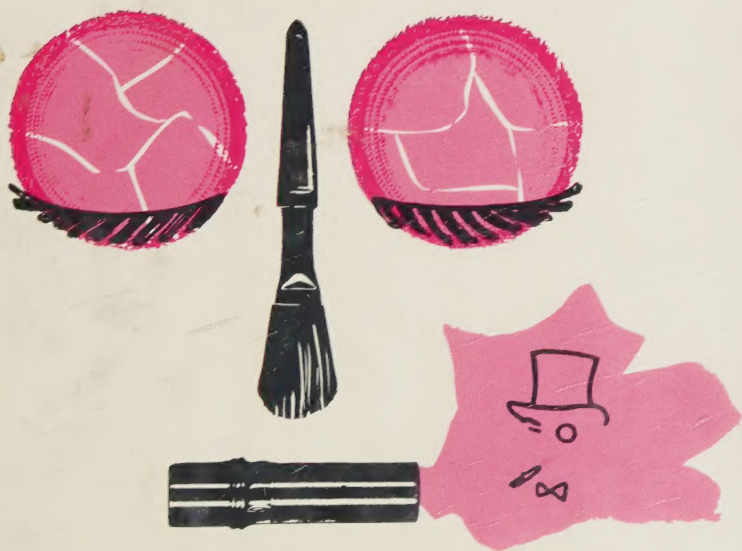



A WALKER MYSTERY

Make-Up for the TOFF



John Creasey



MAKE-UP FOR THE TOFF

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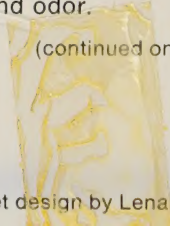
Agatha Bell had almost no waist at all. In the sunlight, by the Thames, she dabbed at her Peach Bloom powder with a tiny puff. Noticing the trace of raspberry juice near Agatha's young mouth, the Toff bent forward in his silver-grey flannels. Then came the horrible cry, drawn out across the river, the cry that meant only death.

Agatha's face began to rage; and the Toff could not stop her pain.

Irritant by irritant, the story connected with the river murder went back to Silver Queen cosmetics. And to the stunningly composed Griselda Vance, whose likeness haunted the ads of Silver Queen . . . whose husband had been killed . . . and who alone knew the whereabouts of the missing Adam Bell.

At Wembly, Edge's face went talc-white. The signs of glass wool in the powder the Toff had brought were unmistakable. Two women, Edge was reminded, had died after putting on lipstick. The fateful crystal gave off an almond odor.

(continued on back flap)



(continued from front flap)

The cosmetician of the killer lipsticks was at large. Someone had brained lady-killing Jimmy Vance. Paul Vance was ready to strangle Griselda. And the lipstick works at Silver Queen were glowing, blood red.



Walker and Company
720 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10019

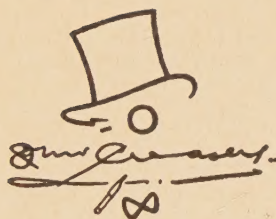
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MAKE-UP FOR THE TOFF

BY
JOHN CREASEY

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DEACCESSIONED



WALKER AND COMPANY
New York

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All the characters and events portrayed in this story are fictitious.

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Author's Note

I am most grateful to Mr. G. Kempson-Jones for his patient and expert help on the many matters of make-up mentioned in this book.

John Creasey

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1

A KISS ON DEMAND

SHE was young and she was lovely, and she gazed upon the Toff. Both were content, judging from their expressions. For if the Toff—occasionally known as the Hon. Richard Rollison with his habitat in Mayfair, W.1—had passed the first bloom of youth, he was still on the right side of forty, and as gallant and as gay as most people half his age.

“Rolly,” said Agatha Bell, “isn’t it divine?”

“In the colloquial meaning of the word, I couldn’t agree with you more,” murmured the Toff. “Let us count our blessings. You start.”

She had that kind of blue in her eyes which the sun and the sky give to the sea near Naples, and is sometimes captured by makers of beautiful china. Neither the sun nor the makers of china could match the gleam which appeared suddenly; a kind of mischief born out of high spirits.

“I’m here,” she said, “with you.”

He did not smile, blink, wink or otherwise change his expression. His eyes were grey, some would say steely, exactly right for a man with dark hair in which the grey flecks were almost unbelievable; for the truth is that he had a young face.

“Sunning ourselves on the banks of the Thames,” he said, “the river rippling by, a punt within reach, cushions for our heads. Your turn.”

“We’ve had a wonderful lunch,” Agatha said, almost dreamily. “Raspberries and cream. Do you know, I think I prefer raspberries to strawberries. Such a lot of cream, too, it can’t be good for my figure.”

He glanced at her waist.

She lay on her back, reclining on two of the brightly coloured pillows brought from the punt and placed upon the grassy bank. Her dress was of pale green with huge, lemon-coloured flowers on it, and was not belted. In that position a young woman's figure was not likely to look at its most notable, but it was clear that her waist was ludicrously small.

The Toff sat on the grass with his back against a willow, the furry branches of which kept the glare of an unusually fierce July sun from them. His silver grey flannels, cream-coloured shirt with short sleeves, open at the neck, not only fitted but suited him. He moved, lazily, until he was on one knee by Agatha's side. He looked down into that fresh, lovely face. His eyes shone. He raised his two hands, lean and brown and strong-looking, and without a word, placed them at her waist. She could not have guessed what he was trying to do, but she did not stir, nor look in the slightest degree perturbed. His fingers curled round her waist, and squeezed. The laughter in his eyes brought an answering gleam from hers. He squeezed more tightly.

"Draw a deep breath," he said.

She drew in a breath.

"Into your lungs, not your tummy!"

She tried again.

His fingers tightened, and she held her breath until, quite suddenly, he raised her slightly from the ground, so that her waist was clear but her shoulders and her feet still touched the grass.

"I knew it," he said. "I can span your waist with my hands, my Ag, you can eat as much cream as you want to." He let her go, gently, and she panted a little, but looked delighted. When she was able to speak quite easily, she said :

"Did they really?"

"What?"

"Did your fingers touch?"

"Tip to tip."

"But that's marvellous! Show me how big my waist is, then." The blue eyes were demanding, and the Toff

formed a circle with his hands, the tips of the two middle fingers and the tips of the thumbs touching. "As tiny as *that?*"

"I did have to squeeze," he reminded her.

"But you actually did it. It's wonderful! I shall always be able to boast that the great Toff squeezed the very breath out of me!"

"Who would you boast to?" he inquired, as if idly.

"Oh, almost anyone," Agatha declared. "It wouldn't matter who, everyone's heard of you." She reclined with her hands still behind her head, studying him with great deliberation, until she went on: "Do you know, you must be the most handsome man I've ever seen."

"You're so young that you've hardly started noticing men yet," the Toff informed her. "Don't——"

"Don't be modest," interrupted Agatha, "it just wouldn't suit you. I mean it, anyhow. Some people have all the luck—money, good looks, a skin that tans a nice brown and doesn't go lobsterish, and in addition you can eat all that cream without having to worry about your waist-line. It *is*, you know." She gave a smile that was nearly seraphic.

He sat back on his haunches, nicely poised.

"Is what?"

"Divine. Weren't we doing something?"

"Counting our blessings?"

"Oh, yes. That," went on Agatha, looking at him straightly, "is one of the things I didn't expect to find in you."

"Blessings?"

"No—thinking of counting them. You've a serious side, haven't you, you aren't just a man of action and what did Father call you? Oh, I remember—the last of the true gallants, a throwback to the Regency."

The Toff chuckled, not without genuine pleasure.

There was a lot to be said for being here, having nothing to do but laze, looking upon her loveliness, and being told pleasant things in a matter-of-fact and convincing way which marked Agatha Bell as a remarkable

young woman. Looking at her, it would be easy to believe that she wasn't much more than sweet seventeen. She had a pale smear of raspberry juice just beneath her nose, her lipstick had run a little, and her cheeks would soon be shiny; the fact that she had not yet troubled to make sure that her make-up was in good repair was another pointer to both her temperament and character.

Yes, it was very pleasant.

She had called at his Mayfair flat that morning, ostensibly with greetings from her father, an old friend of Rollison's who was now in the United States. She had come back from New York, she said, and was staying for a few weeks in London before going to Shropshire, where the family had their home. Everything she had said had made it seem as if she had called simply because she had wanted to see him, and because her father had charged her with the mission; but he did not believe that was all. Beneath her manner there was tension, perhaps alarm.

He wondered when she would come to the point.

He also wondered who the man was.

He did not look up, and had shown no hint that he was aware that they had been followed from his flat in Gresham Terrace to the riverside house of his friends near Kingston, where he had borrowed the punt. Nothing he or Agatha Bell had done suggested that either of them knew that the man was still watching them. He was near the path on the other side of the river, hidden by bushes, and invisible except for those times when he peered across, to make sure that they were still there.

"Rolly," Agatha said, and used the name as if she had called him that since childhood, although they hadn't met until four hours and thirty-one minutes ago, "will you do something for me?"

Was this her moment of mingled confession and appeal?

Still on his haunches, and sitting with the patience and the ease of a Hindu, while looking at her almost owlshly, he said:

"If I can."

"Oh, you *can*!"

"Then if I will."

"You'd better," she said, and didn't move. The gleam of mischief had gone from her eyes. Her hands were still behind her head, her body slightly raised and beautifully relaxed, and the curves up and down from her tiny waist were really something to see. She had nice lips, none the worse for being a little short on lipstick, and the stain of raspberry juice made her look such a child.

"Will you kiss me?" she asked.

He had not expected that at all, and in fact he was beginning to wonder a great deal about Agatha Bell.

She did everything so well; she had the poise of an actress, as well as this girlish pose which might all be part of a general plan of action. He was not yet sure what the plan involved, but was certain that it would involve him; deeply. And it was a fact that when she did come to the point of asking what she really wanted, it would be difficult to refuse.

She didn't repeat the question, and didn't move; just looked at him, with a kind of naïve invitation.

He had never been more vividly aware of her youth and beauty, and it did not matter that there were nearly twenty years between them. She was woman, and he was man, and she was inviting him to have and to hold, to kiss and to—what? He felt the warmth of the afternoon about him, and there was a voluptuous rhythm in the hum of insects and the ripple of the water. It was easy to forget that they were being watched. Everything was easy to forget; including the fact that she was undoubtedly challenging him. For some reason he did not yet know, she was willing him to bend down and to kiss her; and she was old enough to know that one thing led to another.

Was that sweet innocence just façade? Or was she sure of herself, and of him?

He shifted his position, and her eyes narrowed but didn't shift their gaze. He was on one knee beside her. He leaned forward, and with the gentlest of movements lowered his head until he could touch her forehead with his lips. She didn't move.

Suddenly, he kissed her as he knew she wanted.

And Agatha Bell knew how to kiss back.

Slowly and deliberately Rollison drew away. It was one thing to tell himself that he was humouring her, but when he sat upright and took out a cigarette case which shone like the gold it was, his heart was pounding.

Something had changed in her.

She closed her eyes, and turned her face away, and for a few seconds he wondered if that were because she was disappointed or chagrined; no feminine mood could be easily judged, and she might just want a tumble, in which case he would be sad and sorry for her father, and not hopeful for her. He took out a cigarette and lit it. He stared at her, the profile now, and the gentle curve of her chin was lovely; like those of her figure, too. He let smoke curl gently into the air. He glanced, without appearing to, at the man on the other side of the river, who had parted the bushes and was looking at them.

Tensely?

Then, Rollison saw the incredible; a tear, squeezing itself between the girl's lashes, reaching her cheek, quivering. Was this also part of an act? Having failed to seduce him one way, was she trying another? It was extremely difficult to believe. He found his mood changing to one of compassion. She was in a highly emotional state, the more dangerous because she had been hiding it well.

How could he help her?

Abruptly, she sat up, brushed a hand across her eye as if to ridicule the idea that there could be a tear there, and she put out her slim hand.

"Give me a cigarette, please."

He took one from his case and put it to her lips, and then lit it. She drew too quickly, and it made her cough.

"Thank—thank you." She blew smoke out, fiercely, and looked at him through it. "And thank you for being all that my father said you'd be."

He put his head on one side, and raised one eyebrow, inquiringly, but he didn't speak. She wasn't in the mood for questions. He knew that he had been right, from the

moment of first meeting; underlying the simplicity, the gaiety and the beauty, there was severe nervous strain. Soon she would start telling him about the causes.

Whether she had studied the manner or not, she had the qualities of a shrewd, a clever woman. That 'and thank you for being all that my father said you'd be' really sparked his curiosity.

"He said you were *absolutely* trustworthy," Agatha went on, "the kind of a man a girl could spend a week-end with and still not know more than she did when she started." That came out almost defiantly. "They're *his* words."

The Toff's eyes were smiling.

"It would probably depend on the girl," he remarked.

She said: "Would it?" and blew smoke fiercely again, then started up. Something had caught her eye on the other side of the Thames, and the Toff was quite sure what it was. She was sitting upright against a tree, the cigarette in her fingers, and she stared across the water as if searching unsuccessfully for whatever had moved. But her manner had changed again. She began to breathe more shallowly, as if fear had come across the cooling river and touched her, chilling the afternoon's warmth. The Toff expected her to say what she had seen; but when she looked away, she didn't talk of it, said nothing to suggest that she had seen the man.

"Agatha," he said quietly, "what is it you want? How can I help you? What made you come?"

She said quietly, clearly: "I came because I am afraid, and because I think you can help me." She paused, putting her cigarette to her lips; she had a perfect sense of timing, whether natural or acquired. "It isn't easy to explain. I feel so—so lonely, helpless, frightened. You see—Daddy isn't in New York. He left, the week before I did. He left our apartment one morning two weeks ago, and said he'd be back for dinner. He didn't come back. I haven't seen him since. I know he returned to England, and I came after him but—I can't find him. I don't know where he is or what he's done or why he's gone. I'm just—scared."

2

THE CRY ACROSS THE RIVER

It was very quiet.

After Agatha had spoken, she looked away from Rollison, but he did not think that she was taking notice of the man on the opposite bank. Tears filmed her eyes, and she didn't fight them, now. The secret was out, and he did not doubt that it was the cause of her fears; it seemed reason enough.

"So he left New York two weeks ago," Rollison said.

She sniffed. "Yes."

"Why did you come home to look for him?"

"I know *he* came home. That's one of the things I can't understand, that's so—hurtful." She sniffed again and then swung her body round and almost shouted: "Not that it matters a damn about being *hurtful*! I wouldn't care how much it hurt if I could only be sure that he's—he's all right."

Rollison said slowly, as if with deliberate cruelty: "Do you mean, if you could only be sure that he's not dead?"

She looked at him with sudden stillness, her wide-set eyes rounded.

Abruptly, she said: "Yes."

"What makes you even begin to think that he might be?"

"I don't know," she said, "I'm not sure what to think. He—he was worried, too. He wouldn't tell me what it was about. I knew there was trouble of some kind, it began before he left England and got worse after we reached New York. Within a few days he obviously wished he hadn't taken me with him, that was so clear that—well, I offered to come back alone. He just brushed

the suggestion aside. He didn't seem to be able to think about anything, except his worry. Do you know," Agatha went on, very slowly, and with a small voice, "in the ten days that we were together in New York, he grew *old*."

"How old is he, Ag?" asked Rollison, easily.

"Sixty-two. But you know what I mean. When you last saw him he didn't seem an *old* man, did he?" She was challenging.

"I'd have said, in the middle fifties."

That pleased her.

"There you are! And he almost seemed to be getting younger before we left, he was doing so well. One or two of his pet ideas had come off and he was almost skittish. Honestly, I would prefer to spend an evening with Daddy, when he was in a gay mood, than with any of these solemn young asses there are about these days. And if they're not solemn they seem to take it for granted that a girl will—but never mind that. Daddy was happy, that's the simple fact. To tell you the truth I *think* there was a woman."

She flung that out, then tossed her half-smoked cigarette into the water, and got up. She moved slowly and easily, and when she stood upright, she was very erect. Any man's eyes would spark at sight of her.

"Not that I would blame him," she went on, abruptly. "It must have been very lonely, since mother died. What *can* it be like to live on your own after you've been married for thirty years? It must be intolerably lonely at times."

Rollison just nodded.

"I don't know whether he was in love with some woman or not," Agatha said, "but if I thought that a woman had made a fool of him, I—I—I'd——"

She broke off, and was silent until she burst out: "Will you help to find him? *Will* you?"

"I'll do what I can," promised Rollison, and rose slowly to his feet. "But I don't quite get the picture, Agatha. If he disappeared two weeks ago, why wait until now to try to do something about it? And how do you know that he left New York for England?" Rollison could

have asked a dozen questions, but those two would do for now.

A movement made him glance across the river.

The man there had appeared, but had dropped out of sight again; the branches of the bushes were folding together. Just beyond the tow-path was a fence of new chestnut paling, and beyond that graceful beech and birch trees and a few oaks; between the heavy foliage the Toff could see the red tiles of a large house.

"A friend actually saw him at the airport," Agatha was answering. "I'd been to see everyone we'd met in New York, every man and woman I could think of, and then I met Jimmy Vance. Quite by chance." She used the short 'a' in Vance, American style, and the long English 'a' in chance. "Jimmy had been to Chicago, and had just come back to New York. I told him what had happened. He was flabbergasted, and told me that he'd been seeing someone off at Idlewild and actually saw Daddy in the waiting hall. They'd spoken to each other."

She stopped.

"Did Vance say what your father looked like?" asked Rollison. "Did he seem agitated, or——"

"He said he looked all right," Agatha answered flatly. "He—I mean, Jimmy—was with several friends, and I gathered they'd been drinking. Jimmy never could hold his drink. He hadn't taken much notice, but was absolutely sure that it had been Daddy. So were some friends he had with him—we checked closely. Once I was sure I couldn't do anything else in New York," Agatha went on, "I flew back, and made sure Daddy wasn't staying at his club. He once had a service flat, but hated it, and he's always insisted on me having my own place." She drew a deep breath, and finished miserably: "Well, that's the position."

"Not quite," said Rollison, firmly. "Why did you come to see me?"

"Surely that's obvious." Agatha was almost impatient. "You knew Daddy, you were old friends, and you're the next best thing to a real detective. So——" she started,

coloured furiously, and then said hurriedly: "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way! I meant next best to a Scotland Yard man, I—oh, you grinning fool, stop it!"

He was chuckling.

"It's nothing to laugh about," she said crossly, "I thought you'd have more feeling."

"Your fault," said Rollison. He was glad of the chance to lighten the atmosphere a little. "I was thinking how happy Grice of the Yard would have been if he'd heard you say that. So you came to me because I knew your father, and someone told you that I'm a detective——"

"Everyone knows that you are. You're the Toff," Agatha declared, as if that put all other matters beyond the need of explanation. "Look here, it is true, isn't it?" She was almost alarmed. "You have played at—I mean, you have been a detective, an investigator, a *private eye*. Haven't you?" Now, she was nearly storming, and that above all else told him how taut her nerves were. She had done marvels in holding herself together.

"Yes," he said hastily. "But why come to me, and not the police?"

"I don't know," answered Agatha Bell, and eyed him very straightly. He had the impression that she was determined to give him a truthful answer, that she wanted to be absolutely honest. "I don't *know*, but I just think it would be wise not to go to the police. It—it's a kind of feeling." She put a hand on her heart with the *naïveté* of a child. "I'm sure he wouldn't want me to."

"No reason at all?"

"No."

He glanced at the watch strapped to his wrist, wondering how best to handle her. He wanted the whole story, in as much detail as she could give, and he also wanted to try to reassure her.

"We'd better get back," he said, "it's after three, and we won't be in town until five. You can tell me the rest on the way."

"So you really will help?" She was eager.

"Of course I will."

"Rolly," she said, chokily, "find Daddy for me. Find out what happened. I—I feel so dreadful because I'm so helpless. Useless!" She fought against tears again, and then exclaimed: "I bet I look terrible!" She bent down and snatched up a white linen handbag, opened it savagely, and took out a slim compact and a lipstick. The compact was over full, when she opened it, powder flew out in a little, sweet smelling cloud. "Damn!" she exclaimed, "I filled it too full." She peered at herself in the mirror, and went on in a shrill voice: "Look at me!" She began to dab, tiny puff on to powder, powder on to face, and the powder flew and the breeze wafted the perfume to the Toff. It was the kind of picture he would like to keep for posterity. She patted away, and then pursed her lips, saw where the lipstick had run, scowled, and went through all the motions of make-up. When she had finished, she looked as if she had just come from a beauty *salon*. "Will I do?" she demanded.

"You'll do," the Toff said, dryly, "and don't ask me to kiss you again, or you'll be disappointed. Why didn't you tell me all about this when you came to the flat, instead of waiting until now?"

"I wanted—I wanted to get to know you."

"Why?"

"I wanted to decide for myself whether I could trust you," Agatha said downrightly. "Daddy said anyone could, but men are hopeless judges of other men."

Rollison chuckled. "Whereas you know the sex! Step into the boat, lady, next stop Kingston Towers, then——"

He picked up a cushion, tossed it into the punt, and stooped for the other. The picnic basket was already in, only his coat and her handbag remained. The punt, varnished a pale brown, was moored close to the bank, and it was easy to step in; it pointed towards the opposite bank and the hiding man.

Rollison gave Agatha a steadying hand.

"But mind you," he said, "there's a condition."

She stepped hastily back to the bank.

"*What's* that? Why didn't you say——"

"Why haven't you told me the real reason why you waited until we came here?" he demanded.

"But I have!"

"Only half of it."

"That's not true," she protested, her rounded eyes looking so bright a blue that it wasn't real. "Why on earth should I lie to you?"

"You forgot to mention the man."

"What man?"

"The man who followed you to Gresham Terrace, and followed us both from there."

"I don't know what on earth you're talking about," said Agatha, crisply. "No one followed me, I——"

She broke off, catching her breath, as if in pain.

The timing of the interruption could not have been better.

Until that moment, Rollison had been watching her closely, trying to decide how much of this was true; it all seemed to be. In her indignation she was very lovely; but it was the fear which sprang to her eyes that told him how raw her nerves really were.

A scream came from the other side of the river.

The first sound, sharp, shrill and frightening, affected them both; but that wasn't all. It grew worse. It became a screech, developing into a long drawn out cry, as of agony—and then suddenly it faded. There was a curious gurgling kind of sound, like *gug-gug-gug*; then utter silence.

Gradually, out of the quiet, there came a rustling sound, as of animals moving through the bushes.

That grew quieter, too; and then it was drowned in nearer sounds, for the Toff grabbed Agatha's arm and thrust her forward. She stepped into the punt and went, swaying, to the bows. He followed her swiftly, stooped down for the pole and thrust it against the bank. The punt shot out into mid-stream with bewildering speed, and before the pace slackened the pole was in again, and the Toff's lean body was thrust forward. They skimmed across the quiet river towards the silence which had taken the place of that awful sound.

Agatha, white and shaken, was sitting upright and staring towards the far bank. That was now drawing close, and the Toff plunged the pole in again and sent them shooting forward. As he did so, he saw two people appear not far from the spot where he and Agatha had sat; a scared young couple who had been among the bushes.

Agatha turned to face him; only her lips had colour, the scarlet of fresh lipstick.

"What do you think—it was?"

"I'll tell you in two minutes."

"Was it—a man?"

"One minute, fifty seconds," said the Toff, and thrust again. He didn't say that it could have been man or woman, or that although it had sounded unearthly, it was the kind of noise which terror could force from a human throat. He did not doubt that terror had caused the scream; and felt that he knew what had caused the final *gug-gug-gug*.

It was like being in the presence of death.

"One more," he said, and bent to the polie again. "Get up, will you, and jump ashore."

Agatha was nimble, and didn't falter. She swayed on the bank and went several paces up it. The Toff leapt after her as the punt ran ashore, the force of its pace taking it far enough up the bank to hold it. Agatha stared towards the spot from whence the scream had come, and Rollison took her elbow and hurried her forward until they were close to the bushes among which he had seen the man who had followed her.

"Wait here, Ag," he said, very gently, and gripped her arm, to make her understand that he meant what he said. Then he pushed the bushes aside, and stepped into a small clearing—and found that he had been right, for death sat here.

The man was young; no more than thirty.

It was the man who had followed Agatha Bell.

He had fair hair, now spotted with crimson, and one side of his face was that of a handsome male; the other

was that of a nightmare vision. The blood from the savage blow had splashed, and spots had fallen upon the newspaper, the greaseproof paper of some sandwiches, had actually soaked into the bread of a sandwich which was still clutched in the right hand.

The dead man was leaning against a tree, and some small pieces of paper were sprinkled about him. Some were white, some looked like pieces of a glossy photograph.

He must have realized what was coming, just in time to scream.

It mattered little who it was, for that would soon come out. The Toff was much more worried by the effect of this on Agatha. Such a sight could impress itself upon a young girl's mind and haunt her for the rest of her days; for this was *horror*.

He turned, and saw her parting the bushes. She was a yard or so to one side, and as he made to thrust her back, he realized that she could see only the uninjured side of the dead man's face; the man's body hid the blood and also hid the sandwich.

Agatha said, in a husky voice: "Why, that—that's Jimmy. Jimmy Vance."

3

RED CHEEKS

AGATHA's voice had an edge of tension, and she spoke as if she was gripping some object tightly, so as to stop herself from screaming. She could tell from the way the young man sat, and from the droop of his head, that he was dead; and probably she had felt that aura of death. Her breathing grew more shallow, and came faster, until she was almost panting.

"Agatha," said Rollison, quietly, "go to the tow-path, and shout across to the couple on the bank. Ask them to go and telephone the police, and then wait for me."

She didn't move, and was now really panting.

"And hurry!" Rollison snapped.

Agatha licked her lips, those brightly carmined lips, and turned unsteadily away. He wondered if she would faint, and watched her as she clutched branches and kept pausing; the river's edge was no more than twenty yards away, and it might have been a mile. Across the broad stretch of the river stood the couple, the youth with his arm round the girl's shoulders.

No one else was in sight.

At least Agatha had something to do; a struggle to make.

Rollison turned quickly towards the dead man. Death by violence was not strange to him, but this had an ugliness which touched it with true horror. The man was so young. The sandwich seemed to be clutched so tightly between those lifeless fingers. Flies buzzed. A piece of rusty iron, heavy, ugly and bloodstained, lay near; a weapon on the spot. The grass was flattened in places, there was a sprinkle of cigarette ash, but no ends; a careful watcher.

There had been no hope of chasing the killer; and unless there was something in the dead man's pockets, no clues that Rollison could follow.

From behind him, he heard a croaking kind of sound, and knew that Agatha was trying to shout, but hadn't yet found her voice; she would, soon. He went down on one knee beside the dead man, whose sports jacket lay open, showing the inside breast pocket; it gaped a little, as it would if his wallet had been taken out.

The pocket was empty.

His tailor was Webber, of Savile Row.

Rollison collected the pieces of paper—actually of a photograph which had been torn across and across. He handled them cautiously, placing them in his wallet. Then he looked round, quickly and expertly. There were places where the grass had been trodden down, and there was a patch of earth showing the faint impression of a footprint. He could try to find out where the killer had gone, or he could look here, for clues which would help him before the police arrived. He stayed. There were several spent matches and the ends of three cigarettes. He slid his fingers into the side pockets, and found only the ordinary things one might expect; and in the trousers pockets, only keys and some money.

Rollison stood up.

Agatha had found her voice, and it travelled clearly now.

"Please—please will you go and fetch the police and a doctor?" she called across the river.

There was a pause, and then the youth answered as if he were horror-struck, too.

"All—all right. Won't be—won't be long."

Agatha didn't answer.

Rollison left the dead man, and saw the girl turning from the edge of the river. She looked—lost. A little colour was back in her cheeks. There were no tears. She moved towards him as she might if she were sleep-walking, and he did not think that she knew that he was there. He did not call her, but the essence of her story went swiftly

through his mind. Her father disappearing, her search, her meeting at Idlewild Airport with Jimmy Vance, who couldn't hold his liquor, and some friends who were quite sure that Adam Bell had caught a plane for London; at least, for the British Isles. Her own flight, her visit, her 'test' of his own integrity—and the fact that Jimmy Vance had followed her, and been brutally murdered.

Had she known that he was behind her?

She was only two yards from the Toff when she stopped and started, as if suddenly aware that he was there. She rubbed at her right cheek; not at her forehead or her eyes, as he might have expected, but at her right cheek. When she took her fingers away, there was a slight red patch.

"They—they've gone," she said.

"I know. Nice work, Agatha." Her eyes had a dazed look but she didn't glance away. "Did you know that Jimmy Vance was following you to-day?"

She said: "I knew—I knew he did, in London," in a flat voice.

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"I didn't think it mattered."

"Do you know why he followed you?"

"Yes," she said, in a dreary voice, "I know." Her eyes were filmed with tears, and she put her fingers to her cheek again, and rubbed with a curious kind of insistence. "He—he has, ever since I got back. He came to see me, and—well, he's followed me. I—I did everything I could to stop him." Now, she rubbed at her left cheek, absently, and Rollison noticed that without giving much thought to the red patch on the other. "He just wouldn't leave me alone."

Silence fell.

"Why?" asked Rollison.

"I suppose you wouldn't understand his type," she said, and at the word she looked past Rollison towards the bushes and the sight they hid. "He couldn't help it, he—he was a lady-killer, he—oh, for heaven's *sake* use your imagination!" That was a welcome flash of spirit. "He pretended he wanted to—to look after me, but *I* know

what he wanted. How a married man——” she broke off, leaving that silence again.

“Let me get it straight,” said Rollison, quietly. “He pestered you, followed you everywhere, and wouldn’t stay away from you. Is that it?”

“Yes,” she said. “He wanted to stay at my flat, gave me all that nonsense about sleeping on the floor, said that he—he thought I was in danger.” She kept rubbing her cheek and staring at the bushes, and it was a long time before she went on almost fearfully: “*Could he—could he have meant it?*”

“What made you so sure he didn’t?”

She flared up again.

“Why don’t you listen to what I’m saying? He would say anything, do anything, to—to get his own way. In New York he was with a woman, he’s notorious for neglecting his wife, although how any man could neglect Griselda——” Agatha caught her breath, and then muttered: “I’m sorry if I shouted, I feel terrible. He is—he is dead, isn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“That scream——”

“We’re going to have trouble with that scream,” said the Toff, gently, “but it’ll fade, and you’ll forget it. So you knew Jimmy Vance pretty well?”

“Yes.”

“Socially?”

“In a way, he—he was——” she paused at the ‘was’ and gave a little shiver. “He was the son of Paul Vance, who owns Silver Queen—you know, the big cosmetics firm. He—Jimmy, I mean—he travelled all over the world for them. And Daddy often went with him. Daddy’s the ideas man at Silver Queen, he invents patent containers for powder and lipstick, and—well, he gets *ideas*. You knew he worked for Silver Queen, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s how Jimmy and I got to know each other. If Griselda——”

She broke off.

Rollison said, still gently:

"Go on, Agatha."

She was more likely to talk freely in this than in any other mood; and everything she said had to be looked at, dissected, analysed, like a specimen on a slide. Soon, there would be an end to this false calm. There would be police, doctors, the press, people, crowds; the peacefulness of the river would be blasted by the prying and the peeping. A single boat drifted past, with a middle-aged man at the oars, a woman and two children sitting in the thwarts, with one of the children holding the rudder rope and looking delighted. These all glanced towards Rollison and Agatha—and when the news of the murder spread, there would be boatloads of people, a milling crowd all trying to see the very spot where murder had been done.

Rollison had very little time.

"Griselda put up with it all, she didn't—she didn't want to admit their marriage had failed," Agatha said, at last. "If I'd been in her place I would have wanted to kill him. I would have——"

She stopped, as if suddenly understanding the significance of what she had said.

Then:

"Someone did," she breathed. "He——" she broke off.

"If he played around with women, a lot of men might have had cause to hate him, mightn't they?" asked Rollison.

"I suppose so, I—I only know he couldn't resist a pretty face, and he was so good-looking that girls easily fell for him." Agatha rubbed at both her cheeks with a sudden burst of angry energy, and exclaimed: "What on earth's the matter with me? My face is itching all over."

"Nervous reaction, probably," said Rollison, and didn't give that much thought, just noticed that her nose and both her cheeks had red patches; there was also the red patch where the raspberry stain had been. "How well did you know this Griselda Vance?"

"Quite—quite well," Agatha said.

He felt sure, then, that there was something she could have told him, but which she kept back. He could probably force it from her; little pressure would be needed. But before he could start, the opportunity was lost. Not far off, a man called out:

"Anyone there?"

It was a deep voice, with a determined tone, and it made Agatha swing round and stare away from the bushes towards a bend in the tow-path.

"*Anyone there?*"

"This way," called Rollison, and added: "Who's that?"

