
A FANTASTIC MURDER ON A QUIET STREET
EXPLOSION
DOROTHY CAMERON DISNEY
BANTAM BOOK Complete and Unabridged

AN EXPLOSION
wrecked their home...
rocked their lives...

Nice, ordinary people, the Greers, the kind who live next door to anybody, *next door to you* . . . Harby worked hard, took care of his family, went through life with nothing but determination and love to help him past each defeat . . . Lucy, facing forty, was still a mediocre housekeeper and a warm, wonderful wife and mother . . . Ted came back from the Army to face the disillusionment of unkept promises . . . and Till was still too young and pretty to know that there could be anything wrong with the world.

Nice, ordinary people, friendly and respectable . . . if a dreadful accident left them homeless and helpless, you'd take them in yourself. Their next door neighbor did . . . and found herself suddenly in the center of a police investigation when the senseless violence of the explosion turned out to conceal a deeper, darker, more purposeful crime.

Nice ordinary people . . . but somewhere in their simple lives was a hidden *motive for murder!*

About THE COVER

Later, she remembered just noise, the loudest noise she'd ever heard. Her mind couldn't take it all in. Just as her ears declined to interpret the colossal roar of sound, to pick out and identify the shatter of glass, the scream of steel, the thud of falling objects, and heard only noise, so her eyes also refused to perform the ordinary function of eyes. In forty-five seconds it was all over, and nothing but a cloud of choking dust remained to hide the rubble that had been a house.

EXPLOSION

by

DOROTHY CAMERON DISNEY

BANTAM BOOKS

NEW YORK

This Bantam book contains the complete text of the original edition. Not one word has been changed or omitted. The low-priced Bantam edition is made possible by the large sale and effective promotion of the original edition, published by Random House, Inc.

A BANTAM BOOK published by arrangement with Random House, Inc.

Bantam Edition Published
March, 1950

Printed in the United States of America

For EDITH HAGGARD

THIRTEEN PEOPLE IN *EXPLOSION*

Harbison Greer, a lawyer, middle-aged, competent, devoted to his family.

Lucy Greer, Harby's wife, didn't know how to get along without money . . . but kept smiling while she tried.

Till Greer at nineteen was pretty and gay, and only normally selfish.

Ted Greer, Till's older brother, had already learned some hard lessons in life . . . but he hadn't stopped fighting.

Dorritt Mitchell lived next door; she was tall and slender, blonde and beautiful . . . and Ted had always wanted her.

Elizabeth Mitchell, Dorritt's aunt, worried about the young people drinking and smoking, wanted to see them married.

Jessie Wayne boarded with the Mitchells, and kept her own devotion to Ted locked in her heart.

Arabella Rixey, Lucy Greer's half-sister, had all the money Lucy had grown up with . . . and didn't intend to part with any of it.

Claude Rixey, Arabella's new husband, didn't seem to mind being under his wealthy wife's thumb.

Janet Culp, a secretary who didn't know she was too old to be cute.

Alec Bates, a promising young lawyer, helped Claude Rixey manage his wife's estate.

Timothy Dwight, a policeman, didn't mind seeing his name in the papers.

Dr. Kenneth MacNab, the District Coroner, didn't like Dwight.

One

THE EXPLOSION occurred at 2:06 P.M. on a burning summer afternoon in Washington. Miss Elizabeth Mitchell rose at six A.M., partly because it was too hot to sleep, and partly because she liked to use the bathroom before the girls got at it.

Miss Mitchell loved early morning solitude in her house. To tell the truth, she loved her house. She had spent her youth acquiring it, and she never regretted as one wasted hour the thirty years she had worked for the U. S. Government to make the purchase possible.

The house, a two-story brick structure, wasn't one of your row affairs joined by party walls to neighbors. It had a patch of lawn in front with a narrow strip of grass on both sides. In the rear was a skillfully planted, very tiny yard, backed by an ivy-covered garage that Miss Mitchell rented to a merry, improvident, young couple who owned nothing but the car. A real town house, as Miss Mitchell called it in her thoughts, the dwelling sat on a pleasant residential street off Connecticut Avenue in sight of Rock Creek Park and not far from the Shoreham and the Wardman Park hotels.

Roomers were prohibited by zoning law in that particular block on Woodland Road. Miss Mitchell had two. Her niece, Dorritt Mitchell, had come on from Iowa several years before to begin a career in the government as her aunt had done a generation earlier, and occupied the second most important bedroom. Because of the relationship, Dorritt could hardly be considered a roomer. To Miss Mitchell, Jessie Wayne, squeezed into the third and smallest bedroom, represented an equally defensible case. Jessie had accompanied Dorritt from Iowa and was her dearest friend.

The deciding factor, however, was financial. Without the girls, Miss Mitchell couldn't have maintained the house. Her

modest pension wouldn't cover taxes, upkeep, repairs. If she could have managed without the girls, it is highly probable she would have done so. Elizabeth Mitchell didn't suffer from the pangs of loneliness. She preferred youth in moderation and at a distance.

Running the water slowly lest she disturb the sleepers, Miss Mitchell took a long, cool bath. After thought, knowing Jessie wouldn't mind, she used a sparing handful of Jessie's bath salts. Carnation, a nice, spicy smell. Dorritt—as one might imagine from the high-flown name chosen by her fool of a mother—ran to odors more exotic. Sitting up to her elbows bolt upright in the refreshing, carnation-scented water, Dorritt's aunt regarded with mild amazement the label on Dorritt's perfume bottle. *Little Sins,* if you please! What was a little sin?

Neatly dressed in her morning costume, to be changed later on for the afternoon, Miss Mitchell descended the stairs to the kitchen. It was too hot for an egg. She settled on orange juice, dry cereal and toast, her regular, man-sized pot of coffee. She drank four cups of coffee, slowly sipped them, while in solitary splendor in her own dining room she viewed the domain of which she was queen.

Dorritt and her fiancé had returned from the movies after the householder had gone to bed. Miss Mitchell began her inspection with the living room, visible through an archway. She'd thought it possible that Ted might leave Dorritt at the door and let her get some sleep. Plainly Ted hadn't stopped at the door. The boy must have come in and stayed for hours. Every ash tray in the living room was overflowing. Several half-smoked butts had wound up in the fireplace, despite a folded paper screen kept on the hearth to discourage that untidy habit.

Miss Mitchell sighed, partly for herself, but mostly for Ted. Humdrum civilian life wasn't working out too easily for some of the lads. With no slightest comprehension of the memories Ted Greer had carried home from the Pacific, with no understanding of what might be behind his present restlessness, Miss Mitchell recognized that Ted was restless. She was much too

fond of him not to know. The situation was hard on Dorritt. Hard on Ted's mother and father, too.

Automatically her eyes moved to the Greers' house. She hardly needed to shift position to see the place next door, so close it was to her own back yard. She could look straight across her table and on through her shining, polished dining-room window. The window on the right.

As usual her study began with the roof. Not for the first time Miss Mitchell wished that Harbison Greer would either mend his roof or remove it from her sight. The Greers' house, if well kept up, might be slightly more impressive than her own. There was no denying it was larger. Unfortunately, for Miss Mitchell, the dwelling had a peaked, tiled roof. Five years before in a freak hailstorm eleven of the tiles had clattered off and had never been replaced.

To the Greers' closest neighbor, the Greers' denuded roof with its vaguely polka-dotted effect was a daily affront. Sometimes she dreamed about those eleven missing tiles. She tried to be charitable. Harbison Greer, invariably referred to by his adoring wife as Harby, was an only moderately successful tax and estate lawyer. He was putting a harum-scarum daughter through college, and now, in his tired hands, was the problem of Ted. Furthermore, Lucy Greer, with all her winning ways, was a fantastically bad manager. Five years ago, Miss Mitchell sternly told herself, was just about the time Harbison Greer had suffered that crushing blow in his business, lost his most important client.

Still and all, you would think anybody could afford eleven tiles. The Greers kept a dog. The dog's food alone . . .

Miss Mitchell tore her eyes away from the roof. Mr. and Mrs. Greer slept on the other side of the house, which always made it difficult to judge if they were up. Ted had fixed a bedroom-study for himself in the basement that had no windows. Nineteen-year-old Till, to Miss Mitchell's certain knowledge, had never pulled a shade in her life. Her clothes, some of them anyway, lay heaped up on her bureau. Other garments undoubtedly

lay out of sight on the floor. A dress that looked new, an evening dress from the length of it, was swinging airily from the ceiling electric fixture. What an extraordinary place to hook a hanger! The dog, a blot of black and white, was sleeping on the foot of Till's bed.

Miss Mitchell's eyes flew to the other dining-room window and her own back yard. Once or twice there had been a little trouble with Mickey slipping through the fence and digging up things. There'd been no further difficulty after she'd repaired the fence at her own expense and spoken in a casual, kindly way to Lucy Greer, but Miss Mitchell's instincts remembered.

The narrow band of fuchsia and coxcomb that rimmed the flagstones—there was too much shade to grow grass or sun-loving flowers—was in pristine order. Not so the flagstone court that Miss Mitchell, to the awed amazement of the neighborhood, swept with a broom and dustpan twice a week. Someone walking along the alley had tossed in a greasy piece of paper, or else the nasty thing had blown from some neighboring trash can. Well, that could be handled later.

Miss Mitchell turned back to satisfy herself about Till's new dress. Just as she raised her eyes, something—a shadow—flitted across her vision. One of the Greers had stepped out of the kitchen door into the Greers' back yard.

The two houses, built in the early twenties in the piping days of that other post-war building boom, occupied a wedged-shaped slice of land on which few architects could have managed or would have attempted two separate dwellings and two separate garages. Side by side they sat, angled in such a way that Miss Mitchell had a much better view of her neighbors indoors than out.

The Greers' garage.blotted their back yard from view. When someone stepped through the Greer back door while Miss Mitchell was in the dining room, all she was aware of was the flitting shadow. At seven o'clock, it could only be Lucy Greer. Lately Harbison Greer had been getting off to his downtown office unusually early, and Lucy would never allow him to leave his home unfed.

The only way to be really sure was by means of an inconvenient window in the kitchen. Elizabeth Mitchell would never demean herself to the point of spying on neighbors. But just then she found that her pot of coffee had grown unpleasantly cool.

She stepped in the kitchen and put the pot back on the stove. The window was beside the stove. Anybody might have glanced out.

It wasn't Lucy, after all. It was Harbison Greer himself. No, it wasn't. It was Ted.

With a shock, Miss Mitchell realized she had mistaken the son for the father. Seen from the back in the clear early morning light, Ted's young shoulders had the same discouraged sag, his dark head the same spiritless droop. At twenty-four, Ted looked almost old. He was walking across the yard, slowly, at a shamble, toward the alley. He looked so wretched that the watcher wanted to run and comfort him.

What in the world had got the boy out of bed at such an hour? Ted wasn't due at his newest job until nine o'clock, and by choice he would lie abed until noon. Apparently he found surcease from his bitterness and frustrations in long hours of sleep, as though, locked away alone in bed, he could shut out the selfish, indifferent civilian world of which he still complained so violently.

Suddenly Miss Mitchell perceived that Ted wasn't contemplating a brisk early morning walk, which would have been her own prescription for what ailed him. He was only going as far as the alley. He was carrying something to the Greer garbage can. A large parcel, awkwardly done up in a newspaper.

For a moment Ted disappeared from sight in the alley. With almost suspicious haste he scuttled back across the yard and vanished, this time for good, into his private refuge in the basement. As Ted Greer himself would put it, he was hitting the sack again.

Miss Mitchell's conscience compelled her to wait a full fifteen minutes. It was twenty after seven when she felt the time had come to dispose of her own garbage. She trimmed the orange

peels of waste, and laid the good part on the window still to dry for later use as candied orange peel. She always filled a good-sized jar to put in her fruit cake at Christmas time.

The coffee grounds, treated with her habitual recklessness, joined the orange waste in her paper bag. Even during the war-time shortage which nearly drove her mad, Miss Mitchell hadn't been able to abide a cup of coffee that wasn't strong and fresh. It was probably her one extravagance.

The coffee grounds swelled the paper bag but not enough. She was obliged to admit that her take was rather flat and thin, hardly worth a trip to the alley. She opened the icebox, saw at a glance that Dorritt and Ted hadn't touched the cheese the night before. She'd confidently expected the pound would be nearly gone. Jessie had bought another jar of communal jelly, strawberry this time. And then Miss Mitchell spied the box of chocolate wintergreens that Ted had balanced on the egg bowl as a morning surprise for her. If that wasn't Ted all over! The boy should save his money. Miss Mitchell ate a wintergreen with relish.

She dropped the fluted cup in her paper bag. She pulled the rind off the cheese, thoughtfully removed a bit of string from the remains of last Wednesday's roast and added that. Hurrying into the living room, she gathered up the ash trays and emptied them, observing with satisfaction that not too many of the cigarette ends were stained with Dorritt's lipstick. Using her fingers like a pair of tweezers, she picked the offending butts from the fireplace. And then suddenly—dozens of cigarettes smoked, food untouched—she could not repress a vaguely troubling, displeasing thought. Herself and Jessie Wayne upstairs asleep, Ted and Dorritt by themselves down here. Miss Mitchell was delicate minded and without personal experience in the ways of a man with a maid. Nevertheless she dimly suspected that Ted, who habitually addressed his white-haired neighbor as his first and favorite sweetheart, was the kind of boy her father used to call full-blooded, the kind who preferably should marry early. It wasn't wise for couples to be engaged too long.

Miss Mitchell gazed at the hearthstone, decided that scrub-

bing the stone could wait until later. She snapped a dead leaf off her begonia plant, put it in her bag.

There, that did it. Neatly folded paper bag in hand, Miss Mitchell went out to the alley.

Two

LIKE THE Greer and Mitchell houses, the Greer and Mitchell garbage cans sat companionably side by side in the alley behind the two garages. But what a difference! You could have used Miss Mitchell's garbage can to wash your clothes in. In addition to wrapping every scrap of refuse like a little personal present to the Department of Sanitation, she hosed and sunned her garbage can twice a week when she swept the flagstone court.

Lucy Greer's leavings were a scandal. The tall gray can that nudged Miss Mitchell's own was always jammed to bursting and often spilling over on the pavement. Long ago the tormented lid had broken. When sweet-natured, harried Lucy remembered her tidy neighbor's feelings, she would perch the battered lid on top like a rakish hat, and weight it down with a stone or brick or anything at hand.

Ted hadn't bothered with the lid. It was lying on the pavement. Ted's personal contribution to the family waste, cascading from its newspaper covering, was plain to see.

Beer bottles. Beer bottles and beer bottles. Six to be exact.

Ted's furtive manner was at once explained. He'd hurried his parcel out early in the morning so his mother wouldn't know. Poor Lucy, poor Ted. Poor Dorritt. They might tell you that beer wasn't as strong as whiskey. But surely six whole bottles would leave one young man in no fit condition to face a job in which he was inexperienced on the morning after. Six bottles in a single evening!

What time had Ted gone to bed? He hadn't left her own house until all hours. It must have been nearly dawn when sod-

den with malt and alcohol—Miss Mitchell, whose father hadn't been a drinking man, hardly knew which was worse—the boy had closed his eyes and found the peace of oblivion in his basement hideaway.

Deeply disturbed, Miss Mitchell didn't hear the warning creak of the Greers' unoiled gate. She jumped when Lucy Greer, staggering under the weight of her kitchen garbage can which also had a broken lid, appeared around the corner of th garage. Lucy jumped too.

There was something very girlish about Lucy Greer, mother of two grown-up children. Sometimes at night, dressed in one of her stepsister's elegant cast-off frocks laboriously cut down to size, Lucy with her size twelve figure could pass for thirty-eight years old. By the cruel light of day you could see the worry lines on her delicate face, the sadness of her mouth, the gray in her fair hair.

It had been Lucy's innocent hope to clear the kitchen and make it just a little tidier before Harby got down to breakfast. She had planned to leave the kitchen garbage can shamelessly in the open alley, lined up beside the regular outdoor receptacle, trusting that the garbage men would be kind enough to empty both. Now that wouldn't do. Miss Mitchell, she knew, didn't approve of housewifely improvisation. Lucy's fondness for her neighbor was mixed with healthy respect, not to say a tinge of fear.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," she began with an air of bright nervousness. "This feels like the beginning of another scorcher, doesn't it? I decided I'd make an early start myself, and empty out my garbage."

She thought she'd put that rather neatly. Turning a little helplessly to empty the can into the larger receptacle, she paused, confused. Miss Elizabeth, moving fast, did a most peculiar thing. She stepped squarely in front of Lucy. Arms folded, her tall, spare figure completely blocked the Greer container into which her neighbor must somehow crowd the contents of this can.

Miss Elizabeth, reaching a rapid decision, had made up her

mind that Lucy Greer wasn't to begin her day with an inspection of those tell-tale bottles. She cleared her throat in an ominous way.

"Use my can," she invited in a formidable voice. "Yours is full."

Lucy Greer became even more confused. On one previous, never-to-be-forgotten morning, Till, attempting to assist her mother, had carried out the remainders left over after an elaborate dinner party and placed them in the wrong container. Miss Elizabeth's kindly, casual comments on that occasion could still ring in the ears of Till's mother.

"I'm afraid my stuff is a little messy," Lucy admitted nervously, and set the can down on the alley pavement and leaned back against the garage. Suddenly, with the day just beginning, she felt awfully tired. This unexpected generosity from Miss Elizabeth almost made her want to cry. Perched on her neighbor's fence, she caught sight of Miss Elizabeth's neat little paper bag. Sometimes it would have made her giggle inside, but not now. She'd been sleeping so miserably of late. "I forget to wrap up things," Lucy said. "You know I'm not much as a housekeeper."

"It doesn't matter," Miss Elizabeth replied. But she couldn't forbear wincing, when she glanced down at that can. Such waste! Through the gaping crack she could see cabbage salad, a scandalous amount of good cooked macaroni, and certainly those were untouched chicken wings.

Lucy correctly followed Miss Mitchell's thoughts. Behind her eyelids the tears were clamoring for release. She forced her eyes wider open to prevent their fall. It seemed to Lucy, who liked to please everybody, impossible as the assignment might be, that Miss Elizabeth was plainly awaiting an explanation.

"It's so hot," Lucy said. "When it's hot my family won't eat. I cook things, and they won't eat."

"But that chicken. Lucy. So good for sandwiches. Don't you buy food for the dog? Surely . . ."

"Till thinks chicken bones are bad for Mickey's insides. But maybe I could run in and get his plate, and pull off the meat . . ."

Perhaps it was the thought of running (one more errand) with so much inside still left to do that caused it. To the horror of both women, Lucy Greer burst out crying. Tears, floods of tears, rained down her face. She threw up a hand to cover them.

"It's nothing, nothing really," she sobbed, "except every day, every hour, I fell so darned inadequate."

"You do very well," said Miss Elizabeth, wretchedly trying to offer sympathy. She felt like crying herself. Without conviction she repeated, "Lucy, you do very well."

One of Lucy's charms was the swiftness with which she could change her mood. Perhaps that engaging quality sprang from years of tinkering with her own character. Perhaps it could be explained by her steady, continuing determination, born of love for Harby and the children, to make Lucy Greer into the kind of woman that she wasn't. She blinked her tears away and straightened up. At this moment it gave her a kind of relief to accuse herself.

"You know you don't believe that," she said sternly to Miss Elizabeth. In her cotton house dress, her hair freshly combed the way Harby liked it, she stood there in the alley and looked like a pint-sized queen explaining to her cabinet how she had lost India. "I don't do well at all. I run up bills that drive Harby nearly crazy. I'm not the slightest use to my only son. Till is going to be a wife exactly like me."

"Now, now . . ."

"I shouldn't," said Lucy clearly, "have been brought up like a millionaire's daughter, when I wasn't a millionaire's daughter."

How could Miss Mitchell argue? Lucy was putting into words what both of them knew was true. For a moderately prosperous lawyer's wife. Lucy Greer's early training or total lack of it was a catastrophe.

When Lucy was only six months old, her pretty and now long-dead mother had married a second time and into wealth. A widowed millionaire with a five-year-old daughter of his own. Both girls had been treated exactly alike. Private tutors, ponies, trips to Europe, twin doll houses big enough to shelter a fam-

ily, heaven know what all. Thirty years after the ending of that unrealistic, carefree existence, Lucy could still remember the rude awakening a girl of nineteen had experienced when her parents were lost with the sinking of the *Lusitania.* Her stepfather, who had always boasted of his two lovely daughters, spoiling and indulging both, had never got around to changing the will which acknowledged only one daughter. Arabella inherited everything.

"Arabella has been awfully good to us," Lucy said forlornly. "We owe a lot to Arabella. Just last week, she and Claude stopped by with some lovely flowers from their greenhouse. I expect she'd do more if the children, and even Harby sometimes, weren't difficult."

Miss Elizabeth barely managed to keep still. She'd seen those flowers arrive. Neither Arabella nor her husband had so much as got out of the limousine. They'd sent the chauffeur in with the bouquet. Who wanted a bunch of delphinium, big enough to choke a horse, in July? Flowers, indeed!

"They did look pretty," Lucy said weakly. "They're a little faded now. I should throw them out. Arabella sent along the vase, too."

"The vase!" cried Miss Mitchell, bursting the bonds of reticence. "Then you may be sure she'll want it back. I notice she's never got around to giving you your own mother's pearls. She's had thirty years to do it in."

"The pearls went with the estate. All the jewelry did."

"Your stepfather always promised the pearls to you."

"A verbal promise isn't legal, Miss Elizabeth."

"Legal, my foot! You can't convince me, Lucy, that Arabella Rixey has been good to you, or to your husband, or to your children, or to anybody on earth except herself."

"Miss Elizabeth, you met her only once. I mean to talk to."

"Once was quite sufficient."

Five years back, Miss Elizabeth had been invited to the small reception that the Greers gave to celebrate Arabella's sudden marriage—a marriage that pleased nobody except the simpering, fifty-year-old bride and possibly the groom. Miss Elizabeth

had no trouble whatever recalling the guest of honor, or their brief, very brief, conversation. Not caring to offer congratulations that would be insincere but wishing to be decently sociable, Miss Elizabeth had pointed out her house to Lucy's stepsister. Arabella had repaid her by speaking disparagingly not only of Miss Mitchell's house, but of the entire neighborhood. Woodland Road, it seemed, compared unfavorably with the glories of Spring Valley where Arabella and her Claude, three hours married, were already negotiating the purchase of their thirty rooms. Thirty rooms. Fancy that! Who, except a hotel keeper, needed thirty rooms?

Arabella Rixey was a fat, vain, snobbish woman. A fool in the bargain. Any financially independent spinster of fifty should have learned long since how to get along without a man. Certainly she should have learned how to get along without a man fifteen years her junior. Claude Rixey was just forty now.

Miss Mitchell had nothing in particular against Claude Rixey, until one month after the marriage he took over the management of his wife's estate, set himself up in an office and left Harbison Greer out in the cold. For years Harbison Greer had handled his sister-in-law's affairs. Very satisfactorily, too. Claude Rixey could have suggested a partnership. He didn't. If he chose, Claude at this late date could make amends and do something constructive about Ted. Take him into the office, say. Claude had one overworked young assistant, whom Miss Mitchell strongly and correctly suspected was covering Claude's own deficiencies in matters of business. Why not two assistants? Claude Rixey could be of help to Ted. He wouldn't. Too selfish. Too hoggish, when you came right down to it.

"How does Ted like this new job of his?" Miss Mitchell inquired abruptly. "I haven't had a chance to ask Dorritt."

"Oh, oh, then you haven't heard."

"Heard what?"

"Ted quit Saturday," said Lucy with a lightness that woudn't have deceived a child of ten. She added hurriedly, "The job

didn't pay very well, Miss Elizabeth. It takes a while, you know, to settle down."

"But Lucy, that's terrible!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say it was as serious as all that."

"But Lucy . . ."

"Most of the boys come back restless and with exaggerated ideas of civilian salaries. Ask Dorritt. She'll tell you. It's only natural Ted would want a decent wage; natural, too, that he'd like to make some use of his army experience. Radar," said Ted's mother firmly.

Miss Elizabeth underwent a valiant struggle to control her tongue and feelings. This was Ted's fifth job since his army days. Perhaps the job wasn't interesting, perhaps the salary wasn't sky high, but together he and Dorritt might have managed. What did Ted expect? What had got into him? Ted didn't use to have these get-rich-quick notions, combined with such appalling impracticality. How could you make a living out of a thing called radar?

Miss Elizabeth said hollowly, "I saw in the paper the other day where somebody had sent a radar message to the moon. I must say I wondered why."

"So did I," admitted Lucy, with a sudden giggle.

The giggle stopped. She heard her husband's familiar footfall in the yard. Brisk and quick, to hide the nagging weariness she knew Harby felt inside. Her thin figure tensed. She whirled around.

"Oh, Harby," Lucy cried across the gate, "here I stood gossipping in the alley, not knowing you were down."

"Well, I didn't know you were down yourself," the big man confessed, smiling a little guiltily at his wife. He had thought to slip away and leave his Lucy to get her sleep out. "Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," he said in a tone of slight restraint.

Harbison Greer didn't altogether share Lucy's enthusiasm for their nearest neighbor. It seemed to him that Miss Mitchell was always teetering on the point of offering him some sound advice. This morning, as usual, her eye was speculative. He

spied the garbage can resting between the two women on the pavement.

"Can't I help you with that?" he asked Miss Elizabeth.

"It's ours," Lucy informed her husband. "You can empty it, please. Then you can march back inside and eat your breakfast. It's still poisonously early. You're not going off again with nothing in your stomach."

"I had coffee. Lucy, I have to run over to Baltimore this morning. I have a good bit to do first."

"You can do it just as well, maybe better, after some solid food."

A sudden interruption decided the matter. The kitchen door of the Greer house opened. Mickey rushed into the yard like a dog shot out of a cannon. Till's voice screaming that her father must wait, that she positively must be driven to college, was heard from inside. Then came Till.

The three adults stared.

Till was barefoot, her hair was uncombed, but she was wearing plenty of lipstick and powder. She was also wearing a full-skirted taffeta evening gown, cut low at the neck and shoulders, tightly fitted at her twenty-two-inch waist.

Till was small like her mother, dark like her father. She was more than pretty. At nineteen Till Greer had that shining, burnished, seemingly imperishable look of youth that makes you catch your breath between a laugh and a sob. Everything about Till had the look—the gleam of the uncombed hair, the peculiar liquid whiteness of the eyeballs, the moistness of the skin at the thin neck and bare, cleanly rounded shoulders. Till had that. She had also inexhaustible energy.

"Brand new, Daddy," caroled Till, pirouetting on the doorstep and shrieking with joy when Mickey tried to chase her flying skirts. "I simply had to try it on again this heavenly morning. Maybe I've mentioned once or twice that we're having our formal dance next Friday evening."

"I believe you have," said her father dryly. "If I'm driving you, young lady, you'd better change in a hurry into something suitable for a classroom."

"Why, when I look so ravishing?" Till pulled out the skirts of the sapphire-colored taffeta to their fullest extent. "Tell me. Do you love this dress the way I do? Do you think Alec will admire me?"

Harbison Greer thought that any young man who didn't admire Till should have his head examined. But his face darkened.

"Till, I didn't know your date was Alec," Lucy said slowly. "At your age, I won't have you getting serious. Aren't you seeing quite a bit of Alec Bates?"

"Oh, no," Till said earnestly. "No indeed, Mother. You can't count running into him yesterday at the drugstore; that was accident. I couldn't be rude, could I?"

"Dear, Alec is so much older . . ."

"Only seven years. What's seven years? Why, Daddy is eight years older than you. You admit yourself that once a week is all right. Do you want some other girl to snag my most important beau?"

Lucy's heart ached for Harby. He said nothing. His face showed nothing. He wasn't even looking at Till. He seemed to be studying the latch on his rather shabby briefcase. But his wife knew.

With a peculiar mixture of humiliation and self-contempt, Harbison Greer was wishing that Till had fixed her bright eyes elsewhere. Anywhere else.

Alexander Bates was an up and coming young lawyer. Smart enough. An attractive-looking youngster. But it just happened that Alexander Bates was Claude Rixey's young assistant, handling every day the business that Harbison Greer used to handle, the business that had made all the difference.

Harby didn't blame young Bates for jumping at the chance to look after Arabella Rixey's interests. Bates hadn't sought out the job. The job had sought him. Claude, that incompetent no-good, had soon discovered that managing an estate the size of Arabella's took industry and brains, and so had hunted up a boy to do a man's work. That was perfectly all right. It was Claude's privilege to make an offer to Bates, and Bates' privilege to accept. It was okay with Harbison Greer.

Harby was human. He didn't blame Alec Bates. He just didn't enjoy seeing red-headed Alec around the house, mooning over Till.

Till had no idea that her father wasn't crazy about Alec. Why, wasn't everybody? The complexities and subtleties that form the jungle of middle-aged emotion and feeling lay well outside Till's somewhat limited field of interest, which was—herself.

Her dragon-fly mind lighted on Miss Elizabeth. The old darling was certainly getting an earful this morning. Suddenly Till grinned.

"Hello, there. How are you enjoying the second showing of my dress?"

Miss Mitchell looked alert and startled.

"I hung it good and high," confided Till, "way up on the light fixture, so you couldn't miss."

"Till!" cried her outraged mother. "Miss Elizabeth, I—I . . ."

"No apologies necessary, Lucy. Till and I," said Miss Mitchell, blinking but unoffended, "understand each other. She knows I think she should pull her shades!"

The three Greers went back across the yard and into their kitchen. Harby forgot all about the garbage can, and so did his Lucy. When Miss Mitchell made an offer, she meant it. Furthermore she had still to dispose of the neat little parcel perched on the fence.

She lifted the lid from her container. She stared. She dropped the lid in a hurry. In her garbage can there was an empty whiskey bottle.

Three

MISS MITCHELL had every intention of speaking pretty plainly to her niece. Dorritt was twenty-four years old and earned her own living. If she was silly enough to drink, if she

was willing to lower herself by becoming her sweetheart's pot companion, some might say it was her own affair. Dorritt might very well retort that these days everybody drank. But what about that other—danger? Liquor doesn't leave young people clear-headed and in full control of their faculties and emotions. Stumped by a subject that no power on earth could have compelled her to discuss with Dorritt or anyone else, Dorritt's worried and angry aunt hit upon an objection that she could clothe in language.

She objected and strenuously to Dorritt's deceitfulness in washing up the glasses and scuttling out, just like Ted, to hide the evidence in the alley. It was the kind of trick that smacked of Dorritt's mother, a worthless piece who had led Miss Mitchell's youngest brother a merry dance indeed before she ran off and deserted him. Miss Mitchell re-entered the house with a firm tread.

In the kitchen she found Jessie Wayne, dressed for work and busy at the toaster. A tray beside the toaster held coffee, orange juice and a poached egg. Jessie was a plump, kind-hearted girl, whose looks weren't likely to lead her into temptation. Thick glasses covered her eyes, her neatly combed hair was mousy colored.

"Why the tray?" inquired Miss Mitchell.

Jessie hesitated.

"Dorritt isn't feeling especially well. I thought if she ate a little she might feel better."

Miss Mitchell stiffened. So Dorritt wasn't feeling especially well. She didn't doubt it. If Dorritt was prepared to stay away from her work nursing the results of last night's folly, her aunt was prepared to see that she wasn't made too comfortable.

"Jessie, I won't have you waiting on her. I feel sure Dorritt is quite able to come down."

With that, Miss Mitchell marched up the stairs. To her surprise Dorritt, standing before the mirror in her bedroom, was dressed for the street. The tall blonde girl—the Mitchells ran to height—in the smart gabardine suit looked pale and ill. Miss Mitchell opened her mouth, closed it. Suddenly with unusual

intuitiveness she realized that Dorritt's illness didn't come from drink, that it wasn't physical, that it came from deep inside the girl herself. It was a sickness of the mind and spirit. Dorritt's hand was steady. She was powdering out the traces of very recent tears.

For perhaps five seconds, Miss Mitchell regarded her dead brother's daughter from the stairway. Her harshness and anger died. All she felt was pity.

The war had been hard on Dorritt's generation. At twenty-four the girl had already lost the radiance and untried confidence that were Till's. During Ted's three-year absence while she waited, sometime during that endless procession of lonely evenings passed with girl friends or at the movies, Dorritt's first bloom had been lost. Her lovely blonde hair was a trifle darker, her clear, unblemished skin was just a little dryer. You could tell now when she hadn't slept well. If Ted had changed, so had the girl he left behind him. Miss Mitchell remembered Dorritt, six years ago, when she first came to Washington.

Looking at her own reflection in the mirror, Dorritt was remembering, too. Six years ago. What a wide-eyed kid she'd been! What a country bumpkin, bouncing out of Iowa, certain that in the big city every day would be Christmas! At eighteen she had pictured handsome, dinner-jacketed wolves on every street corner, dangling mink coats and diamond necklaces which, of course, she would proudly reject. Invariably, in those satisfying dreams, she was soon rewarded by a proposal of marriage from some likely millionaire well under thirty. They would go to all the embassies, join the international set, meet the Washington cliff dwellers too, dine at the White House once or twice a year. Thus, the dream.

Reality was something else again. Dorritt had lived and learned. Happiness and security don't lie in the stuff of dreams. You have to work and fight for them.

"Dorritt?" said her aunt.

The girl turned.

"Aunt Elizabeth, did you know that Ted had quit his job again?"

"Yes, I know. Are you coming down? Or maybe you'd like me to bring up a tray?"

"Don't go, don't go. What am I to do about Ted? Tell me," Dorritt said despairingly. "Aunt Elizabeth, I'm at my wits' end. We could have married in a few months if he'd only stuck to the job. But he wouldn't—couldn't, I suppose. What is going to happen to us?"

"Dear, try not to get yourself all worked up."

"How can I help it? Ted has changed so. He didn't use to be this way. Talking all the time about money, as though we needed to start out in a mansion like hotsy-totsy, dream-boat Arabella. Half of it is the fault of that damned aunt of his. . . ."

"Dorritt, your language . . ."

"You'd use strong language yourself for Arabella if you were honest. Ted keeps thinking, thinking of what he went through with Arabella and Claude sitting snug and safe at home, and all they have now and all he and his family haven't got. Aunt Elizabeth, it isn't fair!"

Fair or not, Miss Mitchell reflected, it was a fact. Ted should be mature enough to accept things as they are. There was no sense in the boy's being eaten up with envy because his mother's sister was rich.

"If Arabella would only stay out of their lives entirely," cried Dorritt, "instead of popping in whenever she feels like showing off and being particularly patronizing and offensive, Ted and all the rest of them would be better off."

To this Miss Mitchell fervently but silently agreed. Stepping into the bedroom, she put a gentle arm around the girl's tense shoulders and drew her down the stairs. Dorritt was still talking feverishly when they reached the kitchen.

"It's not that I don't like money well enough myself. I know you can't live on roses and honeysuckle. You need money. But it's becoming an obsession with Ted. If I could only figure out the way to help him . . ."

"Time will help Ted," said Jessie Wayne.

There was something in the way she spoke the name. Miss

Mitchell looked at her sharply. For a moment, under that penetrating eye, Jessie went cold with fright.

She'd kept her secret well. No one had guessed how passionately she herself longed to help Ted, had always longed to help him. Those endless discussions he held with Dorritt weren't doing any good. Probably Dorritt didn't realize that Dorritt herself, who spent every penny on her back, was responsible for some of Ted's trouble. He couldn't bear to start with Dorritt in a modest way. That was the truth of it. Ted wanted money to buy lovely things for Dorritt.

