratiocination, could have been there to follow my mental processes. I put myself in Axel Renning's place and reasoned out just how I would

proceed to dispose of Mrs. Stentson. Her husband was making it a practice to taste everything that was brought to the cabin for her, so it had to be done at the dinner. With so many people watching, I couldn't slip it directly into the food or drinks, as I'd done with Serena and Larry Remington. So I had to lace one of the bottles beforehand, one from which only she would drink. Brandy would be ideal for that purpose, as it is an orthodox stimulant for fainting persons, and some excuse for administering it to her was sure to come up. You see that, don't you?"

"I see it now. But why didn't you tell me all this before? Why didn't Ginnie?"

"Because you're a man. And no man can keep a secret," Dorrit said. "You might have let something slip to Captain Wren prematurely. Besides, you had to have the thrill of achievement. This way, you did it all yourself. You'd have hated us if we'd deprived you of your big chance to show what you could do."

"Not hated you, exactly. But this is better." Mr. Humble stirred uneasily, reminded. "Um—Miss Rowe. I haven't seen her since we left the ship."

"Oh, her," said Dorrit carelessly. "Now that you remind me, I seem to remember she said something about meeting you someplace, here in town."

"Where?" Mr. Humble had to say.

She rose and cocked her golden head at him, her eyes too wide and innocent. "Now, isn't that embarrassing! After all my talk about my memory, I can't seem to remember. Of course sometimes the memory can be refreshed with a gift, or reminder. It doesn't have to be so much—orchids might do it. After all my services, which obviously are not going to be rewarded with the detective job I had anticipated, I feel you owe me something."

"I do owe you something, Miss Bly," said Mr. Hum-

ble. "Not just orchids, not just for your services, but what every man owes to any charming woman of his acquaintance for brightening a world that otherwise would be wholly drab and pointless. His hand, his fortune, his heart's blood."

Her eyes came open wider, growing bluer and soft as an April sky. "Boy!" she breathed. "No wonder Ginnie fell so hard. You just keep that up, and it not only will save you a lot of arguments. It will save you money too. Who would want orchids, after that?"

She bent to kiss him warmly, then went out. About to follow, Mr. Humble stopped, seeing Ginnie enter through the same door through which Dorrit had gone.

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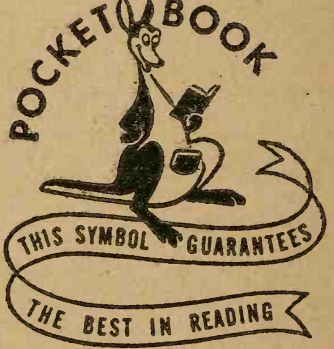
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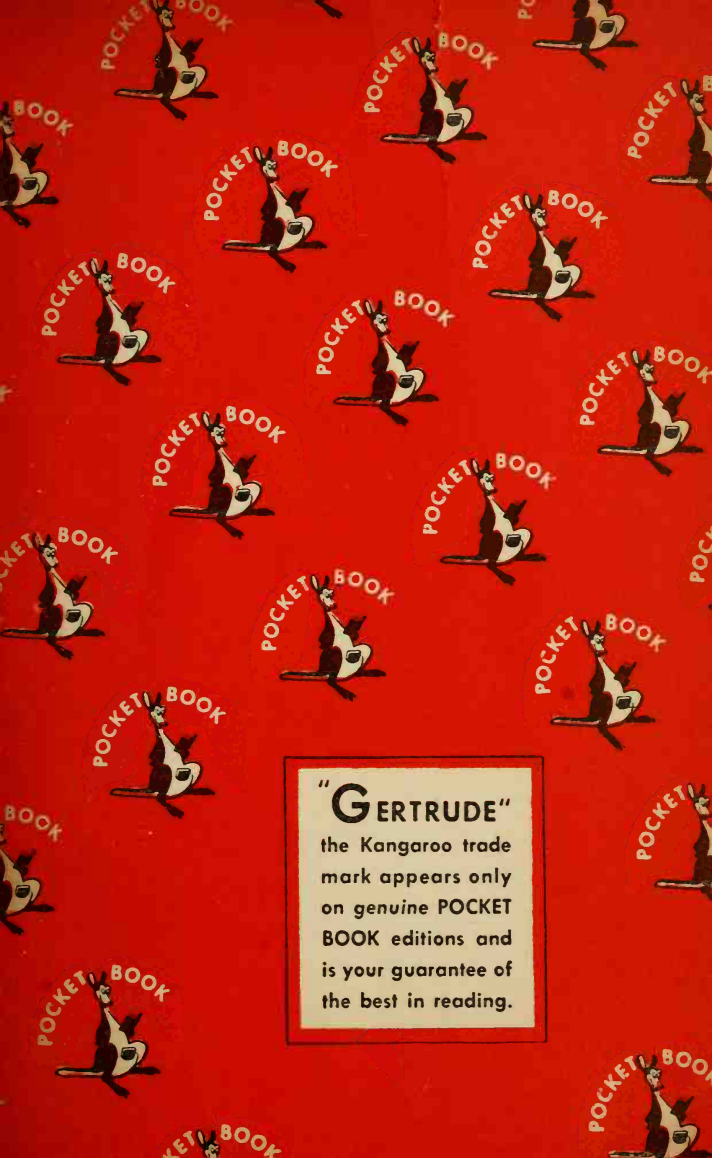

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