The man didn't answer, but soon came into sight, wheeling a bicycle. He was a tall, massive policeman, hot in his uniform and beneath his helmet, taking long, regular strides; and he didn't quicken his pace when he saw them.

"What's this about needing the police and a doctor?" he asked. "Did you send for me?"

"Yes," said Rollison, and relinquished hope of getting the truth from Agatha now; it didn't occur to him that he would have real trouble later. "You're not going to like this any more than we did," he went on, and moved towards the bushes and the body. "How did you hear about it so quickly?"

"Young couple came across the river in a boat," the policeman said, "I happened to be patrolling along here. They're telephoning the station. If it's a false alarm——"

Rollison parted the bushes.

The policeman said: "*Oh*," in a funny little subdued voice.

Agatha said shrilly: "*What on earth's the matter with my face?*"

Both men turned to look at her, the policeman shocked. She was scrubbing at her cheeks and nose with her fingers, leaving pale marks on the red skin—but the blood soon flowed in, and when she took her hands away for a moment, she had a startlingly high colour. It heightened

the beauty of her eyes and killed the redness of the lipstick, and obviously it was burning.

"I can't stand it," she cried, "it's driving me mad! And my hands——" she rubbed her hands together in a wringing motion, making little slithering sounds.

"Be good enough to look after the young lady," said the policeman to Rollison, "but don't go away, sir, please." He went through the gap in the bushes, quite steadily, while Rollison looked into Agatha's scared eyes and hot cheeks. He had a picture of her dabbing at her face with the tiny powder puff, and the powder billowing out.

"It's dreadful," she cried. "It just won't stop, I can't stand it!"

"Let's see if bathing it will help," suggested the Toff, and took her hand; there were red patches on it, too. "Come on, get in the punt." He helped her in, then took out a handkerchief and soaked it in the clear river water, wrung it out and dabbed at her cheeks. She sat with her hands in the river, for relief. Her face was so red that she hardly looked the same girl.

"Any better?" Rollison asked.

"It—it helps when the water's on it, but it soon starts up again," she said. "What on earth is it, Rolly?" She closed her eyes, puckered her lips. "It's so ghastly, all I can worry about is the itch, and—and Jimmy's lying there dead, *murdered*. It seems so callous, but I can't think about anything else. *I tell you I just can't think!*" She was near screaming point.

"I can," said Rollison. He bathed her face for her, looking more closely; there was no swelling, no pimply marks, just the inflammation. His thoughts went swiftly back over the years, to schooldays and oafish boys who loved practical jokes. "Ag," he went on, in a very quiet, authoritative voice. "I think someone's played a lousy trick on you, that irritation's caused by itching powder. It may sting like hell but it won't do you any harm. And we'll soon have——"

"How do you know?" she cried. Her eyes were blazing, her voice shrill. "I can't stand it, it's driving me——"

"Keep quiet!" he snapped at her, and she was so startled that she stopped. "Get a grip on yourself," he continued sharply. "A doctor's on the way, he'll know just what it is."

She kept quiet, but obviously it was a great effort.

Soon, a car sounded.

Doors slammed, men called out, the policeman answered from his clearing.

Two boats appeared in mid-stream, and began to circle round; the first of the gawpers.

"I'll get a doctor to you and us out of this as fast as I can," promised Rollison, "leave all the talking to me. Don't say anything about knowing Jimmy Vance, or knowing who he is. I'll square it with the Yard afterwards. Understand?"

"Yes." Agatha was clenching and unclenching her hands, but she didn't complain again.

They reached the towing path, as another policeman came swiftly towards them. Through the bushes they could see a car, men in plainclothes, two small children and a middle-aged woman.

News spread like the wind.

The important thing was to get away as soon as possible. The man in charge might even have heard of the Toff——

Rollison went forward, watched by the second policeman and the plainclothes men. He slipped into a mood of authority with complete ease.

"Is one of you a doctor?" He knew which one was; a youthful, clean-limbed man in brown.

"Yes, I am," that man said.

"May I ask——" began the other, a massive six footer in navy blue.

"Won't keep him a jiffy," promised the Toff, and smiled brightly, and produced his card. "I found the body," he said, "give me two minutes and I'll be with you. Ah, doctor——"

The doctor needed no bidding, once he'd glanced at Agatha's face. He peered, first with the naked eye and

then through a magnifying glass. "How long have you had that?" he asked.

"Only for a few minutes."

"Had it before?"

"No." Agatha hardly knew how to answer politely.

"Well, I'll give you a prescription for some lotion that should help a bit." The doctor scribbled on a writing block, tore the sheet off, and handed it to her. "If it doesn't do the trick, I should see your own doctor—don't leave it too long. Chief thing is to find out the cause, of course—haven't fallen among stinging nettles, have you?" He was half smiling, and not taking Agatha's troubles very seriously.

"No, I have not," Agatha said, stiffly. "Rolly, how—how soon do you think we can get to a chemist, so that we can get this prescription made up? I—I'm in *agony*."

"I won't be a moment longer than I can help," Rollison promised, and smiled at the doctor. "Thank you very much. Who's in charge, do you know?"

"I am, sir." The massive man in plainclothes was looking at Rollison with open curiosity. "I've often heard of you, Mr. Rollison, and I'm glad to meet you in person."

So it wasn't likely to be long.

4

THE ITCH

AGATHA said in an agonized voice: "I look terrible, and I feel—I feel awful. I just can't *think*!"

"That's the way you want it to be," the Toff assured her, and went to a cocktail cabinet in a corner of his big room at his Gresham Terrace flat. He used it as a drawing-room and as a study, and at one end there was a large recess, now curtained off by rich red velvet, which was used as the dining-alcove.

The room was cool.

It was a little after seven o'clock, and they had just returned. On the way back they'd called at a chemist, and Agatha had bathed her face. The itching was nearly gone, but her skin was blotchy and red.

The windows were open, and the footsteps of people walking by sounded clearly even up to this, the fourth and top floor. In the distance, a radio was on, bringing soft music. Over the mantelpiece was a small Regency mirror with a gilt frame, and Agatha stood in front of this, staring at her reflection.

"Like to bathe it again?" Rollison asked, "then come and have a drink."

"Yes," Agatha said. "Please."

He led her to the bathroom; and she had the salve in her handbag. He left her, and went back to the living-room-cum-study. He had bottles and glasses out when she came back.

"Better?"

"Much."

"Wonderful!" He was pouring whisky. "Sit down and drink this, and you'll feel better still."

"What is it?"

"A tot of whisky."

"I don't like whisky."

"This is medicine."

"I don't need——"

"Don't be awkward," said the Toff, and although he spoke lightly, he made it clear that he meant her to drink up. Agatha took the glass obediently, and threw back her head, swallowed, made a face, and handed the glass back.

"Thank—thank you."

"Now just relax," advised the Toff, and took out cigarettes. She took one and he lit it for her, then pulled up a tapestry covered stool and sat down a little way away from her. "Just take it easy. That's all."

"Will the police want——"

"Take it easy. I made the statement to Morgan, who'll telephone it to the Yard. When they're ready to talk to me again, they'll let me know. Just sit back and stop fuming."

"You're a brute!" she said, but she smiled faintly and sat back.

She looked comfortable, and doubtless was, for the large armchair was among the best that Harridges could supply. Like all the furniture here, it was built both for use and to please the eye; and it succeeded. Even the stool on which the Toff sat had a sprung top, and the tapestry itself was the work of a remarkable woman, Lady Gloria Hurst, whom he liked to call his only favourite aunt.

The room had a certain atmosphere. . . .

Behind the stool was the large desk, where the Toff worked more often than most people imagined; and behind the desk was the trophy wall. Agatha had seen it, had exclaimed and been impressed, only that morning. There seemed no room for another trophy; the wall was crowded with improbable things, like daggers and tiny pistols, including one which fitted into a cigarette lighter and another which looked no larger than a half crown or a silver dollar. There were small glass cases containing tiny glass phials in which were deadly poisons. There was

a hangman's rope. There was a cuckoo clock which, when working as its maker intended, shot out not a cuckoo but a lethal bullet. There was a cigar, once presented to the Toff by a Brazilian with a grievance, had it worked as expected, this would have scarred the Toff for life; the middle contained not the best Havana leaf, but high explosive. These and other pretty little gadgets had been collected over the years, and the trophy wall had become an institution; it had even reached the eminence of being photographed for the shiny weeklies, and written up in *Punch*.

Above all the lesser trophies was a top hat, beautifully furry and shiny, with a bullet hole in the crown; at the time that the hole had appeared in it, the Toff had been wearing the hat. He still regarded that as the nearest he had been to death, but not everyone agreed with him.

One who did not was his man, Jolly.

Jolly came in, and Agatha glanced towards him, as fascinated by the man as by the trophy wall. Jolly was of medium height and medium weight. He had a brown skin and great brown eyes and baggy pouches beneath them. He was dressed in black, as a gentleman's gentleman should be, and succeeded in creating the impression that his was a thriving, not a dying race. In fact, he was much more than a servant; he was part of the flat and of Rollison's life.

"What time would you like dinner, sir?" His voice was subdued.

"Will a quarter to eight be all right?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Then a quarter to eight."

"Very good——"

"If the telephone goes, answer it," said Rollison, "and tell anyone who wants to know that I'll be out until about half-past nine. We'd like to eat in peace."

"*Very* good, sir." Jolly went to the door, paused in it, glanced at Agatha, and then said in exactly the same gentle voice: "The guest room is ready, whenever you wish, ma'am."

Before Agatha could comment, he went out.

Agatha said: "He's really priceless, Rolly." There wasn't much feeling in her voice. "Daddy said——"

She broke off. Obviously her face was much better, and her nose no longer glowed. But other things were on her mind, now; urgent, perhaps frightening.

Rollison poured himself another whisky and soda, but didn't give the girl a drink.

"Daddy said that he was your business manager, or something. It began when you lost all that money and had to start detecting as a profession——"

"Consultant, *if* you please," the Toff smiled, watching her closely; she'd come through, and she had a lot of guts. "That's right, Jolly's the business man of the family, and sends out all the bills. Now, Ag, I want——"

"Rolly," she interrupted, "I didn't think of this before, but I must say it. I *don't* expect you to do all this work for nothing. I'm not rich, but I can afford to pay fees, and—and I want to make sure that you're working only for me. For us," she added, with a touch of defiance. "I know Daddy would approve."

"No fees between friends," declared the Toff, and obviously meant it. "You were going to tell me something more about Jimmy Vance's wife, and stopped. What was it?"

Agatha didn't answer.

"I'm not trying to lay down any laws," said Rollison, "but you may take it from me that the police will ask a lot of awkward questions, and if you've kept anything back, they'll want to know why. I'll be seeing them again, soon after dinner."

She still didn't answer.

"Agatha," said the Toff, gently, "was there anything between your father and Griselda Vance?"

The question fell into the cool room, and seemed to hover. The girl stared at the Toff, flushing so much at first that it was almost like the itch again; until gradually she lost all her colour. That was answer enough, but he gave her time to speak, without prompting her again.

"I'm not—sure," she said.

"You think there was?"

"I've wondered. I—no, that's not true," she exclaimed, suddenly tense and shrill. "I've just noticed that they were good friends, why shouldn't they be? Griselda was the original Silver Queen, before she was married. She and Daddy have been friends for years, there's no reason why they shouldn't be. Don't start jumping to conclusions." She was almost aggressive.

"No conclusions, just questions," the Toff assured her. "You know what this business could look like, don't you?"

If she realized what he meant, it proved that she was no kind of fool.

She said flatly: "Yes. If there was anything between Daddy and Griselda Vance, and if Daddy's alive, then he might have a motive for—oh, but it's *crazy*!"

He wondered if she really thought so; or whether part of her fear sprang from knowledge of enmity between Jimmy Vance, the woman Griselda's husband, and Adam Bell, Agatha's father.

Rollison asked: "Have you seen Griselda Vance since you came back?"

"Yes."

"Does she know that your father's missing?"

"I told her, and she——"

"Was she worried?"

"She didn't seem to be, she said almost casually that she was sure that he would turn up," declared Agatha, and added quickly: "But if she were fond of him, if there was anything between them, she wouldn't want to seem too worried, would she? I did wonder if she knew where Daddy was, but I don't think she does. I think she was more worried than she appeared to be, but——" Agatha broke off, throwing up her arms in vexation and dismay. "Oh, it's such a shocking mess!" She jumped up from her chair, passed the mirror, and caught sight of herself without pausing; as if, this time, she didn't notice what she looked like. "Jimmy must have made dozens of

enemies, but people don't kill because—because their wives—because——” she faltered to a standstill.

“Sometimes they kill,” said Rollison, flatly. “Jealousy and passion make as good a motive as any. Did you know anyone who especially hated Jimmy Vance?”

“No. No, I don't think so.”

“Was he on good terms with your father?”

“Don't ask beastly questions like that! Whose side are you on? To hear you talk——”

She broke off again, and spun round. Anger gave her movements an added touch of grace, she was really a sight to see. She went to the window and looked out, and there was something almost despairing about the droop of her shoulders and the way her arms hung by her sides.

“What you want is another drink,” said Rollison, “and then a wash, and some dinner. But first, one more question. Where did you get that box of powder?”

She turned round. “Eh? Oh, I bought it.”

“Where?”

“At a shop near my flat, where I always do.”

“I see,” said Rollison. “Thanks.” He took her elbow and led her towards the door, which led to a wide passage. “The door at the far end leads to the kitchen and Jolly's glory hole,” he went on, “on your right, the bathroom, on your left, the guest room, and everything should be in apple-pie order.” He opened the door and led the way into a small and charming room, obviously meant for a woman, not for a man. “And here's everything you're likely to want, I hope,” he said. The dressing-table had three mirrors, and on it were the kind of oddments that Agatha had in her own room, down to night creams, nail varnishes and face powders.

She looked at Rollison sharply.

He took this all in his stride.

“If you feel like changing, I expect something in the wardrobe would fit,” he said, and stood looking at her with his head on one side. “Try the black one with the beads on it. Oh—let me have your face powder, will you?” he added casually.

"What?"

"The stuff you dab on your face, remember," said the Toff, lightly. "Sweet smelling Silver Queen, wasn't it?"

She said blankly: "Yes, but——" and broke off.

"Did you fill it from a new box, this morning?"

"Yes, how on earth did you know? I filled it too full, I hardly knew what I was thinking, but——" she broke off again, puzzled. "How *did* you know?"

"Before you powdered your nose, no irritation," he said, "after you'd powdered it, much itch. An odd coincidence or else cause and effect, and we'd better play safe. Unless Jolly's slipping, you should have a fair choice of shade in here." He opened a dressing-table drawer, and there, fitting snugly into compartments, were various boxes of face powder. On each was the trademark of Silver Queen, a silvery portrait of a young woman with a silvery crown upon her head. "Jolly believes in the stuff, too," Rollison remarked. "What's your shade—ah, that's it." He pointed to powder which was visible through a cellophane window. "Peach Bloom, and who'd deny it? No hurry, Ag."

He went out, taking her powder.

As he entered the large room, the telephone bell rang, but he let it ring; until, afar off, he heard Jolly's voice; soon, the telephone stopped ringing.

Rollison picked the instrument up, cautiously.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Grice," Jolly was saying, "he won't be here until half-past nine."

"Hmm," grunted Superintendent Grice of New Scotland Yard in a tone which clearly expressed his doubts. "Ask him to stay there for half an hour, will you. I want a word with him."

"Very good, sir," said Jolly, smoothly. "Good-bye, sir."

He replaced the receiver gently, Rollison did the same—and then he went to the desk and looked at the box of Peach Bloom face powder. He dabbed the tip of his little finger in it, then rubbed this on to the back of his left hand.

He rounded the desk, sat at it, and took out the last of

the four telephone directories. He found the name Vance, James Edward, but no other Vance followed by James. The number was Hampstead 48148, and the address: "7 Heath View." He knew Heath View as a road bordering the Heath, as lovely a position as there was in all London, and a place where only the wealthy lived.

He wondered if the police had broken the news of Vance's murder to Griselda Vance; or whether the identity of the dead man was still unknown.

He'd soon find out.

Now, he went to the telephone, and spent five minutes talking to the Airways Terminal at Victoria; another five with London Airport. There was no official record of Adam Bell's return; but he could have used a false name.

And a false passport?

Next, Rollison took the pieces of the photograph from his wallet, and called for Jolly.

"Yes, sir?"

"We want to test these for fingerprints," Rollison said, "and then place them together, and find out whose picture we have."

"Very good, sir," Jolly said, as if that were a most normal request.

He went for the equipment, which he kept in his room. Fullers earth, a camelhair paint brush, and a pair of tweezers with which to hold the pieces without smearing any prints.

In five minutes it was clear that there were no prints.

"No fool our murderer," observed Rollison. "He wiped the photograph carefully before scattering the pieces like lilies over the body."

"I'll place them together now, sir," Jolly said, primly.

There were sixteen of the pieces in all, and quite easy enough to match up. With half of them in position, both Rollison and Jolly looked at each other in some bewilderment.

"It looks like a photograph of two *babies*, sir," Jolly hazarded, almost shocked.

"It is," asserted Rollison, and silently they put the remaining pieces into place.

Two small babies, each nearly naked, lay on their stomachs, looked up brightly.

"Stick 'em together and then make some copies," said Rollison. "No photographer's name on the back, is there?"

"No, sir," said Jolly.

As his man went out, Rollison began to rub the back of his left hand, where he had put the powder; it was beginning to irritate, much as if he'd been bitten by a gnat. That impression quickly faded; soon, there was a tiny burning spot, red and angry-looking, and the itch was so extreme that it was almost painful.

Agatha must have been in agony, by the river.

Rollison went into the bathroom, dabbed a spot of the lotion on, and felt almost immediate relief. But the itch had not completely gone when Jolly came into the big room again.

"Is there anything else, sir?"

"Yes, please," Rollison said thoughtfully. "Try to find out if Mr. Adam Bell has been to his Shropshire home, or whether he returned from the States by sea. If you learn anything positive, let me know."

"Very good, sir," Jolly said, and turned, to bow slightly from the waist as Agatha came in.

She looked lovely in the black beaded dress.

5

DEAD MAN'S GRISELDA

AT twenty minutes past nine, ten minutes before Superintendent Grice of the Yard was due to call or to telephone, the Toff left his flat in a manner that was almost surreptitious. He suspected that Agatha was looking out of the window of the big room, to catch a glimpse of him. He was sure that Jolly was already telephoning the Yard, to tell Grice that he, Rollison, had been delayed. He was nearly sure that Agatha suspected that he was going to Hampstead, but she hadn't said so, and hadn't uttered any protest at being left on her own.

No one was in the street.

Rollison went towards Piccadilly. It was still daylight, but the day's brightness had gone. It was much cooler, too, and he was glad of the serge jacket which he'd put on for dinner.

No footsteps echoed behind him.

He did not go far, but took a different route back, so that he reached the far end of Gresham Terrace; and he watched the deserted street. A few lights were on, including that at the window of the big room in his own flat. He could see no shadow. He could see nothing to suggest that the flat, or Agatha Bell, was being watched. Satisfied, he went back the way he had come and, in Piccadilly, hailed the first cab he came to; and it pulled up.

"No. 7 Heath View, Hampstead—and can you hurry?"

"I can try." The cabby grinned.

The Toff leaned back, lit a cigarette, and watched the passing scene as it faded into the dusk. All he could yet see were pieces of the puzzle of Adam Bell and Jimmy Vance, and he had no way of telling how long it would be before the pieces began to fit.

In a way, they were beginning to.

There was Jimmy Vance, son of the owner and top salesman of the fabulous, world-wide Silver Queen network, whose slogan shone wherever there was light, appeared wherever there was a newspaper, was heard wherever radio or television were commercial. "*It is our business to make the woman beautiful.*" From silver screens came pictures of the Silver Queen brand—lipstick, powder, cream, pancake, nail-varnish and varnish remover, mud pack and home-perm—everything a cosmetic king could dream about.

There was Griselda, Jimmy Vance's wife, once the original Silver Queen whatever that might mean; there was Adam Bell, with his flair for invention and his ideas, his likeable personality—and his disappearance. And there was something in a box of face powder which the makers certainly hadn't planned to put in.

The Toff closed his eyes in concentration, not in weariness.

Within ten seconds of reaching No. 7 Heath View, he might find some indication as to whether the police had yet been to see Griselda Vance.

Within five, he was sure that they had not.

The house was in darkness, except for a single light on the first floor, almost immediately above the front door. It was approached from the Heath itself, with a wide circular drive which seemed newly gravelled. A flower bed was in the centre of the drive, and flowering shrubs grew round the edges.

It was nearly dark.

Rollison heard the cab moving off, not far away, then reached the porch and the front door. There was no moon, but the stars and street lamps spread a dim light, and he could make out the outline of the open gates, the wall surrounding the house, the trees which grew so much higher than the wall.

In the distance there were the sounds of traffic.

Rollison stepped into the porch, found the bell, and pressed it lightly. He stood back, listening intently. There was no new sound, nothing to suggest that the ringing

had been heard. He pressed again, keeping his finger on the bell-push; but there was still no sound.

He drew back into the garden, and walked round the house. No other light shone. He saw the garage, with the doors wide open, and no car inside. So presumably Griselda Vance was out; but there should be two or three servants at a house this size.

He reached the back, and tried the door there, only to find it locked.

The window alongside it wasn't; it was open at least two inches at the top.

The Toff felt for the gap with his gloved fingers, then fiddled until he was able to push the bottom half of the window up. It made a slight squeaking noise, no real cause for alarm. He pushed it higher, until he could climb through. There was less light here, but he saw the glitter of chromium taps and of white tiles. He hoisted himself to the window sill, and climbed; for a moment or so he stood in the sink, and it gave off a clanging noise, the noise of maltreated stainless steel.

He climbed down, cautiously.

The house had the silence of emptiness. He could just see the outline of a doorway, and went towards it, stepped into the passage beyond and took a slim pencil torch from his pocket. Its light seemed very bright, and the beam was thrown on a staircase, on pictures, on panelled walls. The floor was thickly carpeted. He went towards the foot of the stairs, and saw a dim glow of light somewhere at the top. He went up very quietly, for the silence might be an illusion, there might be someone here.

Waiting for him?

He reached a spacious landing, and saw a door, standing ajar, with a light coming from it; not a bright one, but the kind that might come from a reading lamp.

He stepped to the door, and pushed it open, very cautiously. Now, the gloom seemed to hold moving shadows.

He went in and looked behind the door. No one lurked there.

The room was filled with books, big armchairs, a few tables and one reading desk; and it was silent, too. The light shone at the side of a winged armchair, the back of which was towards the Toff who could not be sure that it was empty. He knew what he feared; if anyone sat there, hidden from him, then only sleep or death could explain the silence.

There was no sound of breathing.

He held his breath as he moved forward—and then he began to grin at foolish fears. No one sat in the chair. A copy of *The Times* lay on the floor, and a book lay open, face downwards, on a table by the side of it; he picked the book up. *The Sea Around Us*. He put it down, and glanced round the huge room.

He saw a photograph album, on a small table, and looked through it; there was no picture of two babies.

A quarter of an hour later he had looked in every room, but seen nothing odd, and not seen a copy of the photograph or a likeness to the two babies. A room next to the library had twin beds; a dressing-room leading off it, with one bed, and a wardrobe with two men's suits, some shirts, ties, socks and oddments. None of the other bedrooms seemed to be occupied.

Where was the staff?

The eeriness remained, but no longer pulled at Rollison's nerves. He went downstairs briskly, and found a telephone in the hall. He used his torch to see the digits, dialled Scotland Yard, asked for Superintendent Grice.

"I think he's out, sir, will you please hold on?"

Rollison waited, compelling patience.

The operator came back: "Yes, sir, he is out, he's not been in this evening."

"Thanks," said Rollison, "tell him Rollison called, will you?" He rang off, and dialled the number of the flat at once; he was answered with uncanny promptness by Jolly.

"Mr. Rollison's residence."

"Jolly," said the Toff, quietly, "is Mr. Grice there? If he is, I'd like a word with him."

"As a matter of fact, sir, he was just about to leave," Jolly said, precisely. "Will you hold on?" He was gone for a few seconds, and then came back to say: "Mr. Grice, sir."

A moment later, Grice came on the line, his deep voice sharp with annoyance. That wasn't surprising, for he would guess that Rollison had deliberately evaded him; and he would be anxious to know why. He probably suspected that the Toff was not only stealing a march, but was concealing information that the police should have.

"Why don't you want to see me?" he demanded, brusquely.

"Oh, Bill, unjust." Rollison grinned in the darkness. "What's all this about, anyhow?"

"You know damned well what it's about—the murder near Kingston. Did you know the man?"

"I did not."

"Sure?"

"I am positive, and I'll gladly state that on oath."

"What happened there?" Grice demanded. He was either in a very bad temper indeed, or intent on convincing Rollison that he was, in the hope of wringing information out of him.

"Why don't you read the reports?" asked the Toff, solemnly. "I was having an afternoon out with a pretty young maid, and we heard the scream. Not nice. As soon as I'd done my duty——"

"Cut it out," said Grice. "I can believe in coincidence, but not the kind where murder is done under your aristocratic nose. Where's the dead man's wallet?"

"Oh, Bill," chided Rollison reproachfully, "how would I know? His pocket was empty, even a blind man could have seen that, but I didn't touch his wallet. Found out who he is yet?"

"No. Do you know?" That question came sharply and accusingly; and it was the direct kind which it was always hard to turn. A lying answer might have sharp repercussions later, a truthful one might have them now.

"Bill," said the Toff, earnestly, "I hope to have word

for you soon, but not just now. As soon as I'm sure who he is, I'll get in touch with you."

"You tell me what you think *now*," ordered Grice. "Once we know who he is we can start moving. Until we do——"

He went on at some length, but the Toff stopped listening. He turned his head and looked at the open door of a small room on the right of the hall in this big, empty house. Light had appeared there; and it moved, drawing nearer and brighter.

The hum of a car engine sounded outside, and the Toff spoke very quietly into the mouthpiece.

"Sorry, Bill, see you later."

He rang off.

He stood up, and stepped towards the door of a small room, going behind it so that he could not be seen. The light was drawing nearer from another doorway, across the hall. Inside the house there was silence; outside, the car had pulled up, and a door banged.

Someone with a torch had crept inside; and was waiting for whoever was coming in now.

The footsteps of one person rang out clearly, first on the gravel drive, then on the porch. There was another sound, of keys knocking against one another, of metal scraping. The door opened and light appeared, dim and diffused from headlamps; then a dark silhouette showed up. Next moment, there was a click, and a light went on in the hall.

A woman stepped in.

She passed out of Rollison's line of vision, and he didn't open the door any wider. The carpet muffled her footsteps now, yet did nothing to detract from the impression of briskness.

Was she going along the passage, or upstairs?

She stopped, and something of her own uncertainty passed itself on to the Toff. He had moved, and could see further into the hall. The light in the other room was out. The woman was at the foot of the stairs, looking up; for some seconds she didn't move.

Then, abruptly, she called: "*Adam!*"

There was no answer.

"*Adam!*" she called.

Only silence greeted her.

She began to move quickly, stripping off her gloves as she did so. She promised to be really something to look at, nicely formed, beautifully tailored; she had long, slim legs and moved with grace; but in her movements and in her voice there was alarm.

"*Adam!*" she called again, and reached the landing, then hurried almost at a run towards the room where the light was on. There was something more than alarm in her voice; it was easy to imagine the touch of panic. She didn't call out again, but a door banged back, her footsteps sounded—and then stopped abruptly.

She didn't call out.

She had already told the Toff much that he wanted to know. Adam Bell had been here, and the woman expected him to be here now; she was alarmed because of that empty chair and the turned down book, and the silence. The silence would unnerve her more than anything else.

Yet there were movements here.

The light which Rollison had seen before the woman's arrival did not come on again, but a man appeared, his shadowy figure moving towards the stairs. It was obvious that his interest was in the woman, he did not pause to look about him, did not seem to suspect that anyone else was here.

The Toff followed him, some distance behind.

"*Adam!*" cried the woman. "*Adam!*"

Then the man in front of Rollison reached a half landing, and his footsteps were quite audible. The woman came striding out of the library, her face alight with eagerness. It was the first time Rollison had seen her face, and in spite of the mystery, in spite of the man now on the landing, and in spite of the death of Jimmy Vance, he forgot problems and the murder in amazement.

She was—superb.

Movement, figure, face—all were quite beautiful.

Looking radiant, as if with relief, she reached the dimly-lighted landing, and saw the man. She called:

"I couldn't think where you'd gone. I was afraid——"
She broke off.

There was a catch in her breath, and the Toff saw her move back as if something were pushing her, and that something was fear. She took another step backwards. She raised her right hand as if to fend some evil off, and breathed:

"No."

The man was coming up the stairs, each footstep firm, deliberate and heavy, carrying with it a menace which seemed to fill the air, which drove the woman back another pace with a second whispered:

"No!"

6

THE MAN IN GREY

It seemed to Rollison that he could hear the woman's breathing, and that even that was a confession of her fear. She moved again, but didn't turn and run. It was as if whoever came towards her was holding her there against her will; she wanted to turn and flee, but could not make herself.

She didn't speak again.

She was almost level with the Toff, and he could see the head of the stairs and the top of a man's hat. He waited. If murder were intended, and the night seemed right for death, it would not be yet—unless the man needed to be at close quarters so that he could kill.

He came into Rollison's sight.

So did the gun in his hand.

He was a man in grey; grey hat, jacket, trousers. He was dressed as for a summer evening, without a top-coat. He moved with a smoothness which added to the menace in his manner and in the way in which the gun covered the woman. In his way, he was quite handsome, with a broad face and grey eyes—glittering eyes. The odd thing was that Rollison did not get an impression of badness. There were good and bad; there were the men who meant well and the men who were evil. This was just a man, tall, powerful, well-dressed, good-looking, with his broad nose and full lips now set tightly, his bright grey eyes and the gun in his hand.

He reached the top of the stairs. By then, the woman was half-way between him and the room with the open door. The light was not good here, some coming from the empty room, some from the hall; no landing light was on. Except for the footsteps, which came softly, and the

sound of their breathing, there was no noise at all. The two people believed that they were alone in this house, and they behaved as they would if they had been alone.

"Griselda," the man said, "I've come to kill you. I told you I would."

"No," she said, and clutched at her throat. "You're wrong, Paul, you've always been wrong."

"You killed Jimmy. You betrayed Jimmy, and then you killed him, and I always told you what would happen if you let him down."

She said, as if incredulously: "Jimmy—*dead*?"

"As if you didn't know," sneered the man named Paul. "As if you and your lover didn't plan his death, as if he didn't die from a blow you would gladly have delivered." The voice was cold and dispassionate, yet it held a ring of hatred. "I don't know whether you struck the blow, but it amounts to the same thing. Now I'm going to kill you."

She was by the open door.

"Paul," she said, beseechingly, "I didn't even know. I just didn't know."

"That's very likely," the man conceded, "and that's exactly why I've come. I can make sure that you pay for it, Griselda—because the law might not hang you. They wouldn't know what I know—that it was your fault. You were years older than Jimmy, you should never have married him; but you did. He was too young for you, and you found what you wanted in an older man; in Adam Bell. I know the whole story. Your hero lover went out and killed Jimmy, so that he could have you for himself. He may not have told you what he was going to do, but if you hadn't given yourself to Adam, none of this would have happened. That's moral guilt, Griselda, and I'm going to make you pay."

"Paul," she said in a flat voice, "it just isn't true. Adam wouldn't——"

Her voice trailed off.

"Adam Bell *did*," the man said. "I was telephoned, two hours ago. I don't know who the caller was, but he told me that Jimmy had been killed. At first I couldn't believe

it. But I went to find out. I saw a photograph of my son lying on the cold stone of a morgue slab, with one side of his head smashed in. That's the way you treated him. It would have been better if you'd killed me, but you had to kill Jimmy——"

The man caught his breath, and so gave warning: the desire to kill, the lust for revenge, the awful passion in him would soon burst upon her.

Ten feet separated the man and the woman.

The gun was steady in the man's hand.

"Paul," the woman said despairingly, "it wasn't Adam, it couldn't have been Adam, he wouldn't——"

"He did."

"How do—how do you *know*?"

"I've not lost my wits yet," he said. "No one else would want to kill Jimmy. One side of his face was hardly touched, Griselda, he looked as if he were sleeping. Remember how handsome he was? Remember the way his hair curled? Remember the throbbing vitality that lived in him? *You* killed that. You've done one evil thing after another to him. You started him on drink. You started him on women. You've made his life hell from the moment you were married, and you're not going to live to make anyone else suffer. Why, *look* at you. So beautiful and so foul, so——"

He was almost choking.

She stopped by the open door of the library, and faced the man whom she called Paul. He also stopped, perhaps six feet away from her, and the Toff had a sideways view.