There were times when Jessie Wayne had very mixed emotions about her oldest, dearest friend.

The girls left the house at 8:15. Miss Mitchell was finishing the breakfast dishes when she heard the Greers' car drive off down the alley. She clucked disapprovingly at the kitchen clock. Till had got around her father again, delayed him over an hour, upset his whole day. It was a shame. Still and all, Harby's neighbor conceded on second thought, the poor deluded man was probably enjoying himself.

Miss Mitchell was right.

As usual, Harby was happy to be with his daughter and—at her service. Although he frequently complained to Lucy because Till was too confounded lazy to travel to college on a bus, he fooled neither Lucy nor himself. Often this middle-aged father of two was baffled and perplexed and bitterly exasperated with Ted, but never with Till. Harby failed to understand why Ted couldn't hold a job, settle down and get married. Dorritt was too nice a girl for the boy to play around with. She couldn't be expected to wait forever. He ought to have a serious talk with Ted. But Harby knew he wouldn't. These days he and his son weren't close enough.

Now, Till was something else. Till was his delight. Secretly Harby believed his daughter still preferred her old dad's company to that of anybody else.

Till let him think these thoughts. Instinctively, as she chattered of this and that, she avoided the topic of Alec. Long ago the girl had made what she considered a discovery unique to

herself: one man doesn't really care to hear another man talked about. Even fathers don't. Fathers would rather hear you're doing well in your studies.

Till obliged. She was learning such a lot, said Till, even though her marks might not show it. She only wished some of the dry-as-dust professors could hear her father explain things. Then their lectures might be easier to follow. Legal training does give people a marvelous vocabulary. Maybe, if she ever got through English Lit, she should take a little law herself. What did Harby think?

Harby thought the kid was laying it on with a trowel, and had a private chuckle to himself. He wondered fleetingly whether she was building up to some fresh request, and didn't mind too much. To be sure that dress was damned expensive, but nineteen isn't the age to be concerned with a parent's worries.

Till brought the scholarship routine to a triumphant close. Best of all, she decided not to mention a certain pair of sapphire-colored slippers that exactly matched the gown. There wasn't any hurry. Friday was still a whole week off.

When Harby dropped his daughter, he was feeling fine. On the drive downtown, his glowing mood evaporated. To rearrange his day was a tedious business. Tiny, reasonably unimportant problems, that once he would have settled easily, swarmed like gnats to harass him. Should he take the ten o'clock to Baltimore as he'd previously planned, and let his correspondence go until the afternoon? Or should he stop by the office, clean up his work and delay the trip? Which?

Of late years, Harby had found it increasingly difficult to reach small decisions. It was as though he no longer trusted his own judgment. Whichever way he jumped, he was likely to feel vaguely dissatisfied. Sometimes it seemed to him that the shock of losing Arabella's account had permanently impaired his self-confidence, his belief in himself. After that, nothing had gone well for the Greers.

Five blocks from the Hibbs Building where he had his office, Harby's small immediate problem resolved itself. He spied that

miracle in downtown Washington—a parking space. At once he pulled into the space. He'd make the trip this afternoon. And then he couldn't resist another look at his watch. There was still time to catch the ten o'clock to Baltimore. For a moment, tentative and indecisive, he sat in the car before he stepped irresolutely to the sidewalk.

A small dark-haired girl wearing a tight skirt came around the corner fast. Janet Culp, who looked younger at first glance than at second, was also headed toward the Hibbs Building. Once, several summers ago when her own Mr. Pomerane was out of town, Janet had done some extra typing for Harbison Greer. Out in Montana, where people weren't so stiff and standoffish and so wary of new associations, that would mean something. In Washington, it meant nothing at all. Janet hadn't seen Mr. Greer since she'd got that last check from him. She didn't see him now, hesitating at the curb.

Without her glasses, the truth was that Janet didn't see extra well. Any inconvenience, to Janet's way of thinking, was preferable to wearing glasses on the street. However bad a girl feels, however low in spirit and ill in body, she can't afford to forget that big brown eyes aren't improved by spectacles. Janet's big brown eyes were sunken in her head. Her small heart-shaped face, framed by an impish youthful bang, was lined and puffy. She felt simply foul this morning. As per usual. In the clatter of her heels on the sidewalk was the ring of panic. She would be late to work again. Well, she couldn't help it. She had nearly telephoned that she wasn't coming in.

Unfortunately she had been out two days last week and one day—or was it two days?—the week before. Mr. Pomerane was a patient, understanding boss; he'd known her family in Montana and knew that Janet Culp was somebody. Another human being. Not just a piece of office furniture. Lately, however, Mr. Pomerane had been acting kind of funny. Ever since that time she'd been fool enough to carry a bottle to the office, he'd seemed—different. Drinking on the job so you can live till five o'clock is a mistake. You'd better stay at home. Janet admitted that. But Mr. Pomerane himself was very much mistaken if he

imagined for one minute that the way she joked with clients or maybe kidded the elevator boy was anything but simple, democratic friendliness. A girl had to get acquainted some way, doesn't she? Otherwise, evening after evening, she will sit and twiddle her thumbs and go mad from loneliness within her own four walls. Of course she can succumb to that other choice—join some dandy female clubs, eat in unspeakably dreary tearooms with a bunch of other business girls, squabble over the check, lie about non-existent dates. Not for little Janet! Once you surrender to hen parties, the battle is lost.

Mr. Pomerane ought to understand. Instead he kept asking if his secretary ever thought of going home, as though after sixteen years in Washington there would be anything left for Janet Culp in Montana. Who would now remember that she'd been voted the most popular in the high-school graduating class? Who would now remember the bright-eyed witch of Senior Week? If Mr. Pomerane was so crazy about the West, Janet wondered resentfully, why didn't he pack up his wife and go back there himself? In a city filled with ex-Congressmen practicing law, Rufus Pomerane would not be missed. Too late, Janet perceived where this unpleasant train of thought was leading. She couldn't duck the question. In a city filled with younger, fresher, prettier girls, who would miss Janet Culp?

With that, in broad daylight, her mind played an old and horrid trick on her. Suddenly the crowded sidewalk seemed to empty, the street noises around her faded away, and she was walking in a vacuum, alone. Going nowhere fast. Her rapid gait faltered.

She ran plump into Harby Greer. His features were a blur to her. Only when he mechanically apologized, when she heard his voice, did recognition come. At once, like magic, Janet pulled herself together. Her whole face changed, became sparkling, provocative, alive. Why, it was Mr. Greer. One of the nice older men she knew. Married, of course, but still . . .

"Hello, stranger!" cried Janet gaily. "I see I'm not the only one who's late this morning. Promise you won't tell my boss, and I won't tell your wife."

Harby's response was a blank stare.

Said Janet, hurt, "Why, Mr. Greer, I do believe you've forgotten me. You ought to be ashamed. I certainly haven't forgotten you."

"I'm bad at names," muttered Harby.

"Just don't forget the face," said Janet, as friendly and forgiving as a spotted pup, "and you're excused. I'm the little girl who worked her fingers to the bone for you that summer. Remember now?"

Harby did. Janet Culp was making him as uncomfortable as she'd made him that summer when she switched her skirts at him and rolled languishing eyes every time she sat down to take a business letter. Mixed with his distaste was reluctant pity. Harby had seen other Janet Culps. Rootless women, who'd left their families behind and flocked into town from everywhere, to seek what they never found. Worthless women, ripe for cheap adventure, who'd once been silly, hopeful girls. For no particular reason, Harby thought of Till.

"And how is that handsome son of yours?" Janet was asking with overpowering cordiality. "I haven't seen Ted since he was in uniform. Why don't you bring him around to our office sometime?"

"Perhaps I will," said Harby, courteously hiding his surprise.

Janet recognized the familiar evasion that met so many of her gay-voiced invitations. If she hesitated, Mr. Greer would slip away. With him would go another chance to enlarge her contracting circle. It was now or never. Her smile became breathlessly eager.

"Almost any afternoon would do. Why don't we make it definite? Today would suit me beautifully. Suppose I expect the two of you around five o'clock."

"I'd have to talk to Ted," said Harby, dismayed to find himself entangled in this idiotic situation. The woman must be a good ten years older than Ted. "The boy is pretty busy."

"You needn't tell me that," Janet said archly. "If he's as good-looking as he used to be, he must have dozens of girls."

"Only one," said Harby, lost to pity in his sudden desperate

anxiety to be quit of the adhesive Miss Culp. He had his own problems, plenty of them, and wanted none of hers. "Ted is engaged to be married."

"Oh," Janet said. She flushed and rallied. "News like that calls for a cup of coffee! My treat. I insist. Then you can walk me to the office and tell me all about it."

"Some other time," Harby said abruptly. "I'm catching a train to Baltimore. Nice to see you."

She watched him get into the car. The smile was frozen on her face. In her eyes were shame, humiliation, hatred. She hated Harby, she hated herself. In Janet's heart was despair. Another accidental encounter that had started promisingly, that might have led somewhere, had added up to zero. Nothing, thought Janet, was ever going to happen to her.

Janet was wrong. Because she had driven Harby into a change of plans, something was going to happen and—to her. Very soon she would be allowed to play a scene in which she—and no one younger, fresher, prettier—would be the leading woman.

When Harby boarded the Baltimore train he still had a vague, uneasy memory of Miss Culp's eyes. And then, like many others during Janet's sixteen years in Washington, he forgot her.

Four

BACK ON Woodland Road at ten o'clock Miss Mitchell was dusting the living room. As she whisked a bit of lint from the piano lamp, she saw Ted come out the Greer front door.

She stepped out on her porch, hoping to have a word with him. She was quick but Ted was quicker. He must have almost leaped across the street. Odd, with the bus stop on this side. Ted wore no hat, but Miss Mitchell was glad to see that he'd shaved; glad, too, that he wasn't idling the day away in bed but

was evidently headed downtown. He waved at her, was pleased she'd liked the candy, and then he hurried on. His walk was brisk and purposeful. Perhaps . . .

Miss Mitchell sighed, refusing to entertain hopes all too likely to be dashed. Dismissing Ted for the moment, she surveyed the handsome new apartment house across the street. She decided that it did add tone to the neighborhood, quite forgetting that Miss Mitchell's name had led the list of those who had attempted unsuccessfully, before the Zoning Commission, to petition the project out of existence.

The apartment superintendent, with whom Miss Mitchell was distantly acquainted, was outside attempting to coax a little extra motion out of two rather sluggish men who were trimming the hedges. Good! The hedges had been needing attention. Miss Mitchell had no hedges herself. She had a tree.

A moment passed while she enjoyed her tree, a smallish maple which shaded her sidewalk and embellished the patch of lawn. To her great delight, a pair of cardinals were nesting in the upper branches. Later on she'd bring out seeds and crumbs, trusting that nasty squirrel wouldn't be around again. Miss Mitchell and the squirrels from Rock Creek Park carried on unceasing warfare.

As she turned to go back in, she paused to explore the mail box. Without surprise she pulled out an envelope addressed to Harbison Greer. The new mailman made those careless mistakes.

Well, it wouldn't take a minute to step next door. Then Miss Mitchell perceived that this wasn't a letter. It was a bill—a bill from the neighborhood hardware store. No use rushing a bill to Lucy Greer.

Miss Mitchell carried the envelope inside and placed it on her mantel.

Shortly before eleven o'clock, she went upstairs to tidy the best bedroom. On the way she paused to approve Jessie's room, and to wish she hadn't taken the position that Dorritt also must keep her room in order. In anticipation of marriage Dorritt had bought the furnishings of the second best bedroom, a bleached

oak suite which Miss Mitchell considered much less handsome than her own heavy, lavishly carved mahogany, but land knows it was expensive enough to take care of. There was another burn on the chifferobe. Miss Mitchell did step in and hang up Dorritt's satin negligee and nightgown and put the mules in the closet, but she firmly closed the door on the rumpled bed.

At just eleven o'clock when she was making her own bed, the Greers' telephone rang. All the upstairs windows were open. She could hear Lucy's voice, but not the words, of course.

Twenty minutes later, the Greers' phone rang again. This time Miss Mitchell was in her back yard holding converse with the egg woman, who drove in from her farm in Maryland every Monday with the week's supply of nice fresh eggs. In the open, the acoustics were somewhat better. Miss Mitchell lost interest in debating the price of eggs as compared to the cost of chicken feed.

It was Till, calling from college. On Mondays the child had a free hour between eleven o'clock and noon, when she reported to the detested course in advanced English Literature. There was a campus drugstore. Till was probably phoning from there, while having a sandwich and Coca-Cola.

Miss Mitchell carried in her eggs, and totaled up the amount in the household account book. The girls each paid a third, of course, even though the arrangement seemed a little unfair to Dorritt who did a great deal of her eating out. But there just seemed to be no way around it.

It was exactly twelve o'clock when the Mitchell doorbell emitted the melodious chimes that Miss Elizabeth had installed as last year's Christmas present to her own house. She opened the door to Lucy Greer.

Lucy was dressed in her best. The flower-trimmed beige hat with the starched polka-dotted veil, the beige frock printed in splashy matching flowers, high-heeled pumps still damp from cleaning (Lucy had smeared whitening on the brown leather trim), white gloves that were spanking clean. That costume could only mean an appointment with Arabella. Lunch?

"I'm lunching with Arabella at the Shoreham," Lucy said

hurriedly. "I thought I'd better explain about Mickey. There's no one home; Ted's gone down to the Veterans' Bureau to see the job consultants again and that always takes hours, so . . ."

"I was just wondering where Ted . . ."

Lucy rushed right through Miss Mitchell's wonder.

"So I shut up Mickey in Till's room. She doesn't get through until four o'clock today. I don't know when I'll be back. If Mickey should bark a little . . ."

"Quite all right. Quite all right. You're looking very pretty, Lucy."

Apparently Lucy had no time for exchanging pleasantries. She fled before Miss Mitchell had a chance to mention the envelope on the mantel. Not that she'd have handed a hardware bill to Lucy, just before she was to face her stepsister.

It was exactly like Arabella to call up at eleven o'clock, demanding company for lunch. No, decided Miss Mitchell in sudden perplexity, it wasn't like Arabella. Her appointments were made regally, long in advance. About once a month on the average, Lucy would speak of an invitation from Arabella, and a week or so later amid no end of flurry and previous preparation, the whole family, or just the elder Greers, would get in the car and drive out to dine in Spring Valley. Twice each year, on the second of January when Arabella and Claude departed for Florida, and on the fifth of July, which was Lucy's birthday, the Rixeys dined *en famille* at the Greers.

Lucy would soon be running up a temperature over the July menu. Jellied consommé or do you suppose melon balls would be worth the trouble? And then, abruptly, Miss Elizabeth remembered the date. Why, today was the third; government pay day for Jessie and Dorritt was just two days back. Lucy's birthday was on Wednesday! Dinner Wednesday? Lunch today?

Miss Mitchell ate her own lunch thoughtfully. A tiny but quite deep scratch on the dining-room table caught her eye, as she was rising to carry out her cup and plate. It needed a dot of varnish. One of the knobs on the sideboard was a little loose.

She kept the tool box upstairs underneath her bed to discourage the girls from borrowing. After she washed her dishes

and put away last Wednesday's roast and wrapped the heel of bread in a moist cloth, Miss Mitchell climbed the stairs again. But her step was flagging.

Through the morning, the temperature had risen steadily. It was now suffocatingly hot. The air felt like lead. She had been on her feet since six o'clock.

At half past twelve, Miss Mitchell removed her dress and shoes, lay down on her bed and fell asleep. Exactly an hour later she awoke, drenched in perspiration, feeling headachy, sodden, unrefreshed. Served her right for napping in the daytime.

With an aspirin tablet and a sponge bath, she recovered sufficiently to carry down her tool box. She didn't propose to be beaten by a little heat. The sideboard knob was almost too simple to be enjoyable. The bolt just needed tightening.

She put away the screwdriver, and sat down before the scratch on the dining-room table with the small anticipatory thrill she always got from a job a bit more complicated. Carefully she lined up the necessary tools—a square of No. 3 sandpaper, the can of varnish, a soft rag, a chunk of beeswax. First a gentle rubbing with the sandpaper, then the dot of varnish quickly swabbed with the rag so it would dry fast and blend properly with the finish. She reached for the beeswax.

It was five minutes past two.

One minute later the explosion came, announcing itself with thunderous sound over a two-mile area. Hundreds of people in that thickly populated, hotel, apartment and residential neighborhood, hearing the roar of awful noise but seeing nothing, thought that a bomb had fallen.

Sitting at her dining-room table, Miss Mitchell saw everything that could be seen. She, too, thought that a bomb had fallen and on her own house. The floor shuddered under her feet. The shining, polished window she was facing disappeared. Glass rained in. Not a single shard was left clinging to the frame. It couldn't have been done more neatly with a knife. Windows were breaking in the living room. Glass was shattering upstairs. In the backyard a blizzard of ivy leaves buried the

fuchsia and coxcomb. The gate sailed into the alley. A cornice on the front porch fell off. Something landed on the roof.

Stupefied, Miss Mitchell stared at what was happening over at the Greers. Her mind, of course, couldn't take it in. Later she remembered just noise, the loudest noise she'd ever heard, movement, the most complicated movement ever witnessed by her; confusion, chaos, dust. She recalled with some distinctness the feeling of the floor shaking under her, the texture of the beeswax in her tightly folded hand, the way the whole house shook, as she gazed unseeing at disintegration in process. Just as her vibrating eardrums declined to interpret the colossal roar of sound, to pick out and identify the shatter of glass, the scream of steel, the thud of falling objects, and heard only noise, so her eyes also refused to perform the ordinary function of eyes.

Miss Mitchell saw an—explosion. Her neighbor's house blew to pieces before her stunned, uncomprehending gaze. The first story of the Greers' residence burst and blew in all directions; solid walls were reduced to jagged sections and even to separate bricks. The second story fell, followed abruptly by the roof that Harbison Greer had never got around to mending. The ridge pole split at the middle. The roof broke in two pieces, cascading tiles in a mighty avalanche.

Things, unidentifiable things, were flying through the air. The tiles. Sash weights from window frames. Bricks. Bits of furniture. A curtain rod, later discovered, sped like an arrow straight through the trunk of Miss Mitchell's maple tree. The nesting cardinals had already winged away.

In forty-five seconds it was all over. A cloud of choking dust, composed of pulverized plaster, concrete, dirt, accompanied by the first faint wisps of smoke, arose as though to hide a heap of rubble that had been a house.

Dust grayed the room in which Miss Mitchell sat. Her face and hands were black. Gritty dirt covered the table, the carpet, the walls. She didn't know it.

She sat for a long while. Minutes passed before she opened her hand and carefully laid the chunk of beeswax on the grit-

covered table. In faint surprise she regarded the beeswax. It was clean.

Miss Mitchell got up like a sleepwalker and went in the hall and picked up the telephone. Scores of others had preceded her. The police lines were busy; the fire department was busy. She was still hunched at the telephone when she heard the scream of the first fire engine, the siren of the ambulance.

She had her first coherent thought. She bowed her head and said a little prayer. She thanked the Good Lord who protects us all that no one in the family had been at home. Nobody except Mickey. And then she found herself crying like a fool over a dog of which she wasn't fond. Other minutes passed as she wept. Later, she never knew how long she had sat on the chair in the hall; it was a black-out.

Dazedly she got up to go outside, just as the first policeman walked in and asked to use her telephone. Behind him came a gas company representative who wanted to tell her that temporarily they were shutting off her gas. With effort she spoke.

"Was it gas?"

"Might be, might be. Hard to say right now. But the company takes no chances."

"Gas? Gas? Do you mean that a little gas leak could . . .?"

"My God, lady, no little leak caused that explosion. It would take a hell of a concentration of gas to wreck a place like that."

"Yes," said Miss Mitchell.

"Do you happen to know if the folks had a gas furnace?"

"Yes. They have—they had a gas hot-water heater, too."

The policeman put down the telephone, and regarded Miss Mitchell with slightly more interest. She sounded like one of your nosey sisters to him. When the gas company man went out, the policeman spoke.

"I hear they got a son, a Pacific veteran, roomed in the basement. Whatever exploded, exploded down there. Maybe the kid brought back some kind of dangerous souvenirs."

"No, not Ted." As Miss Mitchell and Ted's family well knew, Ted desired no reminders of war in the Pacific. "Ted is

interested in radar," she added for no particular reason. "In the service, he was a radar engineer."

"An engineer, huh?"

Talk was helping Miss Mitchell. The interior quivering in her stomach was lessening. The jumping behind her knees, the angry complaining of her outraged heart, the beat of blood in her temples, was better.

When the policeman suggested that the Greers should be located and notified of the disaster, she was able to oblige him with specific information. Harbison Greer could be found in his office at the Hibbs Building—unless he was in Baltimore. Ted might be reached at the Veterans' Bureau. Till would be in English Literature III at George Washington University. Lucy Greer was lunching at the Shoreham with her stepsister, Arabella Rixey.

Timothy Dwight didn't think of himself as a snobbish man. Actually, he wasn't. The bald, red-faced, thick-set policeman, two years ago promoted to the detective force and the wearing of plain clothes, was as common as an old shoe. Certain of his associates thought he was even commoner. When he pricked up his ears at the name of Arabella Rixey, Dwight was thinking along concrete lines that had to do with social position and wealth in a somewhat specialized way.

Timothy Dwight didn't mind seeing the name of Timothy Dwight in the papers. There was a much better chance if class was involved, even in an accident case. There would soon be reporters outside.

It was a spectacular accident, at that. Page-one stuff, probably, so long as the mystery angle held up. What in hell had caused that explosion? An ordinary gas leak would be noticed in an occupied house long before sufficient pressure accumulated to blow the house to pieces. Or if it wasn't noticed, you'd have a collection of corpses and a different kind of story.

Arabella Rixey, eh? And Mrs. Greer was lunching with her at the time, only a few blocks away. Dwight viewed the gabby old lady before him with heightened respect.

"You say Mrs. Claude Rixey is Mrs. Greer's sister?"

"Her stepsister," said Miss Mitchell in emphatic correction.

Something in the firmness of her voice struck Timothy Dwight as vaguely familiar. Slowly his face changed. Suddenly he had placed Miss Mitchell. Elizabeth Mitchell, 2703 Woodland Road.

The two had never met, but Timothy Dwight hadn't needed to meet Miss Mitchell to form an impression. Sitting at ease in the Precinct Station, in the days before his well-merited promotion, Dwight had been interrupted many, many times to speak over the telephone with Miss Elizabeth Mitchell. A heller, if there ever was one. Wanting little boys arrested for playing stick ball in the alley, asking that a warrant be sworn out if someone walked on her grass, reporting reckless drivers complete with license numbers, reporting barking dogs, trespassing cats, and once, by God, a marauding squirrel. Dwight's interest in the accident case evaporated.

"Well, Miss Mitchell, if you're done giving your information, I've got some phoning to do."

Miss Mitchell had postponed her journey outside as long as possible. Shouts and sounds had come in from the street. Apparently everybody in the neighborhood had rushed to the scene of the disaster. The ruin next door was quite a sight. Well, let others gawk and stare. The Greers' next-door neighbor didn't care to.

Miss Mitchell had watched Ted and Till growing up. For years and years of days she had rejoiced with Lucy Greer in those tiny triumphs of everyday existence, a cake that turned out right, a successful argument with the plumber, a joke that made Harby laugh until the tears ran down his face; with Lucy she had mourned Lucy's failures. She was as pleased as Harbison Greer himself when three years ago he won the golf cup and got his picture in the paper, even though she privately reflected that the hours he spent in practicing might better have gone into his business. To Miss Elizabeth Mitchell, as to the Greers themselves, the explosion would mean the ending of a certain way of life.

She walked out on her porch and down the steps and to the

sidewalk, looking straight ahead. The hundreds of merely curious people who had thronged into Woodland Road were held back by fire lines now. The fire that followed within seconds of the explosion had been brief, choked by hundreds of gallons of water. The dust and smoke had settled. Down the block at Connecticut Avenue firemen had stretched restraining ropes across the street. Police stood guard. Woodland Road, so far as the general public was concerned, was bottled up.

Residents of the block, of course, were allowed inside the ropes. The windows of the apartment house across the street were festooned with peering faces. At least a dozen people were watching from a vantage point on the roof. All of them were staring toward the Greers.

Miss Elizabeth turned.

Strips of cloth and material, pieces of curtains, towels, linen, bedding—that yellow banner must be from Lucy's counterpane —fluttered gaily from the telephone and electric wires, from the trees. Bursting mattresses in flight had sprayed hair and cotton into the street. Much of the street had been cleared. A fireman was just shoveling up a heap of wall-papered plaster; a large scrap of paper eluded him and drifted away. Morning glories patterned the paper. Till's room, that would be.

At the curb two fire engines were reeling in damp and dripping lengths of hose. Men working at the rear of several heavy fire trucks were looping hawsers, thick, triple-cabled strands of rope, around the fire-truck bumpers. The vehicle down from them was a steam shovel.

Beyond the curb on the irregular-shaped, twenty-foot-high mound of rubble that had been a substantial two-story house, policemen and firemen were crawling. They carried picks, spades, shovels, fire hooks, axes. Some of them were dragging the other ends of the thick ropes attached to the bumpers of the fire trucks. They were going to pull away the roof to make easier the necessary digging underneath.

Officialdom was represented. Two inspectors from the District Building Permits Office had arrived. The gas company could have held a small convention. A vice-president just back

in town from a country week-end, the division chief for northwest Washington, his assistant, the assistant's assistant, the chief engineer, flanked by the company lawyer, were standing by until company laborers tunneled a satisfactory hole to the basement.

To Miss Mitchell, the scene was best summed up by a heap of objects piled in a cleared space on the sidewalk. This heap was composed of things considered salvable—strange and twisted things that Miss Mitchell recognized.

The bent base of a bronze lamp, one of Lucy's wedding presents, a torn and filthy piece of rag that had been the stairway runner, half of the globe the family had bought to keep in touch with Ted's distant journeyings, one of Harby's golf clubs, a waterlogged shoe that looked like Till's. Miraculously intact, still holding stalks of withered delphinium, only needed to be washed of the prevailing filth, was Arabella's crystal vase.

Hysteria bubbled in Miss Mitchell's throat. Tears, unnoticed, trickled from her eyes. Hands clutched to her breast, she rocked gently back and forth on her heels as troubled women will.

Something terrible was happening to Elizabeth Mitchell. She was losing her hold on what she believed in. Suddenly, she sickened of her own house. She wanted to run away from it, run for her life. What use was a house, when you could lose it in a minute?

Thirty years she'd put into a pile of brick and stone and plaster. A chill, informing wind seemed to blow through her. Something whispered that she was without chick or child, that no one wanted her. Something whispered that she was old.

Five

TURNING BLINDLY to seek the shelter of the house that had chilled her with a disquiet she had never felt before, Miss Mitchell saw two people in the doorway of the apartment house.

Lucy Greer. Ted Greer. Just standing there, across the street from their vanished home like strangers to the neighborhood.

She must go to them.

On the surface Lucy looked almost normal. In the smartest frock she owned, the only frock she owned, she stood straight and unflinching. Behind the starched beige veil, her blue eyes were a trifle wider. That was all. It was as though deliberately and quite completely Lucy Greer had disassociated herself from any personal connection with the scene across the street.

Her son seemed stricken in comparison. In a way, that was strange. Three long years of expensive training had gone into teaching Ted that chaos is universal. He had hardly glanced at the ruin across the street. To him the ugly sight was as natural as breathing. A commonplace. All ruins are alike. A broken roof, crumpled walls, a bedstead sticking in the air, a stairway climbing nowhere, grayness, a trashy mess of nothingness. Why trouble about the dispossessed, or wonder where they are to live if they live?

To Ted Greer, no explosion could be shocking. Then how explain his deadly pallor? Ted's eyes were blank and dazed. He looked at Miss Mitchell and didn't speak.

"Miss Elizabeth, how awful for you!" cried Lucy, as though the disaster was her neighbor's. "Being all alone, your windows falling in . . ."

"I'm covered by insurance," said Miss Elizabeth sounding surprised at something she hadn't remembered until now. "I hope that you . . ."

Ted was listening, after all. His voice cut in, harsh and savage.

"Oh, we don't need insurance! Haven't you heard? We're rich. Rolling in the stuff. Haven't we got Aunt Arabella to fall back on . . .?"

Something odd flickered in Lucy's slightly widened eyes. Miss Elizabeth put her arms around her.

"You can't keep standing here. It's foolish. Come on over, I'll fix some coffee, lemonade, iced tea."

Lucy shook her head.

"Harby will be looking for me here. Harby is going to explain to Till about—about Mickey. Unless Till gets here first. They've called her."

"Lucy, I cried over Mickey."

"Very decent of you," said Ted.

It wasn't like Ted to be rude. He and his first and favorite sweetheart had bickered and traded insults for years, but not like this. Miss Mitchell was more bewildered than hurt. Shock must be affecting Ted in this unpleasant, peculiar way, just as it was affecting Lucy in a different but equally peculiar way.

"Well, then," said Miss Mitchell, and surprised herself again by kissing Lucy, "I'll go over and fix the lemonade, and expect you shortly. We can set up cots, pallets, something, in the living room for overnight."

Just then Till, racing like a leaf blown before the wind, rounded the corner. She was on foot. She was deliriously excited.

To Till at nineteen a house was just a roof, a temporary convenience to cover one. An event like this, such a colossal break in dullness and routine, offered Till a unique opportunity to grab the spotlight. Arms flung wide, she hurled herself onto her mothers's breast with an enthusiasm that nearly knocked Lucy to the sidewalk.

"My darling, darling Mother! It's awful! Terrible! You and Daddy can count on me. I'll look after you, I'll quit college and take a job . . ."

"Till, you're mussing up the only dress I've got left. And you'll do nothing of the kind."

Lucy pushed her daughter off. Simultaneously Till was reminded of something. Her mouth dropped open. She looked in horror at the agitated mound across the street, fixed the spot where her bedroom had been. She felt something real. The anguish that contorted her face, pulled her forehead together and still couldn't make Till ugly, was truly, deeply felt. Her voice rang out in desolation.

"My wonderful dress! My dress I've never even worn! It's gone. I'll have nothing for the dance on Friday."

Lucy perfectly understood her daughter. Now her own arms went out. She gathered Till close. Better to pile one grief on another, better to take catastrophe in one mighty gulp all at once. Better than to take sorrow and defeat piecemeal, served out by the spoonful, slowly, day by day.

"Till," Lucy said, "Till, you must be brave. There's something I have to tell you. When I left for lunch, Mickey . . ."

Lucy came to a dead stop. Shock does play queer tricks with the nervous system. It affects the ears, the eyes, the powers of observation. Lucy Greer wasn't the only one. Miss Elizabeth and Ted also gaped.

Till hadn't rushed around the corner alone. She'd brought Mickey with her. Ears alert, the cocky little wire-hair sat on the sidewalk and thumped a friendly tail at everybody.

Lucy gasped.

"Till, darling! How in the world? Am I crazy? You left this morning before nine o'clock. At noon I shut Mickey in your bedroom . . ."

Till was silent.

"How come, Till? Did you show up at English Lit like Mary and her little Lamb?" demanded Ted, too quickly.

Brother and sister exchanged a look. A look that might have been missed by anybody except their mother and Miss Mitchell. Mickey, bored with this lack of attention, stopped thumping his tail. The dog whined and licked Till's hand.

"Yes, I did," Till said, speaking straight at her brother. "You should have seen what happened in English Lit. Professor Thompson was wild until the janitor came and tied Mickey to a radiator in the hall."

Lucy's weary brain, occupied since morning with accumulating confusions, attempted to make some sense out of Till's untruthfulness. At twelve o'clock when she had left a house that no longer existed, Mickey had certainly been securely fastened in her daughter's bedroom.

Till's class in English Literature, a seminar, began at twelve o'clock and ran two full hours. When had Till returned home and why? Lucy looked across the street. By cutting class, her

beloved, amusing, exasperating Till, the daughter who was the light of Harby's life, might have been killed. A few minutes one way or the other, and Till might have been buried over there. Lucy paled.

"Till, Till . . ."

"Here I am," Till said quaveringly, interpreting for once a thought, an emotion that was not her own. The maturity came and went. She hugged her mother and then her dog. "Here we all are, except Daddy, and he's coming. Quite a bunch of refugees! How did your lunch go?"

Another mysterious silence occurred. Till looked impatiently at her mother.

"Wake up, darling. I mean your lunch with Aunt Arabella. How did it go?"

"Not very well," said Lucy Greer.

In a sense, she spoke the truth. How could a luncheon party go well when it hadn't taken place? After that extraordinary conversation with Arabella, after Arabella had insisted upon and virtually demanded a twelve-fifteen appointment at the Shoreham, Lucy and her stepsister had not lunched together.

It was all too much for Miss Mitchell. For years she had neighbored beside these three, had thought she knew everything about them. Within a few short hours, Lucy, Ted and Till Greer had turned into baffling strangers.

A car, a 1937 model in need of paint, was passing through the fire lines down the block. In the car at the wheel sat Harbison Greer. Murmuring incoherently of lemonade, ice tea, coffee, Miss Mitchell fled across the street.

Harbison Greer parked the car carefully before the apartment house. Then he got out carefully and took Lucy's outstretched hands and held them. Each found courage, strength, something, in the other's eyes. Harby's son spoke.

"Dad, do you know a lawyer named Pomerane in your building?"

"Pomerane?" Harby repeated automatically. "I don't believe so. Yes, I do. His secretary did some work for me one summer. I ran into her this morning."

"Her name is Culp, isn't it? Janet Culp?"

"Yes, the secretary's name is Culp. Why?"

"I was just wondering," Ted said.

"This a hell of a time to be wondering about a thing like that," said Ted's father, looking away from Lucy and at his home, just as a fire truck pulled the first section of the roof away.

Six

THREE PEOPLE who were vitally interested in what had happened on Woodland Road—Dorritt, Jessie and Alec Bates —received no official notification of the explosion. On a hot Monday in Washington, news and rumor travel fast.

In the government departments on summertime Mondays, file clerks and stenographers and even Bureau Chiefs can find time to discuss matters not strictly connected with business. Dorritt and Jessie Wayne heard varying garbled reports, all of them terrifying.

The Wardman Park Hotel had blown up. The Shoreham had been badly damaged. A whole block on Woodland Road had been destroyed. Several families had been wiped out (a) by a homemade bomb, (b) by a souvenir brought from a New Guinea battlefield, (c) by an exploding gas main. No, there weren't several families. Just one family was involved, very social people named Greer. It was their house that blew up. Some members of the family had escaped. The daughter had been killed. Or was it the son? Everybody had escaped. Was it possible, people asked each other disappointedly, there were no casualties at all?

Dorritt worked for the Department of the Interior. Jessie was with Justice. They took separate taxies. Coincidence delivered them simultaneously at the scene, coincidence bolstered by Jessie's chronic inability to explain her rights convincingly. Paradoxically, her open, honest countenance, her air of whole-

some plainness, her very spectacles, often worked against her. People were inclined to trample on Jessie.

The police wouldn't allow Jessie to pass through the fire lines. She was still meekly engaged in argument when Dorritt arrived a good five minutes later. Dorritt soon got them through the rope that held the general public a block from where the general public desired to be.

Together, clinging to each other's hands for moral support, the two girls started along the sidewalk. Their terror took different forms. Dorritt was frozen and silent. Jessie couldn't stop talking. She was babbling. Caution gone, unaware of her danger, Jessie betrayed her deepest secret with every word she uttered. Ted. Ted. Ted.