The Toff knew that neither of the couple would notice him if he moved; the woman had eyes only for the man in grey, who was oblivious of the rest of the world because of that all-consuming hatred.

"You're wrong, you've always been wrong," the woman said. "Of course Adam wouldn't have killed him. I'm quite positive."

"Then who would?" Paul asked, with a brittle calm.

"Paul, I don't *know*. But don't do anything you'll regret," the woman went on, pleading for her life with a

quiet, brave dignity. "If you kill me, you'll only be hanged. They're bound to find you, they always do."

"They won't catch me," the man said. "Not that it would matter much if they did, what else have I to live for?" He took a pace nearer. "But no one knows I'm here, I walked from the main road. There will not be the slightest whisper of suspicion against me." His voice was very hoarse, now, he spoke as if he wished that he could strike at her over and over again. "I wish I could make you feel the way Jimmy did. I wish I could give you months—no, *years*—of hell. I wish——"

He broke off.

Griselda Vance stood by the door, head erect, shoulders squared; so very lovely, proud and oddly calm.

"If you kill me," she said, "you will be making the big mistake of your life. You've never been prepared to believe anything against Jimmy, you were always blind. I used to admire you for it, but now——"

Paul said thickly: "I'll kill you with my bare hands, you vixen!"

He dropped the gun, and leapt at her.

His hands were outstretched, the fingers crooked to fasten round her neck and to bury themselves in the flesh. She flinched, but made no attempt to get away; she waited as if knowing that there was nothing to stop him.

Surely she would fight——

That was a thing the Toff would never find out.

He saw her fine eyes and her stillness, before she was hidden from him by the man named Paul. Paul's hands must have encircled her throat, for she gave a little choking sound.

"Quite far enough," the Toff said, clearly.

He moved at speed. The man didn't and the woman couldn't hear him. He saw the man's powerful shoulders, his bent arms, big fingers encircling the woman's throat; and he saw the fear of death in the woman's eyes. He reached Paul Vance and bent his knee, thrusting it against the inside of the other man's. Vance gave a queer gasping sound, and strength seemed to drain out of his legs. His

knees bent under him, and he tried to twist round. The Toff brought the edge of his right hand down sharply on the nape of the broad neck. Paul gasped, grunted, and crumpled up.

The woman stood there, hands at her pale throat, eyes feverishly bright.

"In fact, too far," said the Toff, very gently. "I'm sorry I waited so long." He put out an arm, to support Griselda Vance, and as he did so the intensity of the light in her eyes faded. She nearly fell. He supported her, and shifted his hold so that he could put an arm beneath her knees, another round her waist. He lifted her and carried her into the library where the one light burned, and the newspaper and the book hadn't been moved. He put her into one of the huge chairs, and turned and left her.

Paul was trying to get up.

"Paul the Avenger," said the Toff, in a voice which those who knew him well didn't like at all. "Paul the passionate fanatic. Paul the strangler. I ought to break your neck."

Paul was on his feet, now, but unsteady; swaying, like a drunk. His mouth opened and closed, he licked his lips and kept gasping, as if the breath wouldn't go far enough into his lungs. Rollison turned towards the door of the room where the woman was, found a switch and pressed it down. The light from a small chandelier shone starkly on to Paul's pale, grey face, his greying hair, his watery grey eyes.

"Who—who are you?"

"A better friend than you deserve," said Rollison. "I ought to have let you kill her, that would have seen you hanged."

"I don't understand," Paul began. "I——"

Then he moved.

He was no fool, and somewhere or other he'd learned a lot of tricks. He was going for the gun, which was still on the floor, just beyond Rollison. To get it, he lunged at Rollison, hoping to put him off his balance and to have

the gun before he had recovered. It might have worked, if Rollison hadn't been expecting something like it; he shot out a leg. Paul crashed into it and fell headlong; and was still on the floor when Rollison picked up the gun.

He nursed it in his hand.

"It could be self-defence," he said, ominously. "What makes you think that Adam Bell killed Jimmy Vance?"

The man said: "He—Bell—wants to marry—Griselda. Can't you understand? They're crazy about each other. It's driven Jimmy mad, he——"

Paul Vance broke off.

"Or something's driven you crazy," Rollison said, coldly. "We'd better save the story for the police."

"The—police?"

"That's right," said Rollison, "the men of the law you're not frightened of. They're on the way." They might be, too, for all he knew. "They'll be interested in my eyewitness account of the attempted murder of your daughter-in-law. They'll even wonder whether a man prepared to kill his son's wife would be ready to kill his son, given enough provocation. They'll ask a lot of questions and they'll want the straight answers."

He stopped.

He heard a movement behind him, and knew that Griselda Vance was coming. He could hear her shallow breathing, and could see her shadow. He wondered what had given her the strength to get out of the chair and to come out here. She didn't draw level, but stopped, as if she hadn't the will-power to draw nearer.

Then, a new sound came from outside.

There was no mistaking it, and no missing its sense of urgency. First one, then a second car swung into the drive, and the Toff could hear the grating of tyres on the gravel outside; so Paul Vance hadn't closed the door. Headlights shone against windows, fiercely white for a moment, then paling off as the direction changed.

"Who——" began Paul Vance, and turned his head.

"I told you," Rollison said. "The police, Paul, with all the awkward questions, including: 'who told you that

you could take the law into your own hands?" The marks of your fingers are still on Mrs. Vance's throat, and they'll see them. Got your answers ready?"

Vance didn't reply at once; and when he did, it was coldly.

"Supposing you wait and see," he said.

At least he was no coward.

Car doors banged, and footsteps sounded.

"Just wait," said Rollison, "it won't be long." He backed a pace, so that he could see the woman as well as Vance; and he saw more than he expected.

She held a gun.

She was level with him, about a yard away.

"Let him go," she said, in a hurried voice. "Paul, go out the back way, hurry! I won't let him stop you." She covered Rollison with the gun, standing so close, and holding it as if she had been used to automatic pistols all her life. She took no notice at all of the gun in his hand. She had been magnificent in despair and she was magnificent in this challenge.

"Hurry, Paul," she repeated urgently.

Vance hesitated, then turned and began to walk rapidly along a passage which led into darkness. As he vanished, men came stamping into the front hall, two speaking loudly, and one calling out:

"The door's open!"

"Careful," someone called from the outside.

The woman said pleadingly: "Please—please don't tell them who he was."

She didn't try to force the issue; obviously she had screwed herself up to that quixotic effort, and it had taken all her strength. She was swaying, dizzily, and the gun pointed towards the carpet. Her eyes had lost their brilliance, her face had no colour at all.

"Please——" she repeated.

From half-way up the stairs, a policeman called: "Who's there?"

7

ANOTHER BOX OF POWDER

As the policeman's voice came, and others followed him up the stairs, the Toff slid an arm about Mrs. Vance's waist; and knew that without it she would fall. He took the gun from her, without the slightest protest, and she leaned heavily against him. The police came hurrying, but slowed down as they neared the top, as if they were afraid that they would run into trouble.

"*Who's there?*" one called.

"Friend," said the Toff, brightly, "but aren't we getting it the wrong way round? You ought to give the counter-sign, or at least produce proof of identity."

Nearing the landing, a policeman in uniform and wearing a peaked cap, asked sharply:

"Who are you?"

"This is the lady of the house, and I'm a friend," said Rollison, still brightly, "and if you're looking for the chap who broke in, you're too late. The big one got away." He looked sad as the police came hurrying, three of them now; one of them was in plainclothes. "Cops and robbers, and the cops didn't win."

"You talk too much," one of them said, sourly.

"Man born of woman is prone to verbosity," deplored the Toff. "Do you mind if I take Mrs. Vance into the other room? She's all in. Nasty experience, I believe, but it's all right, I came to the rescue." Without another word, he lifted the woman, and carried her into the library. He put her down in the same huge armchair, by the side of *The Times*. He kicked against the newspaper and made it rustle, then looked up into the face of the plainclothes man and the two uniformed policemen behind him. "Anyone here a dab at first aid?" he inquired, "it might

be as well to check, because Mrs. Vance has had a nasty shock."

"Let me have a look at her," the plainclothes man said, and came forward. He stared hard at Rollison's face, and looked puzzled, but he didn't say anything else until he had felt the woman's pulse and her forehead, and looked at the red marks at her throat.

She was very pale, and her eyes were closed, but she wasn't unconscious.

"She should be all right," he said. "Spot of brandy wouldn't do her any harm. Get her nice and warm, too." He glanced at one of the constables. "See if you can find a heavy coat or some blankets." He had already seen a cocktail cabinet, against one wall. "Will you get her some brandy?" he asked Rollison.

"Gladly." Rollison went to the cabinet, still conscious of being closely scrutinised. In a minute or two the penny would drop, he'd be recognised and the battle of wits would be on. It had to be a battle of wits; he wanted to know much more about Adam Bell, about this woman, and what was going on, before he told the simple truth.

He went forward with the brandy.

The plainclothes man snapped his fingers. "Got it! You're Rollison—the Toff." He marvelled.

"Who am I to tell a lie?" asked Rollison, meekly. "I freely admit it." He looked down at Griselda Vance, and saw that her eyes were open and she was watching him; there was a little colour in her cheeks. He smiled, amiably. "All right, Mrs. Vance, we'll soon get it cleared up. Mind telling me why you came here?" he added, to the plainclothes man.

"A neighbour saw a man sneak in, and we were handy," the Squad man said. "There've been several burglaries round here lately, and two squad cars were on the prowl. Say you saw this chap?"

"Vaguely," agreed Rollison, with the utmost gravity. "I'm probably the man seen sneaking in, though. I'd come to see Mrs. Vance, and the front door was open." That sounded better than the truth of his forced entry.

"As I came up the stairs I saw a man attacking her. I scared him off, but couldn't give chase because I had to look after Mrs. Vance." Said like that, it sounded quite logical; the trouble would come if the Flying Squad man decided to try to break the story down, and chose to work through the woman.

"I *see*," the Flying Squad man said heavily. "Anything missing, ma'am?"

"I—I don't know——"

"Supposing we find out," suggested the Toff.

He was not surprised that nothing was missing.

He was not surprised when, half an hour after the police had arrived, Superintendent William Grice of the Yard came into the hall. Rollison was there, talking with the Flying Squad man, a Sergeant Davidson. Mrs. Vance was in her bedroom. There was a hiatus, because no servants lived in at the house, and the police were reluctant to leave the woman here by herself but could do little about it. They were looking for fingerprints and signs of forced entry, and there had been some excitement when a report came that a kitchen window was wide open.

Now Grice arrived; forbiddingly.

He was a tall, spare man, with broad shoulders, very little flesh, cheeks which were almost hollow. He was brown-clad, brown-haired and brown-eyed, and his skin was sallow, almost olive in colour, stretched tightly at the bridge of his nose, where it was white. One side of his face had a nasty scar, a legacy of an affair which he had worked on with the Toff.

He and the Toff knew each other well.

He did not offer to shake hands.

"I want to talk to you," he said, grimly. "Wait in the other room for a few minutes, please."

"Yes, sir," responded the Toff, meekly.

He went into a large, modern drawing-room, one of silver grey and royal blue, with gilt mirrors and a grand piano, a thick carpet, a small fortune in water colours on

the walls. It was a room of riches and richness, and it did Mrs. Vance's taste credit; it also appeared to pay a silent tribute to the income which her husband had earned.

The Toff was left alone for five minutes.

Grice came in, also alone; and he closed the door behind him. He had something of the manner of a hawk, never quite losing the look of a bird about to pounce, and there was no friendliness in his gaze.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he demanded.

"Oh, Bill, temper!"

"I don't intend to be pushed around any longer," growled Grice, "if you'd come to see me straight away, even if you'd waited in for me, it wouldn't have been so bad. But my time's valuable, and I thought you had more sense than to start pulling fast ones. You broke into this house, and I could prove it if I tried. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't try."

Rollison was lighting a cigarette; Grice seldom smoked, and this wasn't the moment to proffer the case.

"Regard for the truth, Bill," Rollison said, easily. "You might do the wrong thing. Between these four walls, and as man to man——"

"I'm a policeman. Remember?"

"I do recall having heard something about it," said the Toff—and immediately regretted the flippancy, because it made Grice really angry. He wondered why Grice felt so strongly; it might simply be that the encounter had come at the end of a long and tiring day. Whatever the reason, he was in no mood for facetiousness, so the Toff sobered up and said: "But policemen can't do anything on hearsay, and that's all I have to work on." He gave that a moment to sink in, but Grice just stood there something like an avenging angel—somehow reminding the Toff of the man in grey. "Want to hear it, in confidence or off the record," he asked, "or must I paddle my own canoe?"

"I've already made it clear. I can prove that you——"

"Forget it, Bill. No felonious or burglarious intent. I came to see Mrs. Vance, saw there was trouble and

saved her from it. Have you seen the bruises on her neck?"

Grice grunted: "No."

"The Squad man has. Do we talk as friends?"

"All right," said Grice, reluctantly, "let me hear it, but make sure it's the truth."

"And nothing but," said Rollison earnestly.

He told part of the story. . . .

Agatha's anxiety about her missing father, her plea for help, the fact that a man had followed her and watched them from the other side of the river, the scream. The fact that he knew that the dead man was James Edward—Jimmy—Vance, that he had come to see Mrs. Vance to try to find out if she could help him; or rather, help the girl.

"... and I wanted a talk with her before you told her what had happened," said the Toff, "so I kept the name from you for a while. Grant me good motives, if nothing else." He stubbed out his cigarette.

Grice said: "If we'd known who he was this afternoon, we might have found the killer by now. It's one of your crazy Sir Galahad jobs, and don't blame me if you get hurt. Know why Vance was killed?"

"No."

"See the murderer?"

"No. You know everything I can tell you about that."

"No glimpse of him?"

"Just the scream and the silence."

"Why did you come here?"

"I've told you."

"Now I'll tell you something," said Grice, and he seemed to take malicious pleasure in what he was going to say. "Upstairs in Mrs. Vance's room, we've found a photograph of Adam Bell, and enough to suggest that he and Mrs. Vance know each other pretty well. Let's have the truth—you came here to find Bell."

"That's what I said."

"Did you know he was staying here?"

"I did not."

"Did you see him?"

"No. Bill, we're wasting time, this is elementary."

"This is essential," Grice corrected, "but it wouldn't have been if you'd come across from the beginning. There's an *affaire* between Mrs. Vance and Adam Bell—did the daughter tell you that?"

"She made me wonder."

"Let's have it all," rasped Grice, aggressively again. "She knows that her father killed young Vance, and you're trying to cover her and cover him. There wasn't a burglar here to-night, there was only Adam Bell. You came to warn him to get away, and——"

"That's hardly good enough for a rookie," Rollison broke in, "and the answers are no, no, no. Do the simple thing. Look at the bruises on Mrs. Vance's neck."

"Bell could have tried to kill her," Grice said, but there was less conviction in his voice, and he seemed more satisfied. The Toff, knowing the signs well, knew that part of Grice's trouble had been due to annoyance and part of it an act—to try to hector the Toff into making admissions that he didn't intend to make. Grice would probably be much more amiable and amenable from now on.

"Did you know Mrs. Vance before this happened?" he asked.

"Sadly, no, Bill."

"Does she know that her husband is dead?" asked Grice and when Rollison didn't answer, he went on softly: "Does she? I'll go and inquire. If she knows, it would be interesting to find out who told her."

Rollison said: "Take it easy with Mrs. Vance to-night, will you? She's had a rough time."

"There's a man in a morgue not far from here, lying with his head smashed in," said Grice, "and I want to find the killer. I'm not sparing anyone's feelings."

It would be easy to talk of the man in grey, the dead man's father; it would be easy to do and say a lot of things which might make the police more amiable, but wouldn't help Agatha Bell or Griselda Vance. The Toff

found himself wanting to help them both, one no more than the other.

"You go ahead," he said, tartly. "Be a copper, not a human being. Mrs. Vance knows about her husband. I told her. But you put her through the mill thoroughly. You grind and grind until she's at screaming point. You try to find your killer by tormenting the dead man's wife. Then go home and tell your children how proud they should be of their old dad."

Grice turned away and went out of the room, without a word.

All that the Yard man asked Griselda Vance, it soon transpired, was whether she knew where Adam Bell was, and whether she had seen him since morning. She told him, simply, no. She admitted that he had stayed here for several days, and some of his clothes were here. But she said he had been out most of that day.

Grice didn't believe that she told all the truth, but there was no way of compelling her to change her story.

There was no way of compelling her to have someone sleep at the house to-night, either, although a doctor who came from nearby strongly recommended it. She was lying in bed, her eyes closed, her body relaxed, suffering from shock which a good night's sleep would help most to cure. She no longer looked truly beautiful, was just a woman in the early forties, with fine features; that was all.

"We can't leave her here on her own," Grice said. There was a kind of armistice between him and the Toff. "It looks as if you could do a good deed for once. Could you ask Lady Gloria to send someone here?"

"A nice chap after all," said Rollison. "I can and I will." He went to the telephone and called his aunt, whom he called by an affectionate 'Old Glory'. She ruled, with gentle authority, over an institution called the Mari-gold Club. It was residential and for women only, and frequently for women who were in need of a kindly, helping hand. It was a cross, as Grice had been known to

put it, between a Y.W.C.A. hostel and an Old Girls' Association.

Old Glory listened to Rollison, grasped the essentials, and said that she was sure she could send someone to keep Mrs. Vance company for the night.

"That's wonderful, Glory," said Rollison, "even the Yard is grateful. I'll come and see you to-morrow, just as a reward." He chuckled at her exclamation of disgust, said good-bye, and rang off.

An hour later, a brisk, middle-aged, businesslike Miss Cadisser arrived, and took full charge of Mrs. Jimmy Vance and that emergency. Five minutes afterwards, Grice left the house, still in a better mood but not properly thawed out.

Before leaving the house, the Toff went up to Griselda Vance's bedroom and, under protest from Miss Cadisser, searched for and found what powder she used. It was Silver Queen, and there was a nearly new box of it in the dressing-table, of a shade called *Dusk*. Under the disapproving eyes of Miss Cadisser, he rubbed a little into the back of his hand, and waited.

He felt no discomfort at all after several minutes.

"If you've finished your nonsense," said Miss Cadisser, "I'd like to get ready for bed."

"Sorry I can't help you," said Rollison, quite straight-faced; and it wasn't until he was half-way down the stairs that he heard her exclamation of vexation.

He went out into the street facing the dark heath, and to his satisfaction discovered that Grice had decided to leave two men to watch the house. Grice did not know of Paul Vance, or the possibility that he would come back, but was taking no chances. If the elder Vance did return, the watching police could cope; so the Toff could worry about other things.

He went at once to Agatha Bell's tiny flat, in Kensington. It was one of a small modern block, all exactly the same—a fairly large living-room, kitchen, bathroom, and bedroom, these three very tiny. He had not been here before.

He had a key, which he had borrowed without permission from her handbag. He let himself in, found his way about and made sure that the flat was empty, looked around and found nothing of interest except the box of Peach Bloom powder which Agatha had opened to overfill her compact that morning. As far as he could judge, there was nothing to indicate that it had been tampered with after leaving the factory; a cellophane window had been broken, and some powder scooped out, presumably by Agatha, that was all.

He tried a dab of power on the back of his hand; and the irritation started up in ten minutes or so. He wrapped the box up, and pushed it into his pocket, then telephoned Jolly.

Agatha Bell was sleeping, he was told, and would certainly sleep until morning, for Jolly had mixed a sleeping draught with a milk drink he'd taken to her in bed. That was as Rollison wanted it. He loosened his collar and tie, untied his shoe laces, and then went into Agatha Bell's tiny bedroom and stretched full length on her bed. For if her father had been driven from one sanctuary, he might see this as another.

Rollison dozed.

He slept.

But nothing happened that night.

He hadn't been back at his flat for ten minutes next morning, just long enough to be told that Agatha was still asleep, and to see the photograph of the two babies neatly stuck together, when the telephone rang.

Jolly, grave as in the midnight hours, answered the call, turned, and said:

"It's Mr. Grice, sir."

"So early," said the Toff, and took the receiver, schooling his voice to amiability. "Hallo, Bill," he greeted. "Want me?"

"I want you to come and see me," Grice said. "Now."

8

THE FACTORY

SCOTLAND YARD, at nine o'clock on a bright summer morning, had a curiously half-awake look. Tired men were leaving, heavy-eyed men were coming on duty. There was a certain gruffness which made itself obvious even as the Toff, completely on his own, made his way to Grice's office. The fact that he was not given an escort made it clear that if not forgiven, at least forgiveness was on the way.

Grice looked offensively bright-eyed.

"Ah, hallo, Rolly," he greeted, with a breeziness which did nothing to fool the Toff. Grice, which meant the C.I.D., now wanted something from him. The change of mood was less hypocrisy than a hearty sense of duty. "Sorry to drag you out so early."

"Not early enough," said the Toff, blandly.

"Eh?"

"No worm, no early bird."

Grice grinned.

"I see what you mean. As it happens, I don't want to make more trouble for you. I've been checking pretty closely, and I've come to the conclusion that you didn't know anything about this affair until yesterday."

"On our next case I hope you'll believe me first time," said Rollison. "Look at the trouble caused and the tempers frayed." He sat down as Grice motioned to a chair, and took a cigarette which Grice offered. "I'm confused and confounded; what do you need as desperately as all this? I can't tell you a thing."

"Can't you?" Grice didn't force the question, and his sunny mood didn't change. "You may be able to, later. On the assumption that you didn't know anything about this beforehand, I'll tell *you* something."

"Miracles," marvelled the Toff.

"Eh?"

"The millennium."

"We *do* pick the odd thing that doesn't reach you," said Grice, with a barely perceptible touch of airy malice. "Not really important, I agree, but it happens. For instance, we know quite a lot about the girl who died in the process of putting lipstick on."

The Toff didn't make any comment and didn't blink; he just stared with a quickening interest which must have made itself very plain to Grice. And for the moment Grice looked almost smug.

"In fact, there have been two," he went on, "one in Paris, one in New York."

"This I find hard to believe," Rollison said, firmly. "They would reach the headlines——"

"One coincided with a printers' strike, the other with the flood disasters," Grice told him, "neither got much Press over here. The circumstances were almost identical. A woman was found dead in front of her dressing table in her *appartement* in Paris. She was fairly well off, she'd been mistress to several wealthy men, she was young enough to expect a prolonged career. She seemed to have been standing in front of the mirror, and have rubbed the lipstick good and hard on her upper lip. I imagine she was going to press her lips together, that's the common method, isn't it? She didn't get that far. She collapsed and died from poisoning by cyanide of potassium."

"What?"

"That's the simple truth," declared Grice, and there was a glint in his eyes. "A similar thing happened in New York, to a similar kind of girl—more the out-and-out prostitute, but goodish class, expensive, not poor by any means."

"The lipsticks?" asked the Toff, bleakly.

"Found, analysed, normal except for the poison which was in a tiny container which broke on contact with the lips. The cyanide was really a pill with a coating of wax."

"I assume," said the Toff, wiping his forehead, "that they were of Silver Queen manufacture."

"Yes."

"I begin to see why you were in such a foul mood," said the Toff, and waved a hand in full forgiveness. "All is forgotten. Did these details reach you through the cops' clearing house in Holland, or whatever you call the international police joint?"

"They did," agreed Grice. "It's not officially our job, but we were asked to make inquiries, because there was another curious coincidence: not only was the lipstick Silver Queen, in each case, but Silver Queen was the only cosmetic either woman used. That isn't surprising, as each had been more than friendly with James Vance. That's why we've been very canny at the factory, so far, and made no official inquiry."

Grice dropped that out casually as if to suggest that, if his tone was any guide, it was hardly worth mentioning. It affected the Toff as a kick from a large horse. He actually moved his head back, went as near to gaping as he ever would, and then said emptily:

"Well, well." He paused, gulped, and added: "Well."

"I thought you were having a shot at the murder inquiry," said Grice, "and I didn't like the idea of you knowing more than we did. You've a lot of American friends, of course, and plenty of friends in France, too. Anyhow, I'm persuaded that the case was new to you yesterday. If you'd been involved before we couldn't have asked for your help, as it is——" Grice broke off.

"Anything," the Toff assured him, humbly. "Absolutely everything."

"Good," said Grice briskly. "Find out what you can from Miss Bell about the Silver Queen factory out at Wembley. We've had a man there, as a factory worker, but haven't got far. There are rumours of trouble, that's all."

"Mystery at Silver Queen," murmured Rollison. "But would anyone like Jimmy Vance use his own firm's lipsticks for the bumping off trick?"

"That's only one of the things we don't know yet," Grice said. "Will you work on Agatha Bell?"

"I will," promised Rollison.

Agatha's fair skin was back to normal, and showed nothing of the previous day's irritation. She was very pale. Her eyes had the hard brightness of someone who is afraid or desperately over-tired. It was a form of cruelty to force questions upon her, but that had to be done. Jolly softened the background, with a luscious casserole dish with wine sauce; even Agatha seemed to eat with relish.

Fruit salad and cream. . . .

Coffee. . . .

"Rolly, if I knew anything more I'd tell you," Agatha said, and was close to tears. "I just *don't*."

"Ag," said the Toff easily, "I'm trying to find out things you don't even realise that you know. You don't work at Silver Queen, I know, but you may have picked up hints about trouble there—that it's been brewing for some time, perhaps. This affair didn't burst suddenly."

"The first I knew was when Daddy disappeared," Agatha insisted. "Oh, I knew there was trouble between Jimmy Vance and Griselda, Reggie told me that first, but——"

"Reggie?"

"Reggie Jameson," she said, and coloured slightly. "He's the Works Manager at the Factory, a chemist really, but——" she broke off, pressing her hand against her forehead. "I didn't think twice about it."

"What did your father say about the trouble between Jimmy Vance and this Griselda?"

"Daddy?" She raised her hands. "*He* wouldn't gossip at all, I never got a thing out of him. Reggie always had the titbits, but I don't want to talk about——"

"It's the titbits I'm after. For instance——"

"Oh, just gossip," Agatha said quietly. "There's a story that Paul Vance was in love with Griselda, and she turned him down, and then married Jimmy. But it was all so vague."

"Did you know any of Jimmy's other girl friends?"

"No," Agatha said, "I didn't meet them. He went to an awful lot of fuss, even had special make-up prepared for them, matching their colouring and that kind of thing."

"So he knew a bit about the technical side of the business," Rollison observed, as if that information had no possible significance.

Agatha laughed, almost scornfully.

"Not Jimmy, *he* relied on his bright smile and ready tongue, he never *worked*. One of the lab boys always made up the special things for him—that's how I know about them."

"Hurrah for lab boys," said the Toff, and did not show any outward sign of excitement, although inwardly he was at the point of rejoicing. He could put Grice onto those lab boys, to find out exactly what they'd done. He poured out more coffee and lit a cigarette for Agatha, then stretched his legs beneath the table, and asked quite casually:

"What has Reggie to say about the disappearance of your father?"

"He doesn't know," Agatha said. "Well, anyway, I haven't told him."

"But I thought he was a close friend——"

Agatha's cheeks flushed almost as hotly as they had with the irritant. That made her eyes look incredibly bright and glowing, and put tartness on her tongue.

"To tell you the truth, we had a row just before I left for America. I haven't seen him since. It was some idea of Daddy's that Reggie didn't like, and I told Reggie it was prejudice and jealousy. The truth is," Agatha went on, with a flash of candour that the Toff observed with relish, "we'd been building up for trouble for a long time. I couldn't see myself spending the rest of my life with Reggie Jameson. But I can't see how all this is going to help."

"You can never tell," said the Toff, sententiously. "Is Reggie always in England?"

"Oh, yes," Agatha said, and could not have made it

more clear that she did not want to talk about Reggie Jameson any more.

But the Toff was most anxious to meet him.

The luck ran his way.

Every afternoon at three o'clock a small party was taken on an escorted tour of the Silver Queen factory. Jolly discovered that. The Toff arranged to join it to-day as a freelance journalist recommended by an editor of repute in Fleet Street, and gave his name as Mr. Richards. On the way, he left the box of face powder with an analyst acquaintance, who would make a confidential report; then he hurried to the rendezvous in Piccadilly with the rest of the party. There were ten in all, an odd assortment of minor stage and radio stars, newspapermen and friends of the Silver Queen management. They travelled in a small motor-coach, and were regaled with a summary of the history of Silver Queen over the loud speaker.

It was almost a potted biography of Paul Vance; from office boy to millionaire——

When they reached Wembley, no one could miss the great show-piece outside the wire fence which surrounded the factory. It was a huge Silver Queen, smiling benignly, and looking beautiful.

Or a huge Griselda Vance.

The preliminaries were amiable enough.

Then a youthful man with curly, wiry hair, a broad, bull-dog kind of face, a hand which kept fidgeting, as if he wished that he could take out his pipe, began the tour. He introduced himself as Jameson, Chief Chemist and works manager. The factory, consisting of several large, single-storey sheds, all painted silver with the Queen upon them, was spacious and attractive. Green lawns were between the buildings, beds of summer flowers gave it an almost park-like air. There were only two two-storey buildings, the 'lipstick shop' and the main offices.

"Now of course we'd be wise to start at the beginning," Jameson said, "and I gather that you're particularly

interested in the face powder and the lipstick. The first room is the powder room." Jameson gave the quick smile of a man who had made that joke a thousand times. "I mean, of course, the place where the face powder is manufactured." He led the way to one of the single-storey buildings, and opened the door. "If you'll step through and gather round me so that you can hear above the noise of the machinery . . ."

The noise was persistent but subdued. A hundred or so girls in white turbans and white smocks, were doing various operations with remarkable speed. A faint, perfumed haze of powder hung about the huge room.

Jameson kept talking, pointing, explaining.

"The powders are mixed in the next room, show you in a minute, and they come through here on a vacuum feed, each box is filled from the bottom—see?—and then it's pasted and labelled and pushed along to the next process or for packing and storing. Twenty thousand boxes of ordinary powder go through one of these machines each day. That's in a single shift, of course. Now, the contents. A talc base, to start with, then other powders—zinc oxide, titanium oxide—what we call a covering powder—because it really covers or hides the skin. Talc itself is transparent, of course. Then we have to have something to make the stuff stick on the skin, can't afford to have shiny-nosed customers, so we need an adhesive—zinc stearate, say, or magnesium stearate. Get the idea? So we have, one, the base, talc; two, the covering up powder; three, the stuff to make it stay on. Then we have to have bulk, of course, to make it fluffy. We use precipitated chalk and magnesium carbonate—sorry if I sound a bit technical, but you see what I mean. Finally, we have the colour pigments, red oxide, various oxides of iron in fact. Oh, I mustn't forget the perfumes."

A red-head asked: "Are the perfumes *natural*?"

"Can be," said Jameson. "Natural perfume goes in the more expensive powders. Almost any flower, properly crushed and treated, gives a lasting perfume. Synthetic perfumes are cheaper, and very good too. To keep the

odour fresh from the first dab to the last, we add a little fixative—ambergris or musk, from the musk deer, or—but you don't want me to be *too* technical."

Jameson led the way into a smaller room, filled with sacks of powders, big drums filled with powder, with machines and big drums or containers suspended from the ceiling. "See that." He pointed up to a big U-shaped container. "Everything goes in there for a start. It's dropped into the big hopper—see, that square thing that's shaking as if palsied—and it's sieved through a 120 mesh screen. Then it goes——"

He traced the different processes, showed where the ingredients were channelled towards one spot, then carried up on an enclosed bucket conveyor and tipped into the big mixer, which was on a level with their heads.

"Of course different shades are made at different times," Jameson went on, "the materials are the same, the only differences are the colour pigments—dark powders made for dark-skinned people obviously. You know about the different shades we make here, from Peach Bloom to Dusk, don't you?"

They went back into the room where the boxes were filled. Anyone who wanted to put irritant into a few odd boxes, would have to do it here. Rollison watched the four girls on duty. One of these could easily do it, or someone who distracted their attention before a box was sealed; or someone who came by night and filled a box or two by hand.

"Now let's have a look at the lipstick shop," said Jameson, and led the way. The party followed, sheeplike, out into the warm day, across a path which divided a bright green lawn, towards the double-storey building which had been pointed out before.

At a doorway, Jameson turned to speak to someone who was passing, and for the first time, came face to face with the Toff. Recognition flashed into his eyes, there was a perceptible moment of silence, while the Toff looked at him blankly; but inwardly, he was cursing the frequency with which his photograph appeared in newspapers.

Jameson recovered quickly, and went on talking quickly.

"Here of course the processes are very different," he said. "Different raw materials, oils and waxes basically, like mineral oil, castor oil——"

"*Really!*" exclaimed the red-head.

"Oh, yes," said Jameson, and led the way through double doors into a room which looked rather like a kitchen, with huge steel vats all filled with melted fat which was being stirred very gently by a mechanical spoon. "That's the first process," Jameson added. "We have to melt all the stuff down, and then we add the colouring, in—here."

He flung open a door, almost dramatically. But he avoided the Toff's eye.

"Oo!" gasped the red-head.

This smaller room had a sultry, fiery look. There was red everywhere; the red of flame. Big containers filled with bright red paste were being fed into big 'mouths' which looked like letter boxes. The colour touched the workmen, the floor, the walls, the outside of the containers.

"Bit satanic when you look at it quickly," said Jameson. "Not laid on for your especial benefit, either, it's always more or less like this. Now, you see the actual paste being fed through there. Now come into the next room, and you'll see what's happening."

Again he led the way, and this time took a quick, wary look at the Toff; who appeared not to notice it.

On the other side of the dividing wall, there was a row of seven or eight taps. Girls were at four of these, and the bulk lipstick was oozing out of the taps into shiny moulds, pieces of metal about fifteen by five, two inches deep and pierced with holes rather like a cribbage board. The molten lipstick filled these up, until every hole disappeared.

"Then they go into this refrigerator, to cool off," said Jameson, and opened the door of a metal cupboard. Several of the metal moulds were in there. "Next, the girl

working here takes all the lipstick bullets out, and puts them on this tray. . . .”

The ‘bullets’ were put on to the tray in even rows, then passed along to girls sitting at a long bench, in the middle of which was a moving conveyor belt. Naked gas burners, inside a kind of metal box, were by the side of each girl. Each had a mass of gilt containers on one side, and a tray of the bullets on the other. One picked up a ‘bullet’, put it into a container, twisted it to make sure that it went up and down properly, then stood it on end so that it was conveyed, on the belt, through the naked flames.

“That gives it the nice shiny surface the ladies like,” said Jameson.

“So everything in this room is handled individually,” the Toff observed, brightly. “If anyone wanted to meddle with a lipstick, this would be the place. Put a needle in, for instance, or——”

Jameson rasped: “Why the hell should they?” and glared.

“Oh, my,” said the Toff to himself, “surely there’s a case of guilty conscience.”

“What a horrid idea,” said the red-head.

“I read about poison in a lipstick once,” said a man who hadn’t uttered a word until then. “Do you use poisons in manufacture, Mr. Jameson?”

Jameson moistened his lips, then seemed to brace himself.

“Oh, yes. Here’s the laboratory.” He led the way into a long, narrow room, with its benches, its stills, burettes, retorts and burners, its rows of bottles or powders and liquids, an oven, a dozen things which meant nothing to a layman.

“We use poison for various tests,” Jameson went on. “Arsenious oxide, better known as white arsenic, for instance.” He touched a bottle. “There’s some barium chloride, but you’d have to take a hell of a lot of that to do much harm.” He passed from that bottle of white powder to another which was purply red. “Sodium nitroprusside there.”

He went on talking; and he missed a bottle which held another poison—one which was labelled: POTASSIUM OF CYANIDE: the poison which had killed two of Jimmy Vance's lights o' love.

"What I'd do, if I were you," said the Toff into the telephone, "is find out who goes to the factory when the work people aren't there. The poison's there for the taking, of course."

"We *have* eyes," Grice said, tartly. "Didn't you pick anything else up?"

"If I were you," said the Toff quietly, "I'd check the movements of the Works Manager, a chemist named——"

"Reginald Jameson," Grice broke in. "Why?"

"Next door to guesswork," said Rollison, "but there are indications that he and Adam Bell didn't get on too well. Agatha broke off a beautiful friendship because of that."

"Jameson's the man who hasn't been too enthusiastic about the inquiries we've made, but he's never been openly obstructive," Grice said. "Is that all?"

"I'm so handicapped," Rollison began.

"What by?"

"The police at Scotland Yard. Now before you start bellowing into my ear," Rollison rushed on, "you might care to lend an ear. I've no doubt at all that Agatha Bell's flat is watched, in case her father turns up. I came round that way this evening, and what did I see but the most massive copper in plainclothes you'll ever come across. Nice chap, no doubt, wonderful in the riot squad. If Adam Bell is desperate enough to try to take refuge at his daughter's flat, he'll only have to pass the end of the street in a cab to see that copper, so he'll stay away."

Grice said: "If I take a man off and Bell goes there——"

"He'd run into me," Rollison pointed out. "I've a sleeping engagement there to-night. Don't get me wrong!" he added hastily. "Agatha will remain in Jolly's care. After all, you did ask me to help, didn't you?"

"All right," said Grice. "I'll give it a run."

"Bless you for an enlightened copper! Another thing,

Bill. I'm sending a copy of a photograph round to you—two babes in arms. The kind of photograph young maidens blush about when being shown to their young men. If you've ever seen it before, let me know where."

"Why?" Grice was wary.

"It could tell a story," said Rollison, and he sounded almost meek.

Rollison reached Agatha's flat an hour later. He searched for and found a family photograph album, but not a photo of the twins. Then he went to bed, fully dressed.

He did not know how long he had been asleep on Agatha's bed when the sound disturbed him. He was awake and alert on the instant, a trick partly natural and partly acquired.

He had told himself, before putting out the bedroom light, that it was a forlorn hope indeed.

Now, there was a sound.

A light went on in the next room.

9

ADAM BELL

THE Toff sat up and the bed creaked a little but he did not think that the sound could be heard outside. He got off the bed and stood up, then stepped behind the door. He heard the man moving about, with the brisk certainty of someone who knew where to find everything he wanted; so, it was someone familiar with the flat. He heard a tap running, then a sound which was like gas being lighted; was the visitor going to make himself some tea?

The Toff opened the door, cautiously.

The light was on in the larger room, and the door leading to the tiny kitchen was wide open. The light was on there, too, and a shadow moved.

The Toff went forward, stealthily, and saw a man standing at the kitchen table, spreading butter on bread. He was in the early sixties, with iron grey hair, a fresh complexion, lean and wiry-looking, and with swift, nervous movements. Behind him, the gas hissed under the kettle.

"Good evening," said Rollison.

The man stopped spreading butter, and looked up with his mouth gaping, his eyes aflame with alarm. He held the knife upright, like a navvy at the table. In that split second the only thing in him was fear; but gradually that faded. He gulped, tried to smile, failed, and managed to utter:

"You—you scared the wits out of me." His voice was so husky that it was obvious that more than his wits had been scared.

"Too bad," said Rollison, perfunctorily. "What's the matter with your conscience?"

"What—what do you mean?"

The kettle began to sing. A piece of bread and butter slipped from the bread board to the table, and drew the Toff's gaze for a moment, while Adam Bell stood absolutely still. The singing grew louder, and there was a hissing sound.

"You can guess what I mean," said Rollison, brusquely. "What makes you think that Agatha deserves the misery you're giving her?"

"I don't—I don't understand you."

"There'd be just one good excuse for letting her think you might be dead," said Rollison, "and that would be if you couldn't help yourself. Instead of that, you're as free as the air. What's the trouble? Ashamed to let her know that you're living with Griselda Vance?"

Bell flushed: "That's not true!"

"Do you deny that you've lived at Vance's house since you've been back from the States?" Rollison asked sharply.

Bell looked shaken.

"No, I—no, but it wasn't what you think. There's nothing—nothing really wrong between Griselda and me." He shivered; it might have been because the steam, coming freely from the kettle spout now, touched the back of his head lightly. "You must believe that, Rolly."

Rollison moved, and Adam Bell's gaze followed him as he dropped into a chair. Rollison lowered the gas, made some tea, put it on a tray, took two cups and saucers from a small dresser, and fetched a tin of sugar from the larder. He did all this while Bell watched with increasing intensity; a kind of fear.

"I don't believe it for a moment," the Toff said at last. "Was Jimmy Vance living at the house?"

"He——"

"Was he?"

"No. No, they—they just can't get on together, it's been a mockery of a marriage for years, but don't get the wrong idea, Rolly. Griselda—Griselda and I can't help

being fond of each other, and I was in great difficulty and needed a place to rest. She offered it to me."

"And you rewarded her by killing Jimmy Vance, setting her free so that you could share the sanctuary good and proper," Rollison gibed.

Adam Bell flashed: "That's not true! I didn't kill Vance."

Rollison picked up the tea pot.

"Milk and sugar?" he asked in a steely voice. "How did you know that Vance was dead?"

"I was told by telephone," Adam Bell said, and suddenly seemed anxious to talk. "Whoever killed him must have guessed that I was at Heath View. The call came in the afternoon, and I left at once. I thought it would be better if I wasn't discovered staying with Griselda. It would look bad for both of us, but much worse for her. No one knew I'd been there. She—she gave the only living-in servant notice, and did some of the housework herself, none of the daily helps knew I was there. But I couldn't stay and let trouble come to her, could I?"

"Who telephoned you?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you recognise the voice?"

"No," Bell said, "it was husky and faint, as if a man were speaking a long way from the mouthpiece."

"And you ran out on Griselda Vance because it would look so bad for her when you were accused of her husband's murder? Pretty sure you would be, weren't you?"

Adam Bell said: "Yes, Rolly, I was. Heaven knows I wanted Vance dead. I hated the sight of him, for more reasons than one. We had a vicious quarrel in New York, just before I left. I could have killed him then. A dozen people saw it, and that kind of thing's certain to reach the police. They were bound to look for me."

The Toff was pouring out tea.

"We're agreed about that, anyhow," he said. "Help yourself to milk and sugar." He pushed the cup across the shiny table. "Where were you last night, Adam?"

"I went to a hotel near Waterloo," said Bell, "but I knew the police would soon be after me, and that once my photograph appeared in a paper, I'd be finished. I passed the end of this street several times, and until an hour or two ago someone was watching. But I had to take a chance, and this was as good a place as any. Agatha always had a stock of food in the larder, and——" he broke off, gulping.

Rollison said quietly:

"So you didn't kill Jimmy Vance?"

"No."

"You weren't near the river?"

"No."

"Then why the hell don't you tell the police where you were?" Rollison was suddenly, angrily aggressive. "Why torment Agatha? Why run away from New York? Who's turned you into a coward?"

Bell asked slowly: "Why are you so hostile?"

"I don't like to see a girl living on her nerves the way Agatha is."

"I ran out on Agatha because my life is in danger," Bell said. "I had to leave New York, and so dodge the people who were trying to kill me. I had to decide how much to tell Agatha, and decided it was better to tell her nothing. I knew the mystery would drive her frantic, but she'd have been frantic anyhow. It was better for everyone that no one should know where I was."

Rollison flashed: "Except Griselda Vance!"

"I knew I could trust her."

"But you couldn't trust Agatha? Your own daughter."

Bell was kneading a little piece of bread between his thumb and forefinger, all his latent tension in that ceaseless movement.

"No," he said, "I dared not trust Agatha completely. She is friendly with a lot of people at Silver Queen. She might tell someone without meaning to harm me. She——"

Rollison flashed:

"You mean, she might have told Jameson."

There was another long pause, but Adam Bell's fingers didn't cease moving. He looked startled at the mention of Jameson's name, but that was all.

Then :

"In a way, yes. Jameson, Jimmy Vance, Paul Vance—as far as I knew, any one of them might be involved. All I know is that my life's in danger, that I've got to hide. I've been shot at; I've been within inches of death by being pushed into the road. In New York, I was almost pushed in front of a subway train. I've been in—in absolute terror, Rolly."

Bell sounded as if he meant exactly that, and there was the reflection of terror in his eyes.

"I'll believe it when I know why you're in danger," said Rollison coldly, "and what it's all about."

Bell said slowly : "I can't tell you why. I don't know. I do know that it began after a quarrel with Paul Vance over Jimmy. Once, I thought that Jimmy was behind it; I've suspected Paul; I've suspected Jameson, for that matter, I've suspected nearly everyone."

"Except Griselda Vance," Rollison said abruptly.

"If you knew her——"

"Listen, Adam," Rollison said more gently, "you say your life's in danger, but you don't know who's responsible. So you can't trust anyone, not even Griselda Vance."

"I think I can."

"It's your risk. Now take the next logical step, though. The police are after you. The killers are after you. You're in danger from both." Rollison paused. "There's an easy way to halve the risk."

Bell stared. "How?"

"Give yourself up to the police."

"*You* recommend that?" Bell looked appalled. "I always thought——"

"You've been fed on the crazy idea that I'm always cocking a snook at the police," Rollison said crisply. "Forget it. They do a damned good job, and they only want to find the truth. At worst you'd be charged and remanded. The remand could be repeated, we could stall

for weeks while the police were looking for the killer, and while I'm keeping my eyes open too."

Bell said slowly, bitterly:

"They'd hang me. Can't *you* see what's happened? Jimmy Vance was killed and I was framed, it's another form of the attack on me. I wouldn't have a chance."

Rollison moved away, slowly. It was difficult to feel sure about Bell's mood; about his innocence. If Paul Vance was right, then Bell had a strong motive for Jimmy Vance's murder; and if anything seemed certain, it was Bell's devotion to Griselda Vance.

Rollison said: "The longer you hide from the police, the stronger the circumstantial evidence against you. Face that." Bell kept a stubborn silence. "They'll soon find out that you're in love with Griselda Vance—with the murdered man's wife. They'll conclude that only guilt would make you hide, and who could blame them?"

Bell said: "I won't go to the police."

"I think you will," said the Toff very softly. "For your own good——"

Bell jumped up, eyes glittering.

"What are you saying? If I thought you'd betray me——"

"I'm going to take you to them," Rollison said, "or else call them from here. There's a telephone in the other room." His face was stern and his eyes a gate hard; he wanted Bell to feel sure that the threat would be carried out, for if Bell were faced with the crisis, he might give way and tell more of the truth.

He hadn't told it all, yet.

"And I'll take it a step further," he went on, "I'll tell them that Griselda Vance was hiding you from them. With the pair of you——"

"Don't say it!" Bell cried. "You wouldn't be such a swine." He was breathing very hard; and the stubbornness was beginning to crack. "Griselda's had a hell of a time. If you knew the truth you wouldn't talk about her like that. She made one dreadful mistake, when she let Jimmy sweep her off her feet. He was a handsome, head-

strong devil, older than his years, and he just wouldn't let her alone.

"So—she married him."

Bell closed his eyes.

"She married him," he repeated, "and she's known no happiness since. Her life's been torment. Paul turned against her, hating her. Within a year, Jimmy was going around with younger women. Griselda just gritted her teeth, and took it all."

"Plus consolation," sneered the Toff.

Bell flared up: "You take that back! Griselda's never——"

"Aren't you her lover?"

"My God," breathed Adam Bell, "I could kill you for that. Griselda would no more take a lover than——" he almost choked.

Rollison said: "Adam, the police will have reason to think you're her lover. You know that. But if you'd talk to them as you've talked to me, you'd make them think again. You'd save yourself from this other danger, too."

Bell looked at him with pain-racked eyes; and shook his head.

He wouldn't give himself up voluntarily; force alone would make him. If only Adam Bell was to be considered, the easy way would be to hold him here and send for Grice. But——

"Adam," Rollison said abruptly, "who is gunning for you?"

"I don't know."

"Why does anyone want you dead?"

"I don't know."

"Would it be Paul Vance?"

"As I stand here," said Adam Bell, "I don't know who it is. But Paul hates—how he hates!"

"Why?"

"If I could get into his mind, I'd tell you," Bell said.

"If I could get into your mind I'd be a lot happier," said Rollison, and swung the pendulum swiftly. "You

ran back to England. You're hiding here. You'd be safer with the police——"

"They'd hang me! Why don't you realise that?"

"A stubborn mule like you would almost deserve it," Rollison said roughly. "Adam, what game are you playing? What makes it worth being on the run? What are you looking for?"

Bell said: "I want to find out who's gunning for me. I want to catch one of the swine. I want to make him talk, and——"

"I'll do the catching, while you're safe in gaol," Rollison urged. "This way you're simply asking for trouble, and——"

He broke off.

Something in his expression made Adam Bell catch his breath. There was a complete change of atmosphere; the tension was no longer just between them; they joined forces against a new element, a threat which came from outside.

The Toff looked towards the door; and there was a sound, quiet but unmistakable; then, silence. Bell's breathing quickened, and his hand dropped to his pocket.

To a gun?

The Toff breathed: "You expected someone to follow you here, didn't you?"

"I'll get him," Adam Bell breathed. "I'll find out why——"

He didn't finish.

The door was flung open from outside and the Toff moved, at one and the same time. In the doorway, gun in hand, was a big man. His hat was pulled low over his face and a raincoat collar was turned up.

The Toff leapt at him as he fired at Adam Bell.

10

THE GUNMAN

THE Toff's right hand felt the warmth of the shot as it came from the gun. Had it been an inch lower, his fingers would have been crippled for life. But it missed. He smashed a blow at the big man which should double him up.

It did.

He made a strange, whining sound, and staggered back.

Rollison glanced round, afraid that the bullet had injured Bell. But Bell was close behind—*ready to attack him*. That was the moment of Rollison's dismay, almost despair; he hadn't a chance, for Bell's attack came out of the blue.

Bell had his gun raised, like a club. Rollison flung himself to one side, but was off his balance. He felt the crack of steel on his temple, and pain took possession of him.

He raised his hands up over his head, to try to protect himself, and the gun cracked against his fingers. His wince was like a squeal, and he felt his knees buckle beneath him.

His head seemed to be screaming.

The light was agony at his eyes.

He saw movement and heard voices, and there wasn't a thing that he could do. He straightened up against the wall, trying to stand without its support; and he couldn't.

A door slammed.

The noise sent agony through his head, which seemed to split in two, and for some seconds he stood crouching against the wall, face buried in his hands, teeth clenched, breath forcing itself into his lungs.

There was no other sound.

He hated that light.

He took his hands away, slowly, and narrowed his eyes, knowing that sooner or later he had to face the light. It still hurt, but didn't blind him. He saw the open kitchen door, the bread board close to it, the big stranger on the floor of the big room. There was a gash over his right eye, and he looked dazed.

The gun wasn't in sight.

Bell had gone.

Rollison moved further away from the wall. He was able to stand without support, now. He stepped nearer the big man, with his hand in his pocket; he had an automatic, and he might have to use it. He was already feeling better; not right, but better.

The big man looked at him.

Rollison standing, the big man sitting, they just stared. Rollison raised the gun, but it was more gesture than threat. The other closed his eyes, as if he was suffering agony, too. There was something in his looks, in the set of his face and his clothes which suggested that he was an American.

There was no other sound. No one moved, above their heads, below, or at their sides. Grice had really drawn his men off, no neighbour had been alarmed.

The dazed look began to fade from the big man's eyes.

The Toff felt that his head was almost its normal size. His grip on the gun was firmer, and on himself much firmer still.

He said: "Who sent you?"

He didn't add 'Why?' because that spoke for itself. This man had come to kill Adam Bell.

There was no answer.

"Friend," said Rollison softly, "even tough guys can get hurt."

The man moistened his lips. The cut on his forehead looked nasty, and was bleeding freely; a drip or two trickled down his cheek, and it reminded the Toff of Jimmy Vance's head.

"We could handle it another way," the Toff went on. "I'll tell you why you came: to kill Adam Bell."

The man didn't speak.

The Toff raised the gun, very thoughtfully. Then he smiled; and he knew the full value of that smile.

Fear woke up in the other's eyes.

"Just one more chance," the Toff said. "Who sent you to kill Adam Bell?"

The man said: "Okay, we're alone." Yes, he was American. "So I'll tell you. I did aim to kill the guy." That came out flatly.

The man had brown eyes. They weren't beady or shifty, but clear and direct. He wasn't a film star for looks, but had the kind of homely face that a lot of women would fall for. In his expression, in his tone and also in what he said there was a kind of simplicity—which did not square with his admission, or with the shot he had fired at sight of Adam Bell.

"Don't make me repeat everything," the Toff said, softly. "Who sent you to kill Adam Bell?"

The man said: "When you get your orders from the place where I got mine, you don't ask questions. You've got a job, you're to kill Adam Bell or maybe act as sitter-in for Barney Bando's baby. Okay, so you go ahead and do it." He moistened his thick lips again. "Okay, so *I* do it. I know I take a chance, but what's wrong with taking a chance? I get paid for it."

Keep it on this level; this almost natural calm.

"How much do you get paid?" asked Rollison.

"A thousand bucks and all expenses, and this time the expenses included a trip to England, so who was I to wish it wasn't me? You want to know something? I think this country's cute. Yes, sir, cute's what I think about this country. Why, you ever been to Buckingham Palace? You been to the Tower of London? You seen"—the American gulped, and almost whispered the rest of the sentence—"you seen the Crown Jewels? Jeep, what wouldn't I do to walk round town with them!"

He was very, very smooth.

He actually smiled a little, as if he was looking at the dazzling sight of the Crown Jewels in their tiny chamber.

The smile was there to deceive, like the mild voice and the simple manner. He was collecting his wits and gathering his strength, and it wouldn't be long before he acted.

He drew up one leg, the better to rise to his feet.

"Who sent you after Bell?" asked Rollison, flatly.

"How would I know?" asked the big man. He had a foot planted firmly on the floor, and was kneeling. If he had trained himself, he could hurl himself forward from that position, and do a lot of harm; obviously he was very, very dangerous. "Why don't you put that gun away? I didn't come here to do you any harm." He smiled again, and shook his head. "How do you pack all that steel in your fist?"

"Don't try to show me how much you pack," warned the Toff, "because next time you might really get hurt." He kept up the questioning. "Who sent you?"

"I guess I don't know the answer, pal," the American sneered.

"Someone just stopped you on Broadway, and whispered in your ear?"

The brown eyes rounded.

"Say, do you know about Broadway? What do you know! No, sir, it wasn't on Broadway, it was on Twenty-second street. There's a clip-joint you wouldn't know about, no one knows about it—well, not so many. A place where you can see what a man wants to see." He grinned and winked. "But everything, any way you like. So I go to get myself a dame at this joint, and who should I see but Mo. You know Mo?"

"No."

"That so? Well, knowing Mo would make a difference," declared the big man. "Mo gets around. Mo gives me a photograph of this Adam Bell, and the dough, and the instructions. He tells me where I might find Bell, and so I come and look. It took me some time to find him, most nights I've been here to have a look round. To-night was the night I thought I'd be going home to see Mo." He finished, and drew himself slowly to his feet. Three

yards separated him from the Toff; and if he could close it to two, he would probably be able to crack the Toff's bones in a bear hug.

He smiled.

"You going any place?" he asked.

Rollison grinned.

"We are," he said, "and don't come any closer, Herb, or Mo won't get any of you back. I——"

The American chose that moment to fling himself forward, as if confident that he could carry the day by sheer weight. He was half right. Rollison didn't use the gun as a lethal weapon, but stretched out a long leg, ramming the massive midriff. It made the man squeal, then double up, head towards the Toff, neck stretched out as if ready for the chopper.

The Toff cracked him twice on the back of his neck with the butt of the gun, and induced complete collapse.

Then, the Toff looked down at the quivering man who had been sent by 'Mo'.

He grinned again.

He went to the telephone and dialled an East End number. He knew that it was nearly two o'clock, that the man he was calling would be fast asleep, with a wife who had an acid tongue. The *brrrr-brrrr* of the ringing sound kept on and on. The heap on the floor stopped quivering, and lay still, there were bruises where Rollison had struck, but the skin hadn't been broken.

Except for that noise in Rollison's ear, there was silence. Murder could be done, and the neighbours sleep the sleep of the just . . . or wake up, feel their hearts pounding, and tell themselves that it was none of their business.

At last, the ringing sound stopped. Noises at the other end of the telephone had a peculiar nature, a grunting and groaning kind of noise. Then a man spoke gustily into the mouthpiece; rather like a rhinoceros whispering.

"'Oo the blinkin' 'ell is that?"

"Is that Mr. William Ebbutt?" asked the Toff, in a whisper both deep and profound.

"Supposing it is, wot perishin'——"

"Bill," whispered the Toff, "tell Liz I'm sorry that I woke her, just blame it on your Mayfair friends."

The whisper disintegrated.

"Blow me, it's Mr. Ar!" the man bellowed.

"Mr. Ar will do nicely," agreed the Toff, gratefully. "Bill, I'm sorry, but I've a little job for you. Urgent but not lethal. There's a man here in 29 Kinton Street, South Kensington, not far from the Victoria and Albert and near the station. He needs a little first aid."

Bill Ebbutt, the man at the other end, gave a snigger of a laugh.

"He's a big chap," went on Rollison. "He packs a Rocky Marciano punch, he's American, he's a killer, but if you treat him well I think you'll get along with him nicely. Think you could come over and collect?"

"Oh, *sure*, Mr. Ar. Right away."

"Wonderful, Bill. Thanks."

"Be right over," promised Ebbutt. "Which side of Souf Ken station is it?"

"The Museum side. Coming from your direction, you'd better . . ." the Toff gave precise directions before ringing off.

The heap on the floor hadn't moved, but that didn't mean that the man was still unconscious. The Toff moved from the telephone, took a hand-towel from a hook, bent over the American and slid the towel round the big head. The man started, but didn't fight back; so he hadn't come round yet. When the Toff had finished, he looked like a creature out of Ku Klux Klan, lying full length on his stomach, his head covered, his hands tied behind his back.

Rollison eased him over, and began to go through his pockets, putting everything he found in a neat pile on the floor.

He talked as he did so.

"You're going to meet some typical English people," he said, "don't try any funny stuff with Bill Ebbutt. He has a lot of friends. You want to know about him? He owns a pub in the East End—you know what a pub is, don't

you? Call it the English version of a respectable clip-joint. He also runs a boxing school, called diversely Ebbutt's Academy and Ebbutt's gymnasium, and beneath the pub and the gymnasium there is a cellar. Most of the bins are filled with wine or with beer casks, but there's room for you. You can meditate in peace and the heady aroma of hops until I've come to have a chat with you about Mo. Understand?"

He finished his search, then picked everything from the floor, put it on the kitchen table, and began to look through it.

He found a photograph of Adam Bell, one taken not long ago, in England. He found an American passport, in the name of Timothy Mahoney, a chit which would have to be exchanged for a return flight ticket to New York. There were some American Express travellers' cheques, also in the name of Timothy Mahoney, and a bill, receipted only that morning, from a small hotel near Paddington Station, where Mahoney had stayed for the past week.

"I'll talk to you later, Tim," the Toff said, "the first problem is to get you out of here."

Bill Ebbutt, a mountainous man wearing a thick white polo sweater and a peaked cloth cap, had two of his gymnastic friends with him, and a small van. No one appeared to notice them take the helpless Mahoney out of the girl's flat and put him into the van; and no one appeared to see them drive off. It was like the end of an era. Adam Bell had escaped again—but that couldn't last.

Where was he now?

Had he killed Jimmy Vance?

It was four o'clock when the Toff reached the flat in Gresham Terrace, making very little noise, being anxious not to disturb the neighbours, Jolly or Agatha. He won twice and lost once, for Jolly appeared, brown eyes blinking like an overtired owl's. By then, Rollison was at the

desk in the big room, looking at the box of powder and an analyst's simple report, which made him grunt, then at three messages which had been clipped together, all of them written in Jolly's meticulous handwriting.

"I put some sandwiches under the cover, sir," he said, "and I wondered if you would like a glass of—ah—hot milk, as the night is so far gone."

"Milk?" echoed the Toff, and slowly shook his head. "The night may be far gone, but I'm not, yet. Whisky, just a nip." He lifted the lid off the dish; the sandwiches were of lettuce and ham, the ham thick and succulent. "Bless your heart! Mix me the drink, will you?" He began to eat. "From Lady Gloria—will I be very careful? Remind me, Jolly! From the Yard—will I go there to sign the statement which I made at the river? Yes, in due course. From—*what's* this?"

He stared at the third message.

"I took it myself, sir," said Jolly, "and there is no possibility of mistake. Mrs. James Vance asked you if you would go and see her as early as possible in the morning. The call was made by Miss Cadisser, and Mrs. Vance came on the line immediately afterwards."

"What time?"

"A little after twelve o'clock, sir."

"No explanations or reasons why?"

"None at all, sir, although I tried discreetly to find out what she wished to discuss."

"I'll bet you did! Hm." Rollison considered, at great length. "Let me tell you something, Jolly. Mrs. Vance is a *very* handsome woman. Plus. Did Miss Bell tell you anything more about the lady, or weren't you in your father confessor mood?"

"Miss Bell seemed concerned only for her father," Jolly told him, "and highly nervous, in case her father had anything to do with the murder of James Vance."

"Did she give you any reasons why she suspects A.B.?"

"None whatsoever, sir."

"Hm," said the Toff ponderously, after another long pause. He finished a sandwich and started another. "Now

you go and tuck yourself in, Jolly, you have work to do in the morning, whereas I can stay in bed all day." He had a drink, and watched as Jolly went out, pondered the message from Griselda Vance, and made a discovery which did not wholly surprise him.

He wanted to see her again.

It wasn't often that he felt like that.

11

PAUL VANCE

MISS CADISSER obviously disapproved; that was undoubtedly why Lady Gloria Hurst had selected her for the commission. But she did not formally object to allowing Rollison to stay in Mrs. Vance's bedroom, while she, the watch-dog, went out and closed the door. She would not listen at the keyhole; Lady Gloria's protégées could be relied upon for strict decorum.

She had probably disapproved of Mrs. Vance's make-up, too.

It wasn't excessive, but it was good; in fact, it was exactly right. It turned her handsomeness into rare beauty. It was so right that Rollison wasn't sure whether she had used eyeblack or not. Her skin looked flawless. She had that silvery coloured hair and the pale grey eyes which had silvery brightness when the light shone on them, clear as a limpid pool trapped amid rocks on the Cornish coast. She wore a pale blue bed jacket of angora wool, with a very fluffy neckline which was turned up, so that the bruises at the throat were hidden. Rollison felt quite sure that the bruises were there; he could see the way Paul Vance had leapt at her, now, could almost feel the strangling power of his fingers.

She smiled formally as the door closed with a snap.

"You're very good to come so soon," she said. "Won't you draw up a chair, and sit down?"

Rollison didn't move, except to put his head on one side. That was not only to create an impression; it was because he enjoyed looking at her. Whatever nervous strain she had suffered seemed to have gone. He could not even see it lurking in those eyes.

Adam Bell loved her.

Rollison felt a quickening of his own pulse.

Agatha could have that effect on him, because of her youthful loveliness, her freshness and her figure. Here was something quite different. He sensed that, and believed that Griselda Vance did, also. It was as if a spell had been cast over them both.

It might take a lot of breaking.

It could be dangerous because it could easily distort his judgment.

He moved, pulling up a bedroom chair, and dropping into it. He glanced away from Griselda Vance. The room was a dream in rose pink and deep red, the red discreetly etched or woven in here and there. Furniture, curtains and the few good ornaments, the things on the dressing table were all of a quality which told of wealth. On the bedside table was a small gilt clock, the hands pointing to a quarter to ten.

"Thank you," Rollison said, "but there was no virtue in coming, I couldn't keep away." His lips turned down at the corners in a smile touched with irony. "You're looking as if you've no troubles in the whole, wide world."

"I don't feel quite like that," she said.

"Pity. At least you're well looked after. Two policemen are on duty outside, you're under what is called 'close surveillance'. Mind you, I don't think that's altogether concern for you, I think they really want Adam Bell."

"Yes," Griselda said, "I suppose they do."

"Expect him to come?"

"Adam was always unpredictable. I'm—I'm so sorry," she broke off quickly, seeing his hand move towards his pocket, "do smoke if you'd like to. I don't, and never keep cigarettes in here."

"And thoughtful, too," Rollison said. He took out the gold cigarette case and lit a cigarette, watching her all the time. Her composure wasn't assumed, and he didn't think it was simply lack of anxiety. It was some quality which belonged to her, and which nothing could easily take away. He pictured her as she had been when Paul

Vance had tried to throttle her; proud, erect, unmoving.

"To what do I owe my good luck?" he asked, ironically.

She was puzzled.

"Luck?"

"Being asked to come and see you."

She smiled, very faintly. The spell was still upon them both. Rollison was aware of it, but did not really want to break it.

"Mr. Rollison," she said, "I do not believe that Adam Bell killed my husband, and I want you to prove it."

He watched her levelly.

"Just faith in Adam?"

"Yes."

"No alibi for him?"

"No."

"Do you know he's in danger of his life—or says he is?"

"I believe he is."

"On what evidence?"

Her eyes held a touch of mockery.

"Just faith," she said.

Rollison grinned.

"I hope the mountains aren't too large. Do you know who killed your husband?"

All mockery vanished; everything but seriousness faded from her.

"No," she said deliberately.

"Any ideas?"

"No."

"Do you know why someone is gunning for Adam?"

"No."

"Care to guess?"

Griselda said: "I think he discovered something at the factory—or about the business. I can't imagine what, and he won't admit it—he may not even realise what it is. But if I have to guess at all, that's what I would say."

"Thanks. Do you know when Adam first realised he was in trouble?"

"A week or so before he left for New York," she answered.

"In fact, just after a quarrel with Paul Vance," Rollison told her, abruptly.