"I heard that Ted . . ."

"For God's sake, Jessie, keep still. Ted wasn't home. He wasn't home. I tell you Ted was going to the Veterans' Bureau this morning."

"Maybe Ted didn't go. They were saying . . ."

"Who was saying? No one that knows a thing about it. I must have phoned Aunt Elizabeth a thousand times but the damn line was busy. Ted wasn't home, I tell you. There wasn't anybody home."

"Dorritt, I keep thinking, thinking about the other night. Wednesday night. Last Wednesday night when Ted . . ."

Dorritt stopped on the sidewalk. She dropped Jessie's hand and seized her by the shoulders. She glared into the frightened eyes behind the thick spectacles.

"What do you mean—last Wednesday night? Wednesday night Ted and I went to the Troika."

Yes, they had gone to the night club. But abruptly, in the middle of the evening, they had come home, and Jessie hadn't known enough to go on up to bed. Sophisticated Dorritt wasn't so calm as she pretended. Remembering Wednesday night, about which she, too, had been thinking, thinking, Dorritt felt weak and sick with fear.

It was the Troika incident that started things off. Dorritt and Ted were settled happily at the night club, when by some evil

chance Arabella and Claude Rixey showed up with the after-theatre crowd. The Rixeys swept in with a party of twelve, and were promptly escorted to a conspicuous, flower-decked table directly beside the dance floor. Seated at an undesirable table in the corner, Ted and Dorritt couldn't pretend to be oblivious of the grand entrance, all the fuss, all the fluttering waiters. Naturally the the two parties had not merged, although Arabella had nodded distantly at her nephew in the corner. She vouchsafed that queenly nod, just as Ted's bill was laid on the table for two. Ted was short of money; a glance had informed him that he and his girl must leave at once. Worse, though Arabella couldn't possibly have seen the under table exchange, he'd been obliged to borrow from Dorritt to cover the tip. Ted had reached a peak of something or other before that awful evening ended. A peak of feeling sorry for himself, maybe.

It was only talk, of course, but what appalling talk had filled Miss Elizabeth's living room until the small hours of the morning. Ted's initial response to humiliation was always fury. He talked at the top of his voice. And what ugly, bitter things he shouted. How the answer to the veteran problem was shooting the veterans. How Ted Greer would be better off dead. In a grave, every man had an equal opportunity. What had his father to live for? His mother? What had Till to live for unless she was lucky enough to catch a rich guy?

That was bad enough, but as always, the second stage was worse. The stage of quiet, apathetic bitterness, with Ted sitting listlessly in a chair, not even smoking, just looking into space. The stage when you didn't know Ted, the stage when you wanted to cry out: "Come back, Ted! Where are you, Ted? Ted, where have you gone?"

What Dorritt was remembering, what Jessie was remembering, was the queer bright look in Ted's eyes when very quietly he spoke of how easy it would be to remove himself from the world and take the others, too. Something quick and painless. Gas.

"Dorritt, I keep hearing Ted say the gas connections in the basement were right outside his room and . . ."

Jessie hadn't known Dorritt was capable of such anger. Neither had Dorritt. Dorritt's fingernails dug cruelly into her friend's plump shoulder. She shook Jessie.

"You stupid, wicked girl! Can't you see what your silly talk might do? Can't you . . . ?"

"Dorritt . . ."

"You had no business being there Wednesday night. Ted didn't want you. I didn't want you. What Ted said to me joking, kidding, is my affair, not yours. And he was tight in the bargain."

"Dorritt, of course, of course. But I've been worried out of my senses. Of course, I wouldn't dream of telling. . . ."

"You'd better not! Keep your mouth shut, or I'll kill you, Jessie. I swear I will! I'll tell everybody you're lying. So will Ted. That's two against one. I'll . . ."

"Please, Dorritt. I don't blame you for being mad. I was stupid. I'm sorry."

"I guess I'm sorry, too," said Dorritt blankly.

The sudden storm was over in a minute. There was a crowd behind them at the ropes, another crowd ahead where the trucks and fire engines clustered. The sidewalk where Dorritt and Jessie had paused to hate each other was deserted or—almost. Neither of the girls noticed a policeman in plain clothes, who stood near by in the shadow of a tree. Timothy Dwight spat the remains of a toothpick from his mouth and walked away.

Alec Bates, a young man who often went around with the uneasy feeling that his beloved's father didn't like him, was the last of the three to hear the bad news. A friend on an afternoon paper called him shortly after he returned to the office from a long and leisurely lunch. Red-haired Alec was the youngest son of a Maryland doctor. His older brothers had in turn become brilliant doctors, which was probably why Alec had chosen the law. It is also probable that Alec's brothers explained why Alec had chosen Till, who had never met or heard of the elder Bateses and had no slightest interest in brilliance in the medical field. Till had an equal lack of interest in the law but she thought and

never tired of saying that Alec Bates was unique and wonderful. Alec loved her.

The young lawyer was feeling a little guilty about the length of that lunch when he unlocked his office door, and he was relieved to find the office empty. Not that he'd really expected Claude would be on the premises. Alec hadn't even laid eyes on the boss—it was hard to think of an incompetent no-good like Claude as one's employer—for several days.

The truth was that Alec handled all of Arabella's affairs for a salary barely a quarter of the annual retainer Harbison Greer used to draw. Claude pocketed the difference for doing precisely nothing. It was Alec's private belief that Claude spent a good many of his daytime hours at one of the near-by racetracks or with the downtown bookies, which was pretty silly of Claude considering that Claude had faithfully promised Arabella to give up gambling. Arabella's temper wasn't notably stable.

But of course that was none of Alec's business. Keeping Arabella's income tax up to date was his business. Alec went quickly to the file whose intricate system he'd invented to keep Claude from meddling and messing things up. He located and got out the monthly reports on Arabella's stock transactions. He was hard at work when the phone rang, and his reporter friend told him about the explosion.

Alec jumped out of his chair as though a firecracker had been lighted under it, grabbed his hat and rushed for the elevators and Woodland Road. Till would undoubtedly be parked with that nice old party who lived next door. Alec had rung the elevator bell, when he remembered that he'd left those stock reports scattered on his desk. He raced back to the office, swept up the papers and locked them in the file. It then occurred to him that the Rixeys might not have heard about the calamity which had befallen the Harbison Greers. He ought to get hold of Claude. Claude and Greer weren't exactly close, but misfortune made all men brothers. Or it should.

Alec phoned the Spring Valley house. The Rixeys weren't home. Claude could be reached at the Chevy Chase Country

Club. No, Claude couldn't. Alec tried the Congressional Country Club next. No luck there. Then he remembered hearing Claude saying something about maybe he was getting a little soft. Soft? Well, that was to put it mildly. Five years of living easy, and Claude was beginning to resemble his Arabella. Who was that trainer out Spring Valley way who pounded the rich and lazy back into shape? Alec fliped through the classified section.

He phoned Big Tim McCarthy's place. Claude was there, but they'd have to call him from the squash court. Probably blowing like a porpoise, thought Alec, with the cruelty of slim-flanked, flat-stomached twenty-six. It might not be so tough, after all, getting Claude into town, providing him with an excuse to drop those exertions.

It was astonishingly easy. Claude cut off the conversation almost at once, promising to come in immediately. Claude sounded honestly stirred and shocked at someone else's trouble. Alec looked in surprise at the telephone, wondering if he'd misjudged the fellow, and then he grabbed his hat again and ran for the elevator.

Standing in the blazing sun outside Big Tim McCarthy's place, unshowered, his elegant gabardine trousers pulled on over sweat-drenched shorts. Claude Rixey still held a nickel in his slippery palm. For fifteen minutes, closed in the phone booth in the gym, he had tried to reach Rufus Pomerane, a lawyer in the Hibbs Building. Pomerane's phone hadn't answered. Lawyers, Claude thought angrily, should stay where they're wanted. God, the man had a secretary. Janet Culp was cute, if a little older than Janet Culp seemed to think. It was Janet's business to answer the telephone and keep the office going. Giggling, slant-eyed Janet, the Montana bohemian, who'd got the nineteen-forties irretrievably confused with the nineteen-twenties, was certainly old enough to know that!

Claude put the nickel in his pocket and despairingly peered up and down the glaring, empty street. Was one failure to be the omen of another? Claude wondered if he'd ever get a taxi.

Arabella had taken the limousine and chauffeur that morning. It seemed to Claude that hours passed before the cruising cab pulled to the curb.

Squash, the hurry in all this heat, the unsuccessful phone call, something, had left Claude Rixey feeling weak and dizzy. He sank back against the seat and closed his eyes. He opened them. The taxi was crawling. It almost seemed deliberate on the driver's part. They'd been caught by three lights in succession.

Claude was inclined to be a little close with Arabella's money, except, of course, where his own comfort and pleasure was concerned. He offered the driver a five-dollar tip to step on the gas. They broke the speed limits the rest of the way.

Even so, Alec got there first. The whole crowd was gathered in Miss Elizabeth's living room. They had brought in extra chairs from the dining room. Ted Greer was sitting on the edge of a table, chewing his fingernails. Beside him on a footstool, watching with strain in her eyes, was Dorritt. As Alec slid in behind Miss Elizabeth, he saw Dorritt reach up, take Ted's hand and place it on his knee. Next those two, was that homely-looking friend of Dorritt's whose name you kept forgetting. Near by, sat Lucy on the rattan sofa. To Alec's relief, Harbison Greer, looking stricken and old, poor devil, over this fresh disaster in a not very lucky life, seemed oblivious that Till's boy friend was around again. Till was enchanted.

"Alec, isn't it awful? Did you ever in your life see such an unholy mess as our house?"

"Hush your mouth, half-pint. Folks might get the wrong idea and think you were having fun."

"Alec!" cried Till, hurt.

Harby didn't even notice that the young red-haired whippersnapper had dared to correct his daughter. Ted aroused sufficiently from his own dark thoughts to wish that his sister wasn't quite such a mental lightweight. It made Till awfully—undependable. He sent a glance of wry understanding at Alec, whom he rather liked, wondered briefly what Alec saw in Till, and then looked down at his own girl.

Ted looked at the crown of Dorritt's blonde head, at the way the fine straight hair sprang away from it, and then he looked at the curve between her breasts. The girl looked up at him and smiled.

Jessie had followed the direction of Ted's eyes, had seen Dorritt's dreamy, answering smile. Her heart beat dully. She wiped her shiny forehead with her handkerchief.

"My, I wish we had an electric fan in here," said Jessie Wayne.

Just then Claude arrived.

Claude didn't bother with the chimes that had announced Alec a moment earlier. He jerked the door open and walked in. He stopped in the archway. He was breathing hard. His slightly protuberant eyes searched the crowded room, went around it twice. The eyes returned to Lucy. Claude spoke. Indeed, he demanded.

"Where is Arabella?"

"Arabella?" said Lucy inquiringly.

"You lunched with her."

"No, no, I didn't," Luck said slowly. "She was supposed to meet me at the Shoreham at twelve fifteen, but she didn't come. I waited and waited . . ."

"At the Shoreham!" screamed Claude. "She told me she was picking you up at home. Where is Arabella?"

Lucy went white.

"Claude, she didn't tell you that. You're mixed up. I know what our arrangements were. Why would Arabella pick me up for a five-block walk?"

"Then where *is* Arabella?"

Timothy Dwight entered, unannounced, through the door Claude had left standing wide open. On occasion the policeman relished drama himself. He fixed his eyes on Claude and cleared his throat portentously.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Rixey. I've just been talking to the apartment superintendent across the street. This was his day for clipping the hedges. Has your wife got a purple hat and dress?"

Claude eyed the intruder with acute distaste.

"My wife has an extensive wardrobe. How should I know? A purple dress? Yes, my wife has a purple dress. She has several purple dresses. Why?"

"Mr. Rixey, you ought to be prepared."

"Prepared?"

"Mr. Rixey, just at one o'clock, a stout woman wearing a purple hat and dress got out of a limousine and went in the house next door. It kind of looks like," said Timothy Dwight in a tone of quiet but intense satisfaction, "that she's still there."

Claude stepped back. His heels scraped the floor in the hall. Otherwise there was no sound. In the silence Dwight's eyes surveyed the crowded living room, skipping from face to face. Dwight loked at Ted Greer a long moment, just looked at Ted, and then walked out.

Seven

THE ACTIVITIES at the site of the disaster changed character. Property is one thing, human life is another. They were looking for a body now. The ambulance came back. Doctor MacNab, the District Coroner, arrived.

The steam shovel's champing jaws were stopped. Picks and shovels dug into the rubble swiftly but cautiously. The grimy faces of the workingmen became grave, solemn, important.

The nine people gathered in Miss Mitchell's living room had no activity with which to occupy themselves. They had nothing to do but wait, as the long hot hours of the afternoon crawled by. Through the vacant spaces where Miss Mitchell's living-room windows had been, they could see the men at work next door.

Finally Miss Mitchell went and got a stack of newspapers, tacks and tack hammer, and brought in her kitchen stepladder. When she started tacking the newspapers to the window frames,

three of the men, Claude, Harby, Ted, watched her hypnotically. It was red-headed Alec who took her place on the ladder and did the job.

For the most part the nine people concerned in one way or another with whatever had happened to Arabella Rixey sat like strangers. Only two of them made even a pretense of mourning the highly probable exit from the world of a woman who had given nothing to it. The two were Claude and Lucy. Lucy cried, silently, into her handkerchief. Perhaps she wasn't thinking of the fat, greedy woman who had made Harby miserable and put the gray in his hair and the stoop in his shoulders; perhaps she wept for the child of long ago. Perhaps Lucy was seeing, down the corridors of memory, two little girls riding forth on ponies, coming home to bread and milk in the nursery with Nana. Two little sisters. Claude cried, too.

It seemed hardly possible that Claude Rixey was as adoring a husband as he pretended to be. Nevertheless, Claude *was* affected. His worry and anxiety were genuine. Claude, who liked his ease, couldn't sit down quietly like the others. He couldn't sit still a minute. He walked around and around the crowded room. Even Till was dimly conscious of his turmoil. Looking up, she saw something in the slightly protuberant eyes that vaguely stirred her pity.

"Uncle Claude," Till said, "I feel awfully sorry for you. I know just how you feel. It's hard not to worry. But maybe it will turn out all right."

Claude wasn't appreciative.

"I don't believe myself," Till said, "that she's in the house at all. Something happened, and Aunt Arabella broke the lunch date. Maybe she's downtown shopping."

Claude stared at her.

"You know yourself how Aunt Arabella is," Till persisted. "She wouldn't come way in from the country just to have lunch with Mother. She must have had other things to do. Isn't that so. Uncle Claude?"

Ted's harsh voice broke the silence.

"Fod God's sake, Till, stop hunting for a silver lining. Aunt Arabella's there, all right. She's there, and in time they'll find her there."

Ted's voice faltered. Again there was silence in the room. Lucy's eyes with the abrupt treachery of surprise, were full of question. Dorritt's eyes were filled with fright. Claude abruptly stopped his pacing. He paused squarely in front of Ted.

"Maybe you know something the rest of us ought to know, young man. Something you should have mentioned earlier. How do you *know* Arabella is there?"

Ted drew a long breath. He reached over to the table, picked up a cigarette and lighted it. Then he stared straight back at this questioner.

"Claude, aren't you forgetting something? I'm a big boy now. I don't think I like the way you spoke to me. If it weren't so damned hot, I'd be inclined to knock your block off."

Leaning forward, he blew a cloud of smoke into Claude's staring face. Lucy made a sound of protest and distress.

"Look, Claude," said Ted. "I hate to bring this up. I'm not the fellow who won the war—but I went to it. Could it be that you were the fellow who sat on the seat of his pants back home? It could be."

There was a silence.

Dorritt, at least momentarily, felt like cheering. That's telling them! Don't let them push you around! Dorritt forgot prudence, caution; she even, briefly, forgot fear. Claude had been intolerable. Claude needed a lesson. What right had Claude Rixey to ask questions of Ted?

Finally Claude spoke.

"Ted, I'll excuse your unforgivable remarks—because you're under a strain. We all are."

Ted wouldn't stop.

"How do I know Aunt Arabella is over in the house? Because the apartment superintendent saw her go in, and no one saw her come out. Because she's been missing hours now."

Ted wasn't finished.

"Now, my friend, suppose I ask you a question. My mother says her lunch date with Arabella was at the Shoreham. How come you're so positive Arabella went to our house?"

"I don't see that it's any of your affair," Claude said coldly. "But Arabella got me on the phone today, twice, within fifteen minutes. First she mentioned the Shoreham. Second, she said Lucy preferred the house."

"But I didn't!" cried Lucy from the rattan sofa. Lucy looked particularly distracted and bewildered. "Claude, I didn't prefer the house. It was never even suggested. I didn't have a thing to do with the arrangements. Arabella made them, and she was definite about the Shoreham when she phoned me at eleven o'clock. I don't understand this at all. What time did you talk to her?"

"She called me at the office," Claude said. "The phone was ringing when I unlocked the door, sometime around noon. About fifteen minutes later, as I told you, she phoned the second time."

Alec jumped in his chair. What a fantastically rotten break! Claude had been in town that morning after all, had found the office locked to him, his young assistant out to a longer lunch hour than any young assistant is entitled to. Alec's and Till's eyes met. They both looked guilty.

Everybody else was looking at Claude. Without quite realizing it yet, Claude had made a tactical mistake. Several of the people present were well acquainted with Arabella.

Harbison Greer, who had done his sister-in-law's work for years, knew Arabella through and through. She wouldn't call her husband or anybody else on earth to chat about a social arrangement, a change in the arrangement. Arabella didn't do gratuitous, friendly telephoning. The information about the luncheon engagement might have been passed on to Claude as an after-thought. But it wasn't the primary purpose of those two calls.

If Arabella telephoned Claude at the office twice within fifteen minutes, Harbison Greer surmised from old experience,

Arabella was in a fury over something. What? To Harby, remembering office phone calls he'd received, it seemed highly likely Arabella was in a fury over something Claude had done.

"One o'clock at your house was what Arabella told me," Claude repeated.

He didn't like the way several people were looking at him. Harby, in particular. Ted. Alec. Dorritt's cool young eyes were fixed on him, too. Claude Rixey, she was thinking, wasn't very bright at times. Dorritt, like Miss Elizabeth, had met Arabella to talk to only the single time at the wedding reception, but she was wise enough to know that two phone calls, spaced so close together, sounded—peculiar. Somewhat, reflected Dorritt, as though the course of true love wasn't running smoothly back at twelve and twelve fifteen o'clock.

Luck was still absorbed with her own bafflement over the mix-up in the appointment.

"If Arabella changed her mind," Lucy said helplessly, "why didn't she let me know? I waited and waited at the hotel from twelve fifteen on. I simply cannot understand why Arabella walked into our house at one o'clock."

"Why didn't she leave?" a new voice inquired. Miss Mitchell was tired of hearing everybody talk except herself. She had a puzzle of her own. "The house was empty," Miss Mitchell reminded the company. "The explosion didn't happen until a few minutes after two. I don't recall Arabella Rixey as being a—patient woman. Why would she sit for an hour in an empty house?"

Nobody produced a satisfactory answer. Instead, another small problem was posed. Why had Arabella sent the limousine and chauffeur away? She had told her husband she meant to pick up Lucy.

Passing over the mystery of the confusion as to where and exactly when Arabella and Lucy were to meet for lunch, assuming Arabella expected to find her stepsister at home, had she intended to walk five blocks to the Shoreham? Arabella, who wouldn't stoop to pick up a handkerchief if she could ring a bell instead.

"Where in hell is my chauffeur all this time?" Claude demanded of the room at large. Possibly, under the circumstances, he left the pronoun slightly inappropriate. At any rate, he added quickly, "Where did Arabella send our car?"

Stepping into the hall, Claude phoned the Spring Valley house. The limousine wasn't there. The butler had no idea where Greggson was. The chauffeur had left the house, so said the butler to his employer, when Mrs. Rixey took the limousine into town at eight o'clock in the morning.

Of that last fact, Claude was well aware. Arabella had declined to wait until he finished shaving, advising her husband to a call a taxi if he desired to go to town.

Claude set down the telephone with a bang. He started to dial another number, and then he glanced into the living room. Everybody was watching, listening. Claude was desperately anxious to try Rufus Pomerane again, but plainly this wasn't the time or place.

Several of the watchers also glanced furtively at the telephone, as though they wished they dared to use it. Four people in the group, and it wasn't telepathy, were also thinking hard about Rufus Pomerane, a reasonably undistinguished lawyer who had an office in the Hibbs Building from which he was unaccountably absent.

Miss Mitchell was not among them. Miss Mitchell, who had lunched lightly, was thinking about her supper. By five o'clock she was faint with fatigue, suspense and hunger. Last Wednesday's roast wouldn't feed the multitude. Thank heavens for the morning call of the egg woman. A dozen eggs. The pound of cheese. A small amount of bacon. Plenty of coffee.

Miss Mitchell whispered to Dorritt. Dorritt whispered to Ted. They both rose. Jessie got up, too, sank back suddenly when she caught her friend's cold eye.

Dorritt and Ted disappeared into the kitchen. Some twenty minutes later they returned with the laden tea cart. Ted wore what seemed to be a smudge of lipstick on his jaw, and he looked decidedly better for the temporary absence, much less gaunt and drawn. Dorritt, thought Miss Mitchell dispassion-

ately, looked worse. The tall blonde girl looked as though she'd been pulled through a knothole, as though she'd poured her own strength into Ted. Dorritt had lost weight recently. She should give up that incessant dieting.

The food was excellent. Dorritt could be a good cook when she felt like it. Wedges of omelet, fat and puffy, delicious with bits of melted cheese, crisps of bacon and just a touch of onion, mounds of hot baked beans, decorated nine of Miss Mitchell's best luncheon plates. For a few moments the gathering in the living room became almost cheerful. The sounds next door were briefly forgotten. When the plates were half emptied, in the middle of a lull in conversation, there was an interruption.

The chimes sounded again.

Nine forks paused. Miss Mitchell recovered first. Timothy Dwight would be the harbinger of the evil tidings, when they came, and it wasn't he. That unpleasant individual didn't know what door bells were made for. Standing on the porch, cap in hand, calm and unperturbed, Miss Mitchell found the Rixey's vanished chauffeur.

Greggson, a lean-faced Englishman who combined a deep contempt for his employers with a desire to improve himself, had spent the afternoon—he had been dismissed at one o'clock —at the Georgetown public library.

"The Madame ordered me to pick her up at half past five," the chauffeur announced. "She told me she was lunching quietly at home with her sister and would pass the afternoon there."

With Greggson's appearance, the last shadow of hope disappeared. If Arabella had expected to lunch at home with Lucy, she would sit it out in an implacable wait for explanation and apologies. Growing angrier by the minute, meditating an increasingly terrible revenge upon the culprit, Arabella would sit forever.

Eight people were prepared. Some of those who heard the chauffeur out looked indifferent, almost bored. Jessie Wayne, for instance. She continued eating through Greggson's recital. Homely Jessie cared nothing about the fate of another homely woman, who'd achieved success because of pots of money.

Sometimes it seemed to Jessie Wayne that everybody in the world, except herself, was married or engaged. Fat, selfish, hideously unattractive Arabella, at the unbelievable age of fifty, had got herself a husband of thirty-five. Well, reflected Jessie, Arabella wasn't married any more. She turned her eyes upon the widower.

Till was the ninth person, the unprepared exception. Till had disliked Arabella, too. Always meddling, interfering and criticizing, suggesting to Mother that Till was too young to do this, that or the other. But Aunt Arabella was a relative, part of the family, someone belonging to Till.

Until Greggson arrived, Till hadn't allowed herself to believe it. She stared at the chauffeur. Like Miss Mitchell, earlier. Till caught a chill, unwelcome glimpse of awful reality. Aunt Arabella wasn't shopping, she hadn't walked into the house and quickly out; there wasn't going to be a happy ending. Rebellious to the last, Till surrendered with a gasp. She accepted that death can overtake someone you know, a familiar, someone you'd had dinner with, someone you'd heard laugh. Death does happen.

Till shuddered.

For the first time in her nineteen years she faced the incredible fact that some day, years and years in the future, but some day, Till Greer, the president of her sorority, the prettiest of them all, with the cutest figure and the slimmest legs, that Till would surely die. Nothing could stop it. Those who loved you best couldn't help you.

In a minute's time, Till progressed in wisdom. In a minute she learned more than in her year of college. Ever afterwards, to the gayest dances, to her happiest hours, to her own wedding day, Till would carry a germ of cold and certain knowledge.

Helplessly Lucy watched what was happening to her daughter. Mother wasn't any use with this. No one could assist, not father, mother, sweetheart, husband, sister, brother. Painful step by step, Till must journey to maturity by herself—alone.

Lucy waited. She gave Till that minute, in the darkness, alone. It just had to be that way. Children must grow. Then

Lucy set down the plate in her lap. Leaning over, she took Till's hand and held it hard. Mother understood. Take the hand of another voyager, darling. Mother was traveling the self-same road herself. Everybody must, Till. All of us are doomed.

In his preoccupation with the son, Harby missed the daughter's trouble. Alec missed nothing about Till, when he was with her. He, too, understood. He flipped a package of cigarettes to the girl, matches.

"Till, are you okay?"

"Quite okay," Till informed her mother and her sweetheart.

This was at six o'clock. The waiting in Miss Mitchell's living room was almost over. A few minutes before seven o'clock, five hours after the explosion, with the sun of a Washington July still blazing fiercely down, they recovered Arabella Rixey's body. They didn't know at first that it was murder. But Timothy Dwight was hopeful. He would have been more hopeful still if he had known about an envelope, addressed to Harbison Greer, that sat unnoticed on the mantel in Miss Elizabeth's living room.

Eight

THE SEARCHERS had expected to find Arabella Rixey's body in what was referred to as "the living-room area." Arabella wasn't there. There was a moment of excitement when her feathered purple hat and one hand-sewn glove turned up in the fireplace, crushed under masonry fallen in from the chimney. She'd been in the living room all right, had taken off her hat and gloves, laid down her purse—"keep an eye out, fellows, for the purse"—and then apparently had gone elsewhere. Arabella wasn't in the dining room. She wasn't underneath the splintered top of the maple stretcher table that Harby and Lucy had bought at a country auction in the thrilling, early days of their marriage.

By a quarter past six, they were working in the basement, below ground level. By twenty minutes past six, they were certain it was gas. A pick or spade would strike an imprisoned pocket, and the sour smell would be loosed to rise into the air. Men would cough or put a handkerchief to their faces, and then start picking away again.

A gaping hole in the basement ceiling marked the center of the explosion. The hole opened upward from where the furnace had been. Men began to guess at what had happened. The pilot light of the furnace had touched off gas collected and trapped in the underground place. The furnace had gone straight up, and the side walls and supports of the first story had collapsed, promptly bringing down the second story and roof. Bits of furnace, a bolt, a nut, a twisted shard of steel, were located everywhere. Two days later a small boy, a resident of the apartment house, found the knob of the furnace door in the hedge across the street.

It was one of the men working in the basement, tunneling like a miner, who struck diamonds. He was digging at the base of a mound of wreckage rising where a vanished flight of wooden steps had once climbed to the kitchen. At the summit of the mound, leaning backward into the kitchen, were the door and the door frame.

The hill sloped clear to the basement wall. The tops of two metal laundry tubs, attached to the wall, could be seen. The man's pick fastened under the edge of a fallen washboard that seemed to be lying over something on the cement floor. He pulled up the washboard.

He gaped. A fat, black hand, loaded with a fortune in jewels, seemed to be pointing at him.

The man yelled.

At once he had plenty of help. Arabella's body was wedged against the wall in the space underneath the laundry tubs. One protruding foot had been crushed, and they had some trouble getting the foot loose from a pile of brick before at last they pulled the body free.

Considering the circumstances, Arabella looked pretty good.

Dirty, of course. Had someone said the dress was purple? One of the men went to fetch the coroner.

Dr. MacNab crawled down into the basement, reflecting on the strange places and situations in which people have elected to die these last few years. The doctor's four sons had gone off to war and three had come back. Not a bad percentage maybe, but Dr. MacNab didn't consider himself exceptionally lucky in the investment.

The coroner looked at the body on which he supposed he would perform a post-mortem tonight. Kenny had been twenty-two, the father was thinking, with all his life before him. Dr. MacNab leaned over, sniffed Arabella's hair, licked his finger to moisten it, and then scrubbed the grime from a corner of her mouth. The lipstick underneath was indelible. He made the finger wetter, gave up, and used his handkerchief.

The lipstick came away from a corner of the mouth. Freed of the coating of grime and lipstick, Arabella's lip was a peculiar rosy color. Just as he'd expected.

"Poisoned!" said Dr. MacNab.

"Poisoned!" echoed Timothy Dwight from the sidelines, in a voice startled and uncomprehending.

"Carbon monoxide. Lack of oxygen. Gas poisoning," said the doctor impatiently. Sometimes he wondered why men with brains, with just a little general information, so seldom chose a police career. This fellow Dwight had a monkey shrewdness about human nature, the disagreeable, swampy aspect of human nature, but he certainly turned up among the missing when it came to—things. Dr. MacNab spelled it out for Dwight. "She breathed carbon monoxide and she died."

"But the explosion . . ."

Dr. MacNab's uncertain temper, worsening the slow years since Anzio, was severely tried.

"My dear man, breathe in enough illuminating gas and you die. Touch a match to accumulated gas, a furnace pilot light will do as well, and it explodes. Those two facts, fascinating as they may be, are not necessarily connected. Long before sufficient

gas could accumulate in this cellar to blow up the house that used to be over us, this woman would be dead."

"But I thought with all that stuff on top of her, she'd been—well—mashed to death!"

"Then you thought wrong!" snapped the doctor, who liked nothing less than being questioned in an opinion even by another doctor. "If you have the time you might explain to me how to go about mashing to death—as you so nicely put it—a corpse. You may have hit upon a new scientific miracle, Dwight. How a human being can be deader than dead."

"Ah, now, Doc, I didn't mean . . ."

"If you really care to improve your education, which I doubt," said the coroner to the policeman, "you can drop around to my lab tomorrow and I'll show you a sample of the blood. It will be bright red. Ruby red. Carbon-monoxide poisoning. You can see the color now showing through the thin tissue of the lip."

"Then you're saying the explosion happened after the—the —after Mrs. Rixey was dead?"

"Saying? God in Heaven, what have we been talking about? Use your eyes, man." Doctor MacNab pointed at the heap of Arabella lying in a cleared spot on the basement floor. "The body is hardly disfigured, beyond that crushed foot. I dare say those metal tubs protected it. My guess is she'd have survived the explosion, almost as good as new, if she hadn't been imprudent enough to do her breathing in a cellar filling up with gas. They pulled them out alive from worse places in London. But those that came out alive hadn't been breathing carbon monoxide."

"I see," said Timothy Dwight.

"For small mercies," said Dr. Kenneth MacNab, "let us be thankful."

This interchange had kindled in the coroner a faint personal interest in Arabella Rixey. Why had the fool of a woman been wandering around in the cellar, allowing herself to be overcome? Dr. MacNab glanced at Arabella as though to ask.

One of his stiff grayish-red eyebrows went up. He bent over

for another look at the jewelled hands, which somebody had folded on Arabella's breast.

Arabella's manicure was in shocking condition. The nails, coated with lacquer as her mouth had been coated with paint, were broken and ragged. Dr. MacNab lifted Arabella's left hand, her right hand. Every nail—she'd worn them as long as a Chinese mandarin—was rough and broken, several of the nails torn down to the quick. She'd been alive when that happened. There'd been pain. Those fingertips had hurt, hurt like the devil.

Dr. MacNab looked in particular at the right forefinger, held firmly in his left hand. There was something stuck underneath the split, broken nail. Deftly, Dr. MacNab pulled out a wooden splinter.

"It might appear," the coroner said slowly, "that the woman realized her danger in time, and was trying to get out of the cellar."

"Say that again, Doc," demanded Dwight, staring at the splinter with almost suffocating delight.

"Evidently she broke her fingernails clawing at something," said Dr. MacNab. "I hardly understand, unless she was blown underneath the laundry tubs, which seems unlikely from the condition of the body. The wall beside where she lay is stone. The splinter is wood."

Timothy Dwight might be wanting when it came to matters of specialized information, but he did possess the monkey shrewdness with which the doctor credited him. His mind leapt to the usual exists from people's cellars. There were generally two—one leading outside, the other into the kitchen of the house.

Two doors, then. Doors were made of wood. Why claw at a door, pounding, hammering, breaking your fingernails, if you desired to leave a cellar because you smelled gas? Why not just turn the knob and walk out? The very instant he posed the question, Timothy Dwight arrived at a satisfactory answer.

Suppose the doors were—locked.

The group who had waited out the afternoon in Miss Mitchell's living room heard the news of the discovery at seven

o'clock. It was nearly eight when Timothy Dwight took Claude over to identify the body before it was transferred downtown to the morgue. Arabella had been removed from the basement and placed on a stretcher, which lay on a secluded patch of ground beside the ambulance.

Claude fell on his knees beside the stretcher, not even thinking of the crease in his trousers. He looked long and hard at the fat, dead, dusty face. It was a strange look, seeking and inquiring. The expression on his face could be pain. No easy tears moistened the questioning eyes.

What was Claude thinking of? Was he remembering the hard times, the scrounging and maneuvering, the scratching to make a dollar, that Arabella had ended five years ago? Was he remembering how generous and understanding she had seemed to be at first?

Claude got on his feet, brushed the dirt from his knees.

"Yes, that's Arabella," he said. "Yes, that's my wife," he said and walked away.

After twenty years of serving as the District Coroner, Dr. MacNab thought there were no more surprises left for him in the catalogue of human behavior. Nevertheless, Dr. MacNab was startled when Claude walked right back, knelt down again beside the stretcher and stripped off Arabella's rings.

Timothy Dwight wasn't surprised. He'd have done the same himself. No telling what might happen, with a body being shifted hither and thither, in the course of an official police investigation. Dwight felt closer to Claude Rixey. Here was someone a fellow could understand, even if Rixey was a big bug. Claude pocketed the rings. And then—or so it seemed to Dr. MacNab—a súdden and displeasing thought flickered through the widower's mind. In haste Claude's eyes returned to the stretcher. It was as though Claude missed something. Something he didn't care to ask about.

"I guess you're wondering about her purse," Dwight suggested helpfully. "Mr. Rixey, I'm sorry but we haven't found it yet. Frankly, the chances don't look good. But if you can give me a description . . ."

"Never mind the purse," said Claude. "Arabella is all that matters."

Again Dr. MacNab was surprised. Claude Rixey was hardly the man to be unconcerned about the absence of what must have been a well-filled purse. It wasn't exactly—unconcern. As Claude's glance flitted toward the tumbled wreckage, where Arabella's purse was probably lost forever, the doctor could have sworn that the widower looked relieved.

Dwight was also surprised and agreeably. Rixey wasn't going to demand miracles of the force. Dwight clapped him on the shoulder.

"Death comes to all," the policeman pronounced, choosing from the rhetoric of an undertaker friend. "Buck up, old man. Your wife is gone. Nothing you or I can do will bring Mrs. Rixey back. But you've got a lot left to live for."

"Take your hands off me," Claude said.

Dwight stepped back, confused, undecided as yet whether to be hurt, angry, or threatening. Million dollars or no million dollars, Rixey couldn't push the law around, as he might soon find out. Rixey should remember that the law was investigating the suspicious death of Rixey's wife. It was plain to Dr. MacNab that Rixey did remember. The widower certainly changed in a hurry.