She didn't comment.

"Did you know about the quarrel?" Rollison was still abrupt.

"Yes."

"What was it about?"

"I don't see how that affects——" she began.

"Supposing we cut out the lies, the half truths, the evasions, the sentiment," Rollison said, and his manner was almost brutal. "Paul Vance and Adam Bell have an ugly quarrel. After it, Bell's life is threatened. The reason for the quarrel might give us a pointer to the reasons for the attacks, whether you want your precious Paul suspected or not."

That hurt her.

She caught her breath, wincingly. She didn't speak, just watched Rollison with those silvery grey eyes; frightened eyes?

"You let Paul Vance escape," Rollison said, "and you don't do that for a man who's just tried to choke the life out of you unless you've a very strong reason. And don't forget how deep this goes. Murder's been done, and more is threatened. Paul Vance was ready to kill you, and he may yet try again. That kind of passion doesn't grow out of nothing, and it takes a long time to erupt. What's caused it? And before you answer, remember that several lives could depend on what you say—a lie could kill, the truth might save Bell, Paul Vance, even yourself."

He stopped, in a dead silence.

Then Griselda Vance closed her eyes, and it was as if a light had gone out.

She said: "I don't blame Paul for what he did. He's always accused me of turning Jimmy into what he is—what he was. God knows I tried to change him, but at heart Jimmy was a brute. He didn't care about other people. He would flaunt his women before me. He would come home drunk and violent, I could show you the

marks of his hands. Paul didn't want to believe that it was—the natural Jimmy. He blamed me, blamed my—coldness. He said that drove Jimmy crazy, that if I'd behaved as a true wife, it would never have happened."

She stopped.

Rollison felt as a priest might feel, listening to the confessions of a tormented soul.

He didn't speak.

Griselda went on in a hushed voice, speaking as if she could not hold the words back:

"And then Adam Bell discovered what was happening, and lost his head. He threatened Jimmy. He told Paul what a savage brute he had for a son. And they quarrelled like brutes themselves." She paused again, then went on very slowly: "Two—good—kindly—civilised—men."

She stopped.

Rollison did not speak or move.

Then she looked at him as if she were trying to compel him to do what she wanted.

"I want you to help them both," she said. "Don't tell the police what Paul did. Don't betray him. Help them both."

There was nothing else to say. Yet.

Rollison left the house in Heath View, a little after half-past ten, and nodded to the two plainclothes men on duty, stepped into the munificence of his cream-coloured Rolls-Bentley, and started the engine; the self-starter gave just a gentle noise, rather like a kiss. The car moved, its engine purring, out of the drive and on to the road, and then across the Heath. It was another fine morning, but he didn't pay much attention to the weather. He lit a cigarette while travelling slowly, then drove faster, ignoring speed limits but playing safe.

No car followed him.

He made sure of that, then turned towards the East, driving through a part of the London suburbs which he did not know well, until eventually he came to Islington.

He parked the car, and took the underground, buying three newspapers at the station and looking through them on the way to Whitechapel.

There was nothing new or different about the murder of Jimmy Vance. Agatha's picture was there; a lot of people would have shaken their heads and said what a horrid thing it was for a lovely girl to have an experience like that. For once the Press had shown a heart; the Toff was prominent in name and headlines, but there was no photograph.

Few people were travelling in the middle of the morning and Rollison was conspicuous in his pale grey suit and unstudied elegance. Few failed to look at him, and the younger the woman the longer the stare. He left the train and went briskly into the sunlit street, past the shops and the tall, dark houses, past the ends of narrow streets where the houses were hovels with a drab grey uniformity, and where the regularity of chimney pots and lamp-posts made one want to scream.

Soon, he came near the Blue Dog.

This was at a corner of one of the mean little streets, and had recently been painted. Bill Ebbutt had chosen a brilliant yellow, which acted as a signpost for the whole of the East End. Those parts which were not wood were resplendent, also, in brown, blue and yellow tiles, and the big windows were of thick frosted glass, with the name of the pub on it in gilt lettering. All-in-all, it was a magnificent establishment for this drab district. Just behind it was the corrugated iron building where Ebbutt trained his young hopefuls; probably half-a-dozen 'lads' would be there this morning.

And below, of course, was Tim Mahoney.

A small boy, who looked as if he should have been at school, came tearing along the pavement in the general direction of the Toff, and for a moment seemed likely to crash into him. The Toff side-stepped. The boy, with cropped fair hair, a pink face and a pair of bright blue eyes, dodged the same way—one of the silly things. They dodged again: Right, left, right, left.

"Steady," said the Toff. "Sorry——"

"Don't go to the Blue Dog, mister, Bill says keep away," breathed the boy. Then with the nimbleness of the very young, he skipped round the Toff and went on his breathless way.

MAHONEY RUNS

ROLLISON stared after the boy until his flying figure reached a corner and disappeared. Then he crossed the main road, dodging two cyclists and a brewer's dray; the dray driver did not take it calmly. From the far side of the road, Rollison looked towards the Blue Dog; then the luck that was often at hand, came to his aid.

It was in the black, box-like form of an old-fashioned taxi.

"Where to, sir?" The driver had the comfortable look of a man shortly to retire.

"Just drive me slowly past the Blue Dog," said Rollison, "go a hundred yards or so along, and then drive slowly back." He got into the cab. "Then we might do the round trip again."

"Sunnink up at Bill Ebbutt's," said the taxi driver, still comfortably, "saw it as I come past. Coupla coppers there. You never can tell, can you, arf the crooks of the East End hang around that gymnasium, and Ebbutt's missus a Salvation Army so-and-so!" His grin was as comfortable as his double chin. "Okay, Mr. Rollison."

"You and I could be friends," said the Toff.

There were several policemen outside the gymnasium and two police cars. That was all the Toff saw when he first went by. The second trip was more rewarding; Grice and another Yard man were coming out of the gymnasium, and the massive figure of Tim Mahoney was between them. Mahoney looked dazed, and had the almost simple look which the Toff remembered. Grice was grim. The policemen were standing to attention, and one of them at the open door of a police car.

It was a sight to see.

Mahoney did not say a word. His clothes were crumpled, his stubble was almost black, and his hat was dirty. His hands were by his sides, not handcuffed; and the Toff felt sure that clemency was a mistake the moment he saw it. Mahoney's mildness had fooled the police, who had no reason to believe that he had come to England to kill.

Behind them, protesting with sibilant vehemence, was Bill Ebbutt, more massive even than Mahoney, and ten inches further round the waist. He looked exactly what he was: an old prize-fighter of the never-say-die school. Everything about him was pugnacious, and suddenly he raised his voice:

"And I don't care what you say, Mr. Grice, you've no right to accuse anyone behind their backs. If Mr. Rollicson was here, he'd have a good reason——"

A uniformed man said: "Dry up, Ebby."

"You ruddy well mind your own effing business!" roared Ebbutt, turned in a moment into a quivering mountain of wrath. "Flickering flatfoots, pity you haven't got more to do than——"

He was capable of going on like that for minutes at a stretch.

Instead, he stopped abruptly.

Mahoney chose that moment to act; and he was magnificent. He thrust both arms out, sent Grice flying in one direction, the other Yard man in the other. The policemen who were with Ebbutt jumped forward, but knocked against Ebbutt, and lost their balance. Mahoney seemed to race straight towards the waiting cars, and the policemen on duty there crouched; one drew his truncheon.

The cab was almost at a standstill, its driver goggle-eyed.

Mahoney swerved, as two policemen ran at him; he handed one off, and cracked his clenched fist on the other's nose. All the time he moved at speed; and all the time the crowd of Ebbutt's cronies stood applauding, not in silence, while Ebbutt stood as still as any statue.

Mahoney was racing towards the taxi.

"Strewth!" gasped the taxi driver. "He's a human whirlwind, that's what he is. Look at 'im!"

"Mind he doesn't whirlwind you," Rollison said softly.

"*Crikey!*" breathed the taxi driver, and trod on the accelerator and promptly stalled his engine. "Blast it!" He stabbed at the self-starter.

Mahoney was pounding towards them, with three policemen noisily in pursuit, three picking themselves up, and one lying inert. Grice was one of those running. There were twenty yards between the nearest one and Mahoney, who did not even trouble to look behind.

"Don't let him——" began the taxi driver.

He was wasting his breath. Mahoney may have seen the taxi, but he took no notice of it. His face was set and his lips parted as he flashed past; and the wind of his movement stirred the air in the taxi. Pounding footsteps followed, and the Toff felt sure that Mahoney hadn't a chance; the Toff almost felt sorry.

The first policeman ran by.

Grice came towards the taxi, with obvious intent.

The Toff said: "See you later," and thrust a ten shilling note through the glass partition, opened the offside door, and jumped out. He didn't know whether Grice saw him as he ducked out of sight, but he heard Grice jump on to the taxi, and order:

"Follow that man!"

No one stared out of the taxi window at the Toff, who dodged the traffic as he crossed the road. The taxi's engine roared, then stopped abruptly, stalled by intent or by design. Grice was shouting; he didn't often let himself do that. The two running police were some way off, and Mahoney was well in the lead as he ran past the entrance gates of a small builder's yard.

A timber-laden lorry backed out, blocking the path of the police. One man almost ran into it, someone shouted, and the lorry driver jammed on his brakes, but Mahoney was given precious seconds of grace. Rollison saw him

tearing along, with a dozen people standing and staring; one made a grab, and was bowled over.

Then, Mahoney turned right.

Down that narrow street were drab houses leading to narrower lanes which weaved their silent, furtive way among warehouses and high and windowless walls, empty buildings. In sight, too, were the masts of ships from many distant lands, the tops of cranes and derricks. To all except those who knew it well it was a sinister stretch of London's waterfront, and once a man gained its shadowy sanctuary, he could call himself safe from the police, at least for a while.

The police were off again. Grice had reached the corner, and the cab swung round it.

Rollison watched it disappear.

If Tim Mahoney got away, then Tim Mahoney knew his way about London's dockland; not many Americans did.

The Toff was in a telephone kiosk near the Bank of England, half-an-hour or so later. Traffic flowed by, noisy and smelly, City slickers in black coats and striped trousers and curved brimmed bowler hats passed in their hundreds, all looking too hot, and slips of girls wearing next to nothing, and most of that semi-transparent, passed by the kiosk.

He rang the flat, and Jolly answered promptly.

"All well, Jolly?" Rollison asked.

"I think so, sir," said his man, a little doubtfully. "Miss Bell is *much* better, and——"

"Restive?"

"Very."

"Good. But keep her there until I get back—about three, with luck. Tell her anything you like, but hold her there."

"Very good, sir," Jolly said, without enthusiasm.

Rollison rang off, and dialled Bill Ebbutt's number. A woman answered, and:

"Just a minute, Mr. Ar," she said in a shrill voice. "'E's

coming. *Bill!* 'Ere's Mr. Ar, get a move on, you lazy streak."

"*You pipe down,*" came Ebbutt's voice, faintly. A moment later, he spoke in one of his vast whispers, "'Allo, Mr. Ar, did the kid warn yer? . . . That's the ticket, likely boy young Charley, make a fighter aht of 'im one day, too . . . *Shut up, Liz* . . . No, I wasn't talking to you, Mr. Ar," he went on, and the whisper became as the howling of a strong wind among leafless trees. "The Yank got away."

"Sure?"

"One look at old Grice's face would tell you all about it," said Ebbutt, and he chuckled deeply at the recollection. "Caw, was 'e mad! But couldn't do a fmg abaht it, Mr. Ar. Come just because he thought you might have been putting one acrorst him—some copper saw me near Miss Bell's flat when I come to get the Yank, so Gricey put two and two together. Wanted to know how the Yank got into the cellar, o' course, and what did I say? Said I didn't know, nacherly, and he accused *you*, Mr. Ar!" Ebbutt's laughter came in gargantuan gusts. "Didn't arf tear a strip orf of 'im, I did, and there wasn't a fmg 'e could do. 'E couldn't prove *I* invited the Yank, could 'e, and as the Yank's gorn——"

Ebbutt stopped.

A pretty girl with a low-necked cotton dress, black braided hair and too much eye-black, stood outside the kiosk, waiting with obvious impatience.

The Toff winked at her.

"Mr. Ar," breathed Ebbutt, "'ow important was that Yank?"

"We don't know yet," said Rollison, "just try to find out where he went to earth. He must have known the district pretty well."

"You're telling me! Sailor, prob'ly. I'll find out what I can, Mr. Ar. Shall I call you, or will you ring me?"

"Call the flat and leave a message with Jolly if I'm not there," said Rollison, "and thanks, Bill. You're get-

ting even better than ever. Give young Charley five bob for me, and tell him thanks."

"Leave it to me," said Ebbutt. "Just you leave it to me."

Rollison picked up his Rolls-Bentley, a little after one o'clock. He had lunched with proletarian relish off two cheese sandwiches at a snack bar, after making sure that he had not been followed. He divided his thoughts three ways, pondering over the general issues, over Bill Ebbutt's resource—and Griselda Vance, her story and her plea.

Her story had gone deep.

He mustn't let himself concentrate too much on her, remember.

Along the North Circular Road, he drove at greater speed, then lost some time finding his way to Wembley and the Silver Queen factory. Once in the immediate vicinity, the factory was easy to trace. Several vans were on the road, all small, all glistening like silver, all with superb pictures of the Silver Queen on the outside, and the slogan in flashing letters: IT IS OUR BUSINESS TO MAKE THE WOMAN BEAUTIFUL. He saw the sign high in the sky as he drove slowly along a road which fed a dozen factories. He saw the name and slogan suddenly, on the fencing of the cosmetics factory itself—the slogan was skilfully painted on the silvered iron posts of the fence, and seemed to move with the car: IT IS OUR BUSINESS TO MAKE THE WOMAN BEAUTIFUL. He reached the factory gates, and began to appreciate the true genius of the Silver Queen concern, for over the gates was a huge picture of the Queen and her slogan, and at the gates there were two girls, instead of two old soldiers. They were dressed in amber coloured uniforms, smart as guards on parade, and beautifully made-up. They would have looked at home on any first-class airline, and they raised the tone of the factory buildings unbelievably.

Rollison pulled up.

Both girls looked at him, and the cream-coloured car admiringly, and one stepped forward.

"Good afternoon, sir, how can I help you?"

"You've done a lot already," said Rollison, and won a ready smile. "Do you know if Mr. Paul Vance is on the premises?"

"As a matter of fact, sir, I believe he is," the girl said. "His car is here, I know. Have you an appointment?"

"Sadly, no."

"I know that he is very busy to-day, and you may have heard of his sad bereavement." The girl said that formally, but managed to sound as if she meant it. "I don't think you'll be able to see him."

"Just have a message sent through, will you—that I'm a friend of Mrs. James Vance."

"Oh, I *see*," the girl said. "I think you'd better drive up to the office, sir, and I'll telephone a message. If you ask for Mr. Edge, it will be simpler."

"Who is Mr. Edge?"

"The Secretary, sir." She might have said: "The Leader" with no greater sense of awe.

"Good," said the Toff, "and thanks." He drove on, along a well-made road, with single storey factory buildings on either side. Because of the warmth of the day, several long windows were open, and he could see girls in white working inside the big shops. He could also smell the faint odour of a perfume which he couldn't place.

The offices, clearly marked, had pictures of the Silver Queen on the windows of the doors, and the slogan on the doormats. Here, another two girl commissionaires were on duty, as sleek and blessed and well-made-up as those at the gate. They smiled as if they were trying to impress a film director.

"If you will wait one moment, sir . . .

"Mr. Edge won't keep you long, sir . . .

"If you will please come this way, sir."

Rollison followed one of the girls. She moved like a dream, and the curve of her waist and her hips was as one. She led the way through a maze of glass-walled offices, where hundreds of people seemed to be working and a hundred typewriters seemed to be clattering, as many

telephone bells ringing, each on a different note. Then she stopped at a wall of frosted glass, which had a door in it and on the door, the name: *Jeremiah Edge, Secretary*.

The girl tapped, almost reverently, opened the door, and announced him as Mr. Smith. He stepped into a large room, a haven of quiet after the din outside. But it was a deceptive quiet.

Griselda Vance was here, with a sleek but passable young man.

A THIRD BOX OF POWDER

GRISELDA VANCE was standing by one of the long, narrow windows overlooking a lawn and flower beds. Behind her was an oil painting, beautifully done, and it was so like her that it seemed as if two women were in the room.

She wore a cream-coloured linen suit which fitted her like a sheath, and a gossamer-thin scarf was about her neck.

The sleek and passable young man was also standing, by his large, flat desk. Only a telephone, a silver inkstand and one file of documents spoiled the shiny smoothness of the desk and a box-like contraption for making internal calls. The surface made a third woman; Griselda's reflection showed, shimmering a little, in its hard polish.

"Ah, Mr. Smith," said Edge. He looked very hard at Rollison, and then added: "But surely—Mr. *Rollison*."

"Either will do," Rollison said.

Edge smiled. It was a quick, automatic kind of smile that went well with sleek brown hair and bright brown eyes and general smoothness; yet he was not a man to dislike on sight. "I don't think we've met before, although of course I know of you very well. I hope you haven't called on us in the way of business!"

He shook hands, briskly.

He turned towards Griselda, and went on in the same easy, flowing voice:

"Allow me to present Mrs. Vance—Griselda, Mr. Richard Rollison."

"We have met," said Griselda.

"Oh." For a split second Edge seemed almost non-plussed, but he quickly recovered. His busy eyes were

asking questions, and there was no doubt that he was wondering whether the Toff had called because of the murder of Jimmy Vance, trying to see the answer before he really knew the question; he was that kind of young man. "Well, Mr. *Rollison*, how can I help you?"

"I'd rather see Mr. Paul Vance."

"Ah, yes," said Edge, and gave a little frown; a kind of synthetic expression of apology. "I'm afraid it can't be arranged, Mr. Paul has given strict instructions that he is not to be disturbed. You understand that he is greatly distressed by his son's death, and I would feel it an unwarrantable intrusion to interrupt his privacy."

That was parrot-like.

Griselda's eyes were questing, too. "Why have you come?" she seemed to say, "what do you want here?"

"What would convince him that I must see him?" asked Rollison, and smiled amiably. "Evidence of more disaster?" He took Agatha's box of Peach Bloom from his pocket, and the shape must have been familiar to Edge even though the box was wrapped up. He took it to the desk and opened it, with great care. A little cloud of powder came out, with the same perfume that he had recognised as he had passed the open windows. Griselda came nearer, while Edge stared intently. The Toff took the top of the box off, looking at the picture of Griselda as he did so.

A little powder spilled on to the desk.

"Sorry," he said, and put the tip of his forefinger in it. "This is your make, isn't it?"

Edge said, almost sharply: "Yes, of course." He didn't ask for an explanation, was prepared to wait.

"Could you be sure it isn't an imitation?"

"Why should it be?"

"I think you might hope that it is," said the Toff, and with his brightest smile, he held out his hand, with the powder on the finger tip. "Let me rub a little on the back of your hand, will you?"

Edge exclaimed: "Why on earth——" and stopped. Slowly he extended his left hand: no one could have

behaved with greater reluctance. Griselda moved forward, her hands coming within the Toff's line of vision. He rubbed a little powder on to the back of Edge's hand, and then turned to the woman. "Would you like to experiment, too?"

Her eyes were enormous with inquiry.

"Yes."

Rollison dabbed his finger in the powder again, and did exactly as he had to Edge. Her fingers were long, white and cool.

"Guaranteed to do no lasting harm. Just rub a little on a tender spot, wait ten minutes, and watch 'em scratch. Laugh and laugh and laugh. Be a hell of a fellow among your girl friends, too. Especially good on the tip of the nose or the lobe of the ear."

He released Griselda's hand.

She looked at her powdered spot, as Edge was looking at his. It was just a pale film, hiding the skin completely, and there seemed too little of it to do any harm. Rollison sensed their tension, knew that he had given them the clue which each of them took in a flash.

He moved away.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

Edge said: "Yes. Yes, please have one of these." He sat rather heavily at the luxuriously upholstered chair at the desk, and opened a drawer. He took out a flat box of cigarettes and a lighter, and pushed them towards Rollison, opening the box first. He kept glancing at the powdered spot. Griselda looked only at Rollison.

He lit the cigarette.

Seconds ticked away.

Four minutes—five—six . . .

At last Edge said very softly:

"Feel it, Griselda?"

"Yes," she said, "it's beginning to—itch."

"It will last about ten minutes," said the Toff, then took a sheet of paper from his pocket and handed it to Edge. "There's the analyst's report. Talc base, colour pigments, synthetic perfume, natural perfume and

powdered glass wool. Rubbed on the face it would cause quite a sensation, wouldn't it?"

Edge had gone pale; talc-white.

"It couldn't have happened here! It must have been introduced into the box after it was bought from the shop."

"There's the box," said Rollison, "opened just as you see, with the cellophane cover broken. Agatha was in a hurry."

He smiled.

Griselda exclaimed: "Agatha?"

"Agatha *Bell*!" breathed Edge.

"She did the usual repair job on her make-up, and soon afterwards her cheeks were flaming," Rollison told him. "I've looked for indications that the box had been tampered with, but can't see any at all. Factory fresh, except for the hole in the middle. My analyst took four samples, one from the top, three from deeper down. Contents and proportions were almost identical with each sample, so it had been well mixed. Would it be easy to mix the irritant in a box of powder, Mr. Edge?"

"It could be done," Edge said, slowly. There was a startled, almost a scared look on his face. "It would be possible to steam off the label at the back, put in the irritant, then seal the box with a fresh label." But in spite of his words his eyes were worried, and he looked hard at Griselda.

So did the Toff.

Her expression was like Edge's; almost scared.

Edge said: "Excuse me." He looked at the patch on the back of his hand, as if he wanted to scratch it, but wouldn't let himself. He pressed a button in the talking box, and a girl spoke as if from a long way off, her voice had a disembodied sound.

"Yes, Mr. Edge."

"Two things, Ethel. Find out if Mr. Vance is still in his office, and put me through to Mr. Jameson."

"Yes, Mr. Edge."

Edge looked up at the Toff.

"Jameson is the factory manager and chief chemist,"

he said, and stared out of the window. Griselda Vance was by the Toff's side, and he was aware of the faint perfume, as he was very conscious of her nearness. He wished he could ask her why she had come here.

Edge ran a hand over his sleek hair.

A man said: "Hallo, Jerry, want me?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Edge," said the girl with the distant voice, "Mr. Paul is still in his office."

"Thanks, all right . . . Yes, Reggie, can you come to my office, in a hurry, bringing a few boxes of 2YC12 batch with you?"

"Repeat."

"2YC12."

Reggie Jameson sounded as if he was in the same room.

"There won't be much of that left, it's nearly three weeks old. Couldn't come and see me, could you? I've a couple of spots of bother and ought to be here for half an hour. I'll send for the powder."

"All right, I'll come," said Edge. He pressed the button, and jumped up, as if glad to have the excuse to move. "Will you wait here, Griselda? Better if you're not seen in the factory."

"I'll wait," she promised.

"Good." Edge looked at the Toff. "Care to come with me, Mr. Rollison?"

"I'd like to very much."

"Good," said Edge again. Never had a man lived up to his name so truly; he could not have been more edgy. An irritant in a single box of face powder wasn't likely to have such an effect on him; the questions in the Toff's mind grew louder. "This way." Edge opened a second door, and led the way along a narrow passage; in a few seconds they were outside. A warm breeze blew a delicate perfume towards them from the long, low, white-walled building opposite; a strip of bright green lawn and a cement path divided it from the office building. Windows were open, girls with white turbanned heads and white smocks were busy. They neared the big door, which was closed.

Edge paused.

"Have you told anyone else about this, Mr. Rollison?"

"No."

"I'll be most grateful if you keep it to yourself. It may be nothing of course, but—well, I know I can be frank with a man of your reputation." Edge smiled as if he really didn't want to be frank with anyone. "We had some trouble with a lipstick, a few weeks ago. An abrasive had been introduced into it, and it scratched the lips. Luckily, it was discovered before substantial stocks left the factory, and we were able to recover all which had gone out. Then again—we had some ridiculous trouble with a nail varnish remover, a constituent with an unpleasant odour had been added. That reached the shops, but didn't get very far." He looked earnestly into Rollison's eyes. "You see why this has shaken me."

"It would shake me, too," said Rollison, dryly.

"Yes. Well, let's get on," Edge said, and pushed open the door of the building.

They stepped in.

A faint haze, actually of the powder, filled the air of the big 'room'. At the long benches sat the girls, turbaned and smocked, all bending over moving belts which contained boxes—or what looked like boxes. Several machines were working, and there was a steady *thump, thump, thump* as well as, somewhere not far off, the whirr of an electric motor. Electric fans were stirring and cooling the air. Some of the girls glanced up, one smiled, but none of them paused in the job they were doing. For a few seconds each one seemed to be doing exactly the same thing.

In fact, they weren't, as Rollison had seen before.

Several operations were in progress, all needing speed and nimble fingers. Most of the fingers were tipped with bright nail-varnish, the skin looked white, the complexions of all the girls was excellent, and all were made up. The perfume which he had noticed outside was much stronger here, it was sweet, hard to define, not unpleasant but rather too heavy.

Girls glanced at them, some furtively, some openly.

Edge paused, near the end of one of the benches. By their side was a large bin, almost waist high, and two feet across; it was covered with a film of pinkish powder. Tiny, misty clouds of powder came from it, and from a curious contraption above it. This, also coated with the flesh-coloured powder, like the floor and the walls and everything here, looked like an enormous hypodermic syringe; more prosaically, not unlike a large pneumatic drill. A snake-like length of rubber tubing ran from the bin to the 'needle' of the 'syringe'. A girl sitting in front of this kept taking empty boxes off a moving conveyor belt, and putting them beneath the 'needle'; powder poured from it, as a vaccine would from a needle, the box was filled in a trice, and the girl pushed it back on to the conveyor and put another underneath. In all, there were a dozen machines working on the same principle.

Edge picked up an empty box.

"See that," he said, and pointed. The cellophane cover was already in position, sealed and drum tight—as it would be in any box of powder. He turned it upside down, to reveal a hole about the size of a two shilling piece, in the cardboard bottom. "We fill it through there by that vacuum filler, then fit one of these discs"—he stretched out and picked up a disc, fitting it into the hole—"and then paste the label over it. Three different operations, partly done mechanically, of course. These are the only hand operations in the whole process." He looked up at the 'hypodermic needle', and there was an almost haunted look in his eyes. "That's the filler. Sucks powder out of the bin, and fills the boxes. If that—but come on."

They left the powder room, went through the smaller room next door, where the big, box-like containers were suspended in mid-air, machinery thumped and clattered, big drums were filled with powder, huge paper sacks were piled along the walls. Here, only men were working.

"This way," said Edge.

He glanced at the huge u-shaped container. A big tube led from this to a bin, and a faint mist of powder came from it.

Edge led the way into the laboratory. Several men in white coats were busy, and no one took any notice of the new-comers. Jameson sat in a corner office, with a glass surround, talking to a younger man in a white smock.

Edge opened the door.

"More ruddy trouble," growled Jameson, "one of the range mixes won't pack properly. It never rains but it pours. All right, Jem, put the whole mix aside, clean all the containers, and start over again. We'll test the batch again to-morrow." He nodded at the younger man, who went out, and then looked up at Edge—and Rollison.

The sight of Rollison shook him. He showed that, for a second, then seemed to recover.

Edge said: "Reggie, this is Mr. Rollison, who's brought us trouble, too."

"Oh," Jameson grunted. "How're you? What kind of trouble?"

"Is that 2YCI2?" Edge asked, and picked up a familiar looking box of powder.

"Yes," grunted Jameson, and grinned: "I've had one hell of a day, sorry if I show it." He had a good, quick smile, and fine teeth.

Edge was breaking the cellophane of the box. He stuck his forefinger in, and then rubbed it on the back of his other hand. He looked at Jameson, and the now familiar kind of scared look appeared in Jameson's eyes. Slowly, he stretched out his hand, and Edge rubbed a little of the powder in.

"Mr. Rollison discovered that there was an irritant in one of these boxes," Edge said. "A box Agatha Bell says she bought from her local chemist. No doubt about the irritant, I can still feel it." He looked at the first, fading patch; the skin was faintly red.

"What's it supposed to be?" Jameson asked. "This irritant I mean."

"Powdered glass wool," Rollison said.

"No!" Jameson jumped up. "I can't believe——" he swallowed his words, and moved away, to another part of the laboratory.

He came back in a few minutes.

"We had a new supply of powdered glass in a few weeks ago, and it's mostly gone," he said with restrained savageness. He moved to a microscope, and with jerky movements, put a little of the powder from a new box on to a slide, and pushed it under the instrument.

He peered through the lens, then backed away.

"Seen this, Rollison?" he asked.

"No."

"Care to?"

"Thanks." Rollison moved forward. When he looked, he saw tiny, dark blotches, with some crystals which were unmistakably glass. He drew back.

"It's there all right," he said. "In the whole batch."

He broke off, as if horrified.

14

URGENT MEASURES

THE silence in the glass-walled office seemed to last for an age. Rollison, there to pick up all he could, was able to feel the tension in the two men. It wasn't just this discovery; it was all that had gone before, the reason for the indications that they had been so jittery.

Then Edge said: "Well, we've got to stop this batch."

"Can't," said Jameson. "It's out."

"Know where it's gone?"

"We can find out. We *might* be able to find out," Jameson corrected, and licked his lips. "This is one hell of a business." He stared at Rollison, and went on huskily: "If many people used this stuff, it would damage the name of Silver Queen so much that we'd be sunk." He meant it. "Jerry, you'd better go and see the old man. We can't handle this one on our own. I'll find out as much as I can about the batch. It's over two weeks old, and went into stock the usual way." He gulped. "Might be some in that big consignment to Australia. I expect some London shops have had some, we ought to be able to stop it." He was talking almost to himself. "Best thing is to send a telegram to every customer who's had a delivery of powder in the past two weeks. Only thing to do. Quote the code number and get them to send it back to us on full credit. You agree?"

"Yes."

"I'll draft the telegram, you get the Old Man's approval. This is likely to send him right round the bend," Jameson added, as he picked up a pencil. Then he forced a smile, for Rollison's benefit. "Sorry if I seem to be filled with alarm and despondency. Can't thank you enough for bringing the stuff."

"Glad to help," murmured Rollison.

Edge said: "Come on." He led the way back through the laboratory. Now, several men stood and stared, and there came a whisper: "... the Toff." Edge didn't seem to hear it. Rollison went through the first doors, into the raw materials room, where the noise of machinery went on all the time. A new sound and a new movement had started since he had been here before; a big flat box was being shaken to and fro, as if it were suffering from some form of mechanical ague. Powder rose from this in thicker clouds than any Rollison had yet seen. A man stood on a ladder, emptying one of the thick paper sacks into a big container above the shaking, rattling box—a big, powerful man.

Rollison caught a glimpse of his face.

The man turned his head, sharply.

Rollison missed a step; he didn't look round and didn't look again, but he felt a sharp tug of excitement.

The man was Tim Mahoney.

The doors closed behind them, and they were in the room where the girls sat and worked with such nimble precision. Thousands of round boxes of powder had been filled and sealed and labelled since Rollison had last been here. Edge was striding out.

Rollison caught his arm.

"D'you mind if I look round on my own?"

Edge missed a step, and turned his head; he looked harassed, haunted—surely much more worried than the circumstances really warranted.

"What good can you do?"

"Who knows?" asked Rollison. "I can try."

Edge said: "Please yourself, and if you're stopped in any of the workshops, say I gave you permission. I can't stay now. When the Old Man hears about this——" he broke off; obviously he was really nervous about Paul Vance's reaction; as was Jameson. "The stubborn idiot won't call in the police. I wish to hell I knew why."

He went striding off.

Rollison stood quite still, watching the door of the raw materials room, where he had seen Mahoney. A lorry, laden with brown, reinforced paper sacks all labelled *TALC 120*, rolled up to the double doors, and came to a standstill. Rollison took cover behind the lorry, and went nearer. The doors were opened, and two men in khaki overalls appeared; Mahoney wasn't one of them.

Opposite the double doors was a smaller, double-storey house, painted white with silvered windows, like the others, and with the Silver Queen reigning benignly from a landing window immediately over the door. The macadamised path leading to it was not white, with powder, but reddish in colour. The lipstick 'shop', of course.

Rollison hurried across, and pushed open double swing doors.

He was in a hurry, but even though he'd seen it before, the sight that met his eyes pulled him up short. It was like walking into a painted inferno. Everywhere—walls, floor, benches, even the ceiling, was tinged with red, as if a great fire were devouring a city and its glow spread ominously into this big room.

The men and women moving about in it seemed touched with the same fiery glow. Big bowls of molten wax stood about, stirred by mechanical stirrers. The men with reddened fingers were dipping in sticks and matching them with other, drier sticks.

Here was the original home for the Devil, where no one was in a hurry.

To the right, was a staircase. Rollison moved towards it, but a man appeared as if from a fiery furnace, face and clothes, hands and feet tinged with red; it was like walking through a fire made of wax.

"Help you, sir?" That was a challenge.

"Mr. Edge gave me permission," said Rollison. "My name is Rollison." He skipped past the man, who wasn't quite sure what to do, reached the stairs and hurried up to the landing where the window was half obscured by the Silver Queen.

He could see men unloading the lorry, and could see into the store room. Mahoney appeared. He was empty-handed when he reached the lorry, turned his back on the piles of heavy sacks, hoisted one off the lorry on to his shoulders, and took it into the store-room. He didn't show any sign of being worried by the weight or of being in a hurry.

"So he doesn't know I saw him," said Rollison, *sotto voce*.

He looked at his watch; it was half-past three, and Agatha would be raging; she would have to rage. He hurried down the stairs and the harassed Mephistopheles looked relieved.

"Sure I can't help you, sir?"

"You can. What time do you finish here to-night?"

"Five-thirty, sir, unless there's need for overtime."

"Thanks," said the Toff, "half-past five ought to be late enough for me! Is there a telephone handy?"

"Well, sir, there's a prepayment box in the front hall of the office, but if Mr. Edge——"

"He's with Mr. Vance," said Rollison, "I don't want to disturb him." He went out of the picture palace hell into the bright light of the summer afternoon and, confident that the lorry hid him from Mahoney, went to the offices. The two duchesses were still on duty, and their expressions kindled when they saw him.

"Mr. Edge is with Mr. Vance, sir."

"Yes, I know. Thanks. I'm told there's a telephone handy."

"Why, just behind you!"

Rollison smiled as if in confusion, turned, and saw the telephone in its booth of polished wood. He went in, pennies already in his hand. He had put one in when he saw the doors leading from the main offices open.

Griselda Vance appeared.

She reminded him vividly of the moment when he had seen her standing against the partly open door, waiting for Paul Vance to take her neck between his fingers. She had that kind of defiant look. She smiled at the two girls, but

that was no more than a gesture. She went out, and Rollison wished he could go after her; but the third penny was in, and he had already started to dial the number of his own flat.

The dialling sound went on and on, just the familiar, exasperating *brrrr-brrrr, brrrr-brrrr*. There was no answer. Jolly should be there, and if not Jolly, Agatha Bell. *Brrrr-brrrr*. Come on Jolly, shake a leg. *Brrrr-brrrr*.

Rollison gave up.

He didn't like it, but there was no need to assume that anything had gone wrong. If Agatha had insisted on leaving, Jolly would have followed. Of course. That was the simple explanation.

He began to dial Ebbutt's gymnasium. *Brrrr-brrrr*. At a time like this, Jolly wasn't likely to leave the flat empty, except under some kind of duress.

The *brrrr*-ing stopped. Odd sounds travelled over the line, and then a voice came as if from a long way off—rather like the voices out of the box on Edge's desk.

"Wonder 'oo the ruddy so-and-so is this time," grumbled Bill Ebbutt, "if ever I'm doing a job what matters the perishing—'*old your chin dahn!*'" he roared, and the vast volume almost deafened the Toff, "Watcher fink you're doing, inviting 'im to 'it you? *Keep it dahn.*" Metallic sounds travelled along the line as if on the wind of Ebbutt's rage. "*Who's that?*" he roared.

"Sorry, Bill," said Rollison, humbly, "I didn't know you were training Britain's newest hope."

There was a pause. Then:

"Cor, wot a day this 'as bin," said Ebbutt, almost forlornly. "Can't do a fink right, Mr. Ar. Been keeping me temper all day, and then when I take the cork aht, what 'appens? It's you. Well, can't get no worse, I s'pose. Accept me apologies, Mr. Ar, will yer?"

"Accepted. How long will it take you and one other chap who saw Mahoney, to come to Wembley?"

"Wembley?" Ebbutt seemed flabbergasted, and took a long time to consider. "Well, I dunno. 'Bout an hour, I s'pose. By car. Wot's 'e done now?"

"He's working at the Silver Queen factory," said Rollison, "and he's due to leave at half-past five. I'd like to have him followed."

"Can do," agreed Ebbutt, and then with a note of wheedling apology: "Wouldn't matter if I didn't go meself, would it, provided the boys that goes know the guy?"

"Send who you like," said the Toff. He was looking at the front entrance, and to his surprise saw Griselda Vance come back. She carried herself in much the same way, as if steeling herself for another unpleasant session. With Paul Vance? She didn't notice Rollison; one of the girls opened the door for her, and she disappeared.

"Anything else, Mr. Ar?" asked Ebbutt.

"Yes, Bill. There's no answer from my flat. Send someone to have a look round, will you? Jolly should be there, with a girl named Agatha Bell. Quite something to see."

"Mr. Ar," said Ebbutt, and all the hesitation and reluctance faded from his voice, "that's a job I wouldn't leave to no third party. I'm on me way."

Probably there was nothing to worry about at all. Possibly Jolly had gone out, leaving the girl in sole possession, and she hadn't been able to wait there any longer. By now, she would be in a fever of impatience; and if Agatha Bell felt like that, she would take action. She would be feeling desperate for news of her father, too, and be almost sure that the Toff had failed her.

No, there shouldn't be anything to worry about.

Yet Rollison worried.

He remembered the way Mahoney had fired that shot, at sight of Adam Bell. He knew that Mahoney was here, and couldn't do any immediate harm, but—were there others? Bell had said that 'they' wouldn't harm Agatha, unless 'they' thought that she could lead them to him.

Did they think she could?

They'd know, by now, that Bell had been at her flat, Mahoney had had plenty of time to telephone.

Well, Ebbutt would soon be on his way to Mayfair.

And Mahoney——

The situation wasn't exactly forming a clear picture in Rollison's mind, but it was supplying more pieces of the puzzle. There was trouble at Silver Queen with the doctored cosmetics, and obviously the idea was to give Silver Queen goods a bad name. The possible motive didn't yet matter as much as what was happening. Mahoney was working in a place where he could do a lot of damage; for instance, he could put the powdered glass wool into the huge containers which fed the mixer with the talc base and the other powders, the colour pigments and the perfumes.

How long had he held such a position?

Had he come straight here from the East End?

Rollison stepped out of the kiosk. One of the girls blushed suddenly, caught in the act of staring at him. Some could not stand up to the Toff's profile for long.

"Has Silver Queen any other depots in London?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, sir," answered the girl, almost too eagerly, "there's the one at Clapham, that looks after the south and west distribution, just a warehouse, that is, and then there's the depot at Mile End, that's the place where the big export orders go from, and where we get deliveries of shipments from the Californian plant."

"Key points all round, are there?" mused Rollison, and gave her a smile which left her speechless. "Is there a leaflet or a letter-head——"

"There's a shade card, sir," said the other girl, coming to the rescue. "Shows all the different shades of all our products, and it's got the addresses of our different depots everywhere. Would you like one?"

"Very much," said Rollison.

They competed to get a silvered pamphlet, larger than the average book when opened, which looked as if every sweet young thing at the plant had pressed her lovely lips against it. There were kisses by the dozen, all in different shades. *Flame, Sunrise, Sunset, Mid-day Sun, Dawn*—each shade had a different name. There were finger nails, too,

looking like solid finger prints, and circles and squares showing the shades of every cosmetic made by Silver Queen.

"Exactly what I want," said Rollison; for the addresses were on the back. He folded and slipped it into his inside breast pocket. The girls watched, as if it was a Royal Command performance.

"Now if I could see Mr. Edge——"

"He asked me to take you straight in, sir," said one of the lovelies, and opened the door for him. He ran the gauntlet of the glass windows, the typists, the clerks and the telephones again, and there was a difference; the clatter ceased for a split second, and nearly every eye had turned towards him. His girl escort was more attentive this time, there was no doubt that they knew who he was.

Edge's office was just ahead.

"He is with Mr. Vance now," said the girl, and led the way past Edge's office. Another door of frosted glass bore the name: *Paul Vance, Chairman and Managing Director*.

The girl tapped.

A man called: "Come in," and the girl opened the door and stood aside.

There was Edge, still sleek if troubled, and standing by his desk, Paul Vance.

In the good light of the office, with its long windows, Rollison saw Vance clearly for the first time. He was still a man in grey. He was different from the last occasion only because the grey suit seemed lighter. He wore a grey tie. He was a well-built, good-looking man, of the impressive kind. His grey eyes had a lack of brightness which wasn't surprising; he gave Rollison the impression that he hadn't slept for a long time.

He was saying:

"Yes, of course, stop every box that came from that batch of Peach Bloom, and stop everything else that might have been affected. Check all batches made that day. Tell Jameson to keep the laboratory staff working late to-night, it must be finished before they go home. Hurry, please, there isn't any time to lose."

"Reggie's all ready to start," said Edge. There was a stubborn note in his voice. "We can look after all that, Mr. Vance, but this mustn't be allowed to go on any longer."

Vance said: "Indeed?"

He turned away from Edge. His voice could not have been more cutting; no one could have been more effectively put in his place.

He inclined his head.

"Mr. Rollison, I believe."

"Yes," Rollison said. "Good morning. I'm sorry I brought trouble."

Vance said very slowly and deliberately: "Mr. Rollison, I am grateful that you brought this matter to our attention. I hope that it will be possible to find a practical way of expressing our thanks. However, I want there to be no misunderstanding of any kind. I do not wish to be associated with friends of Miss Bell. It is my considered opinion that the difficulties we are having here are inspired by her father." He paused, to make sure that what he said sank in. "I am further of the opinion that her father killed my son. You will understand why I feel so strongly, and why I must ask you to leave these premises."

Edge looked as if he was about to speak; but he didn't.

Rollison said easily: "Yes, I quite understand. You could be making a mistake."

"That is my own responsibility."

"Yes," agreed Rollison, slowly, "yours alone, perhaps, but there are other things to consider, aren't there? Other shareholders of Silver Queen, for instance. The reputations of people who work here. The work itself and therefore the livelihood of the work people. In all, quite a responsibility."

"One I am quite capable of accepting," said Paul Vance, and added with an almost old-world courtesy: "I wish you good day."

Edge's brown eyes were pleading. "He's not himself," he seemed to be saying.

Rollison turned to go. Vance went to his desk. Edge

looked as if he did not know what to do next, when the door opened. Even the Toff was taken aback. Edge exclaimed aloud. Vance, who had started to sit down, now stood upright, his movements very slow, his fists clenching, a hardness appearing at his eyes and the lines of his mouth.

The Silver Queen came in.

15

A BLOW FOR THE TOFF

ONLY two nights ago, Vance had tried to choke the life out of her. The bruises made by his hands were hidden by that wispy scarf. Now, he looked as if he would gladly try again. No face carved out of stone could have looked harder; no eyes could have shown their hatred more.

He said: "Mr. Edge, have this woman removed from the factory premises at once."

Edge didn't speak.

Griselda let the door close behind her. She didn't look at Rollison, her attention was only for Paul Vance. She had the calmness which Rollison had seen at her house that morning; she was seldom likely to lose it. She moved towards the desk, with a kind of serenity.

"Paul," she said, "there is something I must tell you."

He looked at her and spoke to Edge.

"By force, if necessary," he said.

"Paul," Griselda said, "force won't help you any longer. Haven't you the sense to realise that? Whenever a thing has got in your way, you've shifted it by sheer brute strength. Physical brute strength or ruthless strength of will. Either that, or you've blinded yourself to it. You're blinding yourself to the fact that someone is trying to ruin Silver Queen. It's bad enough now. If it gets worse and the news gets into the newspapers——"

"Edge," said Paul Vance, "must I act for myself?"

There was a pause; and it was Griselda who broke it, going on again, with only a slight change in her tone.

". . . the value of the shares will start falling. Is that what you want? You own most of them, you'll stand to lose most. Why don't you make yourself wake up, why don't you ask the police to help?"

"Edge," said Paul Vance, "you are no longer in the employ of this company. I will be glad if you will leave at once, and I will arrange for my solicitors to attend to any matter of salary adjustment for broken contract." He didn't look at Edge, and his voice hadn't changed. He pressed a button in the inter-office box, and when a girl answered, he said: "Send Finnigan to my office at once."

He pressed again on the girl's "yes, sir".

Rollison thought: "Who's Finnigan?" and waited, fascinated by a scene that was almost too vivid to be real.

"Paul," said Griselda Vance, with a tightening of her lips and a look in her eyes which showed no responding hatred, only a great compassion, "you're tormenting yourself. If you won't stop it for any other reason, stop it for your own sake. You can't fight this peril on your own, you just can't do it any longer. You've got everything wrong."

There was silence.

"Listen, Mr. Vance," Edge broke it, huskily, "you've fired me and there it is, I know you don't go back on your word. But take Mrs. Vance's advice. Take my advice, too. You *can't* fight this alone. We may not be able to stop this lot of Peach Bloom being sold. If only a dozen girls dab it on their silly faces and get the itch, it will start a rumour against Silver Queen that will cause hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of damage. We've been begging you to send for the police for weeks. Do it now. I'll go, and Griselda will come with me, we won't come back again, but—call in the police. Do it now, and——"

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," Vance called.

Edge broke off, looking hopeless. The door opened, and a man as tall and as powerful-looking as Tim Mahoney came in. He was dressed in a commissionaire's uniform and was obviously in support of the lovelies at the gates and in the office.

"You want me, sir?"

"Yes, Finnigan. Remove Mrs. Vance from the factory

premises. Make sure that she is never admitted again. That is an order. If she is found on these premises again, you will be dismissed. And if Mr. Edge is still in his office or on the premises when you return, escort him off. The same order applies to him. I hope," he added, and there was a hint of bitter irony in his voice, "that this other gentleman will not make it necessary for you to remove him, also."

"Paul," said Griselda Vance, "you're dreadfully wrong, so terribly wrong."

She turned, and went out.

Edge said: "Mr. Vance, for God's sake listen to reason! If you won't use the police, use Rollison, do something to stop this dreadful business."

Vance opened a drawer in his desk, and behaved as if he hadn't heard. Edge, his once calm brown eyes hot and anxious, took a step towards him. The big Finnigan put out an arm, to stop him. Edge pushed it aside, but Finnigan snatched at his wrist, pulled his arm sharply to his back, twisted and thrust upwards. Edge was powerless in a hammerlock; powerless in every way in the hands of a man of much greater physical strength.

He looked to be in pain, too.

"Now don't let's have any trouble," Finnigan said, in a soothing voice, "you don't want that, Mr. Edge, do you? Or you, sir." The 'sir' was for Rollison, and could not have been more courteously uttered.

"You know," said Rollison, "unlike Mr. Vance, I was never one for trouble that could be avoided. But I'd like two minutes alone with Mr. Vance." He beamed. "Of course, I can't command it. But I'm going to have it, or half an hour from now the newspapers will have the full story of the Mysterious Goings On At Silver Queen Plant."

He waited.

Paul Vance said thinly: "Come back in five minutes, Finnigan."

Finnigan went out, propelling Edge in front of him. The door closed, the hydraulic fitting hissing slightly.

The sound faded away into silence. Vance sat at the desk, looking up into Rollison's face. It was impossible to read anything into the old man's expression; the hardness was still at the eyes and the mouth.

"Paul Vance," murmured Rollison, "do you know the usual prison sentence for attempted murder?"

The question broke through Vance's veneer of calm like an electric shock. The grey eyes showed first surprise, then alarm. The thin, set mouth relaxed. The big body drooped. It wasn't for long, he was soon in complete control of himself; but he had shown himself a human being.

"I can tell you," said Rollison. "Fifteen years. A man with your reputation and upbringing should know better, so it might be more. From the way you behaved the other night, you're capable of trying again. This is warning Number One: don't."

Vance moistened his lips.

"And warning Number Two," went on Rollison. "Don't try to avenge yourself on Adam Bell or his Agatha. You could be wrong about them. It's even possible that someone is trying to fool you, and that Adam didn't kill your son."

Vance said: "I know what I know. You may do as you wish. I shall deal with my own affairs."

He meant exactly what he said.

Jeremiah Edge looked miserable as he sat at the wheel of a green Sunbeam-Talbot, just outside the gates of Silver Queen. The sun was much lower, now, and it touched most of the queens with gold. It touched the original Queen, too, putting the gold into her lovely hair, and into her eyes. She looked rather less troubled than Edge; and doubtless she had reason to.

Rollison opened the door next to her.

"May I get in?"

"Of course," said Griselda, and moved towards a corner.

"Give you a lift anywhere?" asked Edge, in a glum

voice, and then went on: "Of course not, you'll have your own car. Oh, hell, it's the biggest headache I'm ever likely to have. He's killing himself, just corroding himself with hatred. He was always half crazy, now he's gone right over the line." There was defiance in Edge's gaze as he looked round at Griselda. "In spite of what you think," he added abruptly.

"Lone Wolf Vance. 'This is my battle and only I fight it'—that the general idea?" asked Rollison.

"Yes."

"Jerry," said Griselda, "it's easy to forget what he's been through. After yesterday——"

"He's suffered because he's deliberately refused to look at the facts," said Edge. "If he'd admitted the truth about Jimmy being a throwback, he'd never have been hurt like he is. Now, he's turning on everyone. *Everyone*. He seems to have a hate complex against all of us who were with him in the early days. Remember me, the promising office boy? And Adam, his right-hand man as ideas merchant. And you—Griselda, I tell you he *has* gone crazy!"

"Tell you what," said Rollison, "let's have a council of war about it. My flat, after dinner to-night. That'll give us time to think about things. How's the loyalty of the Works Manager, Jameson?"

Edge said: "Oh, he's loyal."

"If you're asking whether Jameson wants to tell the police what's happening at the factory, he does," said Griselda. "We could rely on him."

"Spy in the camp, possibly," said Rollison. "I suggest we invite him, too. Nine o'clock, shall we say, at 22g, Gresham Terrace."

"What number?" Edge asked.

"22g."

"Right," said Edge, and added gloomily, "although I'm damned if I can see what we'll be able to do about it. Paul's the Great White Chief himself, owns sixty-five per cent of the shares, that stuff about suffering shareholders just won't wash. And why should he worry about the

workers? If he's prepared to gamble with his own money, why not with theirs? If this goes on and gets around," he added, savagely, "Silver Queen stock will fall right out of the market."

The fall had already begun.

The Stock Market close showed Silver Queen 10s. Ordinary shares, which had been up to 35s. 6d., down by 6d. It was commonplace. But the evening newspapers carried a story that wasn't. A small paragraph read:

In the past three days, chemists in the North London area have been consulted by several attractive girls for severe irritation of the skin, after using a certain brand of face powder. The makers, when invited to comment, have so far refused to make a statement. It is understood that stocks of the powder have been widely distributed.

Two sleek cars, each of the luxury class, were parked in Gresham Terrace, a wide, short road and tall terraced houses, drably grey except here and there where owners had had them decorated recently. Just round the corner were small Georgian houses, all painted black and white, with colourful window boxes watered so that the sun did not make the flowers wither, but few flowers sported themselves in Gresham Terrace.

Rollison glanced up at the window of his flat; the trophy room window.

It was open a little at the top; normal enough.

He slowed down, some yards before he reached the street door of the flat. He was more worried than he liked to admit, and couldn't really give a reason.

Ebbutt hadn't arrived; at least, he hadn't come in his own car, a bright and shiny T-model Ford. There was no waiting taxi, either. Ebbutt should have been here half-an-hour ago. Had he come, and run into trouble?

Rollison made sure that no one was looking out of the top-floor window, and Agatha was likely to, if she was here, and reached the front door.

"Don't be a fool," he said to himself. "She ran out on Jolly, and he followed her. It isn't a——"

He stopped abruptly.

On the coconut fibre doormat, which was fairly new, there was a large red mark, the kind of smear that a man might make if he were wiping his feet of something sticky, and had red powder on his shoes.

Rollison looked along the narrow hall.

It was not very light in here, but he saw a tinge of red on the pale carpet. He glanced up the stairs; on at least two treads there were red smears.

He reached the top landing, outside his flat. On the stone in front of the door there was a sharper line of red probably made by the edge of a shoe. He took out his keys, making no sound, and inserted the front door key with agonising slowness, then turned it. He pushed the door gently, and listened.

He heard nothing.

He opened the door a fraction wider. Any danger would come from someone standing behind the door, but he heard no sound of breathing. He flung the door back, and it banged against rubber doorstep. When the noise had stopped, all was quiet.

No Jolly.

No Agatha.

Rollison went into the room. The red footprints conveyed so much to him that it seemed as if the hall itself were as much an inferno as the lipstick mixing room had been at Wembley; that was just imagination, but it hurt. He saw no sign of red on the Persian carpet which fitted the hall from wall to wall. He saw none on the plain biscuit-coloured carpet at the door which led to the trophy room and to the rest of the flat.

The big room was empty.

A chair was on its side. A vase of sweet-peas, beautiful that morning, lay on its side, with the water already soaked into the carpet making a large dark patch; that must have happened some time ago. The drawers of the desk were open, and papers strewed the floor. The cock-

tail cabinet was open, too, and the bottles had been taken out, several of them were on the floor.

Rollison felt choked.

He turned round towards the kitchen and the bedrooms. The spare room was empty, and the bed wasn't made. There was a dusting of powder on the dressing-table, and a faint perfume in the air. The girl's clothes were gone.

He went out of the room, into the kitchen—and stopped abruptly.

The shock was ten times greater than any he had ever known; he had half expected, half feared something like this, but in the reality it was appalling.

Jolly lay on the floor by the sink. He wore his white chef's apron, his black trousers, his black shoes. He was in his shirtsleeves, and the sleeves were rolled up to the elbows, showing his surprisingly sturdy forearms.

His head was battered.

Rollison was alone in the flat for what seemed a long time. After he had done everything he could for Jolly, he went from room to room and he saw nothing which he had missed on the first search. The choking feeling had gone; now he felt colder; older. He felt the desire to kill, too, a creeping paralysis of desire. He did not know whether Jolly would live or die, but the wounds were savage, and there had been a lot of bleeding. His pulse was very faint; but he was alive, and the best surgeon in the country would soon operate.

It was very quiet. Deathly.

Rollison had telephoned Grice, and an ambulance was on its way. He had telephoned a friend in Harley Street, and made sure that the best surgeon in London would operate on Jolly, if an operation were necessary.

Now he was alone.

It wasn't the first time the flat had been entered, nor the first time that Jolly had been hurt, but never as savagely or as dangerously as this.

Why?

Jolly had been standing at the sink, preparing the vegetables for lunch. There were potatoes, some of them scraped, some soaking in the water. On the draining board were green peas, already shelled and soaking in a saucepan. He had been standing here, busy, and someone had crept up behind him and smashed at his head—again and again and again.

Who?

And why had he been left for dead?

Where was Agatha?

A sound came from outside, of a car engine whose driver was in a hurry. It drew up, and car doors slammed. The police were here, and they'd soon get to work.

On what?

A man had stepped into the red oxide, a colouring pigment used in making lipstick, had come straight here, without realising the tell-tale marks he was making. That footprint was almost certainly of red oxide, and there was red oxide at the Wembley plant and at the Thames side depot.

Mahoney had been familiar with the dockside area, and there wasn't much doubt where he had gone for sanctuary: to the Silver Queen dockside depot. Anyone coming from Wembley might have brought this mark; but more likely from the depot. Finding out where wasn't the urgent question: the problem was how much to tell the police. Supposing he told them everything, and they went racing to Wembley and to the river. Would they find Agatha? would they be able to make arrests? would they avenge Jolly?

They were coming up the stairs, now, but less hurriedly, Grice seldom hurried although he couldn't always check his drivers. Grice would be at the door in a few seconds.

How much should he tell Grice?

Men were nearly here, but their footsteps were drowned by a new sound outside; the ringing of the ambulance bell. Not too soon. In five minutes, Jolly would be on his way to the hospital, to live or to die. Once he had gone, the flat would seem cold with the coldness of death.

How much . . .

Grice came in. There was nothing forbidding or censorious about him now, he was just a worried, troubled human being. He took long strides. At sight of Rollison's face, he paused, and seemed to lose a little colour. Then he came forward, with two plainclothes men just behind him, and a police surgeon, short, broad and gruff, following them in turn.

"How is he?" Grice demanded, abruptly.

"I wouldn't like to say."

"Do you know who it was?" Grice demanded.

The unvoiced question came again, and had to be answered.

How much should he tell?

DEAD MAN'S GRISELDA

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Looking radiant, as if with relief, she reached the dimly-lighted landing, and saw the man. She called:

"I couldn't think where you'd gone. I was afraid——"

She broke off.

There was a catch in her breath, and the Toff saw her move back as if something were pushing her, and that something was fear. She took another step backwards. She raised her right hand as if to fend some evil off, and breathed:

"No."

The man was coming up the stairs, each footstep firm, deliberate and heavy, carrying with it a menace which seemed to fill the air, which drove the woman back another pace with a second whispered:

"No!"

16

THE DOCKSIDE DEPOT

THE ambulance men had gone, the police surgeon had gone with them, and none had voiced an opinion about Jolly's condition. That was as good as saying that he hadn't much chance. Rollison knew that he hadn't; so did Grice, who was with him in the trophy room, which seemed bleak and empty. The other Yard men had finished searching for clues—finger prints, oddments, anything. They were out in the kitchen, now; the blood-stains on the floor had been photographed, and might offer the best scope for prints.

It was seven o'clock.

"Rolly," said Grice, quietly, "I think I know what's in your mind. If ever there was a job for you, this is it. I almost agree with you. But don't do anything you'd regret, don't keep anything back that might help us to get the brutes. You can't see this job straight."

Rollison tossed down a whisky and soda.

"No," he said, harshly. "You're quite right. Too many distractions." He felt a sudden easing of uncertainty, and knew exactly what to tell Grice. "I don't think this was Mahoney. I'll tell you more about Mahoney on the way to the East End. Mahoney was at Bill Ebbutt's—then on the run till after one o'clock, and this happened before lunch. But there were red oxide marks downstairs . . ."

He explained exactly what he thought.

"And Agatha Bell was here," he said, flatly. "The answer is probably the simple one; she was taken away, because she might give a lead to her father. From what I've seen of this show, I wouldn't give much for her chances of being unhurt."

"Let's get going," Grice said. "I'll alert the Thames-side Division, we can have the depot surrounded——"

"That's right," said Rollison, and he sounded almost bitter. "That's why I argued with myself about telling you, why I nearly decided not to. Agatha knows these men now, doesn't she? If she's rescued, she can put them all inside, and have them hanged. They probably think that Jolly's dead, and that it's a hanging job. They'll let her be caught alive, won't they?"

"People don't kill cold-bloodedly like that. They——"

"They'll kill," said Rollison bleakly. "Ag's chance is slim enough as it is, she won't have one at all if you surround the depot and then raid it. But they'll expect *me*. That's probably another reason why they snatched her; she should lure me. Listen, Bill. I think you ought to put a cordon round the place, but stay a long way from the riverside depot. I think you ought to have river police patrols on the alert, ready to move in at the slightest sign of alarm—and I think you ought to let me go to the depot alone."

"There's a word," Grice said. "Suicide."

"There's another," said the Toff. "Murder. I tell you they won't dare let Agatha Bell escape alive. If she's not dead, they'll have to keep her away from the police."

"If they were caught red-handed——"

"They're bound to have a hide-out, bound to have a way of escape!" Rollison poured himself another drink, and swung it round and round in his glass. "If you're nervous, let's use some of Ebbutt's men to be near the depot. I asked Ebbutt to come here——"

"He couldn't," Grice told him. "The local super hauled him in for questioning, he was picked up on his way to your place." So Ebbutt couldn't be blamed; one good thing. "The last I heard, he was about to be released, but he wouldn't have had time to get here." They moved along in silence, the driver weaving through the traffic. Then abruptly Grice went on: "All right, we'll try it your way." He leaned over the back of the front seat for the radio-telephone, and the driver glanced at his

hand, then away. He flicked it on, spoke to the Yard, and gave orders: Ebbutt was to be told to meet Rollison at his gymnasium.

Well, they were playing the hand as Rollison wanted.

At a quarter to eight, they reached the gymnasium. Ebbutt was waiting with half a dozen of his cronies, all big, plain, uneasy men, who knew Grice and respected him but could never really like a copper. They saw Rollison's expression and had some idea of what had happened.

Ebbutt said: "So you was right, Mr. Ar. Like I told you, it wasn't any use to-day, every ruddy fing's gorn wrong. Even the flickin' rozzers had to pull me in, if they hadn't I might have been in time. And the cove I sent after Tim lorst 'im."

"You wouldn't have been in time, Bill, it happened hours ago," Rollison interrupted. "Let's cut the cackle—the police are playing it our way." The 'our' made a world of difference to Ebbutt and his men, their relaxation was almost visible. "I want some of you to get near the Silver Queen depot—d'you know it?"

Ebbutt said: "Can't miss it, dahn at Wilson's Wharf, just near the *Crow's Nest*. Got quite a big place. What's the idea, Mr. Ar?"

"I'm going in," said Rollison. "I might be glad of a lot of help. No one inside will be surprised to see some of your chaps, who might be dockers—any ship working nearby?"

Ebbutt turned questioning eyes to one of the others.

"*Silver Queen 3*," one of them said, out of the side of his mouth. "Working on it myself this morning, I was, they've nearly finished loading. Ought to be off on the night tide."

Grice rapped: "What time's that?"

"'Ar-past nine," the man said, and his tone implied that anyone who didn't know the times of the river tides was beneath a waterman's contempt.

"Perhaps they aren't on the depot," said Rollison, softly, "perhaps they're on board. Bill"—he was talking to

Ebbutt—"find me a rig-out, will you, it's time we were on the move."

"Fix you up in a couple jiffs," Ebbutt promised, "just come into the office, Mr. Ar."

He turned away.

In the evening light, and with the sun's slanting rays coming across the broken skyline of sprawling London, the dockside took on a softness which it didn't have by the harsh light of midday. Most of the cranes were still and silent. Shadows were cast upon the river's unruffled surface. The spidery masts shone against the misty blue of the sky, sharp and clear as if etched upon it. The thick lines of funnels showed, as if an artist had slapped on paint with his palette knife, not caring what it looked like.

Against the riverside rose the warehouses, many tall, most of them only two or three stories high.

Big ships and small lined the quays. One, some distance off, was being worked, but the cranes servicing it were still. Another, close by, looked like a huge silver picture, shimmering above the waterline as if it had been freshly painted with silver paint. Nothing could have looked brighter above them. It had good, clean lines, and obviously was almost ready to sail. Men were busy at the hatches, fore and after, others were carrying small packages up the gangway which led from the quayside. At the top, at deck level, two men in dark blue were laughing and chatting.

Alongside this ship, *Silver Queen 3*, were some wooden boxes stacked unevenly, and all clearly marked: Silver Queen—IT IS OUR BUSINESS TO MAKE THE WOMAN BEAUTIFUL. There were a few stacks of the paper bags like those which had been delivered to the powder store room at Wembley.

Near these were some wooden kegs, and one of the kegs, standing knee high and about a foot across at the top, was staved in. By the broken stave was a splash of bright red oxide smearing the smooth cement of the quayside.

Obviously the powder had trailed out from the ship as

the keg had been swung over in the rope hoist. A trail led from the edge right to the spot where the keg was standing. Nothing else was near it. The powder was piled in a small heap, like the beginning of a child's sandcastle. Two or three people had trodden in it, and there was a trail of footsteps in most directions—the nearest leading towards a huge breeze-block shed, on which was blazoned Griselda Vance's face and the slogan. No one passing along the Thames towards the Pool could have missed the sign; it was the largest the Toff had yet seen.

He was wearing an old brown coat, two sizes too large for him, baggy at the knees and pockets, ragged at the elbows and the sleeves. A pair of blue dungarees were too tight round the seat. Covering his dark hair was a greasy cloth cap, once almost cream in colour, now dark at the peak and gradually getting lighter towards the back of the head. A tunic shirt was open at the neck, and he had no collar, tie or muffler. His shoes were big and rubber-soled, and he walked with a slight swaying movement, as if unused to the steadiness of dry land. Now and again he gave a sharp, clear *hic*!

No one took particular notice of him.

Men were walking from the big shed towards the ship; and in the other direction, too. They were carrying the last of the oddments on board *Silver Queen 3*. Here was a ship, the hatches already being battened down, making ready to sail the oceans laden with the products of the Wembley plant.

Was Agatha Bell on board? Or was she in the warehouse?

Rollison was aware of watching eyes, even though he did not think that he himself was noticed. Two men were on the bridge, but no tug was near.

Out in midstream, a police launch chugged slowly and sluggishly down river towards Tilbury, the estuary and the open channel. None of the crew seemed to be taking any notice of the *Silver Queen 3*, but one of the men on the bridge watched it, with a pair of glasses at his eyes.