"Sorry," Claude said. "I apologize. I'm unstrung, upset, not myself. To tell the truth, I hardly know what I'm doing."

Dwight decided to be forgiving.

"Mr. Rixey, say no more. I know how these things are. They unstring, upset and make you not like yourself."

Again he clapped Claude on the shoulder. Claude quivered but bore it. No sense antagonizing a policeman. No sense whatever. Friendships can come in handy at times, pay dividends. Removing himself without haste from Dwight's oppressive grasp, Claude proceeded to test this friendship.

"Dwight, I'm grateful for your sympathy. Believe me, it helps. I presume you're the one I ask whether it's all right for me to take my car and chauffeur and go on home."

Dwight frowned.

At this stage of the game, with strong suspicion but no facts to go on, with murder yet to be established, the policeman didn't want the interested parties scattering. Dwight preferred to hold them all together in Miss Mitchell's living room, until the gas company engineer found out and reported exactly what had freed the flow of gas which killed Arabella Rixey.

"Mr. Rixey, your chauffeur can go. I'd a little rather you personally stayed."

"Why?" inquired Claude.

Again Dwight frowned. He had no intention whatever of tipping his hand. Get people scared, and they clam up on you.

Dwight already had firmly fastened in his mind his suspect. The kid—Ted Greer, the unsettled war veteran who'd done some mighty lose talking about gas connections "right outside his room"—was Dwight's candidate. His Paw and Maw probably inherited a packet from Mrs. Rixey, and even though they'd lost their house, what they'd inherit would likely mount up to a fortune. Decent as Rixey seemed to be, Rixey would probably go the limit protecting a kid in his own family, tip off the boy, advise him how to lie and make no end of trouble.

Said Dwight: "Mr. Rixey, there's a few things still need cleaning up, and then, if you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you again."

"Inspector, I've got a home to go to. I need a bath, I need a shave, I need a chance to be by myself. I feel awkward imposing further on the hospitality of Miss Mitchell, whom I scarcely know."

"Mr. Rixey, I'd like it better if you stayed."

"Just as you say. By the way, most people call me Claude," said Claude to his friend, the policeman, and thereupon, seething inside, returned to the house next door.

Dr. MacNab watched the widower go.

The coroner was reflective. Rixey had been surprisingly meek. That "Claude" business, for instance, was a distinctly false note. As false a note as his lack of interest in the missing purse. What made the widower so affable to the police? Could it be a feeling of guilt? What was Rixey hiding or hoping to hide?

It wasn't Dr. MacNab's duty to do the work that members of the homicide squad were paid to do. He wasn't a detective. As a general thing, MacNab had scant interest in the field. But it was true that he had no patience whatever with crime or criminals, however they justified themselves. He was particularly impatient with murder.

Kenny hadn't died to leave the world to folk who, if left to run at large, would pull it down bit by bit, one murder at a time, instead of operating in a pack to pull it down all at once by means of the mass murder of war. Nor, come to think of it, had Kenny necessarily died to leave the world to the Timothy Dwights, even though they represented a system of law and order.

The way Dwight had fawned over Rixey angered Dr. MacNab just in recollection. He felt like hitting somebody or something. He felt his own blood pressure rising, and knew that with a pressure of 180 over 140 he shouldn't allow himself to lose control in this lunatic fashion. To a man of sixty-two, who carried around amyl nitrite in his pocket in case of an angina attack, a fit of temper could be a dangerous luxury. Such a man could kill himself because his collar button rolled underneath the bureau. Nevertheless for a moment Dr. MacNab wished, and violently, that *he* was on the homicide squad.

"Going with us, Doc?" asked the sudden voice of one of the young internes from the wheel of the ambulance. "Doc, do you need a lift?"

"No, no, Doc," replied the coroner with a grin at the youngster. "I've got my car."

He walked over to the curb and got in his car. He followed the ambulance downtown to perform a post-mortem the results of which he already knew. It was a kind of funny world at that.

Nine

TIMOTHY DWIGHT picked his way through debris to the other corner of the basement, the corner where the gas company was in charge and their fellows seemed at last to be getting somewhere. The Police Department, with Timothy Dwight as the loudest spokesman, was later on to take considerable credit for results obtained by the gas company. The company didn't mind. Glad to be of service. It wasn't exactly philanthropy that had brought a company vice-president, the division superintendent, various minor assistants, the company lawyer, the chief engineer, and a dozen laborers, posthaste to Woodland Road.

Public utilities are peculiarly sensitive to public opinion and public nervousness. Company employees worked like Trojans to uncover evidence that company equipment wasn't faulty.

Timothy Dwight, who hadn't held a pick since the long-gone day he'd been smart enough to hire an even smarter college boy to take the examination that landed him with the Police Department, viewed their sweating efforts with approval. He glanced sardonically at the company lawyer, was pleased to discover that Melchoir's pants were dirty. For once that gentleman was earning his salary. Coat-tails flying, the lawyer was flitting around like an addled little hummingbird, worrying himself sick about the possible size of the damage suit. Well, Melchoir could keep his shirt on. There wasn't going to be a damage suit.

Because why? Because it wasn't an accident.

Let them dig out their pipes, connections, meters, mains, their whatchamaycallems and thingamajigs, let them produce their technical evidence. Dwight knew already that it was murder.

The kid had done it. He'd got the gas going good and strong,

invited his rich old auntie to the cellar and locked her in. A real bad boy, that Ted Greer.

Ambling forward as these musings passed through his mind, the policeman came to pause a few yards short of the gas company crew. Ted's basement room, designed in the early twenties to accommodate a maid unwise enough to work in Washington in that day, had been just a box of beaverboard, lightly nailed to the ceiling joists. The beaverboard box had collapsed as a matchbox will when someone steps on it. Dwight thoughtfully eyed this mess. Upstairs on the second story, there must have been four nice bedrooms.

Why then did the kid install himself down here? Months ago, he'd picked the dank, dark, windowless basement room for his own and moved his things down from upstairs. How explain that choice? Dwight pondered. A crime premeditated for months, maybe? Or did the basement itself, the tempting nearness of the gas connections, suggest the means? Which?

The policeman moodily kicked at the rubble. He uncovered a blackened silver frame which still clutched a water-soaked photograph that looked like the blonde next door. He bent over to make sure. Yes, it was her. Dora? No, it wasn't Dora, but something close to Dora, a funny-sounding name. So she was the girl friend. No wonder the blonde was scared.

And then Dwight's dreamy eye lighted on the overseas helmet, which had withstood destruction just as it was designed to do. The eye chilled. No souvenirs, Miss Elizabeth Mitchell had said. If an overseas helmet wasn't a souvenir, what in the hell was it?

For no particular reason, Dwight's mind began to grope through the long list of souvenirs that the boys had brought back from overseas. Samurai swords and kimonos, parachute silk, liberated cameras from Germany, bayonets and knives and pistols and hand grenades, jade from China, perfume from Paris, scarves from London, jagged bits of the flak or a fragment of the shell that nearly killed you from everywhere. He was about to dredge up from his subconscious mind an image of the

very souvenir he sought, when the gas company engineer shouted.

Abandoning thought, the policeman ran.

The laborers had cleared away the last of the rubble, which had risen from the floor to block off any view of that particular corner. It was dark in the corner. The company engineer held a flashlight.

The beam of light played upon a section of the whitewashed stone wall of the basement. Suspended there, was the silenced meter box of the furnace that had gone straight up. The small glass window of the meter box was cracked. The hard enamel finish was chipped and scratched. Otherwise, the gas meter was intact.

Two pipes, one on either side, led into the meter. The first pipe, the larger of the two, had delivered the gas into the house from the gas main on the street. The second and smaller pipe had transferred it to the furnace.

Just before entering the meter, the first of the metal pipes had a clearly defined joint, which swelled out larger than the connecting pipe above and below. This swelling, this enlarged joint, had contained an inner valve, a tiny swinging door, which had moved inside the pipe this way and that way, to regulate the flow of gas coming from the main.

The group of men standing before the meter was staring at this swelling. There was a hole in it. The break in the line was there. Through that hole, through that opening, death had poured into the basement.

If you see an uncorked bottle, you can visualize the missing cork. Looking at the hole, you could tell at once that something —some plug—put there to hold death inside the pipe—had been unscrewed and taken out.

"The lock nut on the pipe was removed," the company engineer announced in a voice of weary triumph. "And then the valve core, the whole damn works, was hammered out of the pipe. After that, you'd get gas pouring in here twelve thousand, fourteen thousand cubic feet a minute. . . ."

"I'll want photographs for my files," broke in the equally triumphant voice of the company lawyer. "A dozen close-up shots should do it. Also, Brady"—he glanced at the engineer—"I'd like you to have one of your fellows draw me up some detail sketches of the connection—before and after diagrams."

"Sure, sure," acceded Brady.

"No remotely possible chance then of accident?" asked Melchoir, who had a legalistic fondness for covering the most remote contingencies. "No chance at all?"

"God, no."

The little lawyer hesitated.

"Frankly, with the whole supply apparently pouring out this break, I was wondering why the furnace pilot light stayed on."

"A little gas—enough to operate a pilot light—would bypass the break."

"How long a time should we figure for the explosion?"

"One hour, maybe, after the valve core was knocked out of the pipe. Maybe two hours." The engineer's eyes turned toward where the furnace and pilot light had been. "That's a problem for the statisticians, Melchoir, it's not my pigeon. They'll have to calculate the incoming pressure, the measurements of the cellar, its depth, the number of cellar openings which would leak in a certain amount of air, the distance between the break and the pilot light. My snap judgment is that sufficient gas would accumulate to reach the pilot light which touched off the explosion in something under two hours. That would put the break, the beginning of the flow, somewhere around half past twelve."

No one asked how long it would take a woman, trapped in the cellar, to die. Once it was established that the lock nut and valve core had been removed from the metal pipe, once all possibility of accident was ruled out, the company's responsibility ended. Arabella Rixey automatically became a police problem.

Dwight himself asked no questions. He knew Arabella had died after one o'clock when she walked into the house, and sometime before 2:06 o'clock. If the flow had begun at half

past twelve, she had entered a cellar already filling up with gas. For the moment, that was close enough.

"There's your cause," said the engineer, nodding one last time at the opening in the pipe. "Nothing faulty about our equipment. It was built to withstand any ordinary hazard. Any hazard, you might say, except the—human hazard."

"Not even the Democrats could hold a corporation responsible for that," said the lawyer, smiling at his little joke. "If our equipment was deliberately tampered with . . ."

" 'Deliberately tampered with' hardly puts it strongly enough. That connection wasn't designed for an amateur to fool with. The lock nut was meant to stay where it belonged. It took quite some doing to get off that nut."

"Yes?" said the lawyer.

"I was thinking of the tool required to do the job. An ordinary household monkey wrench wouldn't serve to screw off the lock nut that held the core in place. The nut would slip on you, unless you had a special tool."

"A special tool?"

"What you'd need to unscrew the nut," said the engineer, "would be a short-handled Stillson wrench."

"What would you use on the core?"

"The other end of the Stillson wrench," said the engineer with a grin. "And you'd hammer like hell, before you got it knocked out of the pipe."

Timothy Dwight had listened long enough. In silence he withdrew.

As the gas company quit, and the weary crew drove away in their cars, additional police arrived. Their work was just commencing, as the leisurely darkness of summer began drowning out the ugly ruins. The new arrivals brought along searchlights, and installed them at the site. Soon the scene bore an eerie resemblance to nighttime scenes a few years ago overseas when other men, and women, too, dug among the ruins by the glare of searchlights.

Timothy Dwight got his people together and told what he

wanted them to find and—preserve. The policeman wanted Arabella's purse if possible, partly because he would enjoy impressing Rixey by producing it, and partly because he had a hazy notion that the contents, an engagement book perhaps, might explain Arabella's coming to her sister's house. From a five-minute telephone conversation with Arabella's maid, he had learned that the mistress had carried a gold mesh bag with an amethyst-studded frame. He described it to the men. The purse, however, was a minor matter.

The two doors that had once led from the Greers' cellar were extremely important. Unfortunately the door that had opened upon a flight of steep stone steps which climbed into the back yard had been located near the furnace. A glance at the wreckage, choking the chasm cut by the stone steps, was convincing evidence that the door which had been at the bottom would never again be seen in this world.

Timothy Dwight had high hopes of the inside door—the kitchen door. He wanted the door, complete with frame, freed of wreckage and delivered up exactly as it was. No picks, hooks, or axes were to be employed on the job. Extreme care was mandatory. If any additional damage to the door was inflicted, if Dwight discovered so much as an extra scratch or dent, the man responsible wouldn't be working for the Department tomorrow.

Last of all . . .

"I want a short-handled Stillson wrench," Dwight said.

"But Tim . . ." a plaintive voice broke the appalled silence. "Good gosh, how do you expect us . . .?"

"Phone up a construction company and get them to send around some coarse sand sieves. Get in barrels to pile the stuff in, after you've sieved it. Phone those trucks that left this afternoon, and tell the guys they'll have to go through their stuff. Start your hunting in the cellar is my idea. Maybe your idea is different. Do it any way you like. But"—said Dwight—"just remember! I want that wrench!"

Leaving his unhappy subordinates to the task of salvaging the kitchen door and finding a needle in a haystack, Timothy

Dwight started toward Miss Mitchell's house—a man with great expectations. Within the next hour, he expected to be escorting young Ted Greer to a cell, charged with murder. He was confident that he could pin on Ted the opportunity to commit the crime, the necessary knowledge and the motive.

Ten

THE THIRD time that Timothy Dwight entered Miss Mitchell's house, he rang the chimes. He paused in the hall, almost in dismay, gazing through the archway at the pleasant and quite normal evening scene in Miss Elizabeth's living room.

A psychologist of the rough-and-ready school, Dwight knew instantly that what he saw boded ill for his purpose. Lucy Greer, lamplight shining on her freshly combed hair, was turning through the pages of a picture magazine. Claude Rixey was striding up and down, smoking a cigar. Ted Greer was playing gin rummy with Dorritt, and Jessie and Harby were looking on. Till and Alec were listening to a softly played program on the radio.

"Well, here is Mr. Dwight again," announced Miss Elizabeth brightly and quite unnecessarily.

With that, Alec turned off the radio. Ted didn't even look up from the card game. That annoyed Dwight. He walked over to the table. He clapped a possessive hand on Ted's shoulder.

"Mr. Greer, I want to take you downtown to the station for questioning."

Ted picked up a pencil and marked the score.

"You want to question me? What about—specifically?"

Dwight let them have it.

"Your aunt, Arabella Rixey, died under suspicious circumstances. We're investigating her death, and I want to talk to *you*."

The announcement didn't produce the effect the policeman had hoped for. No one turned pale. No one gasped.

"Why not ask your questions here?" suggested Ted. Suddenly, Harby moved in closer to him. Simultaneously, Alec left Till's side and also stood beside the table. Flanked by the two tall men, Ted changed position, shrugged the policeman's hand from his shoulder.

Ted said, "My father is a lawyer, so is Mr. Bates. They both seem to feel it will work out better all around if you ask your questions right here."

Harby pushed up a chair.

"Sit down, Dwight. Make yourself comfortable. Ask my son, ask me, ask us all, anything you like. You'll find us happy to co-operate."

Dwight sat. Two lawyers, a suspect as chipper as the May morning—he had expected something different.

There was a silence. And then the policeman had another blow. Into the silence broke Dorritt's clear voice.

"Mr. Dwight, there's no use our kidding you, not that we'd want to kid you. We've already heard all about how—how Mrs. Rixey died. One of the gas men stopped in and told us half an hour ago. So there's something I think you ought to hear right now."

Dorritt hesitated. Her eyes went first to Ted and then to Harby to seek courage. Not for a minute trusting to Jessie's discretion, Dorritt had passed on to Harbison Greer a somewhat softened version of Ted's appalling talk last Wednesday night. Ted had been shouting in a voice that could be heard for blocks. Harbison Greer had perceived aat once how Ted's wild talk and wild threats might be twisted and misinterpreted. Unless another interpretation was produced, voluntarily and—quickly. Dorritt had listened to Ted's father's advice, and now was taking it.

"There is something," Dorritt said to Dwight, "that Ted and I, and Jessie, too, feel you should know. Just a few days ago," Dorritt said clearly, "the three of us sat in this very room talking about those gas connections."

Dwight's eyes sped from Dorritt to Ted to Jessie, stopped at Harby. They'd got together on a story. His voice was dull.

"Gas connections seem like a funny thing to sit around and talk about."

"Yes, they do," admitted Dorritt, and wrinkled her brow as though lost in an endeavor to recapture complete accuracy. "I believe I was the one who brought up the subject. You see," she explained to Dwight, "Ted and I are hoping to be married soon. If we could enlarge his room, I was thinking, and make a kind of sitting-dining room over there, with our own little kitchen maybe, and do our sleeping here . . ."

"Get to the point, Miss! Where do the gas connections come in?"

"To enlarge Ted's room," Dorritt said, "we'd have needed to include the basement corner, all those ugly fixtures. I thought Ted could box them in. He wasn't very enthusiastic."

Dwight lost patience.

"Suppose you let the young man do his own explaining."

"It's unfortunate," broke in Harby, "but it seems that my son . . ."

"Let *him* tell it!"

"I was drinking last Wednesday night," Ted said to Dwight. "Frankly I don't remember much about the conversation, except I got sore at the idea of boxing in gas connections and starting married life in a cellar."

Dwight turned on Jessie Wayne.

"Is this your recollection of what was said about those gas connections?"

"Why, yes," Jessie said. "Yes, that's—that's the way it was."

Pie-face was scared, thought Dwight. But she wasn't scared the way she'd been scared earlier in the afternoon. Boiling with inward frustration and anger, Dwight swung back to Ted.

"If you insist on being interrogated in the presence of two lawyers and all your friends, if that's your notion of co-operating with the police, if you think this build-up don't look damn funny to me, well, I guess it's your own lookout. But if your friends and folks, your sweetie, hear some things and get

some shocks, don't blame me. For the last time—will you go to the station?"

Staring toward the card table through the smoke of his cigar, Claude was watching Ted but was also watching Dorritt. There was a strange expression, lost and hungry, a jealous and envious expression on Claude's florid face. Perhaps the widower was wondering if Arabella, if any woman, had ever looked at him as Dorritt was looking at Ted. Or had every glance like that he'd ever got been selfish and greedy and demanding underneath, or else cynical and lying, a soft delusion bought and paid for? Women were—devils. Claude's expression changed. With cruel malice, he hoped for the day when this hateful braggart nephew by marriage, this callow kid, would, in turn, find pain and disillusionment.

Ten seconds ticked by, fifteen seconds, while Ted hesitated. What questions did Dwight mean to ask? What did the policeman *know?* Could he go through this, Ted wondered, in the company of Dorritt and his mother? Could he put them through it? In that moment of agonizing indecision it seemed to the irresolute young man that it might be better just to give up now and go off willingly with the policeman. Some of Ted's inward struggle showed. He seemed about to rise, he looked at Dorritt, at Lucy, and then, with effort, he held himself in the chair.

"Ask your questions here."

Dwight's face mirrored at once disappointment, brutal contempt, and, queerly, a flick of satisfaction. Dwight could smell fear. This punk was—bothered.

"Okay, Greer, have it your way. Now, if you were sober and can remember that far back, I and your friends would like to hear what you did with yourself today."

"At ten o'clock this morning," Ted said, "I left home and started downtown to the Veterans' Bureau. On the way I stopped in at the Zoo, and killed an hour or so playing the pinball games in the restaurant. I was there until about half past eleven. The cashier will probably remember."

"Why?"

"Because I stayed until I used up a dollar bill on the games.

At half past eleven, when my dollar was gone, I took a bus down to the Veterans' Bureau."

"What time did you get to the Bureau?"

"Just at twelve o'clock," Ted said. "I hung around the Bureau a couple of hours. It was after two when I left."

An alibi, huh? Dwight knew plenty about alibis, too. So Greer had hung around the Veterans' Bureau three long miles away, during the vital period of time when Arabella Rixey had entered the Greer house, walked into the cellar and died. Dwight was willing to bet his bottom dollar that Greer couldn't produce a single corroborating witness. Dwight's lip curled.

"Who'd you see at the Bureau?"

"Just guys. A lot of other guys," said Ted with a flash of bitterness, "looking for cheery little chats with guys holding jobs, about jobs we weren't holding. Oh yes," Ted said, "and of course I saw the woman, the receptionist at the appointment desk."

"This woman wouldn't know you to recognize, I suppose?"

"Yes," Ted said slowly. "Yes, I think Miss Scanlon does know me. I've been around there often enough. Today I got the third to last chair in the waiting room, and Miss Scanlon remarked about it."

"Are you saying this Scanlon woman saw you sitting in that waiting room for two solid hours? From twelve o'clock until two?"

"Yes, that's it," Ted said. "Miss Scanlon went out to lunch at two o'clock, and someone else took her place. A few minutes later I got sick of waiting for my appointment and left. I took the bus home."

The kid had got into the swing; he sounded cocky and confident now. But way down in the brown eyes, Dwight felt certain he detected an uneasy flicker, a crack through a door opening onto panic. Dwight had seen that particular flicker, shining in eyes set in a face otherwise controlled, immediately precede confession and collapse. More than once, he'd seen it. The policeman got up from his chair, carried the chair across the room, planted it squarely in the archway and sat down where

all of them could watch him. Then he reached around and plucked the telephone from its shelf. Dwight called the night operator at the Veterans' Bureau and learned the home telephone of Miss Harriet Scanlon, receptionist at the appointment desk. He dialed that number and waited for an excited landlady in southeast Washington to climb four flights of stairs and bring Miss Scanlon down to talk to the police.

In southeast Washington, Miss Harriet Scanlon was taking a bath. Dripping underneath her terry-cloth robe, she reached the telephone. There, Miss Scanlon discovered that she didn't like either Timothy Dwight's voice or his manner. On the other hand, Ted Greer was a nice boy, for all his gloom and depression, and who was to say he hadn't earned the right to be gloomy? It was a sin and a shame how these days everybody seemed to have forgotten what boys like Ted had done for them . . .

Yes, indeed, Miss Scanlon remembered seeing Ted Greer come in shortly before twelve o'clock that morning, and take the third to the last chair. She didn't feel it necessary to add that the waiting room at the Veterans' Bureau was a very busy place, with constant coming and going, and that she could hardly keep her eye on one young veteran every single moment. Dwight almost convinced her that she had. Where would Ted Greer be sitting by two o'clock? Miss Scanlon's mind asked itself this question and got a quick reply. By two o'clock Ted Greer, moving from chair to chair, along the line of chairs that held the waiting men, would have worked his way halfway across the crowded room. Miss Scanlon searched her mind again, and again her mind and memory obliged. The hands of the big round clock, which hung midway down the room, stood just at two. She distinctly saw Ted Greer sitting in a chair below this clock; she almost saw him wave at her as she went out to lunch.

"Yes, I'm prepared to swear that Ted Greer was in the waiting room today from twelve o'clock until two o'clock," said Miss Scanlon crisply, and hung up.

Dwight hung up on his end, baffled. You don't enter a con-

spiracy and compound a felony with folk like Miss Harriet Scanlon. When the Miss Scanlons of this earth take an oath, truth sits in the witness chair. You'd never convince a jury otherwise.

Nevertheless, Dwight knew there was something wrong somewhere. He could pick it from the air. He could tell it from Ted Greer himself. An awful weight had rolled off the suspect's shoulders, with that corroborating report. The uneasy flicker way down in the brown eyes was gone.

Almost everybody in the room was looking at Ted. Only Lucy was looking at Till.

Till's mouth opened. She sat gazing first at the telephone and then at her brother, aghast with surprise and relief. An incredulous exclamation was certainly trembling on Till's lips.

"Dear, close your mouth," Lucy said sharply. "You look so silly when you let it hang that way."

By the time Dwight turned, he saw only an exceptionally pretty girl. Till had tucked her finger in her mouth as she closed it, and that way she looked exactly like a charming baby.

Eleven

NOW THAT you've finished with Ted," Lucy said sweetly to Dwight, "you'd probably like to hear about me during those two hours."

Lucy plunged forthwith into a description of her restless vigil at the Shoreham. For two hours, Lucy had searched everywhere for Arabella—in the crowded lobby, through the several restaurants, the drugstore. She'd visited the little luxury shops, she'd stepped outside and explored the driveway, she'd patrolled the streams of arriving cars. In short, she had behaved like Lucy—mystified and anxious.

"So you were worried?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then why didn't you go back home on the chance Mrs. Rixey might be there?"

"Why should I," Lucy inquired reasonably, "when Arabella had plainly asked me to meet her at the Shoreham?"

It all seemed logical enough.

Dorritt and Jessie came next. Dwight learned that the girls worked respectively for the Department of the Interior and for the Department of Justice. Both had gone out to lunch at twelve o'clock. Both described different but quite similar drugstores, with themselves waiting in a crowd to grab a stool, a sandwich, a piece of pie and coffee. To Dwight, the stories were equally discouraging. No checking on either one of them. Miss Elizabeth Mitchell, not that you'd figure she'd done it, offered small encouragement herself.

"Where was I between twelve o'clock and two? Right here in my own house where I am every day."

"Alone?"

"Naturally."

"Did you see anyone go in the house next door?"

"I didn't even see Arabella Rixey," Miss Mitchell admitted regretfully. "Between half past twelve and half past one I drew my bedroom shades and took a nap."

With that, Miss Mitchell retired to the kitchen to make some ice water. When she returned with the clinking pitcher, Dwight was asking questions about a Stillson wrench.

"Yes, I know a Stillson wrench is a fairly common tool," Ted Greer was saying. "Nevertheless, I haven't seen one since I was in the army. Mother, was there a Stillson wrench in our tool box?"

"Our tool box?" repeated Lucy, as her mind strayed in wonder among her lost possessions. "No, Ted. We didn't own a Stillson wrench. At least I don't think so. Unless your father has one in the car . . ."

"I haven't even had a monkey wrench," Harby said, "since mine was stolen in that garage six months ago. The car is across the street. Dwight, would you care to look?"

Dwight didn't stir. He *had* looked.

Unexpectedly, as she set down the pitcher and the glasses, Miss Elizabeth spoke.

"I haven't got a Stillson wrench either. Too expensive, though I must say I've always wanted one."

The policeman was mildly startled. Literal-minded Jessie Wayne perceived the cause of his surprise. Jessie explained.

"These last few years everybody with a house has had to learn a lot of things they didn't know before. Like repairing ice boxes and putting up your own window screens. Why, just last week I saw Mrs. Greer . . ."

"I fixed a short circuit in our dining room all by myself," confided Lucy.

Abruptly, one avenue in the investigation of Arabella Rixey's death closed. If a woman knew enough to repair a short circuit in the electric system, she knew enough to procure and use a Stillson wrench on the lock nut of a gas valve, assuming, of course, she desired to fill her house with gas and blow it up. The other ladies, excepting Till who looked as blank as an Easter bunny, proved to be equally well informed in the field of household mechanics. Alec Bates had worked his way through law school by doing odd jobs. Claude Rixey was no handy man, but he was familiar with Stillson wrenches. He invited Dwight to step outside for an inspection of the tool kit in his car.

"Greggson is always buying tools he doesn't need. My guess would be we've got a Stillson wrench."

Again Dwight didn't stir. He knew already there was a Stillson wrench in the limousine. With the limousine locked and parked directly outside a library window during the time interval in question, there wasn't a chance that Greggson's wrench could have been stolen, used and returned.

The Stillson wrench that interested Dwight was the wrench which had been employed to start the flow of gas next door. Nobody volunteered any information about *that* wrench. No one of these nine people appeared to know a thing about it. But one of these nine knew—everything.

Dwight looked around the room. The case that had seemed

so simple that afternoon looked plenty tough now. Murder established, and damn little else.

Suddenly Till spoke. She had rejected death until forced to it. She certainly didn't propose to believe in murder. In the newspapers such things might happen, but not in your own family.

"Listen to me, Mr. Dwight! How do you know it was murder? You don't know. Why didn't Aunt Arabella do it herself? Why didn't she go down in our basement, use that wrench you've talked so much about and commit suicide?"

Dwight smiled tolerantly. Tolerantly he shook his head.

"Suicide? No, little lady, suicide won't do."

"Why won't it do?"

Dwight countered with a query of his own.

"Why," he inquired of Till, "would any woman with a million dollars kill herself?"

In a way, it was a classic question. Why would a woman with a million dollars kill herself? Some women, even though they had the million, might. Arabella Rixey was not among them. The suggestion was absurd. Away with Till and her youthful trust in clouds with silver linings. Till herself, a little girl who yesterday hadn't believed in death, was learning fast. In an instant she lost sight of the radiant transitory glint of hope. The cloud rolled over and engulfed her, too. Like the other eight, Till believed in and faced murder. Somebody had killed Aunt Arabella, done it on purpose.

Dwight's spirits improved imperceptibly. These nine educated liars, with their tony manners, were beginning to get the general idea. They weren't so chipper now, not by a damn sight. Refined and genteel-spoken or not, these people weren't all in love with each other; you could play one off against the other, maybe, with luck, catch them out in their lies.

Where to begin? Dwight decided to begin the inquiry chronologically with Arabella leaving Spring Valley that morning. He turned abruptly to the widower, and he forgot to call his old friend "Claude."

Dwight said, "Mr. Rixey, you and Mrs. Rixey both came to town around nine o'clock this morning. Is that so?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Mr. Rixey, why didn't you come in with your wife?"

Claude didn't drop his cigar, but the cigar jumped in his hand. A long curl of ash fell on the floor, as Claude's mind journeyed back to Spring Valley in the morning. No servant was allowed on the second floor of the Spring Valley house until the mistress rang for breakfast. Arabella hadn't yet rung the kitchen when she walked into his dressing room that morning at eight. Mercifully the second floor had been deserted when master and mistress exchanged those—words. Without her breakfast, without even a cup of coffee, Arabella talked to her husband, walked downstairs, stepped into the limousine and went to town. Claude told Dwight what he thought Dwight ought to know.

"I hadn't finished shaving. My wife was in a hurry."

"So Mrs. Rixey took the car and let you call a taxi?"

"I called a taxi when I was ready."

"Were you annoyed?"

"Annoyed with Arabella? Certainly not. Why should I be annoyed—when my wife was in a hurry?"

"What was Mrs. Rixey going to do in town in such a hurry?"

"She didn't say."

"Mr. Rixey, most husbands and wives talk over plans together."

"This morning Arabella went off in such a rush, there wasn't any chance."

"Later on, your wife had time to call you twice and tell you about her lunch."

"Later on, Arabella wasn't so—rushed."

"Where did she phone you from?"

Claude opened his eyes wide.

"My dear Dwight, my wife didn't happen to mention where she was telephoning from. It didn't occur to me to ask. Arabella and I didn't pry into each other's affairs."

"Weren't you curious about what your wife had been doing all morning?"

"Not in the least!"

Claude put his heel on the cigar ash and ground the ash into Miss Elizabeth's carpet.

"It's quite apparent," said Claude, "that you've been talking to both my butler and my chauffeur. If you're so concerned with my wife's whereabouts this morning, why don't you ask Greggson where he took Mrs. Rixey?"

"I have asked Greggson," Dwight said. "At half past nine, when they got to town, your chauffeur dropped Mrs. Rixey at the People's Drug Store across from the Treasury, so she could get some breakfast."

It made an odd picture—the master of the household out in Spring Valley summoning a taxi, the mistress of the household sitting in a drugstore over doughnuts and coffee. Too much haste in leaving home on Arabella's part was indicated, much too much. Such haste strongly suggested dissension in Spring Valley. Claude just wished that he could talk to Greggson. At that very moment the chimes sounded again, and the long-faced Englishman walked in to ask how much longer the master expected to be.

"I have no idea," Claude said coldly. "Furthermore, Greggson . . ." And then Claude remembered his audience, and decided to settle later with the chauffeur. "That will be all, Greggson. Don't interrupt us again. Kindly wait outside until you're called."

As the chauffeur turned to resume his vigil at the curb, Harby spoke. Harby Greer had been thinking.

"Just a minute, Greggson."

Unexpectantly, without interest, the chauffeur turned from Claude to Harby.

"Yes, Mr. Greer?"

"When did my sister-in-law ask you to drop her at the drug store?"

"After we reached the city, sir. As I have already informed Mr. Dwight," said the expressionless voice of the chauffeur,

"Mrs. Rixey ordered me to pick her up again outside the drugstore at promptly twelve. However, she didn't appear on the designated corner until a quarter of one. I drove around and around the block until I finally saw her."

"Didn't that strike you as odd?"

"Not particularly."

"You haven't got my meaning, Greggson. Didn't it strike you as odd that my sister-in-law would rush to town, and then ask to be dropped at a drugstore?"

"Not particularly."

Harby was nettled.

"Well, it certainly seems peculiar to me! I would have thought that when my sister-in-law started out this morning, she had in mind a more definite objective than a drugstore."

"Mr. Greer, I fancy you may be correct. My own impression," said the chauffeur, "is that Mrs. Rixey was obliged to change her plans shortly after we left Spring Valley."

"Did Arabella tell you this?"

"Hardly, sir. It wasn't Mrs. Rixey's habit to discuss her private affairs with an employee."

"Then how do you explain your impression?"

"On the way to town," Greggson replied calmly, "as we were driving in, Mrs. Rixey requested me to stop and make a phone call for her."

"You didn't tell me that!" cried Dwight.

"Sir, you didn't ask."

"Go on, Greggson," Harby said. "Arabella asked you to stop and make a phone call for her. Why?"

"Mrs. Rixey wanted an immediate appointment, sir. I was to arrange it. I stopped at a filling station and used the phone. However, I failed to reach the person Mrs. Rixey desired to see."

"Who was this person?" demanded Harby and Dwight simultaneously.

"You, Mr. Greer," replied the chauffeur, looking straight at Harby. "Your sister-in-law was anxious to see you immediately,

but the young lady in your office informed me you had gone to Baltimore."

Harby had been leaning forward, and now sank back. He looked flabbergasted. If it was strange that out of a clear sky Arabella should demand Lucy's company for lunch, it was still more strange that she should rush to town to seek an interview with her brother-in-law. Only to Lucy's loving heart was there nothing strange about it.

"Something had gone wrong for Arabella! Harby, she wanted you to fix it," cried Lucy. "I should have known. When Arabella talked to me, she was in a stew. But I was so surprised over her asking me to lunch . . ."

"In a stew?" interrupted Dwight. "Mrs. Greer, I'd like you to explain that. Do you mean your sister was crying and carrying on?"

"Oh my, no," said Lucy, shocked. "I don't believe I ever saw Arabella cry. But she was worried and upset—in some kind of trouble. No, she didn't exactly say so . . ."

"Then how do you know?"

"Otherwise she wouldn't have invited me to lunch," Lucy said logically. "When she couldn't reach Harby, she called me. I could tell from Arabella's voice that she was upset. In need of help."

"When Arabella was in need of help she asked for it," Claude cut in sharply. "When Arabella was in trouble, she talked about it. She didn't speak to me—her husband. Lucy, you're always imagining things."

"Claude, I didn't imagine this. I guess I can tell things from my own sister's voice. Arabella was worried sick. I think I see now what the trouble was," said Lucy, who hadn't taken her eyes from her husband. "Something must have gone wrong about Arabella's investments. Harby, she wanted your advice."

Arabella hadn't wanted Harby's advice concerning her investments for five years. Harby and Claude weren't alone in feeling queer. There was an odd look on the face of young Alec Bates, who handled all of Arabella's business affairs. Had Arabella been thinking of changing lawyers? It would have

been exactly like her to make a change without a word of warning. Had Arabella spotted some mistake, some slip-up? How was that possible? Alec kept the files himself.

"What did Mrs. Rixey want with you?" Dwight was asking Harby sharply. "What's your own idea?"

"I have no idea," Harby replied. "Unfortunately I didn't see Arabella. I took the ten o'clock train to Baltimore."

"Mr. Greer, you were back in your office at half past two when we notified you about the explosion."

"My business in Baltimore didn't occupy me long. Only half an hour."

Dwight was looking at Harby strangely, with a fresh new interest.

"Then, Mr. Greer, that would mean you were back in Washington around twelve o'clock this morning?"

"I reached my office at noon."

"The Hibbs Building, isn't it?" Dwight said musingly, reflecting that the Hibbs Building was about a twenty-minute drive from Woodland Road. "Was your steno there in the office with you?"

Harby shook his head.

"Miss Harris," he said, without heat, "apparently miscalculated the length of my absence. Anyhow, she wasn't in the office. I picked out a few letters by myself and more or less lost track of time until—until I got the news."

"Mr. Greer, you're pretty fond of your family, aren't you?"

"Fond of my family?" echoed Harby, startled. In surprise, and in that order, he looked at Lucy, at Till, at Ted. Harby answered himself as much as the policeman. "Naturally, I'm fond of my family. They're all I have."

And then, abruptly, Harby got the drift. In amazement, he gazed at the policeman.

"I'm so fond of my family, Dwight," the lawyer said, "that I didn't figure out a way to blow up my family's home and my wife's sister with it. To be sure, you've just established that I had the opportunity, but I'm afraid you'll have to hunt for someone who had a motive."

"Most of us can use more money than we've got, Mr. Greer. Just how much are you and your family going to inherit under Mrs. Rixey's will?"

"Arabella's will!"

Dwight obtained a different reaction than he had expected. Harby's eyes and Lucy's eyes met. Harby grinned a little wryly.

"Speak up, Lucy. What was the last reading on Arabella's fluctuating will? Weren't you cut down again about a month ago?"

"Ten days ago," said Lucy. "Yes, it was about ten days ago when Arabella told me she had decided to change her will again."

"Reducing you this time to what?"

"Harby, I'm not just sure. Alec," said Lucy brightly, "will know. Alec, did you draw up another new will for Arabella last week?"

"Last Tuesday," Alec replied.

The young lawyer moved uneasily in his chair. It flickered through Alec's mind that possibly he shouldn't disclose a client's affairs without requesting a court order, even though the client was dead—murdered. Lucy's gentle eyes were waiting.

"Alec, what are the terms of Arabella's last will? I mean, what do I inherit?"

"Three thousand dollars," Alec said.

For a moment Timothy couldn't believe his ears.

"Three thousand dollars," the policeman repeated in consternation. "Three thousand dollars to her own sister out of over a million! Why, that's outrageous! What do the others—her niece, her nephew, her brother-in-law—what do they get?"

"Nothing," said Alec Bates.

Twelve

NOBODY ELSE was surprised by Arabella's will.

But Dwight had received a body blow. The moment he heard

the terms of that last will and testament, the monetary motive for Arabella's murder—the motive for murder that Dwight best understood—was swept away insofar as the four Greers were concerned. What did Harby, Lucy, Till, Ted Greer get out of Arabella's death? On the credit side was Lucy's legacy—three thousand dollars. On the debit side was the total loss of a house worth fifteen, eighteen thousand dollars in the present market. The house, every stick of furniture owned by the Greers, every stitch of clothing except what was on their backs.

"It does seem as though," Till said, with a mournful glance at her mother, "that Aunt Arabella could have left you the pearls. Your stepfather promised them to you."

"Hush, darling. A verbal promise isn't binding. The pearls were Arabella's to leave as she chose."

Claude fingered the rings in his pocket, and frowned slightly. Usually when Arabella expected to see Lucy she made a point of wearing her pearls, perhaps because Lucy loved them so. Claude's mind returned to a still figure lying on a stretcher, and his face cleared. No, he hadn't overlooked the pearls. The necklace must be safe at home.

Dwight found it hard to swallow that will. Ordinarily, in homicide cases, he was quite indifferent to the victim, regarding these unfortunates with a godlike impersonality. For the first time on a case, Dwight almost hated the victim. Over a million, and three measly thousand to her sister. What kind of a woman had Arabella Rixey been, anyway?

Lucy explained.

The tale of Arabella's will, and the frequent changes in that will, went back thirty years to Arabella's and Lucy's girlhood. In the first shock and grief of losing both parents with the sinking of the *Lusitania,* Arabella had temporarily stepped out of character, and decided quite correctly that her father would have wanted his stepdaughter to share in his own daughter's fortune. So thirty years ago, Arabella had put Lucy down for one hundred thousand dollars—which, thought Dwight, was more like it.

Unfortunately, as the years went by, whenever Arabella be-

came displeased with Lucy, she changed her will. Her first serious displeasure arose when Lucy left her stepsister's roof and married. Arabella gave the bride and groom a handsome silver service, and cut Lucy's legacy to fifty thousand. Through the years, Arabella had been displeased in other ways. Lucy and Harby unthinkingly named their infant son to suit themselves, without consulting Arabella. On the day she sent her little nephew a silver rattle, Arabella reduced Lucy's prospective legacy two thousand dollars. In 1926, the summer before Till was born, the Greers packed their small son in the car and took a ten-day holiday, neglecting to inform Arabella. Lucy's forty-eight thousand became forty-five. When Hárby took up golf in 1930 and was out of town a week appearing in an amateur tournament, he discovered that Arabella didn't approve of golf when she asked him to draw up a new will in which Lucy received forty thousand. By 1941, the year Ted started in college instead of going to work, Lucy's legacy, what with this and that, had shrunk to ten thousand. When Till began to go to college instead of attending secretarial school, her mother's legacy dropped to five thousand.

"I don't remember," Lucy said, "all the things we did that Arabella didn't like. But we did them, and used my money up."

"What did you do," Dwight inquired bleakly, "ten days ago?"

"Oh, that was Till's evening dress," Lucy said. "Till and I ran into Arabella downtown in Gawaine's, just when we were having this dress fitted. It—annoyed my sister."

"I don't get it. Why would Mrs. Rixey care about your daughter's dress?"

"I suppose," Lucy said meditatively, "it was because Arabella, after all, didn't have such a lot to interest her."

This remark contained a slight slip in tact, betrayed the fact that Lucy hadn't thought of Claude as exactly an absorbing interest. Claude looked a trifle flushed. Jessie Wayne glanced in his direction, and her spectacled eyes were moistly sympathetic.

"Your sister didn't like this dress?" Dwight asked, perplexed.

"That wasn't quite it," Lucy said. "Arabella took the position that Harby and I couldn't afford a custom-made dress for our daughter. I didn't agree."

"So because of that Mrs. Rixey chipped your legacy down to three thousand."

"Yes," said Lucy.

Dwight pondered the evening dress which had cost two thousand dollars. Harby was also thinking of the cost, but in concrete terms. An unpaid bill at Gawaine's would also soon be coming in. Miss Elizabeth's mind went off on a tangent, on a little by-track of its own. She was wondering what Arabella had been doing in Gawaine's ten days ago, when the luckless encounter took place. Arabella's clothes were custom made—but in New York.

"Mrs. Greer," Dwight said, "did you and your sister fight this whole thing out in the fitting room at Gawaine's?"

"I suppose," Lucy said fairly, "you might call it fighting. Arabella's voice got rather loud. Perhaps mine did, too. Arabella explained her position, and I explained mine, saying that Till needed and must have the dress. When I could, I tried to please my sister. . . ."

"Why? Why didn't you give her what-for?"

"I expect," Lucy said, "I tried to please Arabella because I felt sorry for her."

"Sorry!"

"I've got a great deal out of my life," Lucy said slowly. "I have my husband and my children. Perhaps Arabella got a great deal out of her life, too. I didn't always think so. Even with me, Arabella lost out. When a difference came up between my stepsister and my family," Lucy said, "I always chose to please my family."

Dwight was stumped.

He stared, uncomprehending, at this thin, sweet-faced earnest-eyed woman, with the fluff of gray-blond hair. What made her tick? Would one woman kill another woman because she was sorry for her? Would this fifty-year-old woman, a good wife and mother, kill her stepsister to put a final period to that

stepsister's meddling in her family's business? Suppose she'd suddenly decided that everybody, including Arabella herself, would be happier with Arabella dead.

Lucy Greer hadn't the shadow of an alibi. That mix-up in the lunch appointment was against her. There was only Lucy's word that she was to meet Arabella at the Shoreham.

The Shoreham was only five blocks away. Lucy could have trotted over to the hotel, milled around the crowded lobby, nipped back home, met her sister, done the dirty work, and serenely returned to the Shoreham to await the news of the explosion. It would have been easy for Lucy to persuade Arabella to step into the cellar. Any excuse would serve between one sister and another.

Dwight looked at Lucy Greer, said heavily, "This money Mrs. Rixey kept taking away from you, who did she leave it to?"

"Arabella always gave my money to charity," Lucy began soberly, and then she couldn't help it. Lucy giggled.

Dwight abandoned further study of this incomprehensible female idiot, who apparently saw some kind of mysterious joke in losing a fortune in good hard cash. He turned, addressed himself to Alec Bates.

"So $97,000 goes to charity, $3,000 goes to Mrs. Greer. Where does the balance go? Who gets the million?"

Alec hesitated. Claude laid down the stump of a cigar that had long since gone out.

"I do," Claude said. "Naturally, Arabella left the bulk of her estate to me. I was her husband."

"Mr. Rixey . . ."

"Dwight, you needn't remind me again that I was in town this morning. I am fully aware of it. My cab dropped me on 'F' Street somewhere around ten o'clock."

"And then?"

"I went around the corner to Childs," Claude said acidly, "and ate my own breakfast."

He said nothing about the public phone booth in the restaurant, or about those frantic efforts he'd made to locate Ara-

bella, find out just what she was up to. Nor did Claude describe how he'd walked the streets of downtown Washington after breakfast, in search of his wife or the limousine. Why should he? Claude's silence left an unexplained interval of time in his morning, but to hell with that? The dangerous period was between half past twelve and two o'clock.

"I reached my office at twelve o'clock," Claude said, "just as Arabella was calling me on the phone. I can prove it. The building superintendent unlocked the office for me. Jenks and I both heard the ringing phone."

Alec Bates, who had certain personal reasons for following Claude's story closely, recalled that in his earlier account Claude had spoken of unlocking the office door himself. It seemed a curious discrepancy. Alec frowned.

"But, Claude, why didn't you use your own office keys?"

Claude started. He glared at his young employee. His voice wasn't quite as frigid as he hoped to make it. Indeed Claude stammered a little.

"I didn't have my keys this morning. I—I forgot my key ring, left it in my other trousers. So Jenks had to let me in."

It wasn't like Claude to forget things. He'd never forgotten his keys before. Alec was puzzled.

Dwight didn't care how Rixey had got into his office, but he did care how long he had stayed there, and whether Rixey could establish by the evidence of a disinterested party, the length of his stay. It seemed that Claude was prepared to do just that.

"At 12:15 I got Arabella's second phone call, telling me she'd changed her luncheon arrangements and was meeting Lucy at the house."

"So *you* say, Mr. Rixey."

"Jenks will bear me out," Claude reported triumphantly. "I asked him in to repair a sticking window. Jenks was with me in the office working on the window until I left. It was nearly one o'clock when the two of us went down in the elevator together.

On the street the helpful Jenks had summoned a taxi for Claude. The taxi had carried Claude straight from the office

building to the squash courts in Spring Valley where Claude had arrived at 1:45, and where he had remained, with a dozen other sweating men, until he received the news.

"Do you recall the kind of cab that took you back to Spring Valley?"

"A yellow cab," Claude said to the policeman with emphasis. He added, surprisingly, "It just happens that I can help you out with the driver's name. We got talking, he was a nice fellow, and we introduced ourselves. The driver will remember the trip. I tipped him a dollar."

With that, Claude fished from his pocket a piece of paper on which he had scribbled the taxi driver's name and address. Sometimes people do fall into conversation with their taxi drivers, and exchange names. Under the circumstances, however, it did seem that Claude had chosen a singularly fortunate occasion on which to do so. Sometimes an alibi can be a little too good. It almost seemed as though Claude might have anticipated a future need to account for every single minute of his time between twelve and two o'clock.

Dwight eyed the widower thoughtfully. Claude didn't like his expression.

"See here, Dwight. I resent being singled out this way. I was nowhere near Woodland Road between twelve o'clock and two, as I can prove. I loved my wife," Claude said. "Arabella loved and trusted me. Ask the servants if they ever heard us quarrel! Why, in our five years together, Arabella and I . . ."

And then Claude paused. He would have liked to describe five years of unalloyed perfection. But Arabella's relatives, and even Alec, knew different. Claude swallowed.

"I won't pretend," Claude said, "that my wife and I weren't like all married couples. We had our ups and downs. For instance, you may hear that we had a little trouble last winter in Florida. I lost more at the race tracks than Arabella felt I could afford. You're a married man yourself, Dwight. I gave up gambling, and the trouble was promptly settled."

Alec wondered whether Claude really had given up his interest in the race tracks. Claude certainly didn't spend much

time in the office. Also Alec wondered about that sticking window. He couldn't recall any office window that was out of order.

"With Arabella alive," Claude said, "I had Arabella and everything else that any man could want. My wife always felt and often said that whatever belonged to her also belonged to me—her husband. Arabella's will shows how she regarded me!"

Dwight let it go at that.

The policeman summed up where he was. Two people with no alibis—Harby Greer, Lucy Greer. Harby and Lucy had no motive that would leap readily to a jury's eye. Rixey had an alibi but he also had a motive, though he denied it. Most men would prefer having a fortune to themselves, to having that fortune doled out, however generously, by a rich wife. Dwight strongly doubted Arabella's generosity, after hearing of Arabella's reaction to her husband's race-track losses.

Ted Greer, the prime suspect a short time ago, not only had no apparent motive for killing his rich old aunt, but, thanks to Miss Scanlon, was, like Claude, invested with an iron-clad alibi. Somewhere Ted's alibi was fishy, but Dwight couldn't figure just where and just how. Not now, he couldn't.

Dorritt and Jessie could have run out to Woodland Road during their lunch hour, set the basement scene and carried out the murder. But why would Jessie Wayne desire to do away with Mrs. Rixey? Dwight didn't know, but he did know that Jessie had a—a disappointed face. Once he'd known a Polish nursemaid who had tucked the six-months-old baby in her charge into a furnace, because she'd been jilted by her lover. The nursemaid's face, the look around the eyes, as Dwight remembered, was not unlike the face of Jessie Wayne.

A motive might be found for Dorritt, a motive bound up in what the blonde felt for Ted Greer. Timothy Dwight, like Jessie Wayne, was not insensible to the small, outward evidences of passionate love. But he couldn't see just how Dorritt could help the boy friend by knocking off his aunt.

Miss Elizabeth Mitchell, so she said, had been sleeping from half past twelve until half past one. It was eminently plain that Miss Mitchell was fond of her neighbors, that she'd do a lot for

them. But neighborly feelings have limits. You don't remove your neighbor's unpleasant relative to oblige them, commit a murder as a favor.

Dwight had yet to question two people—Alec Bates and Till. Bates, the brilliant young lawyer who had worked for Arabella Rixey, had been away from the office when Rixey arrived. Alec's whereabouts definitely needed to be established.

It was only because he was confident that nineteen-year-old Till had been demurely sitting in a college classroom, and wanted to be rid of her, that Dwight turned first to the girl. Till smiled at him. Gratified, Dwight smiled back. With elephantine gallantry, he asked for her story.

Till opened her mouth at once. Before the first words came, Alec spoke to her.

"Get it straight, Till. Don't get mixed up, darling. Remember, this is a serious inquiry.

Annoyed, Dwight wondered why the red-head didn't let the little lady do her talking for herself. Others weren't exasperated with Alec. Others grasped that Alec was saying: "Don't lie, Till. Don't make a mess of things. Think carefully, Till."

Till sent a hurt look at Alec and was silent. Dwight drew again upon his somewhat rusty stock of gallantry.

"Don't let them rattle you, little lady. Just tell me where you were today between twelve o'clock and two."

"My English Lit class meets on Mondays between twelve o'clock and two," Till began stubbornly, glibly.

Again she was interrupted.

"Till," Lucy said suddenly, "tell me something. Did you call up from college this morning to find out whether I was going out, so you could cut English Lit? Did you come home and get Mickey and take him somewhere with you?"

Till's face went scarlet. Mothers are the best detectives, after all. Mother are incredible. The girl's lips trembled, steadied into defiance. She threw back her shoulders. Her head went up. Words burst from Till.

"Yes," Till said. "Yes, I cut English Lit. Alec and I had a date. At half past twelve I came home with Alec and got Mickey.

There wasn't a soul in the house, I got my dog, my own dog, and left. Alec and I took Mickey to Haines Point, and we had a picnic lunch together. So there!" Till said, "What's wrong with that?"

So there, indeed!

Timothy Dwight was standing in a commanding position on the hearthstone, the better to view the company. Confounded, he stepped backward. His shoulders brushed the mantel. An envelope, perched against the mirror, fell forward noiselessly and the address was hidden.

Automatically Dwight reached out and put the envelope straight, so that it rested against the mirror and facing out again. You could see that the envelope was addressed to Harbison Greer, if you were looking. Dwight was looking at Till.

This newborn chick, this baby, had been in the house at half past twelve. Her own mother had made her admit the truth because she couldn't believe the girl had anything to do with murder. The policeman couldn't believe it himself. If Till Greer had tinkered with those gas connections, if she had lured her aunt into the cellar and left her there to die, then Timothy Dwight was a monkey.

Till, however, had not been alone. She'd brought the boy friend with her. Dwight turned savagely on Alec Bates, who had been in charge of Arabella's business affairs.

"How long were you in the house?"

"I wasn't in the house at all," Alec replied, hating this public dragging forth of his and Till's private affairs. It would make them both look ridiculous. "Till thought . . ."

"Leave the girl out of it a minute. We're talking about you. Didn't you meet her at college and bring her out here to Woodland Road?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"I made Alec wait down the block at the bus stop," Till said. "I made Alec wait on the corner. You see," Till explained in an injured voice. "I'm not supposed to be old enough to have dates with my friends on class days."

Harby drew in a long breath. He remembered Till chattering

gaily in the car that morning on the way to college, planning even then to deceive him and Lucy. To her mother, Till was not Little Eva. Lucy saw straight through Till, saw that inside Till was shaking with nerves. Till was overdoing innocence. There was something wrong. God help us, what was wrong with Till?

"You went in the house at half past twelve," Dwight said to Till. "What happened?"

"Why nothing. I just went in and got my dog."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"Of course not. Mother was gone. There was no one home."

"How long were you in the house?"

"I don't know," Till replied. "Really, I have no idea. Not very long, I imagine. I haven't the slightest sense of time. Ask Mother, ask anybody who knows me."

She was a little too airy. Alec got the blame for it.

"Maybe your time sense is better, Bates," Dwight said grimly. "How long did you wait on the corner? And did you stay on the corner all the time? Or did you walk around a bit?"

"I didn't budge until Till came back with Mickey. I don't know how long it was. It didn't seem—long."

"See here, Bates! It might be easier than you seem to think for me to find out how long you stood on that corner, exactly what time you and the girl started off to Haines Point."

"Why, these days," Till said, "all the buses are so crowded you can't even see who's sitting on your lap. Why, three buses went right past us before . . ."

"Little lady, you didn't take no bus anywhere in Washington, with no dog along. If you and your boy friend and your dog went to Haines Point and had a picnic, you took a taxi. Maybe you didn't write down your driver's name, like your uncle here, but give me a couple of hours and I'll dig up your driver."

"Oh," said Till.

"Yes, we took a taxi," Alec said. "The driver picked us up around one o'clock, possibly a few minutes later. I probably waited for Till about thirty minutes."

"Was it that long?" asked Till.

Thirty minutes did seem very long to walk a short block, enter

an empty house, get one's dog and rejoin one's date waiting on the corner. Too long.

Only Ted, her brother, could have helped Till in that moment of sinking terror. Till dared not look at Ted. Somehow, some way, all by herself, she had to explain exactly how she had spent thirty minutes in a house that was—empty.

"Miss Greer," said Dwight, "how do you know the house was empty?"

"I called my mother, as I went in. She'd told me on the phone that she was lunching at the Shoreham, but there was a chance she might still be home. I called, and no one answered."

"Then you didn't go through the house?"

"I went straight upstairs," Till said, "and got my dog. Mickey was shut in my bedroom. I had to hunt his leash. It was underneath a blanket on my bed. That took quite a while, probably ten minutes."

"You didn't go down in the basement?"

"Of course not!" Till cried hysterically. "What business would I have in the basement? I didn't even know Aunt Arabella was coming to the house. The last I heard she was meeting Mother at the hotel. I went straight upstairs, I tell you. And I stayed upstairs until I left!"

"Take it easy, take it easy."

Till's eyes, literally too frightened to take in and carry to her brain what the eyes were seeing, suddenly took in and grasped something from Dwight's face. She looked again at the policeman. Her relief was terrific. Why, this awful policeman liked her. He was going to believe almost anything she said. The simpler the explanation the better. Till felt calm and competent.

"Oh, yes," said Till with another smile, "and of course I combed my hair and put on fresh lipstick. That takes an awfully long time when you're going on a picnic with your favorite beau!"

Till didn't fool her mother for a minute, but with Dwight she almost got away with it. This jibed so neatly with his conception of what nice young girls were like. The show was given away, or almost given away, from another quarter.

Till hadn't looked at her brother, not once. But Ted had looked at Till. Sitting on the edge of his chair, he had watched her through every word as though with his own will be could pull her through safely to the end. As Till finished, Ted sank back with a long, audible sigh.

Dwight transferred his gaze to Ted Greer, the young man with no apparent motive and with, so far, an iron-clad alibi. Nobody could be simultaneously at the Veterans' Bureau and three miles away at home. Suddenly Dwight recalled something from the afternoon.

"Somebody—Miss Mitchell here—told me you didn't bring back any souvenirs from overseas."

"Miss Mitchell's right. I didn't," Ted said, puzzled at this turn.

"In what's left of your stuff next door, there's an overseas helmet. I saw it myself."

"Oh, that," Ted said indifferently. "I'd hardly class that as a souvenir, and I guess Miss Mitchell didn't either. Naturally I brought home my foot locker, my issue gear, my helmet, my uniforms." And then Ted hesitated. "Oh, yes," he said slowly, "I've just remembered. Possibly you will find a silver-embossed Japanese pistol in my things."

"Don't you call a Japanese pistol a souvenir?"

"Obviously, I do. But this pistol didn't belong to me. I was keeping it for—someone else."

The owner of the Japanese pistol—with the pattern of tiny silver storks flying across the grip—sat very close to Ted. It was Till. One of her beaux had given her the weapon months ago, someone who didn't know the humilitaing family rule that Till Greer wasn't supposed to accept anything but flowers and candy from her admirers. To avoid argument, simply to save everybody's feelings, to say nothing of saving her own dignity, she had quietly packed away the trophy in her brother's locker. At the time it seemed like a good solution.

Till was silent. She wished Ted wouldn't look at her in that funny way, as though he expected something.

"Till do you remember that Japanese pistol?"

"Do you mean the pistol in your locker?" the girl asked nervously. "The one with the cute silver storks on the handle? What about it?"

"Nothing," Ted said. "It was just a souvenir I was keeping for a—friend."

Till wavered, but the words refused to come. It wasn't fair, thought the girl, glancing furtively from her brother to Dwight, that she be bothered further with that awful policeman. She'd already done her share. The old pistol didn't matter anyway. How could it matter?

Dwight didn't inquire into the identity of Ted's friend. He lost interest. No connection between a Japanese pistol and Arabella Rixey's death occurred to him. In this case, weapons didn't figure. Mrs. Rixey had died by gas. Gas . . .

And then Dwight's dilatory memory pounced on the souvenir he'd sought in vain that afternoon.

"Tell me, Greer. Did you bring your gas mask home?"

"Oh, for God's sake," said Ted. "I think I did have a gas mask. What on earth are you driving at? If you're suggesting a gas mask was necessary to do that job next door, you're much mistaken. Illuminating gas isn't quick acting like lewisite or . . ."

"Somewhere around half past twelve, gas commenced pouring in that basement ten thousand, twelve thousand cubic a feet a minute."

"I assure you that if I'd hammered the valve core out of that pipe, which I didn't, I wouldn't have tackled the job wearing a gas mask. I'd have worked fast and left the basement in a hurry."

"Maybe," said Dwight, "you would have."

As he spoke, the policeman decided that he was done with these people for that night. He'd pushed them and himself to the limit. He'd worked like Billy-be-damned, and he hadn't got the evidence to ask for a warrant with a name on it. Lord, he wasn't even sure in his own mind—not now—which one of the nine was guilty.

There was too much that needed finding out. Arabella Rixey

had rushed to town that morning, with her husband rushing by taxi after her, and Dwight didn't know why. He didn't know where Arabella had gone after she left the drugstore, where she'd spent her morning.

He didn't know where Arabella had been when she telephoned Claude, though he was convinced Claude knew. He didn't know why Arabella had desired to see Harbison Greer, though he thought Harby knew. He didn't know why she had desired Lucy's company for lunch, though he thought likely Lucy knew. The mix-up in the appointment was a complete mystery.

Sometime during the morning, Mrs. Rixey had planned to lunch at the Shoreham. Later Arabella had made a switch, which had worked out poorly for Arabella. Something, or maybe someone, had changed Mrs. Rixey's mind for her. A few minutes after one o'clock she walked into a house that was filling rapidly with gas. Someone had met her in a house that wasn't—empty.

There were a lot of things Timothy Dwight didn't know. One thing he did know. He got up from his chair.

"One of you people sitting here," the policeman said, "killed that woman. One of you done it. You know that, I know that. We all do."

He walked through the archway into the hall, and turned around to make his final remark.

"Good night, folks. See you later. Sweet dreams, one and all," said Timothy Dwight, and went on out the door.

Thirteen

LIKE NINE survivors washed to shore on a life raft, these nine by preference would have parted and gone singly in nine directions. Only Lucy perhaps would have chosen to go somewhere with Harby.

Unfortunately, for most of them, no division was possible.

Finding accommodations for a family of four in any Washington hotel at a late hour was out of the question. Alec Bates left at once, without thinking to suggest that Ted might like to come along and bunk with him.

In Miss Mitchell's mind the three upstairs bedrooms revolved like a game of musical chairs. Everybody changed positions. Harby and Lucy could occupy her comfortable double bed and she could make out on the rattan sofa; Dorritt and Jessie might not be crazy about doubling up but Dorritt had twin beds, which meant that Till could sleep in Jessie's room. Ted was left out in the cold. Well, there was a camp cot which could be set up and crowded into the unfinished storeroom. Ted needed his rest worse than anyone, but he probably wouldn't mind roughing it.

Anyway, there was no other solution. Unless—Miss Mitchell recalled the thirty rooms out in Spring Valley. She glanced at Claude unexpectedly, with mild curiosity.

Claude picked up his hat, said good night, and went.

All through the dreadful evening, Claude's mind had been pulling toward the moment he could reach the nearest public telephone. As the limousine turned off Woodland Road into Connecticut Avenue, Claude picked up the speaking tube. And then it happened that Claude glanced back.

Another car, a dark blue sedan, had swung into Connecticut Avenue, behind them. Claude frowned.

"Greggson, go around the block."

Greggson went around the block, turned back into the Avenue. The dark blue sedan also went around the block and turned back into the Avenue, right behind them. Again Claude spoke into the tube.

"It looks as though the police are following us."

"Sir, I wouldn't let it worry me. Regular police procedure, I would judge. Nothing personal."

"Well, I don't like it. I want you to shake them off. Try a quick run through the Park, and then double back on the Massachusetts Avenue bridge!"

"Sir, I'm afraid I can't do that. I wouldn't feel right about attempting to elude officers of the law. A matter of conscience."

"You'll take my orders," Claude began furiously, "or else . . ."

"Mr. Rixey," said the dispassionate voice of the chauffeur, "when I drove you to town last week, as I recall, I delivered you at that 'E' Street billiard parlor where wagers on the horses are laid."

"Oh," Claude said.

"I haven't felt it necessary to volunteer the information," Greggson remarked serenely. "Mr. Rixey, I rather like my job with you."

Claude dropped the speaking tube.

Three quarters of an hour later the limousine and the sedan arrived in Spring Valley. Greggson seemed to enjoy the drive. He was smiling gently. In Spring Valley, hours after the sun had set, the night was still stiflingly hot.

Without a word to his unwelcome guests in the sedan, Claude leaped from the limousine, rushed inside and shot upstairs. A door banged as he vanished into the dressing room where he and Arabella had parted that morning.

In the early days of the Rixey marriage a telephone had been installed in the dressing room for the convenience of the groom, who had sometimes felt the need to use a telephone in privacy. Business calls, of course—or so Arabella had been led to understand. Surely the police couldn't yet have tapped the wires. At any rate, the widower must chance it.

Claude didn't know the home telephone number of Rufus Pomerane, that elusive lawyer. With shaking hands; he opened the directory. Pomerane lived in Wesley Heights, where at two A.M. Pomerane was doubtlessly sleeping the sleep of the just. Claude didn't mind getting Pomerane up.

It was Mrs. Pomerane whom Claude got up. Mrs. Rufus Pomerane, Wesley Heights housewife, was ordinarily a courteous woman. Her courtesy had been severely tried. Three times within the past half hour she had been roused from bed by people demanding to speak to her husband, and declining to identify themselves.

"Who," inquired Mrs. Pomerane, "is this?"

"A client of your husband's. It's imperative that I speak to him."

"I didn't catch the name."

"Smith," Claude said, "John Smith. One of your husband's clients."

"Mr. Pomerane isn't available."

"I must speak to him."

"At half past twelve today," said Mrs. Pomerane, as she had said three times before, "Mr. Pomerane got word that his father had suffered a stroke. He caught the next plane to Montana—he didn't even come home to pack a bag."

"How do I reach him in Montana?"

"You don't," Mrs. Pomerane replied. "My father-in-law is a rancher and lives eighteen miles from the nearest telephone. I hardly think my husband would care to leave his dying father's bedside and drive eighteen miles to talk to you."

Claude hardly thought so, either.

"What's the phone number of your husband's secretary?"

"Miss Culp," said Mrs. Pomerane, "hasn't had a telephone since she moved into her new apartment six months ago."

"Madam, I must talk to one or the other. My business is extremely urgent."

"You may be able to reach Miss Culp, at my husband's office at nine o'clock on Wednesday morning," said Mrs. Pomerane, provided Miss Culp feels like opening the office at nine o'clock on Wednesday. Tomorrow is the Fourth of July, and Miss Culp has never been known to work on holidays. Do you care to discuss your urgent business with me, Mr. Smith?"

Mr. Smith didn't. Mrs. Pomerane hung up. Claude hung up. For a moment, in his frustration, he felt like crying. He pulled himself together.

Moving swiftly, Claude passed from his dressing room into Arabella's quarters. Since morning the clothes she'd strewn everywhere, a dirty highball glass on the bureau, a half-eaten box of bonbons, had been carefully put away. The cigarette ashes scattered at random on the velvet carpet—what did you

pay servants for?—had been swept up. No trace of Arabella's personality remained. This was the immaculate, costly chamber of a rich woman, as sterile and dead as Arabella.

Claude went instantly to the small wall safe. Locked. Arabella had never got around to entrusting anybody but herself with the combination. But Claude's impression, drawn from five years of careful observation, was that she'd kept a copy of the combination hidden somewhere in her desk. His previous observation paid off.

Claude opened the safe. He hardly hoped to find what he sought, nor did he. But Arabella's husband, studying the situation in advance of the estate appraisers, as any prudent heir might feel inclined to do, discovered something else that brought him a shock of sharp dismay.

Arabella's pearls were gone. She'd worn the necklace after all.

The police must know at once. Claude sped back to the telephone. He'd actually snatched the receiver from the hook, when he recalled Arabella's missing purse. The day had been hot, the necklace was unusually heavy. Suppose Arabella had removed the pearls, put them in her purse.

There was no doubt whatever that to report the loss of the necklace would be to stimulate enormously official interest in the purse. The police would redouble their efforts to find it. Arabella's pearls were conservatively valued at $20,000. Claude would have given more than that to insure that Arabella's purse should never come to light.

Claude decided sadly it would be wiser just to forget the pearls, and slowly replaced the telephone. One good thing—he could afford the loss. Indeed, with the circumstances what they were, Claude couldn't afford not to take this loss.

At about the time Claude lost interest in $20,000 worth of pearls, Lucy stood before the mirror in Miss Mitchell's bathroom using Dorritt's cold cream. Lucy was thinking how queer it was to own nothing of your own. Not a nightgown or a pair of slippers, a bed to sleep on, a sheet to cover you. Just gifts and loans from other people.

Never in her life, thought Lucy, had she owned so little that was tangible. Not even thirty years ago when her parents drowned. Not even when the pearls her stepfather had promised Lucy went along with the rest of the estate to Arabella. Thirty years ago she'd been young enough to weep over the pearls, even as she mourned her parents. Lucy smiled gently at that ignorant girl of long ago.

Lucy finished with her face, decided she was too tired to bother with her hair. She left the bathroom. Before she went to bed, Lucy made the rounds upstairs. A quick stop in the second best bedroom to sit a moment on the edge of Dorritt's bed, give Dorritt a tender hug, and then bring in Jessie, who sat grimly braiding her own mousy colored locks, by making the conversation general. Lucy joked about all the trouble caused by neighbors in distress.

"When you and Ted marry," she promised Dorritt, "this kind of thing might be chronic. Dorritt, you'd better start your married life in a hotel!"

Dorritt never knew the energy that was spent to make her laugh, to lift a little the thickening cloud of fear which enveloped her. Lucy talked as though married life was bound to come, as though everything would be all right. Dorritt hugged Lucy with almost passionate gratitude. For Lucy it was repayment enough. She meant to be a wonderful mother-in-law.

A moment in the third best bedroom with Till, and no awkward questions asked either. Till, querulous and complaining at the lumpiness of Jessie's mattress, was in no mood to bear with scolding. Till was heartbroken because Miss Elizabeth and Jessie had combined to banish Mickey to the cellar. Till tearfully wanted back her own bed, her own dog on the foot of it. For Till, Lucy found words of comfort, a special kiss.

Across the hall in the storeroom, Lucy had an extra special kiss for Ted. He needed it, although he lifted a sardonic, interrogative eyebrow to prove he didn't. In Ted's opinion a man should look after and protect his mother, not lean on her. He wished Lucy would go away.

Mothers didn't know what it was all about. Lucy's son

wasn't interested in hearing Lucy's giggled comments on his sleeping arrangements. Ted didn't give a damn where Ted Greer slept or on what. God, half the people in the world would consider this suffocating little hell-hole as unbelievable luxury. It had a roof, didn't it? Ted thought that he could hardly bear to listen to Mother making jokes about all the labeled trunks and boxes, inviting him to laugh at the fantastic care with which Miss Elizabeth labeled all of her possessions. Let Miss Elizabeth go her way, and, thank you, I'll go mine. Mother was behaving as though this was some kind of inconvenient lark that would be over in the morning, as though Timothy Dwight was going to disappear, as though the scene downstairs would pass like a bad dream.