Rollison saw the other man, well-placed to see over the

roof of the shed and the nearby buildings towards the approaches of the wharf. He also had glasses, hanging by a strap from his left shoulder. His gaze moved continually, as if to make sure that he missed nothing.

If the police had flung a close cordon——

Well, they hadn't.

Ebbutt and several of his men were making their way in ones and twos, towards the small, solid pub, the *Crow's Nest*, which was nearer the docks than any other place of alcoholic revelry. This was the spot where men going ashore after weeks or months on the high seas, rejoiced at firm land and freedom from bawling mates, and drank until they were silly. Or drank, and scowled. On the opposite corner, across a cobbled road, was a corrugated tin hut bearing the brave words: SALVATION ARMY HUT—TEA, GOOD FOOD. BEDS.

Once Ebbutt and his men reached that spot, they could go into the *Crow's Nest* or the Army hut, and come out by a side door and approach the wharf with little risk of being seen.

The Toff drew nearer a man who stood by the gangway, checking all who went on board. This was a closer check than usual; one at the wharfside, one up on deck. Everything pointed to extreme caution. The man waiting was short and very stocky, and in spite of the warmth, wore a blue sweater with a high collar and a faded blue cap. He hadn't shaved for days.

"Anything you want?" his voice was unexpectedly deep; and cultured.

His head lowered so that he seemed to be looking from under his lashes, Rollison shifted the piece of gum from one cheek to another.

"Any chance of signing on?" he asked.

"None at all, chum. We've got a full crew."

"Where you heading?"

"A lot of places, chum. Sorry, we've no room for another man," the stocky man said briskly. "Don't hang about, please—and mind your back." He put a hand on Rollison's arm, and moved him aside. He had a lot of

strength in his fingers, and he pushed much harder than he need have done. It seemed a kind of warning; 'don't argue, and get out'. Yet a man carrying two heavy kit-bags was approaching, and Rollison had been in his way.

"Can I see the skipper?"

"No," the stocky man said irritably, "you can't." His grip was tight, he meant it to be painful. "Scram, and don't ask for trouble. If you do, you'll get plenty." He let Rollison go. He had very clear, grey eyes, and obviously he meant exactly what he said. "Just beat it."

Rollison said slowly: "I'm not asking for trouble, mate. I asked for a job, that's all. Where's the crime in that?"

"I didn't say there was a crime, I told you to beat it. And be quick. I——"

The stocky man glanced towards the big shed and the sides of the *Silver Queen* 3, and something in his manner changed. He moved forward, shouldering Rollison aside. Obviously, he had been waiting for whoever was coming now, and the tension which he shared with the two men on the bridge had heightened.

Rollison looked round, chin still tucked down on his chest, his eyes half hidden.

Adam Bell was walking towards him, with a man by his side.

The man was Tim Mahoney.

SILVER QUEEN 3

MAHONEY towered over Adam Bell. He was half a pace behind, the position a man would take if he were guarding another. Bell couldn't move a step without being grabbed. Mahoney's broad face was expressionless but for a kind of blandness—the blandness of a man who was thoroughly pleased with himself. His eyes had a curiously bright look; the powder from the plant had not been properly washed out, and it threw up the blackness of his lashes.

He didn't touch Bell.

Adam Bell was staring straight in front of him—the fixed stare of a man who saw nothing; or did not notice what he saw. He walked heavily and blindly; the evidence of that came when he headed a little to the right of the gangway. Mahoney touched his shoulder, and he turned and headed straight for Rollison and the stocky man.

The stocky man had obviously put the would-be sailor out of his mind. He stood at the foot of the gangway, as if to make sure that Bell couldn't dodge. Bell was clearly a prisoner, as certainly badly frightened. The pallor of his face and the feverish brightness of his eyes told the story.

He was only five yards away from the stocky man and from Rollison.

Rollison slid his right hand into his pocket. His finger closed about the handle of an open knife, one with a short, pointed blade. He hardly seemed to move; but he did move, so that he could thrust the blade into the stocky man's side.

He said: "If you shout or move, I'll kill you."

He jabbed.

The stocky man felt the sharp blade between his ribs, caught his breath with a hissing sound, and turned startled eyes towards Rollison. Mahoney, paying more attention to Adam Bell than to the couple at the foot of the gangway, noticed nothing at all. Rollison spoke out of the corner of his mouth as they drew nearer, and only the stocky man heard what he said.

"Tell Mahoney to go back to the shed."

The man said: "I——" and swallowed whatever else he was going to say.

Adam Bell was practically at the foot of the gangway, and Mahoney's hand fell on his shoulder, as if to let him know where the authority and the power lay.

Adam turned, put a foot up, to start climbing.

Rollison thrust the knife harder.

The stocky man made a choking sound.

"Tim, will you——" he began, and broke off. There was sweat on his forehead, but the shiny peak of his cap hid it. His voice wasn't steady.

Mahoney stopped.

"You want me, Sam?"

"Tim, will you—will you wait over in the shed? The Old Man—the Old Man wants you there for a special job. I'll look after Bell."

Adam Bell stopped moving.

Mahoney frowned at the man he called Sam, and at Rollison. Would he recognise him? Doubt seemed to flicker through his eyes. He was massive and powerful, he could do a lot of damage with one blow, and he could bring a dozen others running at a shout. Ebbutt and the others were probably at the *Crow's Nest* or in the S.A. Hut; some of them might be on their way here, but it wasn't likely. They were to wait for Rollison's signal, a single shrill whistle, and then it would take them two or three minutes to get to the ship's side. A lot could happen to a man in two or three minutes.

Rollison pressed the knife harder.

"Don't argue with the—with the Old Man," Sam muttered to Mahoney. The knife was hard and painful

against his ribs, and he wasn't to know that the blade was too short to go much deeper.

"What's it about, Sam?" Mahoney's voice sounded deceptively gentle.

"How should I know?"

"Okay," said Mahoney, "don't get worried, Sam." He gave a smile that was almost benign. "Up the gangway, Mr. Bell," he urged, "show Uncle Tim you can walk." He stood massively at the foot of the gangway, obviously determined to watch Adam Bell go aboard.

Did he suspect what was happening?

Would he——

The stocky man jumped to one side, drawing in a gasping, frightened breath; for this was a gamble with death. He didn't strike at Rollison, his only concern was to get out of reach of that knife. As he went, he shouted:

"Get him, Tim!"

The first quiver of his movement had warned Rollison, who thrust his fingers to his lips, pulled the lower lip down, and gave a whistle which sounded like the blast of a ship's siren. As it shrilled out, he saw Mahoney looming over him, hands raised and ready. He swung the short-bladed knife at Mahoney's stomach; it was like jabbing a blade into wood. It didn't stop Mahoney, but it lessened the power of his blow. One huge fist struck Rollison on the chin, the other on the right shoulder. Rollison put everything he had in an upper cut, and he felt the jolt of the savage blow. Fist on bony chin cracked like splitting wood, and Mahoney went reeling back, staggering, arms waving, mouth opening and closing.

The stocky man was only a yard away: "Keep still!" he barked, and Rollison saw the snub-nosed automatic in his right hand, the savage look on his face. "If you don't, I'll blow a hole in you that——"

He'd forgotten Adam Bell.

Adam was just above him several steps up the gangway. He turned on the narrow steps, clenched his right fist and brought it down on the back of the stocky man's neck. It

was a rabbit punch with a lot of power, and sent the stocky man staggering towards Rollison.

Rollison said: "Thanks, Adam," and side-stepped, then took the gun from the waving hand as neatly as if he were taking a catch in the slips. He thrust at the stocky man and sent him sprawling, then backed towards the ship, with Adam Bell hurrying towards him. There was a narrow gap between the steel sides of *Silver Queen 3* and the two men; and still, oily water below.

Mahoney had fallen against the ship's side, and one leg had slipped down. He was stuck there, helpless, mouthing and waving one arm.

Men from the warehouse, men from the wharf and men from the ship itself were so astounded that for seconds they just stood and stared. Bell ranged himself alongside Rollison, and Rollison kept the gun thrust forward, to discourage anyone from coming too close. Then he put his fingers to his lips again, and gave the piercing whistle again.

Ebbutt and his men couldn't be far away.

Could they?

He couldn't hear them running.

The men facing them were coming forward, slowly. There were seven of them. None showed a gun, but that didn't mean that no one was armed.

The gangway quivered, and there were stealthy, creaking sounds, as if someone was creeping down it.

Rollison called, clearly: "I'll shoot the first man who gets within ten yards."

His head was back, his cap was off, there was a glint in his eyes. This was what he wanted. It was the beginning of vengeance for Jolly, it brought a thrill of hope and expectancy.

Four of the seven men stopped moving. Three came slowly on. The gangway was still quivering. Rollison heard no sound from the distant alleys, no shout to announce that Ebbutt and his men were on the way; and he remembered that Ebbutt hadn't reached the flat in time.

Only now did his heart begin to hammer.

The man on the gangway would try to drop something on his head.

"Adam, keep an eye on the gangway, will you?" He spoke *sotto voce*, watching the three moving men, seeing the stocky Sam pick himself up. He didn't talk to the men again, but when he saw one quicken his pace, he fired. The gun had a nasty kick and a loud report. The bullet struck the ground just in front of the bold man's foot, and made him draw back sharply. Everyone else stopped; even the man creeping down the gangway.

"How'd they get you?" Rollison asked Adam, and watched the openings between the warehouse walls. He didn't waste time wondering where Ebbutt had gone, but began to wonder if he had a chance of escape.

Would they dare to kill him?

The men worked for Silver Queen, and Mahoney and Sam were their bosses. He was an intruder; he had threatened them; even an honest crew would be justified in attacking him, and if he died . . .

Adam said huskily: "One of them was outside, last night. I got away, and put up at a hotel. After I'd attacked you I began to see how right you were. I was ready to go to the police. Then—Agatha telephoned me. They'd taken her prisoner. She sounded hysterical, said they'd broken in to your flat, that Jolly was—dead." Adam Bell paused. "Is he?"

"Touch and go." Rollison dared not let himself think of Jolly. "Sure you don't know where she was?"

"No."

"What made you come here?"

"A man took the telephone from Ag. He told me——" Bell's voice broke ". . . what they'd do to her if I didn't come."

So old; so easy.

The half-circle of seven men was still twelve yards or more away. The gangway had stopped quivering.

Rollison glanced up it.

A man was standing on the gangway, directly above him, holding a kit bag and about to drop it.

Rollison dodged to one side, pushed Bell, and heard the kit bag smack against the concrete. As he twisted round, Rollison shot at the man, who was racing up the gangway as if he knew that the shot was coming.

Another respite; but why didn't Ebbutt's men show up? Where were the police? Grice and the Yard and Divisional men were in the wider cordon, they ought to be anxious to know what was happening by now.

There was silence.

In it, Mahoney pulled himself free.

The stocky Sam was on his feet, watching Rollison and the gun.

"It's Rollison," he said, in a low-pitched voice. "Okay, Rollison, you can drop your gun. You haven't a chance, now or any time. We knew you and Ebbutt worked together, when he went to the *Crow's Nest* with a gang, we locked them in. What do you think we're doing—just having fun?" He paused, and Rollison just looked at him, head on one side. "We're not interested in you, we want Bell. Let him go aboard, and then——"

"After all," interrupted Rollison, as if suddenly voicing an original thought, "it's a free country, isn't it? A man can do what a man would like—eh, Mahoney? Want to go aboard, Adam Bell?" Rollison didn't look at Agatha's father, but watched the half-circle of men, none of them any nearer, but all ready to rush. If he dropped the gun, if he fired his last shot, he wouldn't have a chance.

Adam Bell said: "If I go aboard, I'll never get off alive."

"Any idea why?" asked the Toff, conversationally, and then lowered his voice and whispered: "*We may have to swim for it. Can you?*"

"*I can try. But—I must help Ag——*"

The stocky Sam called: "Bell knows what will happen to Aggie if he doesn't go aboard."

Rollison heard only the chug-chug-chug of a launch on the river, and it sounded further away. The plan had misfired completely when Ebbutt and his men had been trapped at the *Crow's Nest*.

Sam said more loudly: "Give it up, Rollison, if you wound any of the crew, you'll land up in gaol."

Rollison thought: "Got him!" It was Sam's big mistake, for he was trying to tell the crew he was on the side of the law; which meant that they weren't in the racket, that they'd have no love for Sam and Mahoney if they learned the truth.

Then Rollison heard a high-powered hiss. He twisted round and stared at a foaming jet of water coming from a ship's hose at a porthole, sending a lacework of icy water over the ship's silvery steel plates, and drenching him and Adam Bell.

The men raced towards him.

18

SEARCH FOR AGATHA

THE drenching came before Rollison had a chance to dodge, but the curtain of water hid him from the running men. He saw Bell slip, knew there was no help from him, little for him. Rollison could run towards the crowd, hoping to get through, but the odds were so heavy it wasn't really a chance. He could shoot blindly; and if he killed anyone, they were in a mood to tear him to pieces.

He swung right, towards the gangway.

Mahoney was nearer than any of the others, but he was standing on one foot, and leaning against a stanchion; one of his legs was out of action. Sam was out, too. The Toff swung on to the gangway and hauled himself up, until he stood ten feet above the level of the quayside.

He had time to breathe.

On the platform right at the top of the gangway, a man was standing. The hose was still streaming water, the hiss and the splashing were deafening.

That stopped, and numbed silence followed.

The men were ganged up together on the quayside, hesitating because of his gun. Rollison waved it, grinned, and then raised his voice.

"No one's going to get hurt if they use their heads," he said. "Not even I? After all, I only want the kidnapped girl, can you call me a rogue for that?"

No one else spoke; no one moved, except the man at the platform at deck level, and he had disappeared.

"She's a nice bonny girl," Rollison went on earnestly, "as good as the best. In fact she's the kind of girl you'd like your daughters to be. Have a look at the man Mahoney brought here, poor Adam Bell. He's her father.

He didn't like his daughter being kidnapped, so he tried to get her back. I tried to help him."

Rollison stopped again.

He couldn't tell whether this was having any effect, whether he had won a little time. He was putting his shirt on long odds gamble—but before he knew whether it came off or not, a shot from the warehouse might kill him.

"Just let me have Agatha, Tim," he called, and looked at the injured American. Mahoney was trying to take a step forward, but when his weight went on his left leg, his knee buckled. He stretched out a long arm, and fell against the ship again. The gap between the quayside and the steel plates seemed to have widened. The American was almost certainly in great pain, but that didn't wring the Toff's heart.

One of the men in the gang called :

"What's this about kidnapping?" He had a loud, coarse voice, but what mattered was the way he asked the question, and his puzzled look.

Mahoney called : "The guy's lying, you fool."

"That's right," shouted Sam. "He's lying, he's trying to fool you. He——"

"Shut up," said the man with the coarse voice, and he stared up at Rollison. "Let's have it all, you."

"All right," said Rollison, in a voice which carried well. "I'll make it simple. I have a flat in Mayfair. I'd left this missing Agatha there, in charge of my servant." He paused between each short sentence, and could see that it was forcing itself upon them, the simplicity of the statements and his tone had a ring of truth. That was his gamble. "I was at Silver Queen's Wembley plant to-day," he went on. "I'd been asked to investigate some trouble there. Sabotage. Itching powder in face powder, sand in lipstick, the kind of thing to put your girl friends in a fine old stew. Enough to make them throw Silver Queen overboard, to sink without trace. Understand me, so far?"

Mahoney's face was twisted as he called :

"Can't you see he's lying? He's making his story up as he goes along——"

"Shut up, Yank," a man said.

Rollison went on:

"When Silver Queen's thrown overboard, where will you all be? Out of work, my boyos. Any of you remember the depression days? Remember coming along here, with your bellies rumbling, and your hearts heavy because your wives were hungry too, and because the kids had gone to school on dry bread or bread and scrape? *Remember?*" He flung the word out as a challenge they couldn't ignore, and a man cried: "Damned right, I remember!" as fervently as any ranter on Tower Hill. "Well, that's what you'll get again if Silver Queen gets thrown overboard. That's fact. Someone's trying to do it, too. I was asked to find out who. I'm one of those things that some of you read about, a private eye. I made a start. I went back home to plan the next step. I reached my flat. I saw red oxide marks on the front door mat and on the stairs. *Red oxide from there!*" he roared in sudden fury, and pointed to the cask with the broken stave and the red oxide, sprayed with water and looking like blood. Every eye turned to it, including Mahoney's; then back towards Rollison. "And I went upstairs. Agatha wasn't there. My servant was. Remember I told you about my servant? He was a man I can remember since I was knee high. He's in hospital, hovering between life and death. They smashed his head to pulp. Remember the murder of Jimmy Vance, your head salesman? They did the same to him. Next they took Agatha Bell away. I can tell you why. They wanted Adam Bell, and the only way they could get him was to threaten his daughter."

Rollison paused again, leaned over the gangway, and called very clearly and sharply: "Isn't that right, Adam?"

There was silence.

"Adam——"

"It's absolutely right," said Adam Bell, in a voice which hardly carried to Rollison's ears. "They said they'd send her round from man to man if I didn't come out of

hiding. They told me to come here. What else could I do? They told me that if I didn't walk quietly on board, that's what they'd do to my daughter." There was a pause, followed by an anguished: "*What else could I do?*"

Silence.

Then Rollison said softly: "The police aren't far off, and some friends of mine are locked up in the *Crow's Nest*. I don't know what Mahoney or Sam or anyone else told you, but now you know the truth. Every man among you will be party to kidnapping and attempted murder if you let the pair get away with it. But if you find the girl——"

He didn't finish.

The man with the coarse voice shouted: "Okay, let's find the girl!" He moved swiftly towards the stocky Sam, who was backing away. "Where is she?" he demanded, "where's that girl?"

Sam was mouthing.

"None—none of it's true, none——"

He didn't finish.

Glancing towards the long shed and the great *Silver Queen* upon it, fearful of what might happen there, Rollison saw men moving beyond it. Not one or two, but dozens of men, all hurrying. Ebbutt was there, too massive to be missed, with the rest of his men. There was Grice, too, and Divisional and Yard men, spreading out to come upon *Silver Queen* 3 from different directions. It no longer mattered what Mahoney said, what Sam said, what the officers of the ship did: there was no danger now, it was all over. He'd gambled that most of the crew were honest men, and he'd been right.

He moved slowly down the shaking wooden steps of the gangway.

He reached the bottom as Adam Bell cried out in a startled, frightened voice:

"Look out!"

The Toff jerked his head up, and saw Mahoney; and Mahoney had a gun levelled in the big right hand. Rollison knew that he couldn't dodge right or left, for the gangway was too narrow. He'd fought his way out, then

talked his way out ; but there wouldn't be a way out of this.

Death waited.

"So you asked for it," Mahoney said, "so you get it."

He fired.

Adam Bell flung himself forward, came between the Toff and Mahoney, gasped and grunted as the bullet struck him. Before he fell, before the American could fire again, the Toff had his own gun out ; and his bullet caught Mahoney's right wrist.

Mahoney's gun dropped.

The pain and the force of the shot made him stagger backwards, and he had only one sound leg. He reached the edge, hopping desperately and then he slipped again. This time, he couldn't save himself, and that gap was wider. He went down, feet first, between the quayside and the steel walls of the ship ; and as he fell he cried out in fear.

There was a splash.

There was silence.

Then Ebbutt and the police broke into sight, and came running, and everything seemed to happen at once.

Yet in a way, nothing happened.

They did not find Agatha Bell aboard *Silver Queen 3*, or in the big shed.

They pulled Tim Mahoney's body out of the Thames ; he had been dead for half an hour before they got him up.

They sent Adam Bell to hospital in an ambulance ; there was as yet no way of being sure that the bullet had missed his right lung.

The Captain of *Silver Queen 3* was a weathered, hardened sixty, a small man with bright eyes, a steady voice, a ready answer. He declared flatly that he knew nothing of Mahoney's plans, or of Sam's. Sam, whose other name was Bentinck, was first mate. He, the captain, had been in his cabin until towards the end of the trouble at the quayside. Bentinck had been in command ; Bentinck had stationed the two look-out men on the bridge.

Grice couldn't take any action against the Captain, but he could make sure that the ship wasn't allowed to sail on the evening tide.

He questioned Bentinck, the two look-out men, and others of the crew and some warehouse stevedores. The story took a long time in the telling, but he pieced it together. It was simple enough. The Captain and the crew had understood that they would be carrying a passenger who was not quite right in the head, and that Mahoney would be travelling, to look after the passenger. The passenger was to have been Adam Bell.

According to Bentinck, he was to have been taken to New York, the first port of call.

It was Bentinck who broke down at last, blaming Mahoney, blaming another, unknown man who had been with him at Rollison's flat that day. They'd forced the lock without being heard, surprised Jolly in the kitchen, the girl in the spare room.

He swore that he didn't know where Agatha Bell had been taken. He didn't know whether she had been hurt; he did know that she had been kidnapped as bait for Adam Bell.

Bell was to have been pushed overboard during the trip; and Bentinck's share of the blood money was to have been five hundred pounds.

Mahoney had put the whole project to him, paid him, and been in charge. The other man at the flat, who had taken Agatha off, had been an Englishman whom Bentinck didn't know; biggish, darkish, driving a black A70.

Now Mahoney was dead, and Adam Bell and Jolly lay between life and death. And Agatha was missing.

The Toff reached Gresham Terrace a little after ten o'clock. He had telephoned the hospital to ask after Jolly from the docks; and was on edge to telephone again, although the answer would probably be the same—no change. He turned into the house, noticing that a car a little further along the street began to move. He couldn't be sure that 'they' would confine themselves to the Bells

and to others who worked for Silver Queen. He went savagely up the stairs to his flat, slammed the door behind him, and seemed to hear a soft-voiced :

“Good evening, sir.”

He glowered at the trophy wall, then went to the cabinet and poured himself a drink. It had been bearable when he had been with Grice, Ebbutt and Bell—when there had been something to keep him busy, and to make sure that he didn’t brood.

Why was it happening?

The one man he could tackle, the one he had some reason to suspect, was Jameson. He’d go and see Jameson, next. Then Paul Vance again; then Griselda. One of them must know——

Wait a minute!

He’d arranged for Griselda, Edge and Jameson to come here at nine o’clock. Over an hour ago. They might be together somewhere, perhaps at Griselda’s house.

He moved towards the telephone—and the front door bell rang.

19

WHY?

THE bell stopped ringing.

The caller might be Grice, or might be Bill Ebbutt; but surely each would have telephoned to say that he was on the way.

Rollison went slowly and cautiously towards the door.

It was of solid wood, with a small spy-hole at eye level; he looked through this. He couldn't see who it was, for a man had his back to him. He heard someone speak in a low-pitched voice, which suggested that two people were there; or one, impatient.

He stood to one side, with his right hand in his pocket about the gun, and opened the door with his left hand. Then he pulled it sharply.

"*Oh!*" exclaimed Griselda Vance.

"What the devil——" Edge began.

Jameson didn't say a word.

"Sorry," said the Toff, and moved into sight, taking his right hand from his pocket. "I'm nervous to-night, I thought you might be bad men."

He smiled.

Griselda, in that pale, sheath-like costume, looked not only startled, but too good to be true. Edge just seemed startled and rather less smooth. Jameson was dressed in a suit of brown tweeds and looking hot and ruffled.

Griselda Vance asked: "What's happened?"

"The nearest thing I know to sudden death," said Rollison. "Come in, do. Sorry I was out earlier. You did come at nine, I suppose."

"When we found you weren't here, we went for a drink and then came back," said Edge. "We were waiting in Reg's car." That was the car that had moved, of course.

Rollison closed the door behind them, and led the way into the big room.

Edge said: "Good lord, look at *that*." He gaped at the trophy wall, and his gaze was drawn and held by the hangman's rope and the hangman's mask by its side. "*Look* at it," he repeated weakly. "I—er—sorry, Rollison, but that's fabulous!"

"Not a real rope, is it?" asked Jameson. His curly hair looked ruffled, and his face was a healthy red. It wasn't surprising to see him draw a big-bowled pipe out of his pocket. "I mean, a real hangman's rope."

"It hanged a man all right," Rollison said; the reflection sobered him and sobered them all. "When the pressure's off you must call in for a Cook's Tour." He could only think of Jolly, who had once been adamantly against the trophies, as a form of exhibitionism, but had gradually changed until he was virtually the curator of the Toff's museum. He forced himself to be natural; he had to get at the truth, and sooner or later get mad at Jameson; but not yet. "Sit down, and let me get you a drink." He looked at Griselda Vance. "What will you have?"

"May I have a Gin-and-French?"

"Of course. And you, Edge?"

"The same, please."

"Haven't a spot of beer, have you?" asked Jameson.

"There should be some in the frig," said Rollison.

All this brought Jolly vividly to mind, too. Everywhere, there was Jolly. Jolly, pouring drinks, Jolly murmuring: "There is some cooling in the refrigerator, sir." Jolly handing round the drinks and then withdrawing, but ready to come in at the first touch of a bell.

Jolly, with his head battered.

There was beer in the frig.

"Fine, thanks," said Jameson, "never could stand short stuff."

Edge said: "Rollison, what is the matter with you?"

Griselda Vance was asking that question, too. She sat in the chair that Rollison had pushed forward for her, a winged one, which set off her looks. It was in a corner,

facing the trophy wall. The men were in armchairs, Rollison standing by the cocktail cabinet. He moved, drink in hand, towards the desk, and sat on a corner.

He told them what had happened.

Edge kept absolutely still, Jameson kept ejaculating: "*Well!*" Griselda didn't move, but watched as if the story both fascinated and horrified her. He wondered what they would say when it was finished—and he wondered if they guessed what was in his mind.

Jameson and Edge had a wonderful opportunity for working with Mahoney; for sabotaging Silver Queen; and there was Jameson's nervousness at seeing him.

Had either or both a motive?

Griselda hadn't the opportunity, but might have a motive.

It wasn't easy to forget the way Paul Vance had attacked her; the fact that he would have committed murder. Had his hatred been all because of his son?

Why had Jimmy been killed?

Why was it so essential for Adam Bell to die?

Edge said: "Is Adam Bell going to pull through?" in an abrupt way, and looked as if he cared. It was the kind of question a man might put if he had any reason to believe that Bell could do him harm by talking.

"Probably," said Rollison.

"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Jameson. Too vehemently? His pipe was in his right hand, his eyes seemed bright with real anxiety. "But isn't there a clue about Agatha?"

"No."

"It's dreadful," Jameson said. "Shocking." He looked haggard; a man who had received a really heavy blow. "I can't believe it. Any—*anything* might happen to her."

"Might already have happened," agreed Rollison, stonily.

Jameson said: "Is there anything *I* can do?" He jumped up, and knocked the little table where his beer stood in a silver tankard. He grabbed, to save it from falling. "Is there? I—if you knew how I felt about

Agatha, you'd know why this—this has knocked me sideways." He didn't need to say so, it stuck out a mile. "To happen to *Agatha*——" he broke off.

If this were genuine, it was a form of declaration of love for Agatha Bell.

"Listen," Edge said thinly, "I know how you feel about Ag, but this is bigger than personalities. It's unbelievable. We've known about the campaign to sabotage Silver Queen. We've worked day and night to find out who's doing it, but—murder, shooting, hired crooks from the States——"

Rollison put in: "Most of the hired crooks are home grown."

He wanted them to talk among themselves, and soon he would start them quarrelling. He'd remind them of the murder of two of Jimmy Vance's lights o' love, and how they'd died; and remind Jameson that he had always prepared special make-up to suit the women's needs.

That should start something.

Griselda asked:

"Who employed Mahoney, do you know?"

"Jimmy recommended him," Jameson said. But Jimmy Vance wasn't alive to deny it.

"What I can't understand is why Paul wouldn't admit what was going on in front of his nose," Edge burst out.

"Yes, why won't he?" asked Jameson. "That's the question I've never been able to answer. I warned him what was happening weeks ago, and advised him to call for the police. It would have been easy to have had a couple of men in the factory, we could easily have found out what was happening, but he just wouldn't do it. Now the shares will fall like a ton weight. All that irritant batch is in the retail shops, a lot must have been sold. If we can't stop it, it's ruin for the lot of us."

Griselda said reasonably:

"If anyone hates Paul enough to do this, wouldn't that explain it? If anyone close to him were responsible, Paul would defend him. If *Jimmy* was behind the sabotage——"

"But Jimmy's been murdered!" Jameson cried.

"That happened to two of his girl friends, too," said Rollison. "Didn't you hear about that? They had specially made lipstick, to suit their colouring. Inside was cyanide of potassium, in a fragile container. One rub on the lips, and they died."

Into a tense silence, Griselda said: "Of course. I remember Paul telling me——"

"I'd almost forgotten that damnable business. It—it gets worse," Edge muttered. "Who'd kill them? Who'd do a fiendish thing like that?" He was looking at Jameson. "Reg—Reggie. Didn't you make special stuff for——"

Jameson said thinly: "To Jimmy's specification. Yes, I did. It didn't include cyanide."

"I wasn't suggesting——" Edge began.

"You came damned near it," Jameson flashed.

"I was just remarking——"

"Well, keep your remarks to yourself," Jameson growled. "And don't dodge the main issue. *Agatha's* missing. Understand? These swine have got her. If I could get my hands on them——"

He broke off.

"Jameson," said Rollison quietly, "did you have any reason to hate Jimmy Vance? Have you any reason to want to ruin his father?"

Jameson glared.

"Don't talk like a lunatic!"

Rollison said: "I do try. Ever seen this before?" He took one of the prints which Jolly had made of the baby photograph, and held it out to Griselda. Edge looked over her shoulder, and Jameson glanced at it.

He lost all his colour, and shot one swift, searing look at Rollison.

"No," said Griselda.

"No," said Edge. "Why?"

"Have you seen it before, Jameson?" Rollison asked.

"No, and I'm sick of this sickening nonsense," Jameson growled. "I'm going."

He stalked to the door.

The others had gone, now.

Rollison watched from his window as they were driven off in a taxi, and then he went to the telephone. He dialled Grice's home number, and so saved himself a call to the Yard; for Grice was home.

"I've been back ten minutes," he said, "and I don't want any cracks——"

"Forget it," Rollison said. "Did you check Jameson again?"

"I've looked through the reports we had on him," Grice said.

"Has he ever been engaged to marry?"

"Not to my knowledge. Would it matter?"

"It could. He hates the Vances, and I'd like to know why. There's one obvious possibility: if he had a girl friend whom Jimmy Vance took a fancy to."

Grice didn't answer.

Rollison inquired: "Asleep, Bill?"

"No," said Grice. "No, I've just woken up." He broke off again. Then: "Jameson had a twin sister. She killed herself about four years ago. Four months gone with child."

"Ah," breathed Rollison. "That could be it. Motive for hate." *Twins*: and those babies looked just as twins would, while being photographed by proud parents.

"But Jimmy Vance's murder is only a part of it," Grice protested. "The American and all these thugs wouldn't fit into a scheme of personal violence."

"Wouldn't they?" asked Rollison. "Check Jameson. Find if he's had any dealings with rival firms. Call it far-fetched or call it fantastic, but check. *Please*," he pleaded. "And have him watched."

"All right," Grice promised, as if he knew that it was vital.

Rollison rang off, but soon dialled again, this time getting Ebbutt's number. Ebbutt waited to hear who it was, and then asked anxiously:

"Any noos, about Jolly, Mr. Ar?"

"No change."

"Oh," said Ebbutt. "Well, while there's life, you know."

"I know, Bill." Rollison paused. Then: "Is Slippy Dean about these days?"

"Take it from me he is, Mr. Ar—going straight, too. Nar there's a man who'll never forget you if he lives to be 'n'undred. The way you looked arter his wife and kids——"

"Think he'll do a job for me?"

"It's as good as done."

"Good. Ask him to pay a call on these four people, will you?" Rollison named Edge, Vance, Jameson and Griselda, and gave their names and addresses; and Ebbutt wrote them all down laboriously. "Look for shoes with a red stain on the soles and the welts," said Rollison. "A bright red powder—it may look like dried paste."

"That all?"

"No. Have him look through any photograph album or any photographs he comes across, for a photo of two babies——"

"Kids?" breathed Ebbutt.

"Yes—six months or so old, near naked, you know the type. I—better do it this way, Bill. Send a messenger here, and I'll give him a copy of the photograph. Slippy will know what he's after, then."

"Okay," said Ebbutt.

Rollison rang off, and poured himself another drink, then went to the kitchen for some biscuits, and was greeted by the ghost of Jolly.

Then he went to the telephone again, and dialled Griselda Vance's number. It wasn't long before she answered.

"Mrs. Vance," said Rollison, quietly. "I want to see you, in the next hour or so. I can't be quite sure when I'll be there, but I'm coming."

"So late as this?"

"Yes," he said, "I'll be there as soon as I can. I think I know who's behind it."