Well, it wasn't a bad dream. Timothy Dwight wasn't going to disappear. He would be back. You could count on that. It wasn't going to be over in the morning. It wouldn't be over until everything, every last thing was discovered, and Ted Greer took that last long walk.

"Mother you're nice," Ted said. "I love you—quite a lot. You needn't keep trying so hard."

"Trying, Ted?"

"I know you know," Ted said, "that I didn't kill Aunt Arabella. I didn't acquire a taste for killing even when I had to do it. I hated Aunt Arabella as much as any Japanese I ever saw, but I didn't kill her."

"Ted, you—the way you talk, dear—I wish you wouldn't. People, people who don't know you, they don't understand."

"Why not talk the truth, when it's certain to come out? If you can't hide facts, you've got to face them. Mother," Ted said suddenly, "you may as well find out now as later."

"Yes?" said Lucy placidly, sounding only faintly expectant.

"I came back to the house today from the Veterans' Bureau," Ted said. "I was over in the house from quarter after twelve, until nearly one o'clock."

Lucy didn't move an eyelid. She thought that she would faint, but she didn't even grasp at the cot for support.

"Son," Lucy said, "can we keep this from that—that awful policeman? How are we to keep the police from finding out?"

"I don't know," Ted said, and looked at Lucy. Mother was a —a great woman. Great in the true sense—a great human being. No questions but the one right question, no screaming, no tears and beating of the breast, no hysterics; why, Mother wasn't even shocked. From Mother he got exactly the right words, uttered in an even voice, words that told him Ted Greer wasn't alone with a danger as terrible as the danger to be found on any battlefield, priceless words that told him he wasn't G.I. Joe any more, one pea in a bushelful of peas, each little pea expendable. He was a civilian now, he wasn't expendable; people cared. He was Ted Greer, belonging to a family that would stick with him through everything. His mother had told him so. Ted knew that until the day he or Lucy died he could count on faith and love. "Mother," Ted said, "I just don't know whether we can keep Dwight from finding out I was in the house. I doubt it."

"But Miss Scanlon says . . ."

"Miss Scanlon is mistaken. She didn't see me leave the waiting room. I turned my chair over to another guy, because I was expecting to be back. She saw my place was occupied and thought it was me. It's as simple as that."

"But this other man . . ."

"Sure, he's going to remember I gave him my chair. Christ, I think I even told him I was headed home. I know I did. He was just holding the chair as a favor. This is how it happened. The minute I hit the waiting room," Ted said, "I discovered I hadn't brought along my discharge papers. If you want to confer about a job, you've got to have those papers."

"Why, oh why, Ted, didn't you telephone me? I was home until noon. I would have got your papers to you."

"I guess I was ashamed," Ted said, "to let you know I'd been so stupid and forgetful. I meant to just slip in and then take off again. I don't believe," Ted said, with a shadow of his old self-contempt, "that anybody saw me go in the house. I sneaked in the back way, as cautious as a burglar."

"And you left again before one o'clock," Lucy said with perfect faith, "so you didn't see Arabella. Ted, that's the important thing."

"Mother, you put a lot of trust in me."

"You're my son," Lucy said.

Under the circumstances, in the box he was in, it was extraordinary. But suddenly Ted felt almost elated, brimming with inappropriate confidence.

"No use kidding ourselves, Mother," Ted said. "It's going to be plenty tough to prove I didn't see Aunt Arabella. It was three minutes of one, when I left the house,"

"You didn't go back to the Veterans' Bureau?"

"No, I didn't. After I got home, I—I guess I changed my mind. I didn't even go down to my room and get my discharge papers. The bad thing is"—Ted said slowly—"is that whoever killed Aunt Arabella must have been in the basement while I was there."

"No," Lucy whispered. "No, Ted."

"Mother, I'm nearly sure. Once I even thought I heard someone in the basement moving around, but at the time it didn't make much impression on me. I was thinking of—something else."

"Ted, what did you do when you left the house?"

"I walked over to the Zoo again, by the alley," Ted said. "For over an hour, until I heard the explosion, I sat on a bench watching the bears, and—and thinking."

"Ted someone must have seen you. Someone must have seen you in the Zoo *after* Arabella arrived at the house."

"Mother, let's face it," Ted said. "Aunt Arabella practically walked in the front door as I walked out the back. I missed her by a hair. It would only take a minute to knock her out and put her in the cellar. So you see I haven't got the shadow of an alibi."

"I see," Lucy said.

"Besides," Ted went on more slowly still, "there's something else I should tell you—something really tough."

Ted's mother thought it would be safe to sit down now. Lucy

sank to the cot, and waited for her son to tell her something really tough. She didn't hurry him. Even a moment's respite, Lucy thought numbly, might help her meet her own test. Whatever happened, she mustn't fail her child.

Ted leaned against the trunk. He chewed his thumbnail, and debated how to tell about the phone call without frightening his mother too much. Unquestionably, the phone call was the point of greatest danger, the crux of the bad spot in which Ted Greer found himself. The phone call was tough indeed. It would sound bad, however told.

The phone had rung, very shortly after he entered the house. Ted could almost hear it shrilling now, clamorous and insistent in the quiet of the hall. He'd been in the kitchen, on his way to the basement. So he turned around, went through the kitchen and to the hall and answered the phone. It was a natural thing to do, but most unfortunate. By answering the phone in his own house, he'd learned things that he wished he didn't know.

From that single phone call Ted had learned that Arabella was on her way to the house, was due to arrive by one o'clock. From a few words of conversation, Ted had learned more than Timothy Dwight knew of Arabella Rixey's movements and activities that morning. He didn't care about hearing this stuff about Arabella, but nevertheless he'd heard it.

Miss Janet Culp, Rufus Pomerane's secretary, could be highly unprofessional when she had a nice young man on the other end of the wire. It was Janet Culp who had made the call. Janet had wanted to speak to Arabella Rixey, but since Arabella wasn't on the premises yet, Janet had gladly settled for Arabella's nephew and passed on the message. After talking briefly to Janet Culp, after hearing what Janet had to say, Ted Greer was provided with a dandy motive for killing Arabella Rixey. He was provided with the motive and the knowledge that Arabella was coming to the house.

Ted remembered the cooing, seductive, ain't-I-cute voice of Janet Culp. Would Janet remember his voice also? Would she remember that he'd been in the house just before his aunt arrived, remember exactly what Miss Janet Culp had most

unprofessionally told him? Don't make me laugh. Ted thought savagely to himself. Of course Janet would remember.

But the point was this. Would Janet promptly go running to the police with her story, would she talk it over first with Pomerane, or would Janet keep her mouth shut? Too bad, Ted thought drearily, that he wasn't a little better acquainted with the young woman who held his fate in her hands.

Lucy was still waiting.

At last he got his account of that disastrous telephone call in some kind of shape, decided more or less what to say. Ted glanced toward the cot. He hesitated.

The beam of light from the corner caught Lucy squarely in the face. She was in need of her rouge and lipstick. The thin white line around her colorless mouth meant that she'd received and was attempting to adjust herself to a knockout blow. Ted had seen that line around Lucy's mouth the day he got his orders to proceed to the Pacific. He realized at once that Mother was in no condition to receive the news of that phone call. She'd been pushed to the limit now.

"Well?" Lucy said. "Well, son? You had something else to tell me that is worrying you . . ."

"It's—it's Till," Ted said. "It's that nitwit Till. She came in while I was in the house and saw me."

"So that's what was wrong with Till?"

"I guess so," Ted said. "Mother, Till can be an awfully selfish, undependable girls at times."

"Ted, your sister did her best for you."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. Anyhow, Till's best is none too good. I thought myself," Ted said, "it was fairly obvious that she was lying through her teeth. She sure had me sweating it out downstairs. She had me sweating this noon when she showed up at the house. I thought I'd never get rid of her. She wouldn't leave."

"Why, Ted?"

"Mother, you know why. Till was in a twit because I'd caught her cutting class. She wouldn't leave until I promised I wouldn't

let on to you and Dad that she was dating Alec without permission. Till shouldn't do that kind of thing," Ted said virtuously.

"Ted, did you see Alec?"

"No, she told me she had Alec parked down on the corner. That's no way for a girl to act."

"Till is young."

"She's young," said Ted, "and screwy as they come. You never know, at least I don't, which way she's going to jump, what she's going to do and say next, when she'll decide to do some extra fancy showing off. It scares me just to think about Till. She's my sister, and I love her, but Till is an awfully weak reed to lean on."

"I'll talk to Till tomorrow," Lucy said. "You needn't be afraid, Ted, that your own sister will say now or ever that she saw you in the house."

Maybe Till wouldn't. Maybe Till could stick it out. But Lucy had no influence over—Janet Culp. Ted pulled his mother to her feet. He kissed Lucy on the cheek.

"Thank you, dear. Thank you for a lot of things. Now beat it. Get to bed and get some sleep. Things will look better in the morning."

Lucy kissed Ted back. She left the storeroom and quietly closed the door. But she almost staggered down the hall. She squared her shoulders again before she went into Miss Mitchell's bedroom and to Harby. Lucy's last kiss, her kiss for her husband, wasn't giving.

That kiss demanded.

Hold me tight, Harby, or I'll start screaming. Harby, I'm at the end of my string. I can't take any more. I can't take what I have taken. Harby, I'm serious. I'll jump out the window, I'll kill myself, I'll . . .

Aloud Lucy said, "Oh my, but I'm tired tonight."

"Don't talk, Lucy. You won't make sense. Just keep still."

Harby lifted his wife in his arms and laid her on Miss Mitchell's big double bed. He pulled off Lucy's shoes and stockings, took off her dress and underclothes. In the bureau drawer he

found a voluminous nightdress of Miss Elizabeth's, and put his wife's thin body in it. Then Harby kissed Lucy. His kiss was giving.

"Sleep, my darling," said Harby to his wife. Harby turned off the light, and, wearing his undershirt and shorts, got into bed beside her.

Fourteen

DOWNSTAIRS in the living room, Miss Mitchell heard the last of the activity die away on the second floor. She gazed dubiously at the rattan sofa. She sat down and tested it. The sofa was short and narrow. It was also extremely hard.

Other problems confronted Miss Mitchell. Her false teeth, for one. Usually she kept her teeth in a glass of water beside her bed. Tonight she would sleep in her teeth and also in her clothes, changing in the morning. She didn't propose to be caught sound asleep in a nightgown by someone wandering down from upstairs.

Miss Mitchell took down her sparse gray hair, combed and brushed it, re-did the hair in its usual bun, pinned the bun firmly to the back of her neck. The process was automatic. Her mind was a wild confusion of sudden death, Stillson wrenches, a mixed-up luncheon engagement, Till's fibbing, Ted's terror, Claude Rixey's embarrassment over forgotten office keys, the queerness of Arabella's being at Gawaine's, and what Miss Mitchell was going to feed seven people for breakfast. Miss Mitchell patted the last hair into place. She walked to the mantel, and hid the comb and brush behind the mirror. As she was turning away, she glanced idly at the envelope that had been perched on the mantel since the new mailman left it at the wrong house that morning.

The idle glance froze.

Miss Mitchell didn't move. Her face was impassive. But behind the impassive face her brain worked like a telegraph key, only faster. Dot. Dot. Dot. Dash. This was the message.

Uptown Hardware Store . . . Bill addressed to Harbison Greer . . . Stillson wrench . . . Lock nut of the gas valve in the basement.

She never remembered picking up the envelope. But she never forgot the small crackling sound of the paper as her steady fingers tore the flap, and pulled out the single sheet inside.

She read the bill addressed to Harbison Greer. It hardly took a second. In the debit column, a single item appeared. On the thirtieth of June, four days earlier, a Stillson wrench had been charged to the Greer account. The wrench, which played a small but vital part in taking Arabella Rixey's life, had cost $3.95.

For perhaps a minute, Miss Mitchell stood beside the mantel, staring at the sheet of paper in her hand. Then, out of the long mechanical habit of years, she moved automatically across the room and switched off the light. It was easier always for her to reach decisions that were difficult if it was dark. She didn't achieve total darkness. There was too much light next door. Through the newspapers tacked at the windows leaked the glow of the searchlights.

In the semi-gloom, she sat down on the rattan sofa and pondered what to do. It was a peculiarly difficult problem that she faced, with an origin deep within herself.

Elizabeth Mitchell, as are all of us, was the product of her own experience, what she had seen, done, thought and felt. A woman who had the time for introspection, she comprehended both herself and her place in society. Furthermore, she liked that place.

Miss Elizabeth was civilized to the point where she would have died of horror if cast up by shipwreck on a romantic desert isle. Hardship wouldn't have killed her. She could do with hardship in a scheme of things she understood. She just simply couldn't have existed without the egg woman, the grocery store,

the tailor shop, without hearing alarm clocks and telephones ring, seeing toasters toast, electric lights flash on, streetcars and buses run.

She knew the obligation of every good citizen to that complicated, delicately balanced system to which Miss Elizabeth Mitchell was so perfectly adjusted. You paid your taxes and your phone bill; you didn't try to cheat the bus driver of his dime even when you could; you reported malefactors to the police.

The Department of Sanitation was for collecting garbage, the Post Office was for delivering mail, the Fire Department was for fighting fire, the Police Department, unhappily represented in the person of Timothy Dwight, was for catching murderers.

Miss Elizabeth well understood her obligation. She despised Timothy Dwight from the bottom of her soul. Yet she wouldn't have done it for Harbison Greer. She simply couldn't have.

But Lucy, ah Lucy—there was the rub. Miss Elizabeth pictured Lucy lying upstairs in the double bed beside her husband, reaching out in dreams to touch the reassurance of Harby's shoulder, as she tossed in troubled sleep. For sweet Lucy's sake, Miss Elizabeth Mitchell sacrificed not the habits but the principles of a lifetime. You might say she gave herself to Lucy.

She replaced the sheet of paper in the envelope. Then she got up from the sofa and walked back to the fireplace, and knelt down on the hearthstone. She lighted a match and held it to a corner of the envelope. She laid the burning paper square against an andiron, and made herself watch the burning up of her own character, of what she was.

Halfway through, the little flame went out. It was torture to light a second match, to throw away a second chance. But she did it.

At last the envelope and the fatal bill were gone. They were finished. She leaned into the fireplace, flattened the still warm ashes and blew them all away.

Miss Mitchell got up stiffly from the hearthstone. She had committed a crime and she knew it. She had destroyed a piece

of evidence linking Harbison Greer with the murder of his sister-in-law. Her senses were preternaturally alert, sharpened by ordeal. At the edges of the newpapers covering the windows, fresh light suddenly flashed and deepened as next door another searchlight went on. It almost hurt her eyes.

The confusion of sounds over there was a roaring in her ears. And then, through that complex medley of noise, Miss Mitchell heard, within the house, in some distant part, another noise. A scratching noise, a scratching at a door, as though someone was demanding entrance.

Who?

She started and her hands flew to her breasts like the hands of fair-braided Marguerite, harking to the summons of the Devil. It wasn't the Devil coming to carry Miss Mitchell off. It was only Mickey in the cellar.

Mickey wanted out.

Miss Mitchell found the leash and opened the cellar door and the dog came bounding up. He jumped on her and licked her hands. To a woman who ordinarily disliked animals, this indiscriminate affection was singularly comforting.

"Good dog, good dog."

She rubbed Mickey's ears and snapped the leash to his collar. Together they left the kitchen. Miss Mitchell wasn't accustomed to dogs, nor was either she or Mickey entirely prepared for the eerie scene outside. Her own back yard was bright as day. Next door, blackened figures moved in the surging light, as men worked through one of the city's hottest nights. The workers were stripped to the waist, but they wore hip boots with heavy soles and thick, protecting trousers.

The axes were flying again. A dozen men were working over coarse sand sieves, scooping up the rubble, shaking it loosely, tossing the discard into barrels that were promptly hauled away. They labored in the blazing, brilliant center of the light. Obviously they were in search of something. What?

Miss Mitchell knew. They were looking for Arabella Rixey's purse. They were also looking for a Stillson wrench—the Stillson wrench that had been bought at the Uptown Hardware

Store on the thirtieth day of June and charged to Harbison Greer's account.

As the realization struck, her hold on the leash slackened. The leash spun from her hand. Mickey shot away from her, and at once was among the working men. Miss Mitchell went in pursuit. Howling, the dog fled the center of the light and the strange hands that clutched at him, rushed over a hill of debris, and disappeared into broken walls that had once enclosed the kitchen. Mickey, too, was in search of something—home.

Again Miss Mitchell followed.

A portion of Lucy Greer's kitchen was cleared out now. The door that had led into the basement was free of rubble. The door was upright but leaned forward at a crazy angle, with one side of the frame hanging to a mere thread of wall. On the other side was nothing except vacancy and openness that looked into the cellar, where Arabella had been found.

Light, but not so much light, was shed in here from the searchlights. The man who stood gazing at the door held an electric lantern. At his feet Mickey lay, crying softly.

It was Timothy Dwight. The policeman turned, recognized her without surprise. An edge of his upper teeth showed in what might have been meant as a smile.

"Would you like to look at something?"

Like a woman hypnotized, she advanced. She reached him. Silently he pointed at the crazy door. Deliberately Miss Mitchell began her scrutiny at the far side of the door, where the frame was held by the thread of wall. With passionate absorption, she examined the two flat hinges, hinges like a million others.

And then she couldn't help it. Slowly, inch by inch, her eyes moved across the split and filthy panels of the door. They arrived at the bolt. The bolt was like a million others.

It was locked.

"Just like we found it," said Timothy Dwight. "Someone in the kitchen shot the bolt, and then, you see, Mrs. Rixey couldn't get out."

Miss Mitchell saw.

"Mrs. Rixey smelled gas maybe," the policeman said, "an-

went down cellar to investigate. Maybe she should have been suspicious, but seems like she wasn't. Someone locked the door on her, and Mrs. Rixey she was trapped."

Miss Mitchell leaned to pick up Mickey's leash. Dwight's hand closed on her shoulder, jerked her upright.

"Now, don't you want to look at something else? Step right here. It's kind of interesting to figure what Mrs. Rixey did, just what happened to her."

He pulled her sidewise, swept her to the very edge of vacancy. There were no walls here. The hand on Mrs. Mitchell's shoulder tightened as she staggered and would have tumbled into the gulf of the cellar.

"Take it easy, lady. Plenty of time. I want you to get the idea like the way I get it. Can you figure the stairs?"

The beam of light in his other hand shone down into the wreckage. They hadn't yet done much clearing where the stairs had been. There was no sign of a stairway.

"Can you figure the stairs?"

Her traitor mind obliged him. In the sloping debris, with the clearing at the bottom, Miss Mitchell's imagination sketched a flight of wooden steps, a landing at the top which had faced the door. The reconstruction was easy; unavoidable. The stairs had been like a million other stairs that lead from kitchens into basements.

"Mrs. Rixey stood on the landing, see," said Timothy Dwight. "Someone had locked Mrs. Rixey in, but she smelled that gas and she was scared and she tried to get out. She tried, I guess, until she finally passed out, fell down the stairs and rolled underneath them stationary tubs. Quite some while, she tried to get out. Look! Take a look at this!"

The policeman's hand shoved Miss Mitchell forward. She teetered at the chewed and splintered edge of the kitchen floor. For a hysterical moment she wondered if he meant to hurl her into the wreckage of the basement below.

But the hand that pushed her outward over the brink held her tight, twisted her body around. A corner of the electric lantern in Dwight's other hand ground into her shoulder. She

could feel the warmth of the lantern as the beam passed her cheek.

"Now look! Look at how Mrs. Rixey tried to get out."

Miss Mitchell regarded the basement side of the kitchen door. On that side the door had been whitewashed. One panel, blackened with dust and dirt, showed forth clearly in the upward slanted beam of the electric lantern.

Long deep scratches, like those made by a frantic, clawing animal, scored and disfigured the soft wood. There were many scratches on the basement side of the door. The nails that Arabella had torn to the quick had left their mark. Arabella had tried.

"It ain't a very pretty picture," said Timothy Dwight into Miss Elizabeth's ear. "It ain't a pretty picture, is it?"

No, it wasn't pretty, this picture that was nevertheless familiar, tartly reminiscent of our times. It hadn't been so very many years ago, though of course these days time moves fast, that the Associated Press sent out and Washington newspapers printed a picture of an underground room in Paris, photographed after the Allies arrived. It was just a picture of an empty room, deep in the earth in the center of the city, with walls of stone. The departing Nazis had removed the instruments of death and torture that must have been there, but they hadn't carried away the walls of the empty room.

Hundreds of hands, thousands of anonymous fingers had clawed and ripped the walls, worn the stone away, as the trapped and despairing sought in frenzy to get out. It wasn't especially dramatic, that photograph which recorded that hundreds of people had once scratched upon walls of stone the evidence that they were caught and could not get out. At any rate, why should the heart be stirred by the fate of hundreds, dead several years ago? Surely if anyone had the time and energy and interest to make a tabulation of the underground places that existed until recently in the cities of our world, the trapped and despairing could be numbered by the thousands, by the hundreds of thousands.

Paris, Vienna, Rome, Berlin: we haven't time for Buchen-

wald, Dachau, the Ardeantine Caves, and we long ago forgot how to spell the names of those unpronounceable camps in Poland and Russia. Let us calculate in good round numbers, which is certainly less harrowing, and say that in the last few years ten million of us have been trapped with no hope, no chance of escape.

Arabella Rixey surely could not be dignified by inclusion into such a company. There was no comparison, thought Miss Mitchell distractedly. Arabella was an entirely different proposition. This was just one door; just one particularly disagreeable and obnoxious woman who had sought escape, scratched a locked door, ripped her fingernails and died. This was different. Or was it very different? Let us face the issue squarely. Is one human life, one trashy, trivial, futile human life, worth something or isn't it?

"I thought you'd like to see," said Timothy Dwight.

He pulled Miss Elizabeth back from the opening, let go her shoulder. She closed her eyes, sunk in a combination of thought and prayer. God was Miss Mitchell's bulwark in time of doubt and trouble. She knew what God would think. God has been too occupied of late perhaps to count the falling sparrows, but surely God didn't intend that, somewhere along the way, you and I should lose the ability, the power, the will, to count the people. Surely God intended that we should take a stand, when we could.

Mickey was whining at the old woman's feet. Clearer still from far off, she heard the roll of the Commandments. Over and over in her mind were intoned the words of the Sixth Commandment. Thou Shalt Not Kill. It seemed to Miss Mitchell, looking from behind closed eyelids, that the words must be written across the sky in the glare of the searchlights. The words were written on the splintered door through which Arabella had tried to claw her way to life. Statesmen must find complicated answers, but for us simple folk sometimes a simple answer will do. Thou Shalt Not Kill.

Miss Mitchell shuddered. She opened her eyes.

And then, unwillingly, her eyes met the eyes of the police-

man. It was a naked glance. For a fleeting second, Elizabeth Mitchell and Timothy Dwight saw each other clear. Two strangers, hating and despising each other and with nothing in common, and yet, despite themselves, traveling through a troubled world together. Briefly—in that one long glance—they were forced to acquiescence in the fact.

Timothy Dwight and Elizabeth Mitchell looked deep into each other's eyes and shared an identical fear, an identical questioning thought. The fear was the old, old fear that each of us, at some odd time or place, must on occasion feel, the fear of the cage, the fear of being locked in and unable to get out. Locked in and alive, with no assistance near and with death approaching. The questioning thought they shared was this. If such things can be, if a fat, vulgar, helpless woman can choke to death, die gasping for air in a locked cellar, with nothing done about it, what comes next? What inevitably is the next cold step in logic? Arabella hadn't wanted to die, and yet had died. If such things can happen, if murder is to go unpunished while we stand idly by, where—just where, in the end does that leave you and me?

Miss Mitchell licked her dry mouth. Confession was forming on her tongue. Timothy Dwight spoke first. His voice was savage, gleeful.

"Murder may look easy, but, sister, in the good old U.S.A. it ain't so easy. Gas is a joyride to what's going to happen to the one that done it. Sister, it's a pity I can't take you some early morning down to the District Jail. You ought to see them come stumbling in, with their pants leg slit and a patch of hair shaved off. I look at them, but they don't look at me. They're looking at that chair. They kick and jump when the juice goes on, and I sit there watching like I'm entitled to. They don't know me, but I know them. Me—I'm the one that puts them there."

Miss Mitchell's mouth closed. Her teeth came together with a clicking sound. Plates, thought Dwight, and grinned. Their eyes parted. The long glance severed. Their brief association, that transitory union of the minds, ended. Once again she became the nosey sister. Once again he became the ignorant,

sadistic policeman. Whatever was right, whatever was wrong, Miss Mitchell knew that Timothy Dwight was her mortal enemy.

With Mickey trotting beside her, she returned to the rattan sofa and unrefreshing sleep.

Fifteen

IT WAS half past six on Tuesday morning, the Fourth of July. On Sundays and holidays Dorritt usually slept until all hours. A brilliant shaft of sunlight touched her sleeping eyelids.

Her eyes opened. She looked straight into the open eyes of Jessie Wayne. Their faces were scarcely a foot apart, so close together were the twin beds placed.

Jessie's mousy hair lay in neat braids on the pillow. Her face was dotted with five round circles of the whitish lotion with which she hoped to dry what she called her "spots." Dorritt's blonde hair was in tangled confusion, but her face was rosy, her eyes beautifully fresh and clear.

For perhaps five seconds the girls regarded each other. Then slowly Jessie's eyes closed. Beneath the thin single sheet her plump figure was completely relaxed. Her breast rose and fell, as though in sleep. But Dorritt had caught an expression in the closing eyes. Why—why Jessie didn't like her. Dorritt felt frightened. It was frightening to be watched in your sleep by a friend, who—who hated you.

But maybe, thought Dorritt, she'd imagined it. Imagined the open eyes and everything. The expression had certainly been the kind you surprise on those never-to-be identified faces that peep around corners in your dreams. Fully awake now, Dorritt gazed at the other bed. Jessie was playing possum awfully well, too well for such a stupid girl. She was dead to the world. Imagination, decided Dorritt, played absurd tricks on you.

She rose on an elbow, wondering at the torrents of sunshine that flooded the bedroom. Even before she looked across Jessie's

prone body and on through the window, Dorritt comprehended. Ted's house—the Greers' house—was gone.

Dorritt stared through her own glassless window at vacancy. In her mind she ran up the house as it had been years ago, even before the tiles on the roof were gone, long before Ted went off to war. Dorritt's mind rested upon that lost, lovely period in time when Ted had occupied a room on the second floor, opposite her room on Aunt Elizabeth's second floor.

Dorritt looked into Ted's window, as she had in the past. They used to lean on the sills and call jokes back and forth to each other, jokes like: "You forgot to pull your shades," "My, but you snored last night"; corny jokes, kid stuff. Dorritt was remembering the morning Ted tried to teach her the deaf and dumb alphabet to transmit across five yards such particularly intimate and secret messages as: "I love you."

Dorritt got cautiously out of bed. As she pulled on her black moire dressing gown with the lacy stuff at the bosom and the lace at the ankles, and thrust her bare toes into the pomponned moire mules, she looked back at the bed. Her friend was still—sleeping?

Toothbrush and powder in hand, Dorritt stepped into the hall. Ted, fully dressed, was emerging from the storeroom. His eyes admired that dressing gown. He emitted a low but definitely wolfish whistle, as he pulled Dorritt into his arms. He whispered into her ear.

"Good morning, Miss Lovely Legs and Stunning Breasts. Don't you wish I was in that other bed of yours, instead of Jessie?"

"Silly," she whispered back. "You and I won't need both those beds for years and years. Or will we?"

But Dorritt was nervous. The house had paper walls. Down the hall a light cough identified Lucy Greer, as she twisted in her sleep. On the other side of the hall, Till turned over on the lumpy mattress. Downstairs, Aunt Elizabeth was already astir. Dorritt's imagination went to work again. Clasped in her sweetheart's arms, she pictured a slowly opening, spectacled eye, a pale blue eye, at the keyhole behind them.

Dorritt freed herself. The light died from Ted's face, flared again.

"Dorritt, let's get out of here. Let's go over to the Zoo, and have an early breakfast by ourselves. Just you and me."

She smiled, shook her head.

"Darling, don't be so unrealistic. Let me show you something. At least—I think I can show you something."

She drew him down the hall to the window, adorned with the petunia-filled window box, that faced the street. Sitting on the steps of the apartment house, apparently reading the morning papers, was a stout, middle-aged man. He was not in uniform.

"How far," asked Dorritt, "do you think we'd get?"

"What about the alley?"

"I haven't looked," said she, "but my guess would be that the courtly Dwight is keen enough to know that houses have back doors."

They went to a window on the back. Carefully, keeping themselves concealed, they peeked out. The policeman in the alley hadn't bothered to provide himself with an excuse. There were no newspapers. Arms folded, he sat on a backless chair rescued from the wreckage, posted at the exit from the yard into the alley like Mickey at a rathole.

Ted studied the size and shape of Miss Mitchell's garage. In the fairly recent past he'd had plenty of these little problems to solve, times when it was your bullet or theirs. Ted grinned.

"Dory, get your duds on," he whispered. "I think I see a way. Anyhow, it's worth a try."

The adventure began fifteen minutes later on the stairway. They waited until they placed Miss Mitchell at the sideboard in the dining room, heard her putting silver in the drawer that meant her back was to the archway. Then they swiftly tiptoed down, fled through the living room and thence into the kitchen.

In the kitchen, Ted didn't waste a minute. He cautiously shoved up a window on the far side from the Greers (and consequently unbroken), and lifted out the screen. Then he lowered Miss Mitchell's stepladder through the window to the

strip of grass, partly to shorten the eight-foot drop but mainly to avoid the noise of a jump. He knew the garage and the corner of the house would cover them from sight.

Ted went out the window, lifted Dorritt out. They used the stepladder to get over the wall into the next backyard, used it to surmount a hedge into the next yard, and climbed three picket fences, before they came to where the alley curved. There they stowed the ladder in some slugabed's garage, walked through the gate and sedately down the alley to Connecticut Avenue.

Usually, on past excursions to the Zoo, they'd stopped in the drugstore to pick up the papers. This morning, with no necessity for discussion, they skipped that procedure. They didn't want to read about Arabella Rixey. They didn't want to think about Arabella.

Ted wasn't going to burden Dorritt, as last night he had burdened Lucy. Torturing one woman should be sufficient to assuage the vanity of one man, Ted might have put it, had he been in one of his bitter, self-abasing moods. But he didn't feel that way this morning.

Ted felt buoyant, as young and gay and silly almost as Till. The triumph of their crazy flight through the slumbering back yards of Woodland Road elated both of them, as though this minor triumph promised equal luck in other matters. Temporarily, at least, worry was banished from their minds.

They ate their breakfast in the open on the cluttered, table-crowded terrace of the gimcracky restaurant, which lies deep inside the grounds of the Washington Zoo. The food tasted wonderful because they were hungry, still excited and very pleased with themselves. To be sure the couple hardly breakfasted in privacy. It was a pity that the heat wave had brought others, also, out so early. They managed to talk about themselves, but in low voices. Giggling, Dorritt recalled the deaf and dumb alphabet. It turned out that Ted still knew how to spell: "I love you." No doubt Ted's finger talking drew some of the attention to their table. But most of the masculine glances were directed at Dorritt.

Dorritt had a real flair for clothes. She knew what suited her and where to find it. Her frequent untidiness with her room did not extend to her person. The lemon-colored cotton frock, the lemon-colored shoes, were an unusual choice for a blonde but strikingly becoming. Long inured to Lucy and Till, resigned to the sloppiness of female relatives, Ted had never been even mildly interested in a girl who couldn't keep the seams of her stockings straight. However, the admiration Dorritt was attracting gave him only a moderate amount of pride and pleasure.

He suggested abruptly that when she finished her coffee, they go and feed the prairie dogs. The round fence that enclosed the prairie dogs and the prairie dog holes was ringed with screaming children. Dorritt and Ted tossed in their peanuts and soon went away. Everybody in the world seemed to be in the monkey house. The mothers and fathers and small fry pursued them to the lion house. They went outside again.

They laughed at the antics of the cavy, the size of a newborn calf with the ears and hop of a rabbit; they watched the peacock spread its tail. They had a lot of company. The bears were no good either; they trampled hundreds of peanut shells, apologized dozens of times, as they escaped the crowd which was happily overloading the stomachs of the bears. In summer the smell in the bird house was intolerable.

For a while they sat primly on a bench, in a line of benches filled with other couples who were also holding hands. Their own bench, at the end of the line, was placed a little apart. A study of the holiday morning company offered a kind of cross section of love among the young, if you were interested. You could tell the settled couples, gravely talking budgets and where, oh where, to find a cheap apartment. You could tell the couples newly met, with only a date or so behind them, by their shyness. It was easy to tell the pick-ups met along the sunlit, woodsy grounds that very morning. They talked fast and nervously, with the girls inclined to be very touch-me-not and dignified.

The blond pair down the way, both curly-headed and small like a brother and sister, were honeymooners. The girl's gold

ring was new; she and her stocky little husband must be counting their anniversaries in months, or possibly even in weeks. Just eleven weeks ago, darling, remember?

Dorritt watched a couple take possession of a bench across the pavement from them. The man was tall and dark like Ted, and he carried the baby, a beautiful baby, but a fat heavy baby. The girl was thin and tired looking, and when she held out her arms to relieve her husband of the child you could see her dress was torn under the armhole. The beautiful baby laughed at the exchange of laps, a gurgling joyous laugh, that brought forth answering smiles. Smiling, Dorritt glanced at her own man.

"Ted, don't you kind of wish he was ours?"

"No," Ted said, low. "Before I have a son, I'll be able to afford a baby carriage, and a decent dress for my wife."

"A wedding ring doesn't cost much."

"I must say this is a funny time to be talking marriage," Ted said in a voice lower still but tense with anger. "Me without a job, and likely to be arrested any minute. Baby, your timing could be improved on!"

"Arrested? They wouldn't dare. You weren't arrested last night. I don't believe it!"

"You don't know what the situation is. You have no idea."

"Ted, I *should* know. If we talked it out . . ."

"Talk won't help. Why talk and be miserable? All you women talk too much. We came here, didn't we, to have a little fun . . ."

"Yes, but I can't see why . . ."

"You don't need to see."

Dorritt held Ted's hand tightly. She looked straight into his eyes. She spoke into his ear.

"Let's get a special license," Dorritt said, "and be married tomorrow."

Ted pulled his hand loose.

"Thanks, thanks very much. I'm touched by your generous offer. Sweet of you, Dorritt, and noble as all get out. Just what kind of a louse do you think I am?"

"I don't think you're a louse at all," retorted Dorritt, angry in her turn. "Which doesn't mean you're perfect. Far from it! You're a stubborn, sarcastic, pigheaded, selfish man. We could have been married months ago, and you know it. I've suggested a dozen different ways, and every time you . . ."

"You suggest ways that won't work. Sometimes I think you do it on purpose," Ted said. "What kind of a guy starts married life living with his wife's aunt while his wife works to help pay the grocery bills? And goes around wearing a sweet, sacrificial smile and a ragged dress."

"I wouldn't mind."

"Dory, stop kidding yourself. It's a waste of time trying to kid me. Every hole in a dress of yours would be like a hole in me."

"If a little silly pride . . ."

"Wisdom, darling. Not pride. You're not like that girl over there. Scrubbing floors and tending Junior and wearing ragged dresses, and enjoying it, is not your style."

"Maybe it's not my style. Don't forget it's not your style either. Why, you talk money all the time."

"Dory, because of you. Because I want things for you."

"Please don't hide behind my skirts! You're the one afraid to take a chance. I'm not. Suppose we did start poor. It wouldn't last forever."

"A week can seem like forever. Lord, how you'd make me pay the first day you washed out my socks. Sometimes," he said bitterly, "I wonder why you don't give me up and make your strike for a likelier Joe. You'll never be lovelier, darling."

Dorritt was so angry she could have hit him. She stared at him white with rage. She knew she must control herself. His behavior was inexcusable. But fright and worry always made Ted act and talk abominably. She wasn't to learn the exact cause of his fright; he'd probably told his mother but he wouldn't trust his own girl to help. She knew that, too. Trembling, Dorritt got on her feet.

"Sometimes I think you hate me."

"Sit down, Dorritt."

"Ted, I'm going. Going for good. This time I mean it. No, no, don't try to stop me!"

But he had reached out and jerked her to the bench again. She looked at him. Her eyes were full of tears.

"Ted, what's happened to us? What's gone wrong with us?"

"Sweetheart, you tell me."

"You don't love me any more. You're afraid to say—but, Ted, I know. You don't love me any more."

"The hell I don't! Come on. Let's get out of here."

He pulled her to her feet. Again they walked.

They went past the benign old elephant, past the pacing leopards with their large, unhappy eyes. They went into the reptile house. It was dank and cool and always, winter or summer, had a dry, peculiar, stale odor. Dorritt didn't care much for the reptile house.

But at least the place was reasonably empty. A group of a dozen or so stood watching the stately convolutions of the cobras; a little girl drew back half in fright and half in fascination from the gaping jaws of an alligator; two sailors and their girls were uneasily eyeing a basilisk, wondering if it was a twig or really alive.

Ted and Dorritt passed the sailors and their girls, turned a corner. They went along a corridor, lined with thick glass cages, imprisoning a variety of soundless, subtle movement. There were other people in the corridor. They paused a moment to watch the serpents, gliding to and fro on their secret business. Perhaps the couple cast an annoying shadow into the cage. Three serpents struck the glass. There were three soft bumps in succession. The serpents' tongues darted angrily in and out. Two of the flat, shiny heads drew back to strike again.

Ted and Dorritt went on. With relief, they stepped through a door and out into the open. Behind the reptile house, set among the trees, a row of outdoor cages held the domestic animals which had scant appeal for the public. But the sailors and their girls had anticipated them. The quartet was examining a disgruntled mule, who looked as though he wondered

what he was doing in the Zoo. There was no one else in the sunny deserted place.

Ted and Dorritt sauntered along the path until the sailors and their girls disappeared. Then they glanced at each other, stopped.

He seized her in a passionate embrace. His body forced her backward across the iron protecting rail that guarded the path. His teeth cut her lip. Her right breast clamored with the pain inflicted by a fountain pen in his pocket. Ted's left arm gripped her shoulders, his right hand, pulling her ever closer to him, was caught between the iron rail and the girl. Uncomplaining, his knuckles bore the pressure of both their bodies.

As Ted pressed harder against Dorritt and she was pushed farther back across the rail, her heels slipped. Her shoulder-length hair, dressed high in a twisted fan, hadn't been combed to be worn at such an angle. The fan lost its main supporting comb. The blonde hair tumbled, swung out.

Oblivious until he heard the thud of the comb on the ground, Ted released her.

"Dorritt, darling, darling, we've got to go somewhere. We've got to be somewhere by ourselves."

"Ted, Ted, not here. You shouldn't kiss me that way here." Her shaking hands tried to fix her hair. "Why, any minute someone . . ."

Ted leaned over the rail and picked up her comb. He handed it to her. He was pale.

"Look, Dorritt, I know someone who is visiting his girl's house today. Dorritt, let's go to his room and just love each other for a while. Please, Dory. Please! Please! You don't know how I need it, sweet. Your place is packed to the gunnels, and with that damn Jessie always hanging around . . ."

"I'm afraid of her," Dorritt said suddenly.

She paused. Ted paused. They stared.

The back door of the reptile house was opening. Jessie was coming through it. Her spectacled eyes were fixed on them. On her face was a smile of glad relief.

"I thought you'd be at the Zoo! I've looked everywhere for

you—in the lion house, the bird house, all through the monkey house, all through the reptile house . . ."

"Why didn't you just give up?" inquired Ted.

Jessie was too relieved to be hurt.

"I couldn't give up," she assured him earnestly. "That policeman, the one out front, is having fits. If you and Dorritt aren't back in fifteen minutes, he's going to phone the station and Dwight will probably turn in a general alarm, and everything will be just—awful. We're supposed to ask police permission to leave the house. However did you two get out without his knowing about it?"

"Why, we walked straight out the front door," said Ted.

"He was tying his shoe," Dorritt said. "But I would have sworn he saw us, and it was all right."

"Oh! Oh! Well, then," said Jessie, "I really think we should be starting back right this minute."

"Okay, okay. Much obliged, Jessie, for carrying the message to Garcia. It might have got you into trouble yourself."

"Oh, that's *perfectly* all right."

As they turned to go, Ted glanced at his raw chafed knuckles and then at Dorritt. She was looking at his fountain pen. He grinned suddenly, and transferred the pen to his hip pocket.

With Jessie chattering happily beside them, cherishing what she fancied were Ted's deeply felt words of gratitude and praise, they returned home. It was after ten o'clock. Everybody was up and buzzing about. Miss Mitchell's house, adequate for three, was bursting with people. Dorritt and Ted explained to the policeman about the front door and the shoe tying, which the policeman didn't happen to remember but then a man might not, and eventually Dorritt mollified him.

After that, Ted marched upstairs, went into the storeroom and slammed the door. Dorritt went into her bedroom and locked her door. She intended to finish out her sleep anyway, without the company of her oldest, dearest friend. Dorritt did.

Sixteen

ONE OF the people who were to make a contribution to the case was as yet completely innocent of the fact. One of the interested parties didn't even know that there had been an explosion on Woodland Road, that Arabella Rixey was dead. In consequence Janet Culp, Rufus Pomerane's secretary, had a problem of which Janet Culp was unaware. When Janet awoke she was in no condition to cope with a problem anyway.

Janet awoke with a stupendous hangover. She'd managed to get off her dress and girdle but she hadn't made it to the bed. In her slip and panties, Janet lay huddled on the sofa that she was always impulsively ready to offer to any late-staying guest who seemed to be in need of a bed. It was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon when Janet opened an eye that measured in longing the impossible distance that stretched between the sofa and the bathroom. For a moment Janet almost wished that she was still living with Nancy, who would have been acidly disapproving but willing to fetch her suffering roommate a pitcher of cool, wet water.

Janet hurriedly closed the eye as the ceiling came down and the walls came in, and waves of nausea seemed to revolve the sofa like an oarless boat caught in a slowly turning current. Even the hot sunshine, creeping across the floor that she'd painted midnight blue at the suggestion of the nice young artist with the studio upstairs, gave a hideous effect of shimmering water. Water, water everywhere but where you want it.

Sick, weak tears crawled from Janet's closed lids. She felt sorry for herself. All alone in this damned downtown studio apartment, where ever-optimistic Janet, the Montana bohemian, had hoped to leave conventionality forever behind and to hold forth evening after evening like Madame de Stael or Madame Somebody Else. True enough, she'd explained her change of

address somewhat differently to Mr. and Mrs. Pomerane. The Pomeranes, because they'd known her mother out in Montana, still felt vaguely responsible although after sixteen years in the East on her own Janet was getting a little—older.

To the Pomeranes, Janet had virtuously explained that the inconvenience of an apartment in a downtown loft building was far outweighed by the advantage of being within a ten-minute walk of the office. She hadn't felt it necessary to inform stuffy Mrs. Pomerane that Janet Culp was sick to death of gossipy, complaining roommates and neighbors. When a girl passes thirty, when she passes thirty by four years to be exact, surely a girl is old enough to lead her own life as she sees fit.

Well, thought Janet, as the slow, self-pitying tears oozed from her suffering eyes and her head ached and ached, and her dehydrated body screamed for moisture, she had achieved her ambition. She was all alone, with nobody caring whether she lived or died, with nobody caring enough to be on hand and bring her a glass of water. Janet herself was too weak and ill to move. Even the tears were an effort.

Why hadn't Maloney, the nice young artist upstairs, looked in on her as he'd used to do on holidays? Because Maloney wasn't nice, that was why. At first he'd pretended, helped her paint the floor and get settled, and been glad indeed to drop in of evenings and share a cup of coffee while he bored her stiff talking about that one-man show he wasn't ever going to get. Janet hadn't seen Maloney since that night ten days ago when she'd tripped up the stairs with sandwiches and beer, and a request to use the telephone.

Maloney hadn't been nice at all. He'd been cooly courteous about her using his telephone, but he'd remarked it was a pity the company wouldn't let her have an instrument of her own, and wondered when the company would. He'd refused the sandwiches and beer on the plea of work. As though any fool thought that artists could do their work at night!

Maloney had lost interest, that was the truth of it. Well, he'd certainly been interested enough when she first moved in. One tap on the radiator, and Maloney, bright and eager, would come

flying down the stairs. He'd rapped for her as often as she'd rapped for him, or almost.

Janet pushed back a sheet that wasn't there. With tremendous effort, as her head split with pain, she swung her legs over to the floor, sat up on the sofa and opened her eyes again. She seized a brass cigarette box and banged it viciously against the radiator.

There, that noise which almost shattered her own skull should bring Maloney down. She'd fixed him coffee plenty of times when he wasn't feeling well. He could fix her a pot of coffee, go out and fetch some oranges, show his neighbor a little human sympathy. Janet hammered the radiator again.

There was no answering knock. Cold as he'd been lately, Maloney wouldn't ignore such an imperative summons. He was too soft-hearted. The horrid sunshine splashing the floor had drawn him outside; he'd taken his pad and pencils and gone forth merrily sketching and wouldn't be back until he got good and ready.

Janet was alone in the building, and she could look after herself and her own hangover. Nobody cared. The brass box slipped from her nerveless fingers. As she was sinking back again in overwhelming weakness and exhaustion, Janet caught sight of her dress, her girdle and one shoe, lying in the middle of the painted floor.

Oh, my God, she'd been wearing her last pair, absolutely her last pair of stockings yesterday. Where had she worn those stockings? Janet tried to remember.

She had closed Rufus Pomerane's office on Monday, five minutes after her employer started toward the airport and Montana. A girl whose slim legs are encased in her last pair of stockings, is likely to have stockings on her mind. Janet had sallied forth from the office to go nylon shopping, but as usual she had kept out an experienced eye for gay adventure. She could hardly remember the face of the young man who had promised adventure, though it seemed a nice face at the time, but she could distinctly recall the deceptively gallant, flattering notes of a deep masculine voice inviting her to hop in the car and take a spin into the country on this wonderful afternoon.

The nice young man had a bottle in the car. Where had they gone? Janet recalled a roadhouse somewhere out in Maryland, ear-splitting music, some lousy southern fried chicken, and another couple figured in the incident somehow because there'd been an argument over the check. Janet was certain of the argument over the check, because she could see herself proudly dumping the contents of her own purse on a red-checked tablecloth and proudly stalking out into the night.

The nice young man had followed, or was it another less nice young man who had followed, and another car altogether which had parked much later beside some dark, unknown road in Maryland? Janet's tormented, laboring mind yielded up a scene of ugly, violent struggle in a parked car, and herself springing out, screaming, running through bushes, falling flat on her face.

Her face hurt now. She felt her cheekbone. It was scratched. The face would heal. A memory so distorted and incomplete needn't bother her any more than did many, many other memories equally distorted and incomplete. But a residue of last night would remain to bother her—some. Why, oh why, Janet wondered in sick revulsion and hating herself, was she such a fool? Why wasn't she like other girls, satisfied to work every day from nine until five, willing to get into a comfortable rut and stay there?

She would never, so Janet decided, touch another drop of anything stronger than beer. Never again would she listen to a flattering, lying voice call to her from a slow-moving car. This afternoon, as soon as she pulled herself together, Janet would write a long letter to her mother. She would write another letter to Mr. Pomerane telling him she would take care of the Mrs. Rixey matter, and hoping that his father would soon recover. Only those two people in the world, her mother and Mr. Pomerane, knew the real Janet Culp, the little girl long out of Montana who really wanted just one thing—one nice man, and he needn't be awfully young either, who would love and look after her.

Janet's mind painfully focussed again upon the immediate

and the practical. It returned to the bitter knowledge that she'd worn her last pair of stockings yesterday. She'd got in and out of automobiles, she'd run through bushes, she'd done God knows what, wearing that last pair of stockings.

Janet stood up from the sofa. She still longed for water. But she tackled the most important question first. She had to know. Walking slowly but steadily, she moved to the center of the room and picked up her dress. Her other shoe and one stocking fell from the folds. The stocking was filthy with dirt. It was snagged at the knee, but there weren't any runs. The second stocking was still fastened to the girdle. Janet unloosed the stocking from the girdle—it was dirty but intact, not even snagged. Nylon is really something!

Strangely the miraculous reprieve actually improved her hangover, lifted her morale, made Janet believe she would stick to this brand-new resolution, become a wiser, better girl. Carrying the stockings, she tottered to the bathroom and perched on the edge of the old-fashioned, four-legged tub while she let the water run until it was cool. She drank glass after glass of water, took a Seidlitz tablet in the final glass.

She was almost ready now to face the horrors of coffee and a little solid food. First, however, she filled the basin with lukewarm water, sprinkled in a handful of soap flakes and tenderly lowered the nylons into the bath.

And then she used a washcloth on her own hot, flushed, scratched face. But she carefully kept her eyes averted from the mirror. Most people, or so Janet was convinced, didn't believe that Janet Culp was over twenty-seven at the very most. Lots of people guessed twenty-five. Janet didn't intend to put that small heart-shaped face, with the impish bang, to the mirror test until later in the day.

Returning to the other room she approached her closet, a rather unsatisfactory box-like affair, contrived of wallboard with a covering curtain in front. The studio apartment was just the one spacious room and the bath. Janet selected her prettiest dressing gown and zipped it on over her slip. With distaste, she stepped into mules that were a trifle soiled.

Janet was a neat girl. She hung up the rumpled dress and wiped off last night's dusty shoes before she placed them in the shoe bag. She forced herself to empty the ash trays, holding her breath to avoid the odor of the butts. Poked down behind a cushion, she found and fished out her purse. Her recollection of the restaurant scene, turned out to be sadly correct. She hadn't one red penny left to get through the week. With Mr. Pomerane away, with Maloney acting the way he was, that would be awkward. It might be really serious.

Janet sighed, cheered up a little. Fortunately, she hadn't lost her glasses, too. Had someone put them back after the dumping act? She brushed the purse and laid it on the closet shelf. On her way to the kitchenette, another wallboard box with a covering curtain, she picked up four dirty glasses. Three people then must have accompanied her home, when she finally got there.

When she pulled aside the curtain that cloaked the kitchenette, Janet discovered that these three anonymous folk had finished off her only bottle of whiskey. The stinkers! By now she could have got down a pick-me-up.

In lieu of the pick-me-up, Janet drank a can of tomato juice that she found in her tiny ice box. She hadn't a real stove, just a grill. She made coffee on one burner of the grill, and charred a piece of bread into a semblance of toast on the other burner. Standing up, she still hadn't the energy to seek a chair, Janet drank three cups of black, scalding hot coffee and choked down the toast.

The coffee and toast worked wonders, just as she'd known they would. Fairly briskly she went back to the bathroom, washed and rinsed the stockings, hung them on a towel rod to dry. This time she risked a glance at the mirror. She had smooth, thick, olive skin, the durable kind, and even with the scratches didn't look half as bad as she'd feared. This was nothing like that black eye, thank goodness. She covered the scratches with a patented preparation, powdered her face, put on lipstick, combed her hair.

Well, thought Janet, there's life in the girl yet. She smiled at herself in the mirror. She was okay now, or almost. There was

left only that residue of sour regret, which certainly got a person nowhere. On the coffee table in the living room, there was a small electric fan. She brought the fan into the bathroom, and directed the current upon the stockings.

As soon as her stockings were dry, Janet intended to punish herself. She was going to put on her clothes and go outside for a long, bracing walk. After that, perhaps, she could eat a regular meal. There must be stuff in the kitchenette. She'd really cook it, too. The morning papers, delivered by the newsstand boy, had been downstairs in the hall since eight A.M. Janet fleetingly considered running down to bring up the papers, and decided against it. Leaving one's apartment in a dressing gown, even in an empty building, was the common kind of thing that one simply didn't do. The papers would have to wait until she returned from the bracing walk.

She hadn't written her mother for a month. She had told herself she was going to write two letters today, and write those letters she would and drop them in the mail when she went out. Janet put on her glasses, settled herself at the desk. She began a letter to her mother, the rambling, newsy kind of letter that her mother best liked to get. Things about what a lovely friendly city Washington was, and what a lovely circle of admiring friends Mrs. Culp's daughter had luckily acquired, things that Janet almost believed herself as she wrote.

Janet was on the third page of the letter and really enjoying herself, when behind the curtain in the kitchenette her housebell buzzed. She sprang up in surprise and delight. One of the very friends she'd been describing to her mother must be dropping around just when she'd resigned herself to a lonely, solitary day, topped off by a solitary dinner.

It all goes to show. A bachelor-girl apartment can be an exciting place, provocative of these unexpected events. One minute you're down, the next you're up. Janet snatched off her glasses. She rushed like mad into the bathroom, daubed on fresh powder and lipstick.

On her way to the buzzer she flipped on the radio, feeling that music might add a successful touch to the atmosphere of a

bachelor girl at home. Maybe, depending on how things developed, she'd suggest eating in. A pity there wasn't a drop of liquor on the premises. On second thought, a restaurant would be better. Intimate little dinners, gaily cooked at home, can be dismal flops without advance thought and preparation.

Janet pressed the buzzer hard since the downstairs door was inclined to stick, heard the door bang shut. She had time to get out of the soiled mules and into high-heeled slippers that slightly pinched her toes, before she heard footsteps mounting the uncarpeted flight of stairs that led to her. There wasn't quite time to rush back into the bathroom and turn off the fan, or to shove out of sight that half-written letter which didn't exactly suggest a full, rich, exciting existence. But that couldn't be helped.

A brilliant smile on her lips, a cry of glad welcome trembling there, Janet flung open her door. The brilliant smile faded, the glad cry died. In the dusk of the hall, or so disappointed Janet thought at first, stood a complete stranger.

"Yes? You wanted something?" Janet said inquiringly.

"I was looking for Mr. Maloney."

"Oh! Oh!" Janet rallied herself. "He has the studio on the next floor. Maloney is quite a friend of mine, too, but I'm afraid he's out sketching for the day. Can I give him a message for you?"

"Thanks. I'd like to leave a message in his box, but it seems I've come off without a pencil or a scrap of paper."

"Do come in," said Janet with Janet's eagerness for unexpected company. "I can easily fix you up with a pencil and paper. It happens I was just writing a letter to a—a friend of mine. Maybe you'd like to wait here a while for Maloney to come back."

"The note will do it. You're Janet Culp, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, yes, I am," said Janet, with a sudden slight frown between her brows. "Why?"

"Your morning papers were downstairs in the hall. As I was starting up, I noticed they had your name. I brought them up to you."

"Oh! Oh! That was awfully nice of you."

Janet was much more interested in her unexpected visitor than she was in the morning papers. But as she swept aside the half-finished letter and laid down a fresh sheet of stationery, the front page of the newspaper she'd dropped casually on the desk caught her eye.

No one could miss the photograph of the devastated house that filled half the page. Janet's glasses were quite unnecessary. No one could have overlooked the black headline which said: Arabella Rixey Murdered in Gas Explosion. Janet didn't touch the newspaper. She merely stared at the headline.

"Why, I—I saw Mrs. Rixey at my office just yesterday," Janet said.

"Did you?"

Janet fell back a step. In her haste, she tripped a little over the hem of her housecoat. Her large, near-sighted eyes opened wide. In the small heart-shaped face they looked as big as saucers.

"I know you now," Janet said in bewildered wonder. "We've met before. Anyway I recognize your voice. You talked to me yesterday about Mrs. Rixey's luncheon engagement. I'm good at remembering voices."

"I thought you might be," said Janet's visitor.

Janet didn't even see the gun. It came too fast out of the pocket where the visitor's right hand had been all the time. The two of them, hostess and guest, even after Janet's involuntary backward step, stood barely three feet apart.

The first bullet caught Janet squarely between her wide open eyes, just below the impish bang. The second shot, fired after she fell, was equally precise and went through her heart.

There was no third shot. A visitor, whose hostess is dead, seldom desires to linger long. On the other hand, a gun can be a dangerous trophy to carry around. Particularly when it's an unusual type of gun, decorated with tiny storks and easily traced back to the owner. A half-finished letter, with no time to read it, might also be dangerous.

Janet's visitor retreated to the bathroom with the letter and the gun. The letter was torn up and flushed down the toilet,

which in a way was rather a pity. The three newsy pages contained no mention of Arabella Rixey, no clue to her murder, and those three long loving pages might have made Mrs. Culp out in Montana feel a little better. You can't flush away a gun. Above the old-fashioned toilet, high up on the wall, hung a varnished brown wooden box which contained the water and flushing apparatus. The gun disappeared in there.

On the way out the visitor thoughtfully turned off the radio, but probably didn't think about or notice the electric fan in the bathroom. The fan played for a day and a half on Janet's last pair of stockings.

Thus, unexpectedly, all of Janet Culp's personal problems found an unexpected solution. She was out of her rut, the week's financing wouldn't trouble her, she would keep her resolution and never touch another drop, and she would never need another pair of stockings. That last pair would do.

Seventeen

AT HALF PAST FIVE on Tuesday afternoon, Timothy Dwight and a number of other police officials sat in a big sunlight-flooded office, staring at Lucy Greer's kitchen door. The door and frame had been carefully transported to downtown headquarters for the convenience of the fingerprint experts who had given it a thorough and exhaustive examination. The fingerprint experts had fallen down on the job, which is to say they had discovered no fingerprints in sufficiently good condition to catalog and identify. A tedious examination of the gas connections in the cellar had been equally fruitless.

"Personally," remarked one of Dwight's brother police officers, "I can't see that fingerprints of the family, even if they'd showed up, would prove much. For instance, you'd expect Mrs. Greer's prints would be on her own kitchen door."

"All the same," Dwight said, "prints of the Greer boy might

have helped out at some later stage of the game. You never know what angle a smart prosecutor is going to think up."

"You seem pretty sure this young fellow, Ted Greer, is the one."

"I am sure. Or," Dwight said grudgingly, "almost sure."

"What about the kid's alibi?"

"Not worth the powder to blow him to hell with. Irregardless of what the Scanlon woman says."

"You did talk to her?"

Dwight nodded. He had talked at length to Miss Harriet Scanlon and failed to shake her story in any particular. But he had discovered easily that the Scanlon woman had other work to do, that the waiting room at the Veterans' Bureau was jammed with chairs and people, and had correctly concluded that Miss Scanlon couldn't possibly have kept her eye on Greer for two solid hours. Since it was the Fourth of July, a poor day to locate people, Dwight had yet to trace and question any of the other young veterans who had occupied the waiting room on Monday.

"Tomorrow I will. Tomorrow," Dwight promised grimly, "I'll smash that alibi. If it's the last act of my life, I'll show that Greer wasn't at the Veterans' Bureau from twelve o'clock until two."

"It does seem like Greer's motive for bumping off his aunt is on the weak side."

"Once I pin the opportunity on him," Dwight said, "I'll worry about the motive. I'll bet my bottom dollar now, the motive ties in some way with that girl of his. His aunt was an old trouble-maker . . ."

"You mean Mrs. Rixey might have threatened to make trouble between Greer and the girl?"

"Something like that, maybe," Dwight said restively. "One thing is sure. Greer would go to hell and back to get that blonde."

"Still and all," someone pointed out, "Rixey is the one who gets the dough."

"You don't need to tell me," Dwight conceded irritably,

"that Rixey has a motive. I ain't dumb. But Rixey has also got an alibi that can't be smashed. His alibi has been checked from a to z. Every single minute Rixey was in his office the building superintendent was with him, and after that the taxi driver . . ."

"Seems kind of lucky Rixey happened to forget his keys."

"Sure, it does. Just like it seems lucky he copied down the taxi driver's name and address. But that's what he did. I don't claim," Dwight said, "that Rixey is any saint. I know damn well he had a fight with the missus before she started to town, though Rixey says not."

"What do the servants say?"

"Nothing. None of them was on the bedroom floor. The Rixeys had troubled last winter over his gambling, and I wouldn't be surprised if that was it. I wouldn't be surprised," said Dwight, "if Rixey would have liked to kill his wife. But it just ain't physically possible that he went out to Woodland Road between twelve and two yesterday, and bumped her off."

A short discussion which followed was devoted to the missing Stillson wrench and Arabella's missing purse. The disgruntled Dwight was obliged to admit that he had virtually abandoned hope of ever recovering either of these articles. The search had been carried to fanatical lengths. Seemingly wrench and purse had disappeared forever in the explosion, been destroyed without a trace. Funny, in a way. Metal objects are inclined to resist complete destruction.

Someone said, "Tim, the wrench I understand. But why are you so anxious to get hold of Mrs. Rixey's pocketbook?"

"I want it," Dwight said stubbornly. "Mrs. Rixey had a gold mesh purse when she left her house in the morning. I sure would like to see what's in that purse."

And then Timothy Dwight sighed. Others also sighed. Their thoughts had arrived at the most surprising and disappointing feature of the entire investigation. Nobody had been able to discover how or where Arabella had spent Monday morning. Nobody could even guess how Arabella had occupied herself from nine o'clock until quarter of one o'clock when she stepped into her limousine and drove off to her sister's house and her doom.

With all of the publicity, with columns in every newspaper devoted to the murder, the police had confidently expected telephone calls from people who had seen the victim during the morning. Such calls had been urgently invited. There had been no calls.

"It just don't seem right," Timothy Dwight said bitterly. "A fat woman, as big as a tub of lard, walking around in a fancy purple hat and dress, and not a soul noticing her. Is the whole town blind? The drugstore soda jerk remembered Mrs. Rixey, so did the cashier. In she walked and ate her breakfast, and out she walked but where did she go?"

Reaching over to a big flat-top desk, Dwight picked up a detail map of downtown Washington. On the map was a pencilled square, which outlined a twelve-block area of the city. In the middle of the pencilled square a dot indicated the People's Drug Store where Arabella Rixey had breakfasted. It didn't seem likely to Timothy Dwight or to anybody else that Mrs. Rixey, a stout woman wearing high-heeled shoes, would have walked more than a dozen blocks on a day of record-breaking heat.

Unfortunately, the arbitrary twelve-block area included shops and theatres, restaurants and drugstores, hotels, office and governmental buildings, mostly closed on holidays. Nevertheless, a squad of weary policemen was beating the pavements in this twelve-block square, conducting a door-to-door census on the slim chance of picking up some lucky scrap of information.

When Timothy Dwight left headquarters, he himself headed in the direction of the People's Drug Store. On the way, as it happened, he passed by a loft building which was located a few squares outside the twelve-block area. The gloomy, rather forbidding-looking building didn't attract his interest.

The street he traveled was shabby, treeless, mean and ugly, not the type of street to draw holiday strollers. Dwight glanced with mild curiosity at a young man, who passed him by and turned into the loft building. Fellow looked like an artist, was wearing a short-sleeved pale-green shirt and a beret, and carrying a kind of drawing pad. Dwight moved on.

Maloney unlocked the door and stepped into the uncarpeted hall of the loft building. After the brilliant sunshine outside, he was blinded by the gloom within. He fumbled for and pulled a light chain, and a single weak bulb went on.

Maloney sighed in relief. Janet Culp's morning papers, which he'd guiltily observed when he went out at noon, had vanished from the hall table. Maloney *was* soft-hearted. After last night's confused sounds of merriment, quarreling and uproar, sounds that indubitably meant Janet was off on another tear, Maloney would have felt morally obliged to look in on his neighbor for a moment. If only to call an ambulance to cart her off to Gallinger. Since Janet had recovered sufficiently to come down and get her papers, he was relieved of the painful duty.

Maloney tiptoed past Janet's floor, fearful that she might pop out on him. His caution, of course, was wasted. Maloney didn't know that Janet Culp would never trouble him again. He had no way of knowing, any more than Timothy Dwight had any way of knowing that he'd walked past the residence of a woman who could have told him where and exactly how Arabella Rixey had spent Monday morning. That is, she could have told him if he had reached her a few hours earlier.

On Woodland Road, the crowd was having supper. When Till returned from walking Mickey an hour earlier she had brought back Alec Bates, which surprised nobody very much. Miss Mitchell, for one, had been glad to welcome this guest.

Alec wasn't the thoughtless kind who dropped around at supper time, with nothing but an appetite. Alec and Till had stopped at Brough's, a small but well-known chop house on Connecticut Avenue. There they had collected a staggering number of cardboard cartons filled with steaming spareribs and sauerkraut, French fried potatoes and cole slaw. In consequence, the dinner for eight was heartening and adequate.

When they were halfway through the meal, Claude Rixey walked in, preoccupied and full of his own troubles, and loud with wrathful complaint. It seemed that reporters and policemen were making a hell of Claude's life out in Spring Valley.

"The photographers are the worst," Claude said bitterly. "I had to sneak out the back door of my own house wearing my chauffeur's cap and coat, to get in my own car. Then they chased us nearly all the way to town."

"That *is* too bad," Jessie said sympathetically.

Nobody else seemed especially touched.

"So the rich have troubles, too," Dorritt remarked coolly. "If you're rich, photographers like to take your picture. Being blessed with poverty, we've got off scot-free. Or nearly. They did snap Till and Mickey."

"Well, I don't like it!" cried Claude. "It's outrageous disturbing a man who's just lost his wife and should be left alone with his grief." And then he turned abruptly to Lucy. "I came by on purpose to see you, Lucy," Claude said to his sister-in-law. "The funeral will be held at three o'clock Thursday afternoon. Private services, of course. But naturally, any of you who care to come are invited."

Claude didn't quite like the way that sounded. You don't invite people to a funeral, do you? Invitations are for weddings and receptions, a different sort of social gathering.

"I mean," Claude stammered, "that Arabella, or rather that I, would want her nearest and dearest to be present. We—all of us here—well, we seem to be the ones."

Jessie Wayne had never even been introduced to Arabella Rixey. Miss Mitchell and Dorritt had met her once. Alec, her lawyer, had been fairly well acquainted with Arabella. To fill out the mourners' bench were the four Greers and Claude himself. If Arabella Rixey had left behind her in the world any nearest and dearest, it was true these were the ones.

"Well, anyway," Till said tactlessly, "I'm glad the funeral isn't going to be tomorrow."

Claude looked at her coldly, interrogatively.

"Tomorrow is Mother's birthday. Uncle Claude, surely you remember. You and Aunt Arabella were coming to dinner."

Plainly, if belatedly, Claude did remember. His florid face changed color. His mouth sagged. Suddenly he looked drawn, older, and, in the crowded room, he seemed to stand all by

himself, frightened, friendless and alone. Miss Mitchell gazed at him curiously. She wondered whether it was possible that with Till's careless words Claude Rixey had experienced a sudden pang of genuine grief and loss, the painful, empty twist of what might have been. She broke the silence.

"Mr. Rixey, you'd better sit down and join us at supper. Dorritt, run and get our guest a plate."

"Never mind. I've had my dinner," Claude said, instantly very much himself again. "I've stayed too long already. I'm on my way downtown to the office."

"Then, by all means, don't let us delay you," Miss Mitchell said dryly.

Claude turned to leave the dining room. As he passed Alec's place at the table, he paused. His hand, as though involuntarily, went to his pocket. For an involuntary gesture, it was a trifle too conspicuous. Claude's hand dropped.

"By the way, Alec. Lucky I thought of it. I'd like to borrow your office keys."

"Did you forget your keys again?' asked Alec.

"Apparently," Claude said with a shrug, "I've mislaid them. It seems my key ring went off to the cleaners with my trousers."

Alec handed over his own key ring. Why had Claude made a show of fumbling in his pocket for keys he knew weren't there? Probably because Claude was a lousy actor and mixed up his cues.

"I hope," Claude said, with a sharp look at his young employee, "that you'll be able to tear yourself away from this charming company, and get downtown yourself sometime soon. There's a lot to be done."

"Why the rush?" inquired Alec, resenting this call-down before Till.

"Arabella's papers should be got in order right away," Claude said. "The first thing in the morning I want you to get busy and offer her will for probate."

"Just as you say," replied Alec.

Nobody else said anything. Perhaps even sympathetic Jessie

wondered if the probating of Arabella Rixey's last will and testament might not have been delayed until Arabella herself was underground.

As the front door closed behind Claude, Dorritt looked over at Ted to seek his reactions. She frowned. Apparently Ted had already forgotten Claude. Ted had picked up a fork and was nervously drawing on the tablecloth, a habit of his. But these weren't pictures of funny little faces or cats with whiskers. The pattern seemed to be two entwined initials, traced again and again. Miss Mitchell was watching, too.

Something in Ted's absorption, the darkness of his face mirroring the dark thoughts within, the very movement of the subconsciously guided hand, frightened Dorritt. She looked more closely at the cloth. Then she reached out quickly and took the fork from Ted, and smoothed the pattern away. But Dorritt was fairly sure that Miss Mitchell had seen the two entwined initials.

Miss Mitchell had. The initials were J. C.

Out in Montana, two thousand miles away, someone else was also thinking anxiously about Janet Culp. Rufus Pomerane was worrying over Janet's ability to take charge of his business affairs, even as he stepped outside his father's mountain cabin to see the doctor off. He watched the tail light of the car go bumping down the trail, went back inside.

In the soft glow cast by the oil lamp the junior Pomerane, who at fifty-five was rather old for a junior, looked every minute of his age. The elder Pomerane, who was eighty-one and decidedly old even for a senior, didn't look his age by fifteen years, With a blanket wrapped around his shoulders to keep off the evening chill, sitting straight as an arrow in a leather-thonged chair, old man Pomerane appeared to be in a remarkable state of health. He was.

"You're a damned old fraud," his son said. "Claiming to have a stroke, scaring me half to death, and not a blame thing wrong with you. Why, you'll outlive me."

"Son, I got lonesome after my last hand quit me," the old man

said unregretfully. "You hadn't been home in eighteen months . . ."

"Lonesome or not," said the younger Pomerane irritably, "you had no right to drag me away from my home and business, to bring me thousands of miles on a fool's errand. If you're lonesome, you can pack and come back East with me. Amy and I have invited you dozens of times."

"I don't like the East."

"You've never been there."

"Ain't never going to be. Look, son, I aim to be reasonable. Suppose I make a deal with you."

"I'm listening."

"Stay two weeks and then you can go. Stay two weeks, and I'll get me another hand and . . ."

"Father, I can't stay. It's out of the question. You pulled me out here," Rufus Pomerane said with increasing irritability, "the very day I landed the biggest client of my career. Just luck—another lawyer was out of his office at a time when I was in mine."

"Who," the senior Pomerane inquired coldly, "is this client more important than your poor old father? What's his name?"

"It's a woman. She walked in my office yesterday and . . ."

"A woman!" The old man snorted. "From the way your mouth is watering, I judge she's rich."

"Rich? Hell, yes. Arabella Rixey is worth at least a million."

"What kind of lawing is this rich woman fixing to do?"

"She wants a divorce," Rufus Pomerane admitted somewhat reluctantly. "Mind you, I'm thinking beyond the divorce! eventually it might lead to the management of her whole estate. Ordinarily I don't fool with divorces. But this particular action may result in some pretty fat fees; the husband will probably fight, and Mrs. Rixey plans to enter suit in Florida."