He rang off, finished his drink, and then loosened his

collar and his shoes, and sat back in an easy chair. After five minutes, he got up, went into the kitchen for Jolly's automatic timer, one secret of Jolly's cooking, and set it. As he did so, the front door bell rang; Ebbutt's man was here for the photograph. Slippery Dean in person, an eager, grateful, wizened man who talked volubly. Rollison told him to go to Jameson's flat first, and to report any find he made, and when the one-time crook had left, he stretched himself out on Jolly's bed; the timer would wake him in an hour and a half.

When he left the flat, two hours later, he was wide awake and almost desperately careful.

20

HEATH VIEW AGAIN

THE landing was in darkness.

Rollison closed the door softly, and waited. He heard no sound, no one breathing, no furtive noises. He moved slowly towards the head of the stairs and then went down, keeping close to the wall. At the first landing, he paused again; and still heard nothing.

He went faster.

The street was almost in darkness. Only a few dim lights burned; London after midnight was a gloomy, furtive city. A car was parked some distance along, with its sidelights on; and that might mean anything or nothing.

He turned right.

No one followed him.

He began to wonder if his suspicions had the slightest basis in fact. Edge—Jameson—Griselda. He reached the end of the street, making for the corner cautiously, for this was the next most likely place for trouble.

None came.

Ten minutes after leaving his flat, he was getting into his car at the large ramp garage where the night staff knew him as well as the day staff. He sat at the wheel as it purred down the ramps, then through empty streets which, with the lighting, seemed like the streets of a ghost town. A few cabs, a few policemen and occasional private cars, was all that moved.

He drove fast.

No car followed him.

He had told Griselda he thought he knew who was behind it; and if she knew, if she was trying to protect the man, if she was party to the crimes——

How would she receive him?

He reached the Heath, and put on the headlights. They shone on the bushes and the trees, made shadows upon the dark grass. They shone on two policemen, standing together at a corner, obviously dazzled. They vanished behind him. Heath View was only a quarter of a mile away, and the sight of the two constables gave him more confidence. He felt almost light-hearted as he swung the car into the drive of the house, the headlights still on and shining on the curtained windows, the shrubbery, the red brick walls.

Lights were on; in the hall, in one downstairs room, and in one room upstairs.

Was Griselda still alone?

Rollison switched off the lights and got out of the car, moving towards the steps, the lighted porch and the closed door. It was more sixth sense than hearing which made him pause, which brought home the fact that he was a clear target against the porch light. He jumped forward, feeling foolish as a man feels when he jumps out of the way of the car he hasn't noticed.

Two shots came.

He heard them, and saw the flashes out of the corner of his eye; and he heard one bullet smack into the brick of the porch, another bite into the wood of the door. They came from the right. He flung himself into the right hand corner, out of the line of fire, and he twisted round, the gun in his hand.

A third flash came.

He fired at it, and didn't know whether he scored a hit, because he heard different sounds; of someone running, in the house. He thought it was a woman. The footsteps came nearer. He crouched in the corner, watching the darkness of the grounds beyond the radius of the porch light. He fancied that he saw a shadowy figure move, and fired. The flash was dim in the bright porch.

The footsteps came nearer, as of a woman; a desperate hurry; or panic.

He called: "*Don't open the door!*"

The woman stopped.

He was sure that he could hear rustling sounds in the garden, but didn't leave his corner. If the sharp-shooter was creeping round, so that he could see the corner and the Toff, the Toff would get a little warning. He was tempted to move forward and to start the chase, but if he made himself a clear target——

The door opened a fraction of an inch.

"Don't come out," he breathed.

He didn't glance at the door, did not know for certain that Griselda Vance was there. His ears were strained for more sounds of movement; and he caught one, as of a man stepping on to the gravel of the drive. There was another, similar sound; and then a much louder one, of metal on metal, followed by the snorting roar of a petrol engine. Someone on a motor cycle was starting the engine, without putting lights on.

The door opened wide.

"Close it!" Rollison ordered, and moved forward swiftly. He could see the drive gates, standing open, and the greyness of the sky beyond them. He heard the engine roar. He heard the grating of the tyres on the gravel as it started off. He heard a different sound, further off; a police whistle, which didn't surprise him.

He saw the dark shape of the motor cycle and the man on it, and he fired four times in quick succession. He couldn't be sure that he scored a hit. The dark shape swept through the greyness and then vanished; and the engine continued to roar heading for the built-up area and the two policemen who must have heard the shooting and were taking no chances.

The sound of the engine grew fainter.

A man appeared from a nearby garden, and came hurrying. *"Anyone hurt?"* he called. *"I'm from the Yard. Did you see——"*

His torch light fell onto Rollison, and he broke off, seeing who it was.

"No, no damage," Rollison said. *"Didn't you see him earlier?"*

"Only just back on duty," the man said.

Griselda Vance opened the door wide, and stared into the porch as the Toff turned to look at her.

He had the gun in his right hand, and he had a bleakness in his face and in his eyes which few people ever had the chance to see. He did not know that he looked as if he would gladly kill. He didn't move. Griselda Vance and the Yard man looked at him—and then the Yard man said: "I must go and report, sir." He went off. Griselda watched Rollison without speaking, as if her limbs as well as her tongue were locked. Her hair was a misty halo against the light behind her. She wore a long housecoat of richly flowered velvet, with a shallow V at the neck.

He didn't move, but said gratingly: "That was a brilliant idea. Get ready for me. Have a man in the grounds with a gun. Thanks, Griselda."

She didn't speak.

"What have I done?" he asked. "Found the short cut too soon?"

She let her arm fall from the door.

"I suppose it looks like that," she said, drearily, "I suppose I can't blame you for thinking that's how it happened. But it's not true." She paused; until a different expression showed in her face; alarm. "Are you hurt?"

"Not yet," Rollison said.

"You'd better come in."

"Thank you," he said, and moved forward slowly. "Is it safe?"

"There's no one else here," she said, bitterly. "Not even your friend Miss Cadisser. If you had such doubts of me, why didn't you have her stay?"

He entered the hall, and Griselda closed the door. He felt suddenly very tired, as he did sometimes at the end of a long, tense day. He wanted to relax. He felt worse, because he had lulled himself into that feeling of false security, because he had come so near death. He sensed his own pallor, and felt the sweat which was beading his forehead. He also sensed the change in Griselda's manner, as she led the way into a small room on the right, one which he had seen before—her morning room. She

went straight to a small cocktail cabinet and, without asking him what he wanted, poured brandy. She handed it to him in a small glass.

His lips began to twist in a grudging smile.

"Thanks," he said. "Health." He sipped, and let the brandy trickle down; it was exactly what he needed, she was a woman who would not need telling such things as that. She took cigarettes from a small cedarwood box, and offered them to him, with a lighter. "Thanks," he said again, "I'll have one in a minute." He sipped the brandy again. "Pity to use stuff like this as a medicine. Sorry if I barked too loud."

"Don't worry about that," she said, "if I'd been as near death as you have, I'd bark."

"In point of fact," he said, "you were as near, not long ago. You didn't bark."

"That—that was different." She turned away, went to a chair and sat down; it was as if being reminded of the way Paul Vance had nearly murdered her had taken the strength out of her legs. "I wish I knew how to convince you that I didn't know the man was there," she said. "I can't imagine how he got there. Did you—did you see him?"

"Not clearly." He sipped again. "Did you tell anyone else that I'd telephoned?"

"No."

"You didn't tell Jameson or Edge?"

The question didn't surprise her, but she shook her head slowly. She was supremely easy to watch. He felt the influence which she exerted over men creeping into him. He reminded himself that she could stand quite still while a man threatened to strangle her, which meant that she had a nerve as cool as nerves could be. She could fascinate men, she could cast a spell over them; and as far as he knew, she might lead them to their ruin.

Jimmy Vance had been 'ruined'.

"No," she said, "I didn't tell either of them. I didn't go to bed, just sat in an easy chair." She paused again. "Who—who do you think is behind all this?"

Instead of answering, Rollison asked :

"Did you know Jameson's sister? His twin sister."

Griselda said sharply : "Yes. I——"

"She killed herself. Did you know?"

"Yes." That was less sharp.

"Do you know why?"

"Yes," said Griselda, almost wearily. "Yes, I know."

"Was she one of Jimmy's—victims?"

"Yes." Griselda spoke as if all the spirit had been drawn out of her. "Yes, she was."

"So Jameson had cause to hate Jimmy, Silver Queen, and everything to do with the Vance family."

This time, Griselda nodded.

"Did Paul know this?"

"I don't know," Griselda said. "I've never told him."

"Do you think Jameson killed Jimmy?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you think Jameson's behind the sabotage?"

Griselda said : "I just don't know."

"You mean you know but won't talk," Rollison said savagely. "You'll condemn Agatha Bell to——"

She flung her right hand up. Passion stormed in her eyes. All that serenity vanished, her voice quivered with emotion which erupted as lava from a volcano.

"Don't stand there and talk like that," she cried. "I'd give my right hand, I'd give my life to see it over, to bring him peace, to——"

"Paul Vance?" flashed Rollison.

"Yes," she cried, "I didn't dream how I'd made him suffer. Go and help him. *Go and help him.* He won't let me. He feels cheated and betrayed, he——"

She broke off; crying.

Rollison drove back to Gresham Terrace not long afterwards, avoiding a street where police were gathered, obviously trying to trace the scene of the shooting. As he pulled up outside 22g, a shadowy figure appeared. His hand flashed to his gun.

"Mr. Ar," breathed Ebbutt, "I bin waitin'. Let yer

dahn once terday, and I didn't want to again. I've 'ad a report from Slippy, the boy I put on to the job of looking rahnd the 'ouses. Found that baby photo at Jameson's, and the red on Jameson's shoes. First place 'e went to, like you told him. Fahnd something else, too—Jameson's aht ternight. Runs an old sports car and a motor-bike. He——”

“A motor-bike,” echoed Rollison. His mind was crammed with urgent thoughts. Then: “Busy, Bill?”

“Just tell me wot you want me to do.”

An elderly man was in the hall of Paul Vance's London flat; tired-looking, with a frayed dressing-gown tied loosely round his waist, his feet in carpet slippers.

“All I know, sir, is that Mr. Vance had a telephone call, about half-past two, and went off in his car soon afterwards. I was awake, sir, I don't sleep well these nights, and since Master Jimmy's death I've been so worried about Mr. Vance.”

“Have you any idea where he went?” Rollison asked. “Did he mention the factory?”

“He didn't, sir, no—but he *did*, sir! He said something about the office.”

21

THE FACTORY BY NIGHT

It was nearly four o'clock.

Rollison drove on his parking lights along the silvered fence outside the silvered factory sheds of the Silver Queen plant. A light shone at the porter's box, near the front gates, which were closed and locked. Another light showed, some way further off. Nearby factories were ablaze with light, where night shifts were being worked. The thump of machinery travelled clearly across the clear night air.

Rollison slid the Rolls-Bentley to a standstill.

Griselda, who had come at a telephone call, spoke quietly.

"You'll be careful, won't you? He's hardly responsible for his actions these days. If you anger him he might—might lose his head."

"I'll watch him," promised Rollison. Rollison felt her close by his side, and gripped her hands tightly. He got out and closed the door quietly, and Ebbutt climbed down from the back of the car, massive but light on his feet.

They approached the gates.

There was a small postern gate set within the two of thick wire mesh. The Toff tried the handle, cautiously, but the smaller gate was locked. Rollison couldn't see it clearly. He glanced at the porter's window, and saw no shadow, could not be sure whether the night watchman was in the office.

Rollison shone a torch.

He examined the lock closely, then switched the torch off, took a skeleton key from his pocket, and inserted it. It wasn't difficult to force, if you knew how. He opened the gate slowly, but it squeaked.

"Easy, Mr. Ar," warned Ebbutt.

"All right, Bill. Get it all clear, will you? You're to cover the night watchman, and stop him from giving any alarm. Whistle if there's trouble."

"I'll fix him," said Ebbutt.

Rollison pushed the door wider, and stepped inside; Ebbutt followed, and closed it.

Distant machinery went *thump, thump, thump*. A distant chimney sent sparks high into the air.

The light from the porter's lodge spread palely, and shone on something bright which was close to the wall. Rollison approached that carefully, and as he drew nearer, saw a motor cycle. He put a hand towards the cylinder, and felt that it was warm.

That didn't prove a thing about Jameson; it suggested plenty.

Rollison peered in through the lodge window.

The night watchman was sitting at a small table, with a newspaper open in front of him, a pile of sandwiches on a plate, and a big mug of tea or cocoa at hand. He was stirring, and reading a paper-covered book. He didn't look round.

Ebbutt breathed: "I'll see to 'im okay."

Rollison moved towards the main offices. He had the layout of the plant clear in his mind's eye, and the stars gave some light. He could see the distant lighted window clearly, and judged that it was in one of the big production sheds. He reached the offices; there was no light there.

He went towards the main powder shed, and saw the light more clearly, a slit at the side of a window. He wasn't quite sure where it was, and paused to get his bearings. That didn't take long. Dark against the starlit sky was the double-storey building, and beyond, the fiery-looking inferno of the lipstick mixing room. Nearer, were the double doors where the lorry had stood, and where Mahoney had helped to unload the talc.

The light was beyond that.

"The works' office," said Rollison, and went slowly towards the nearest door. The light grew brighter. He

reached the window, and, standing to one side, peered through.

He could see the grey head of Paul Vance, not far away from him. Vance was sitting at Jameson's desk, his back to the window. It was littered with papers. The office seemed empty but for that; there was the showcase with packed samples of Silver Queen products, the books, the empty bottles—everything as it had been when he had looked in here with Edge.

The office door stood open.

A dim light seemed to be on in the powder workshop, as well as in the office.

Rollison moved towards the doors leading into the production shed where the turbanned girls had worked. He found them unlocked, stepped inside, and stood in the shadows by the wall. The office door was still wide open, and the light came from that and from a single lamp burning over another doorway.

The only sound was the rustle of paper; there was no sign of Jameson.

Rollison moved across the room, towards doors which opened on to the lipstick shop. He glanced towards the office, but heard nothing new and saw nothing else. He reached the far doors, and opened them.

A light came on in the lipstick building.

He went out.

The lipstick double doors were open, and he stepped into the room which had looked like an inferno created by a Hollywood genius. The light here was so toned down that it was difficult to understand whether there was much red colouring; but there was the rather sickly smell of waxes and oils, and in places the floor was slippery underfoot.

A door leading off this mixing room was open. Beyond, he knew, was the room where the lipsticks were formed, like bullets; cooled, polished, and fitted into their metal containers.

Rollison went to it.

Standing at a long bench, was Reggie Jameson. On the

bench was one of the long pieces of metal which looked rather like a piquet marking board when all the pegs were in. The pegs were lipstick bullets, and glowed red beneath the light which shone above Jameson's head.

He had one lipstick in his hand, and seemed to be poking something into it.

Rollison stepped a little closer, fearful lest a draught or a slight sound should attract Jameson's attention.

Nothing did.

Two women had *died* after applying lipstick.

Rollison couldn't see clearly enough, and moved two paces forward. Jameson took another red bullet, and pierced a hole in the middle; then he picked up something tiny and white and put it in; he used tweezers, and acted with consummate care, as if what he held was fragile.

It was fragile all right; and deadly, too.

Rollison felt quite sure that it was cyanide.

Jameson held the lipstick in the tweezers, then put it down, and lit a burner which burned with a butterfly wing flame, like London's gas lamps of a bygone age. He picked the lipstick up with the tweezers, and drew it lightly across the flame; the lipstick looked shinier when it had finished. Then he picked up a metal container and placed the lipstick in it. He held it up, in his fingers now, and he was sideways to Rollison; there was something gloating in his expression.

There were two other gilt containers on the bench, each with lipstick in them. Jameson picked these up, and held them tightly in his hand, then turned off the gas. As he did that, Rollison backed towards the door, got through without making any sound, and waited behind it.

Jameson went out.

He walked across the dark yard, beneath the untroubled, starlit sky, until he reached his door. The light was still on in the office. Jameson went in, and the door swung to behind him.

Rollison waited for five minutes, and saw no sign of anyone nearby; there were just the two men. Shadows appeared on the window of the office. He went through

the doorway, making no sound, and approached the office itself. This was on the far side of the big room, it seemed to take an age to get there.

Rollison drew nearer, hearing the mutter of voices.

Jameson said: "Yes, that's it, Vance. That's the whole story. I've been sabotaging Silver Queen. I hate Silver Queen and everyone in it. Understand? I hated your lousy son. I hate you. I hate the Queen herself. Okay, okay, I'm mad! I hope the jury agrees with you, that would suit me down to the ground.

"But *you* won't know."

He stopped.

Paul Vance said huskily: "Why—why did you turn against me, Reggie?"

"Because of your precious Jimmy, Paul. He made my sister pregnant. She lived in torment for weeks, and then—she *killed* herself. But what did you care? Not a damn, Vance. You just wouldn't believe it of your son.

"At first, it just hurt like hell," Jameson went on flatly.

"Then I began to hate.

"Then I began to hurt *you*.

"Know how I did it, Vance? I began to work for a syndicate of competitors who'd like to buy up Silver Queen. I started sabotage in the factory. I worked on Jimmy and his women. I blackmailed him, and he had to do whatever I wanted him to. And you were scared in case Jimmy was a rat, you wouldn't consult the police—while he was alive or afterwards; you couldn't bring yourself to smear your Jimmy.

"Then Adam Bell came into the picture, and a funny thing happened. Funny!" Jameson shouted the word, and roared: "*Ha-ha-ha!* It was so funny you'll kill yourself! Adam was in the next room to Jimmy and me when I was putting the squeeze on Jimmy. Adam recognised Jimmy's voice but not mine. So he left England for New York, to tackle Jimmy about it. They had a hell of a row, over that and over Griselda. I put the American end of the syndicate on to Adam, to keep him off Jimmy, and they drove him under cover.

"Know why he didn't talk at once?

"He wouldn't betray Jimmy, because it would hurt his friend Paul Vance!"

"Then I killed Jimmy, and framed Bell for it." Jameson was breathing very loud, as if talking hurt. "Like to know why Jimmy had to die? Because he was after Agatha. He was following her, like he'd followed other women. He'd do that for a few days, then tell the poor fools he just couldn't keep away from them. It always worked. He used to boast about his conquests—but he started on Agatha.

"First my sister.

"Then Ag.

"I knew his time had come, so I followed him, and I smashed his head in like a shell. *Hear that? Like a shell!*"

Paul Vance said quietly: "Don't shout, Reggie. I can hear you."

"You can hear more," Jameson screeched. "A hell of a sight more. You can hear Silver Queen crashing about your ears. *Listen.* That's your life's work breaking up, being smashed to pieces. *Listen!*" He gasped for breath now; it was hideous. "To-morrow, the newspapers will have the whole story. Sabotage at the factory. The death of Paul Vance. The end of Silver Queen. It'll drop so low——"

He stopped, choking with the malignance of his own hatred.

"I was going to let you live until the crash," he went on, squeakily. "But Rollison stopped me. I went to Griselda's place. I was going to cut *her* throat, and make a job of it, and Rollison telephoned her.

"I listened in on an extension, and heard what he said. He's on to me. I tried to finish him, but he dodged, so—I had to get you. That's why I telephoned and told you I knew the truth."

"And——"

"*I do, don't I?*" he screamed. "I've made more killer lipsticks, for Griselda, she'll die, she'll die!"

He stopped.

The only sound was his harsh breathing.

Rollison shifted his position, so that he could see further into the room. Neither of the men was within his line of vision.

"And now it's the end for you," Jameson gasped. "I've finished, I've smashed you and all you possess. I'll get this lipstick to Griselda—*don't put your hand to your pocket!*" he screeched.

There was silence; then a shout, a shot, a scuffle, a cry. Rollison thrust the door wide. He saw Jameson reach Vance, right hand raised, a dark, ugly bar of iron in it.

He saw the gun in Vance's hand.

Vance fired, again, and Jameson brought the iron down on his head; again and again.

Rollison couldn't stop it, couldn't do a thing about it, because the bullets had missed Jameson, and one had caught him in the leg.

He fell, dropping his gun. Pain and blood mingled. He was on one knee, several feet away from the men. He saw Vance's knees bend under him. His own pain was so great that he couldn't move towards his gun, couldn't do a thing.

Vance fell.

If Jameson turned and saw who was there——

THE MOVING TARGET

JAMESON would see the Toff and he would kill.

The bloodlust in the man would never be stemmed, now, he would forever be a killer. The canker of hatred had burned deeply, until he was prepared to kill everyone who stood between him and vengeance.

If the Toff died . . .

Griselda might use the lipstick until she reached the fateful crystal, and the odour of almonds would startle her, then its gas would choke her; in minutes if not in seconds, she would be dead.

Agatha?

She might die in the same way, or Jameson might go and kill her now.

Danger to him could only come from the Toff, and when Jameson turned he would see the Toff on one knee, trying to reach the gun; helpless.

Vance was just a heap on the floor. The iron bar, which looked as if it had been plunged into one of the warm vats of lipstick, was in Jameson's hand. He was staring at the window. He wasn't turning round, was just staring.

He raised the bar.

The Toff looked towards the window, and saw Griselda.

She hadn't stayed in the car. She had looked through the gap; and she seemed petrified.

To have *seen* Vance's head smashed.

Jameson was utterly silent for an agonising, sickening second. Then he moved; obviously he had glimpsed Griselda. He turned, swift as a man could, and leapt towards the door. He did not see the Toff, but reached the door and raced out, his footsteps thudding on the stone.

It was like a miracle.

And Griselda had vanished.

Rollison felt sweat on his forehead and his face as he crawled towards the desk. He picked up his gun and crawled on. He reached up, gripped it, and hauled himself to his feet. His left leg was a mass of agonising nerves, and blood dripped from it.

He edged round the desk.

He heard those thudding footsteps and the slamming of a door. He edged further round, until he reached the window, then raised his left arm, the elbow bent, and crashed it through the window. Glass broke and sharp slivers stabbed at him, one cut his cheek, another lodged in his hair. He hardly noticed it. When the ringing echo of the breaking glass died away, he could hear the footsteps, Griselda's sharp and quick, Jameson's heavy and dull.

Rollison leaned against the window.

He could see them racing away, dark shadowy figures. They would be lost in a few seconds, but they were heading for the lipstick shop, and the lighted window there. That was the one hope of shooting Jameson, and it was as slender as a hope could be.

Rollison rested his wrist against the window ledge.

Griselda was drawing near the window, her figure began to show up more clearly; Jameson was still just a dark shape against the greyness. Griselda appeared in clear silhouette, running without looking behind her—running with the knowledge that death was at her heels.

Jameson was becoming clearer, too.

Rollison's lips moved, as if in prayer.

Jameson appeared against the light.

Rollison fired, three times in succession, so swift that the reports merged together in one loud roar. He could not tell whether he had won. He saw Jameson moving right across the window, as if he had not been touched.

So he would reach Griselda.

Jameson disappeared, as Griselda had done, against the darkness of the wall. It was over, and Rollison had

lost. He had waited to hear the whole story, and in waiting had condemned Griselda Vance to death. He could imagine that iron bar rising and falling. He could remember Jimmy Vance's scream, just before the death blow struck.

They were running towards the light of the stars. The porter's lodge was too far away, the porter too busy with his evening meal or his book. Ebbutt—*Ebbutt*.

They were running . . .

Griselda was running, anyhow. He could hear her footsteps, sharp and clear, but that was all. Jameson's thudding steps had stopped. *Would* he stop? Would it serve any purpose to pretend? Was there any sound of Jameson's running?

No; only Griselda's.

Suddenly, more lights flashed on. The night watchman and Bill Ebbutt appeared against the light from the front of the porter's lodge. Griselda appeared in it, too. Rollison could picture her gasping for breath, could imagine how she tried to make the men understand. Ebbutt came running, to help the Toff, the night watchman saw Griselda, and rushed towards her.

Rollison was here alone, with the broken window, the sliver of glass in his hair, the gun heavy in his hand, his leg sticky with his own blood. He was here and he was alive, and Vance lay there with the stillness of death.

But was he dead?

And Agatha—was *she* here?

Jameson began to crawl towards the big powder room, in the night's darkness. He saw lights at the gates, and cars coming along the road. He knew that the police would soon be here. A wound in his waist hurt badly, and was bleeding a lot, but he didn't let that stop him.

He reached the big, empty 'shop', with its strong smell of perfume.

He used a torch, and then crawled, gasping for breath, towards the mixing room next to it. He left a trail of blood; and now and again he rested.

He reached the swing doors of the mixing room, and went in. The doors swung behind him. He heard car engines racing, and headlights suddenly swept against the windows, lighting up the whole room, casting dark shadows. Some were cast by big bins of mixed powder which stood near the mixer. One was sealed with adhesive tape, and marked:

DO NOT OPEN—R.7.

He reached it, and, breathing so heavily that the sound rumbled about the room, he got to one knee.

He ripped the tape off.

He pushed the lid of the bin aside, and it fell, clattering and booming. The lights had gone outside now, and there was only his torch. The beam fell on hair; on Agatha's hair, powdered so much that it looked like a wig.

He said hoarsely: "Going to—take you with me. *Got to.*" He hauled himself up until he was standing nearly upright. He clutched the bin with his left hand, for support, and raised the iron bar with his right.

"*Got to,*" he breathed. "It won't——"

The door opened, without warning; bright torchlight shone into the room, and Jameson was shown up, pointing into the bin.

"There he is!" a man shouted.

"Okay," another said, "that'll do——"

Jameson raised the bar swiftly, finding a brutal strength, and brought it smashing down towards Agatha Bell's head.

Before it landed, the man who had shouted fired at him, and he pitched forward.

Agatha Bell was alive.

Rollison was told about that before he was carried into the ambulance and then to hospital, anxious about his leg. A doctor said it wasn't anything to worry about, but doctors could easily soothe with white lies.

In the morning, when he came round but was bemused

by the anæsthetic, Rollison thought of nothing but the white room and pale faces and drowsiness, in a kind of pallid nightmare. In the evening, when he came round again, he felt thirsty and, at first, afraid. Then he began to remember.

Jolly.

Adam Bell.

Agatha.

"Nurse!" he shouted, "nurse!" He looked round desperately for a bell push, found it, pressed it tightly and kept his thumb on it for long enough to bring a nurse running. She was small, dark, pert. She burst into the room, and then saw him sitting up in bed, glaring.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "I thought——"

"Please," he said, "this is life and death." He spoke as if he were quite sure, and impressed her. "Telephone Scotland Yard, ask them how Jolly is. Understand? No, how *everyone* is. It's vital. Life and death."

The nurse shook her head resignedly.

"I was told you'd be difficult," she said, "but *I* can't go telephoning all over the place. I've some messages for you, if that'll do. Both men will live, Mr. Vance and Mr. Jolly. The police left word about an hour ago. That what you want to hear?"

Rollison said slowly, unbelievably: "*Both* will live?"

"That's what the message is."

"Nurse," said Rollison, huskily, "you're wonderful. *Both* will—oh, that's magnificent, that's all that matters, that's everything."

"You're a queer customer," the little nurse said. "Aren't you even interested in your own leg?"

"Eh? Leg? What's the matter with my leg? I—oh, my *leg*!" He looked round-eyed and marvelling. "Yes, of course, I remember something about it now. Well, what's the verdict, or have you to ask Night Sister?"

She smiled, as if she was beginning to like him.

"You should be about in a couple of weeks, if you're lucky."

"Oh, I'm lucky," said Rollison. "Born that way.

Every lucky star that ever winks at you from a million miles away presided at my arrival in this sinful world. You—er—haven't any other messages, have you? No one's sent me flowers or grapes or things like that?"

The nurse laughed.

"There's a lady waiting outside now," she said. "A Mrs. Vance. *And* there's a policeman. Which one would you like first?"

The policeman had gone, taking his story with him. He'd told the Toff that Jameson was in hospital, too, but that he would be well enough to stand his trial. Paul Vance would almost certainly pull through, and Agatha Bell, who had been doped before being put in the powder bin, had been taken to some club in Mayfair, run by a lady someone—Lady Gloria, the policeman thought.

"How long had she been at the factory?" Rollison had asked.

"Miss Bell? Since the night before last," the policeman had said. "She's okay, Mr. Rollison. You needn't worry. And Mr. Grice will be along soon."

"Fine," Rollison had beamed. But he wasn't really interested in Grice.

Griselda came in.

She was dressed in black, and that seemed right. It threw the beauty of her hair into vivid relief, as well as the whole beauty that was hers. She moved with a grace that seemed part of a dream, and sat down near the bed.

"Hallo," he said.

"Hallo," said Griselda. She leaned forward, and kissed his forehead, firmly, then drew back.

"Why that?"

"Just 'thank you'."

"For——"

"Shooting in the dark."

"Oh, *that*," said Rollison, and waved a hand disparagingly. "I should never have let him get away. If he'd caught you, I would always have blamed myself."

"Never," Griselda said. "For anything."

Rollison grinned.

"You may always feel like that about me." He paused, watching her very closely, before going on:

"Seen Paul?"

"Yes."

"Hatchet buried?"

"Yes," she said, "he knows the whole truth, now. Jimmy plotting with these men who wanted to bring Silver Queen shares down to next to nothing. And Jameson driven mad by something Jimmy had done."

"Yes," Rollison agreed, "the whole truth. Have the police found Jameson's backers?"

"I think arrests are pending here and in America."

"Arrests and some hangings, I hope," said Rollison, bleakly. He didn't look away from Griselda. "Life's been hell for Paul."

"I know," she said.

"Griselda," Rollison went on, "there are times when I ask to be thrown out. Blame my incurable interest in other people. You've both had a rough time. You can help each other to get over it—and probably you can help Paul more than he can help you."

Griselda said very slowly:

"What do you think I can do?"

And Rollison told her:

"He loved his son, and had great hopes for him. He could give the same love and have the same hopes for his daughter."

Rollison was up and about in good time for Jameson's trial. It lasted four days, and before the verdict and the sentence to death, old facts were repeated and new ones came out. The devotion between Jameson and his sister was used skilfully by the defence, whose only hope was a verdict of guilty but insane. The fact that Jameson himself had introduced his sister to Jimmy Vance was offset by another—that Jameson had telephoned both Adam Bell and Paul Vance about Jimmy's murder. There were other things: for instance, Adam had been convinced that

he would hang for the crime, and had attacked Rollison because he had been sure that Rollison would hand him over to the police. That Jameson had wrongly believed that Adam could name him as the killer of the two girls who had died of cyanide in lipstick. . . .

There was sober great rejoicing, after the trial and the verdict and sentence of death.

Rollison knew that Paul Vance and Griselda and Adam Bell and Ag dined together on that night, for he had been invited to join them. He preferred to dine at home, however, because it was a great occasion: the first full meal that Jolly had cooked since he had been discharged from hospital.

THE END

OTHER WALKER MYSTERIES

THE TOFF AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA

John Creasey

\$3.95

The abundance of gorgeous natural resources, human-female and other, caught the Toff off guard on his little trip to Nice. What could be spurious in such beauty? The Toff was prepared for the wanton predilections of the cabaret *artiste*—but not for white slave trade, and a succession of most horrifying deaths against a Riviera background. Things seemed to point to the sadistic Chicot but . . .

THE DEPTHS

John Creasey

\$3.95

Z5 was often concerned with watching over people whose well-being was essential to the entire world. Mysterious events connected with the disappearance of ships at sea were disturbing Dr. Palfrey, so he assigned Julia Shaw, one of his best agents, to watch the eminent Professor Corvell during a pleasure cruise. She therefore saw the little silver object rushing through the water toward the ship, saw the incredibly gigantic wave rise out of nothing and sweep the professor overboard . . . and then she discovered that there were people on board who would stop at nothing to keep her from reporting to Dr. Palfrey.

THE TWENTYMEN

Philip Purser

\$3.95

Colin is aware that it will be more than difficult to make the third British general election in a year and a half seem enthralling to the national television audience, but his BBC job makes him try a little harder anyway. After the election of the new Prime Minister, however, odd things begin to happen. Why, for instance, has some unknown group begun broadcasting on the networks at a time of night when nothing at all should be on? And how do they get access to equipment? Soon he finds himself banded together with a small group of men who are the only ones who can save Great Britain from a totalitarian takeover. . . .

FOLLOW THE TOFF

John Creasey

\$3.95

The Toff had agreed to take on a forgery case, but no one had mentioned murder. Least of all in the plural. Paris in the spring with eye-stopping Katherine Dangerfield was not as romantic as it might be, follow the Toff though she had. It was breathtaking, however. Especially now that Katherine's art-dealer husband was so distressingly removed.

FORGET WHAT YOU SAW

Jeffrey Ashford

\$3.95

Kirkland has a very clever plan for a bank robbery, but he needs Simon to shortcircuit the alarm system and-run accident—and the la a nice young lawyer who thin a vicious campaign begins in testify. This novel maintains t
THE EVIDENCE AND THE HANDS OF



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