"Why Florida? Don't your client live in Washington?"

"She also has a residence in Florida, and grounds for divorce are more lenient there. Mrs. Rixey means to claim incomptability."

The elder Pomerane had no interest in the marital troubles of Arabella Rixey. He spat into the fireplace.

"A funny thing, Rufus, to see you all pepped up about handling a divorce case for some rich and likely worthless woman. I can remember the days when you first went East and had a higher notion of the law."

"Oh, shut up," said Rufus Pomerane affectionately.

He stepped to the oil stove and began to mix a mess of bacon and eggs for supper. He wondered how soon he could get himself started back to Washington. The Wednesday night plane was the latest he could possibly consider. Arabella Rixey hadn't struck Pomerane as the type of woman who would be very patient with a lawyer whose personal affairs took him out of reach. She hadn't even waited for Harbison Greer to return from Baltimore.

Rufus Pomerane hoped without much confidence that his secretary had explained his absence satisfactorily to the client, that she had helped to get Mrs. Rixey started on the trip south. He wished he could talk to Janet on the phone. He wished his father had a radio. It was damned inconvenient to be completely out of touch with the news.

Eighteen

EVERY WOMAN is likely to be aware of her own fiftieth birthday. Few women, even the valiant, care in troubled times to be reminded of it. Lucy sincerely hoped that Wednesday would pass unnoticed. She reckoned without Miss Mitchell.

Miss Mitchell fully intended to mark the occasion with a modest celebration. Her motives were not altogether unselfish. The little party would necessitate a trip to the uptown shopping center. Miss Mitchell was eager to effect even a temporary escape from her crowded household. She was frantic to be by herself.

In Miss Mitchell's house on Wednesday morning, there was no peace anywhere. Everywhere the owner turned, she found someone else. Till was playing the radio in the dining room.

Ted was upstairs in the bathroom, Lucy was in the double bedroom. Dorritt was messing up the kitchen. Jessie was in possession of the living room. Miss Mitchell conceded that Dorritt might not feel like reporting downtown to the Department of the Interior, where the other girls would drive her crazy with questions; she conceded that Till might not want to attend her summer school classes. It did seem, however, that Jessie might have gone to work instead of settling on the rattan sofa with a magazine. Jessie Wayne's name hadn't figured in the papers.

Miss Mitchell opened the coat closet in the hall to get her hat and gloves. There, ensconced among the coats and umbrellas, she turned up Harby Greer. The telephone was on a long cord; Harby had carried the instrument into the closet so he could attempt, without taking the entire household into his confidence, to locate hotel accommodations for himself and family. Miss Mitchell hurriedly backed out.

"Please don't let me disturb you."

"Miss Mitchell, you're not disturbing me," lied Harby. He walked out with the telephone and such assurance as he could muster. "But we Greers are certainly disturbing you. It's an intolerable imposition. I assure you I'm doing my level best to get us settled elsewhere."

With that, Harby seized his own hat and took himself from the house. He didn't relish running into associates, acquaintances, friends any more than did Dorritt, Jessie and Till. But at least he had an office, a secretary and a telephone. He would set Miss Harris to tracking down a hotel suite for four, if in overcrowded Washington such a thing existed.

As he was getting into his car, Harby perceived that he was to be escorted. It annoyed him. He strode over to the police car.

"If you fellows are going downtown anyway, you may as well drop me at the Hibbs Building, and save me the parking problem."

Harby arrived downtown in style. Two brother lawyers, just turning into the Hibbs Building, saw him step from the police car. They nodded, but coolly. A plain-clothes man alighted with him.

"Do you propose to sit around in my office with me?"

"Mr. Greer, I'm only following orders."

"I'm on the fifth floor," Harby said grimly, "but to spare my friends embarrassment, I propose to walk."

They walked.

On the second floor, the climb was briefly interrupted. Harby stepped from the stairway and went toward the fountain in the hall. Harby paused imperceptibly as he passed a door marked with the name of Rufus Pomerane, and then moved on. There was no one in that particular office. The door was locked. Inside a telephone was ringing steadily. Rufus Pomerane was still in Montana, and of course was without the services of a secretary. Harby assuaged his thirst. He and his faithful follower turned around and walked on up to the fifth floor.

Back on Woodland Road, Miss Elizabeth, hatted, gloved, in her marketing costume, lifted her grocery cart down the front porch steps to the sidewalk. A lean spare man with reddish-gray eyebrows and a few shabby remnants of reddish-gray hair had parked his car next door. Dr. MacNab was standing on the walk, gazing at the site of the explosion. He came over to offer assistance with the cart.

"Thank you, I can manage the contraption nicely when it's empty," she said. "Sometimes I have difficulty when it's full. Fortunately people are kind to old ladies if they look sufficiently helpless."

Elizabeth Mitchell looked anything but helpless to Dr. MacNab.

"Perhaps I can give you a lift. I've wasted time enough already, and should be getting downtown to my business."

"Thank you again, but I'm headed the other way. Somehow I had a notion you were one of those policemen."

"Heaven forbid! I'm a physician masquerading as the District Coroner. I have no business here whatever this morning, unless a strong personal compulsion goes under the head of business. Unless . . ."

Dr. MacNab hesitated. It would be difficult to explain to this nice old lady, who was a total stranger to him, his conviction

that Timothy Dwight wasn't going to solve the mystery of Arabella Rixey's death, and Dr. MacNab's own dissatisfaction with that state of affairs. Miss Elizabeth also hesitated. She had an uneasy feeling that it might be unwise to pursue this conversation further. Something held her.

"I don't like mysterious death," Dr. MacNab said abruptly. "Mysterious death is a bad thing, to my way of thinking. Bad for all of us. If you follow me?"

"You sound like a romantic, doctor. I thought that physicians . . ."

"Physicians can travel more paths than one. Some of them substitute science and medicine for religion and faith. Some become mystics," the doctor said. "Obstetrics, for instance, can be a matter of techniques and mechanics, like building a motor car. The most rewarding field in medicine can be reduced to picking the proper forceps. Yet a friend told me once that delivering a child was like standing in a great cathedral."

"I wonder if the friend was you."

But Dr. MacNab had turned to gaze again at the piles of stone and masonry and splintered wreckage, harshly revealed in the strong sun of morning. Let no one tell you that sparkling sunlight can make recent ruins gay and attractive. Were the lovely ruins of Rome and Greece lovely to the Greeks and Romans when they were new ruins? To Dr. MacNab, as to Elizabeth Mitchell, the sight next door was an affront to the eye and mind, sinister to contemplate.

She said, "An ugly place to die."

"Actually it's not the place, madam. It's the moral implications that trouble us. Not all of us are allowed the privilege of dying in our own soft beds. But surely the meanest should be permitted to die at his own allotted time. Isn't that what troubles you?"

"Perhaps so," she replied uneasily.

"Death," the doctor said, "should be one's personal unique possession like birth, and just as natural. An unnatural death disturbs the imagination of every thinking man. Why? Isn't it

because we sense that an unnatural death throws the great unseen plan we live by askew and out of kilter?"

"I expect you're right," said she, suddenly wishing he would loose his hold on her grocery cart. It made her nervous to stand here discussing Arabella's death, even in terms so veiled and abstruse. "To tell the truth, I haven't given the matter much thought."

"Madam, I'm sure you must have. You have an inward-looking eye. The proposition is obvious," Dr. MacNab declared with his characteristic impatience. "Death shouldn't be cheapened and robbed of dignity by the claptrap of the headline writers; it should possess only its own peculiar, essential mystery. The supernatural mystery is always right and natural—because we adjust to death from birth, and in the cells of the newborn infant, as we know, lies the germ of senility and dissolution. Perhaps physicians think odd thoughts," said Dr. MacNab, and continued to air his own odd thoughts, "but it seems to me that the particularly outrageous feature of the so-called 'mysterious death' is the way moral values disappear in the hullabaloo. Glaring headlines, cheap, shallow stories in the press destroy the true mystery of death. You and I are entitled to ponder and believe in this thrilling mystery; without it we find the props knocked out from under our thinking, our faith, our ability to go on existing from day to day. Isn't that a fact?"

"I suppose so," Miss Mitchell said.

"Murder is an abomination!" cried the doctor with sudden furious anger. "Every murderer, from the back alley knifer to the classic killer, wrongs each and every one of us by making both life and death seem insignificant and trivial. A matter of chance, accident, something to be deposed by human minds and human hands. Murder not only robs the victim," Dr. MacNab said more calmly, "but puts an unfair burden upon the living. It leaves us uncertain, doubtful, questioning, afraid. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, yes, I agree," Miss Elizabeth said, and freed her grocery cart and went in haste.

The doctor's angry words fell on fertile ground. Miss Mitchell had good reason to believe that murder was an abomination. Her own household, filled with strain and tension, an awful sense of waiting, filled with folk who didn't quite like to meet each others' eyes, was reason enough.

Murder had destroyed Lucy's home, and might well destroy Lucy's family. Soon it might destroy Lucy, too. If Ted was arrested, Miss Mitchell doubted that Lucy could survive.

Miss Mitchell had known Ted since he was eight years old. She couldn't believe that Ted had grown up to be a murderer, but someone had. Someone had killed Arabella. Who?

Murder had put into Miss Mitchell's mind new and ugly questions, just as it had put into her unwilling heart mistrust of everybody, herself too. She had set her face against the law when she burned the hardware bill, had partaken secretly in the guilt. Already she was paying. She was afraid now to stand chatting casually with a pleasant stranger, because he represented what was right.

Murder can't be hidden. Murder must out. As she walked the sweltering sidewalk with her grocery cart, the conviction hit Miss Mitchell like a stupendous revelation.

Only the truth could restore her to herself. The truth alone could save Lucy, Ted, Elizabeth Mitchell, all of them. With the truth, she could establish Ted's innocence despite anything that Timothy Dwight could do. Instinctively, because she wished it so, or perhaps because she had faith in a long gone, knickerbockered, very noisy boy, Miss Mitchell *knew* that this was so. She knew where and how she would begin. Subtlety was indicated.

Elizabeth Mitchell looked thoughtfully at the young policeman, assigned to accompany her on the shopping trip. Young Johnson's troubles began at the Super Market, where Miss Mitchell put him in charge of buying the vegetables while she collected a can of pineapple juice. The manners of female shoppers have yet to reconvert to the gentle ways of peace. Young Johnson retired from the Super Market with an injured ankle and a dim opinion of the weaker sex. After that, in rapid suc-

cession, he followed his quarry into the butcher shop, the delicatessen, two other grocery stores. They visited three bakeries before Miss Mitchell found an unfrosted birthday cake that suited her. Then of course they were obliged to track down powdered sugar for the fancy icing that Dorritt planned to concoct. At the ten-cent store, where they paused for candles, it was Johnson who finally located and trapped an unwary clerk.

By half past eleven Miss Mitchell was satisfied. The hunter looked as wilted and done-in, as worn out with the shopping expedition, as the hunted had planned for. Miss Mitchell had left her most important errand until last. Casually she brought up outside the Uptown Hardware Store.

"I need to run in here a moment," she said, "and then I think you and I should have a bite of lunch. You look a little tired."

Johnson was so tired he could barely drag himself inside. Why in hell visit a hardware store to prepare for a birthday party that shouldn't be held anyway in the midst of a murder investigation? Miss Mitchell explained. The janitor at the apartment house had promised to put in her downstairs window panes that afternoon. Assuming she provided the material.

"Since I have a strong young man like you along," Miss Mitchell said to the policeman, "I thought you could carry the glass back home, while I wheeled the cart. I could hardly manage both, could I?"

"I guess not," Johnson admitted bleakly.

The Uptown Hardware Store was a frantic, overcrowded version of the Super Market. Johnson sank at once into a canvas beach chair and let Miss Mitchell carry on the struggle by herself. Parking the grocery cart beside him, she tripped over to a counter where she picked out a can of putty and a putty knife. It was an open counter and displayed a variety of articles, including all kinds of wrenches. Miss Mitchell didn't glance at the wrenches.

With the putty and knife in hand, she awaited her turn to get at the only clerk in evidence, a harried-looking, middle-aged man, attempting unsuccessfully to satisfy six customers at once. Eventually she reached him with her purchases. In a series

of almost simultaneous motions, the clerk dumped the putty and knife into a paper bag, rang up 30 cents on the cash register, held out his hand for the money.

"Oh, I'm sorry," cried Miss Mitchell in contrition. "I should have told you. I'd like to charge. I have an account."

"What's the name?"

Miss Mitchell leaned across the counter. In a low, distinct voice, she spoke.

"Greer is the name. Please charge it to Harbison Greer."

And then she held her breath. The clerk didn't give her a second glance. As he started to jot down the name, several things happened calculated to distract him further. A woman rushed up, laid a sum of money on the cash register, mumbled something and sped out of the store with an unwrapped egg beater. At the counter immediately adjacent, two ladies broke into a spirited dispute over the possession of an electric mixer. Moving purposefully toward the door was a man who looked as though he'd got sick of waiting and intended to carry off a saw, without bothering to pay at all. Attempting to hold these disparate factors in mind, the clerk shouted at the man with the saw, informed the disputing ladies that first-come got the mixer, let the egg-beater woman go—hoping she'd left behind the correct amount.

To Miss Mitchell he said:

"What was that name again? Would you mind spelling it?"

"M-i-t-c-h-e-l-l," said Miss Mitchell, again speaking in a low distinct voice. "Elizabeth Mitchell, 2703 Woodland Road."

The clerk looked vaguely surprised.

"Funny, I thought you said something different the first time."

"I don't wonder," said Miss Elizabeth Mitchell. "With all this confusion, I'm surprised you ever hear anything straight. I should think your accounts would often get mixed up."

"Sometimes they do," conceded the clerk. "Now, Miss Morris, if you'll kindly step aside . . ."

Miss Mitchell was breathing easily now. She stepped aside, and went to the rear of the store to buy her window glass. She

had found out what she wanted to know. She had carried out a small experiment, and been rewarded with a piece of information. An item charged to the account of Harbison Greer at the Uptown Hardware Store had not necessarily been purchased by Harbison Greer. Far from it. The Uptown Hardware Store was bedlam.

Anybody could have come into the store last Thursday and charged a Stillson wrench to Harbison Greer, with no questions asked. And then, reluctantly, Miss Mitchell perceived that the field wasn't quite so large as all that. The person who had charged the wrench to Harby had to be a person who knew that Harby had an account at the Uptown Hardware Store. Miss Elizabeth Mitchell knew. Harby's family—Lucy, Ted, Till—would also know. Claude, Dorritt, even Jessie, might know. When you come right down to it, the field wasn't very large, after all.

And then Miss Mitchell thought of something else. Something very odd. The wrench had been bought and charged on Thursday. Why? How could this particular murder have been premeditated and prepared for five days before it occurred? There was a loose cog somewhere. On Thursday Arabella had not been planning to lunch on Monday with Lucy at Lucy's house.

Nineteen

ONE SUCCESSFUL experiment behind her, Miss Mitchell was ripe for another. Which explains why after lunch young Johnson found himself in downtown Washington, entering the hushed, uncrowded and expensive confines of the city's smartest department store. Johnson failed to understand why Miss Mitchell hadn't located a satisfactory birthday present for Lucy Greer among all those shops uptown.

"Because I preferred Gawaine's," Miss Mitchell informed him serenely.

Actually she was hardly more familiar with the luxury store than was young Johnson. Till and Lucy, Dorritt and even Jessie sometimes shopped there, but Miss Mitchell had always felt that the price range began well above her own income level. However, she wanted to choose something really nice for Lucy.

Incidentally, Miss Mitchell wanted to satisfy her curiosity about Arabella's visit to the store ten days back, on the luckless afternoon she'd caught Lucy and Till buying the evening dress and promptly changed her will. The whole episode seemed—queer. Lazy, comfort-loving Arabella had seldom come in from the country during the summer months. Snobbish Arabella had frequently announced that every stitch of clothing on her ample back was specially designed by her own special couturiere on very special 57th Street in New York.

Across the spacious street floor, wheer a few hot and languid shoppers were sauntering around, Miss Mitchell spied the elevators. According to the printed directory on the wall, the custom-made dress department was on the fifth floor. So was the better hat department. So was the better lingerie.

"Suppose," Miss Mitchell suggested briskly to her companion, "we go on up and look at the better lingerie."

Maybe you will, thought the embittered policeman to himself, but not me. There was a chair on the fifth floor besides the elevator. Johnson sat on it. From the chair he could overlook, through airy arches, both the better hat and the better lingerie departments. He watched Miss Mitchell trip off into the filmy mysteries of better lingerie.

The section was deserted. There were no customers and no salespeople either. Through another arch, Miss Mitchell had a view of the custom-made department. A dozen saleswomen were clustered like a knot of bees in the shelter of a rack of dresses. Heads together, they were engaged in excited but low-voiced conversation. The subject of the conversation seemed clear. One of the smartly dressed women, the one with the tallest pompadour, held a newspaper. They were talking about Arabella Rixey.

In vain, Miss Mitchell tried to listen. The group was too far

away, the voices were too low. Once distinctly from the distant corner she heard Arabella's name mentioned, but that was all she heard.

At last Miss Mitchell sighed. Johnson would be growing restless. She rapped her knuckles against the counter. There was a flurry among the gossiping group. She rapped again. Reluctantly the saleswoman with the tallest pompadour laid down the newspaper, detached herself from her sisters, and strolled elegantly into better lingerie.

"Madam wishes something?"

"Yes, please. A nightgown. Something nice for a gift. Blue, if possible. My friend has beautiful blue eyes."

"The size?"

"Size 12," Miss Mitchell said.

The pompadour turned around, pulled out a cloud of fluffy chiffon and then, as though the weight exhausted her, spilled it on the counter. Miss Mitchell reached out her hand, abruptly drew it back. She'd sighted the price tag.

"Dear me," Miss Mitchell said faintly, "this costs more than my last winter coat."

The pompadour became human.

"I think it's highway robbery myself," she confessed, with a sudden, very human grin, "but you'd be surprised at the customers who'll pay it. Everybody's crazy, aren't they?"

With that she bestirred herself and hunted up some pretty nightgowns at around fifteen dollars, which was scandalous but possible. The two of them, customer and clerk, warmed to and approved of each other. Two sensible women in a world gone mad.

If you seek information, Miss Mitchell had long ago discovered, frankness pays. Frankness, that is to say, in moderation.

"I heard you talking in the other room," she began chattily. "Arabella Rixey was a—a friend of mine. Well, hardly a friend. One shouldn't speak ill of the dead, I know. But you really couldn't call Arabella Rixey a very friendly woman."

"You certainly couldn't!" the other agreed with emphasis. "Why, she was in here one day last week, and . . ."

"Oh, you must mean the day she ran into her sister. I've heard there was a little trouble."

"A little trouble? Gosh, it was a holy show. You could hear Mrs. Rixey for blocks," the salesgirl said, pleased to exchange reminiscences with Mrs. Rixey's friend. "She had the whole floor in an uproar, screaming and carrying on about a dress that wasn't any of her affair. Her sister was trying hard not to cry, the girl did cry. I felt so sorry for them. Boy, was I glad when they went ahead, in spite of Mrs. Rixey, and bought that evening dress."

"I'd have been glad myself," Miss Mitchell said sincerely. She didn't rush things. As she considered a lacy, azure nightgown and pictured Lucy in it, she also considered her next remark. She spoke casually. "Such a pity they happened to meet. I was wondering how it did happen."

"Just accident. Mrs. Rixey was in a bad mood anyway and she recognized the other two as they were going in the fitting room, and then the fur began to fly."

"But what was Arabella doing in the store?" Miss Mitchell inquired gently. "She wasn't shopping, was she? I always understood she did her buying in New York."

"It's true Mrs. Rixey wasn't one of our regular customers," the pompadour admitted a little coldly. "But she did select her entire Florida wardrobe here last January. Her train was leaving in a few hours, and stuff she was expecting from New York hadn't arrived. Believe me, that was some show, too."

"I can imagine. When Arabella was in a hurry, she wasn't—patient."

"Madam, you said it. She brought the whole darn family—her sister, her niece, her husband and gosh, I believe her nephew came along too—to help her choose. You'd have to see it to believe it. In thirty minutes, she practically bought out the store. Twenty separate outfits!"

Miss Mitchell could visualize the scene last January in the Fashions for the Sun department. Arabella seated like a pompous queen, surrounded by bored and restive courtiers. Till and Lucy might have derived a certain vague enjoyment from look-

ing at the kind of pretty clothes they themselves could not afford, but it wasn't likely that either Claude or Ted would be much interested in fashions for the sun. Other people's boredom hadn't bothered Arabella. The queen was going south; the queen hadn't a rag to wear; the queen was in a hurry. Queens can pay for service. Whole racks of clothes must have whizzed back and forth before the throne, as suits and dinner frocks, silks and cottons, nubbly weaves, lawns and linens and liberty prints, coats and robes, slacks and shorts and bathing attire, received swift audience, were laid aside with Arabella's smile, whisked from sight with Arabella's frown. Miss Mitchell could almost hear Arabella saying, "I'll take that and that and that, without ever pausing to inquire the price. Twenty outfits in thirty minutes! My, oh, my!

"Strictly between you and I," the pompadour said, suddenly, "that's the reason Mrs. Rixey came in last week."

Miss Mitchell blinked. She missed the connection. Why should the frenzied purchase of a Florida wardrobe in January bring a woman into a store the following July? Unless perhaps the wardrobe had turned out to be unsatisfactory. It developed that it was the bill which was unsatisfactory—to Arabella.

"Rich people are the limit," the salesgirl observed with no particular rancour. "Mrs. Rixey got around to settling her account six months late, and then had the nerve to claim the account was wrong, that she'd been charged for something she didn't get. Why, she couldn't even describe the clothes she *was* willing to pay for . . ."

"Then I don't understand."

"Our business office didn't either," said the other dryly. "One printed chiffon hostess gown—and it wasn't so awfully expensive either—caused the trouble. Some women will swear up and down black is white. Mrs. Rixey declared she hadn't got the printed chiffon, though it was written on the sales slip, plain as day. The simple fact is she'd just forgotten buying it."

Miss Mitchell swallowed her disappointment. It wasn't the salesgirl's fault that her second experiment in detection had petered out with such a dull and profitless explanation. Ara-

bella had a lapse of memory. Arabella had made a mistake. Arabella stuck to her mistakes.

"She probably wore out the printed chiffon down in Florida," suggested the disheartened investigator. "That's the answer."

The salesgirl hesitated.

"No, no, Mrs. Rixey didn't wear this outfit. It was the wrong size. I suppose that's what caught her eye, when she went over the account six months later."

"The wrong size?"

"You know how large Mrs. Rixey was. Well, the printed chiffon we sold her—you could see by the sales slip and by our own office records—was small. That was the customer's only argument."

"Small? What was the size?"

"Size 12," said the salesgirl.

"Why in the world," Miss Mitchell asked blankly, "would Arabella buy a size 12? Size 42 would have crowded her."

"I don't know," replied the other with asperity. "I do know she bought the printed chiffon, along with all those other things she didn't dispute, because it shows on the same sales slip. Maybe she gave the outfit to her maid, and forgot all about it. Our customers do screwier things."

Arabella's screwiness hadn't run to absent-minded generosity. Had Arabella ever in her life made a present that slipped her memory? No, Arabella never had. Unhappily, Miss Mitchell's mind was prepared for another answer. Her thoughts returned to the Uptown Hardware Store and her discovery that an item charged to Harbison Greer had not necessarily been purchased by Harbison Greer.

A printed chiffon hostess gown cut to fit a slender figure and charged to Arabella's account need not have been Arabella's purchase. In this situation, however, there was an additional and tricky, ugly element. Whoever had charged the printed chiffon to Arabella, taking advantage of the haste and the confusion, must have been present on the January afternoon when Arabella bought her Florida wardrobe. The chiffon gown was recorded on the same sales slip with nineteen other outfits. Lucy

and Till had been with Arabella. Claude and Ted had been there. Four people. This field wasn't large at all.

The printed chiffon hostess gown was size 12.

Simultaneously the eyes of customer and clerk fell upon the pretty nightgowns strewn along the counter. Ridiculous bits of lace and silk and satin, cut and sized to fit a slender figure. Miss Mitchell picked up the nearest. Thus, abruptly she selected Lucy's birthday present.

Miss Mitchell paid cash. As she closed her purse, she wondered whether among the bewildering array of clothes on display last January Lucy could remember a printed chiffon hostess gown. Even as she wondered, Miss Mitchell knew it was a question she would never ask.

Twenty

IT WAS NEARLY dinner time. Lucy sat in the living room with Harby and Miss Mitchell, valiantly pretending to be both deaf and blind. If it killed her, the unhappy birthday child meant to be surprised.

In the kitchen Dorritt was icing the cake, while Jessie placidly read the evening paper. Presently Jessie smiled to herself.

"Dory, I suppose you saw the story about Mrs. Rixey's estate. It was even larger than we thought."

"Was it?"

"To think that Claude Rixey gets it all," Jessie mused. "It does seem terribly unfair to the Greers. Think what a difference a little money would have made to you and Ted."

Dorritt was silent. If Arabella Rixey had seen fit to help Ted, either in her lifetime or in her death, the difference indeed would have been enormous. Dorritt sprinkled rosebuds on the cake while Jessie chattered on about millions and what millions would buy. She waited till she'd had enough. Then Dorritt smiled.

"Jessie dear, when your own man finally comes along, maybe you'll find out that money isn't everything."

It was Jessie's turn to be silent.

Upstairs, Till and Ted were having brother and sister trouble. Till was wrapping her mother's birthday presents. Instead of helping, Ted was talking.

"Mother won't let on, but this thing is going to be torture for her. Whoever thought it up, I'd like to wring their neck. I suppose it was you."

"Well, it wasn't," Till coldly informed the wet blanket. "It was Miss Mitchell."

"Then I'm disappointed in Miss Mitchell. I always thought she had more sense."

"Maybe you're the one who's dumb," Till retorted angrily. "Did you ever think of that? All women love parties."

"In other words, you do. Are you pretending you're a grown-up woman? Why, you're just a half-baked kid."

"Anyway, I'm not a gloom like you! Most people aren't, thank goodness. What makes you think you're so awfully smart?"

"I know Mother."

"She's my mother, too," cried Till. "I'm willing to take some trouble about her. But you—you're too selfish. Too busy having big ideas that no one understands. You didn't even bother to buy her a ten-cent handkerchief."

"Wrong again," Ted said. "I got her a box of candy."

"Candy!" said Till in high scorn. "Do you call that a present? Why even Alec is bringing her something better than . . ."

"Alec! My God, did you ring Alec in on the evening too?"

"Why not? Alec is crazy about Mother." Suddenly Till's eyes lit with pride and pleasure. "Ted," she said, "Alec bought Mother the most wonderful bag. You'll see it tonight. Real alligator with super fittings."

The blood rushed to Ted's head. Sick with rage and jealousy, he stared at his sister's glowing face. Till had no idea how she had hurt and humiliated him.

Till didn't know, probably didn't care, how much Ted himself longed to dress Lucy in velvet and diamonds and lay treasures at her feet. Well, he couldn't do it. Mother had picked herself the wrong kind of son. The son she'd got couldn't deliver. He never had delivered. What had he brought Mother in the past except pain and disappointment? In the future, inevitably, at any moment now, he would bring to her disgrace and tragedy.

As a son, Ted Greer was a wash-out, a flop, a disaster. His sister had made that eminently clear. A few well-chosen words about a box of candy had done it.

"Ted, you look so queer," Till said.

"Maybe you look queer to me," said he.

As he regarded his sister's frowning, puzzled face, Ted felt puzzled, too. In sad perplexity, he imagined sitting there another Till, the Till he used to know. The pre-war Till. The Till who would have thought a box of candy was super if her big brother had selected it.

Once again, Ted was sharply reminded of how long three years can be. He had changed during the wasted years. And so, unfairly, had everybody else. Mother's lovely blonde hair was mostly gray these days. The cute frown between her brow that used to flash and go was permanent now. Father wasn't middle-aged any more. He was almost old. Dorritt looked the same, or nearly. But inside she was—different. Let's face it. You lost three years of the girl you left behind you. In three years a lot can happen. Take a look at your kid sister, Ted, and see how long three years can be.

Never again, Ted knew, would he find in Till's eyes a look that once had belonged to him, an uncritical, kid sister look. Never again would he see his own special Till. It was as though Till had walked out of a room in his mind aged fifteen, and abruptly walked back in, a grown-up woman.

Till was nineteen years old. Nowadays the look that had once belonged to her big brother was directed elsewhere. Nowadays Till spent her sweetness elsewhere. Alec Bates was the one.

That was natural. Natural and right. What wasn't right was that Till and Ted should be always bickering and quarreling. Why did they?

Suddenly, reluctantly and unwillingly, Ted admitted it was because he had refused to submit to what must be. Till wasn't to blame. The fault was his.

"Alec is a good Joe," Ted said to his sister. "I like him."

"He likes you, too," Till said eagerly. "Ted, he thinks you're swell. We were talking just this afternoon."

"I'm glad," Ted said.

"Maybe you don't know it," Till's tongue ran on, "but Alec is every bit as worried about you as I am myself."

"Why should Alec be specially worried about me?"

"Ted, you're so funny. Of course he's worried. Alec is a lawyer. He's scared to death the police will find out I saw you in the house on Monday."

"But how does Alec know?" Ted began. And then he paused. His voice changed. "I see," Ted said. "You told him. You weren't ever going to tell anybody, but you told Alec. Is that right, Till?"

"Yes, yes, I told Alec," Till said. "Ted, Alec doesn't count. Why, he . . ."

She was talking to the empty air. Ted turned around and walked quietly out of the room. Till stared. The package she was wrapping dropped from her hands. The ribbons slithered, the tissue paper rustled, and then the room was still.

In the empty stillness the hurt Till had inflicted turned on her, became her own. She, too, felt and for the first time the pain of change and loss. A pain so new and different as to be unrecognizable to her. She couldn't bear it. She wouldn't. A familiar lovely certainty that belonged to Till, the durable, everlasting, unquestioning love of a big brother, the guiding star of her happy confident childhood, was going and going fast.

Till sprang to her feet. She ran after something she didn't realize yet was gone for good. Till caught Ted in the hall. She was crying.

"Ted, what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Why did you walk out that way?"

"Because—because I was a fool. Because I wasn't used to something maybe. Stop crying, Till."

"I can't. I'm too unhappy. Ted, I shouldn't have told Alec."

"So I thought for a minute," Ted said slowly. "I was wrong. You love the guy, don't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Then you couldn't help it. Till, I know. People who love each other can't have secrets, even if stupid brothers get in the way. Secrets are—hell."

Comforted, Till dried her eyes. She'd fixed it. She looked trustingly at Ted, and requested the impossible.

"Then everything is just the same?"

"I didn't say that, kid. You're grown up now. It makes a difference."

"I don't see why."

"When you're grown up, Till, times come when you've got to choose up sides. Times come when you're pulled this way and that way. Brothers and sisters, too, I suppose, they sometimes get the short end of the stick."

"Are you talking about *now*?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm in bad trouble. I'm your brother. Supposing you could get me out of trouble by getting Alec into trouble, supposing I had to go to the chair for murder or Alec had to go . . ."

Till's eyes were dry. She tried pathetically to hide the truth in them, and failed. She quivered as though he'd struck her physically as he struck her torn, rebellious, troubled heart. She seized the weapon near at hand.

"Supposing it was Dorritt and me . . ."

Dorritt or Till? Ah, now the piper played a different tune. Which of the fair ladies would Ted endow with his deepest loyalty? His sweetheart or his sister? Ted was silent.

"You'd put Dorritt first," cried Till. "You'd save Dorritt first, wouldn't you? Don't you love her more than me?"

These hypothetical questions can be as slippery as a basketful

of eels. Hypothetical questions are troublemakers. Silent, Ted admitted to himself that he wasn't willing to level with Till or anybody else where Dorritt was concerned. Dorritt was his own private affair. Just as Alec was Till's private affair. Angry at himself for starting this, Ted threw an arm around Till's tense shoulder.

"Someone ought to kick me," he said. "Forget it, Till. I understand about Alec. Go ahead, choose him every time, dear. A woman who doesn't put her own man first, regardless of everything and everybody, is done for. She's no damn good. You're okay, Till."

"You don't always act like it. Ted—why?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes," she said.

His arm was still around her. Their faces were very close. Brother and sister exchanged a level, a mature and searching glance.

"Sometimes, Till, I wonder if you aren't a little inclined to put your own self first. Suppose, since we've begun it, we change around that ugly situation of who lands in the death cell. Supposing you could save yourself or someone you loved . . ."

"Everybody says that self-preservation . . ."

"Let me tell you something, Till. Self-preservation is more useful to the human race than to the human being. It's like a dangerous drug. A little bit goes a long way."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Save yourself too often," Ted said to his sister, "grab everything you want and leave nothing for the other fellow, take from those who love you and don't give back, and sure as shooting you'll wind up a loser. Some fine day, Till, you'll wake up and find there's nothing left of you."

"Ted, you sound crazy."

"Maybe so," he said. "Sometime, Till, you ought to talk to Mother. She'll tell you that you've got to give your life to gain it. For instance, Till, it isn't really very smart to shield yourself at the expense of other people."

Till turned red.

"I suppose you mean I should have told about that gun belonging to me."

"It might have been a good idea."

"Ted, I will now. I'll phone up Dwight and . . ."

"It's too late now. My sweet, the time to speak the truth is when the opportunity is offered. Otherwise people are inclined to lose confidence. Now," said Ted, "I expect I'd better shave for that damn party."

He gave her a quick forgiving little hug, then went into the storeroom and closed the door. Unsatisfied and restive, Till lingered in the hall.

Through the paper-thin door, she heard Ted prowling around, move here, move there, heard him suddenly stop, curse softly to himself, and then—apparently—get down on his knees and start shoving things. A tentative smile broke through on Till's face, as the worrisome mood dissolved in feminine amusement. Ted had passed up a convenient light plug near the door and ferreted out that awkward plug way over in the corner, so he could plug in the electric razor Alec had lent him. The plug was behind Miss Mitchell's funny-looking trunk, blocked with piled-up cartons and boxes. That explained the shoving sounds. How like Ted! How like every man!

Smiling, Till started to go away, instinctively hesitated a further moment until Ted should bring the matter to its conclusion. No busy zizzing whir of the electric razor rewarded the listening ear. Abruptly the quality of the silence on the other side of the door, a silence profound and deep, became displeasing to Till. She knocked. No answer. She opened the door and stepped inside.

Across clutter and confusion, way over in the corner of the storeroom, stood Ted. His back was to the door. He was staring at something behind Miss Mitchell's trunk.

"Ted . . ."

He spun around, as a man will sometimes spin when a bullet hits him. Ted's face frightened Till.

"Get out of here!" Ted said in a voice she'd never heard from him or anybody else before. "Get out of here, and leave me be."

"Why, Ted . . ."

"Get out of here!"

Till was eager to oblige him. It seemed her feet just wouldn't move. And then, suddenly, the look on Ted's face got even worse, as though shock, terror, anguish, anger and hatred too, undirected and unfocussed, had abruptly found a focus. The focus was Till herself. Something terrible has happened, thought the distracted girl. My own brother hates me, thought Till. Frightened in a way she'd never been frightened before, knees weak as water, Till began to back furtively toward the hall. At once, as though forgetful he'd ordered her out, Ted sprang upon her. He seized Till's shoulder. He shook Till.

"No, no, little lady, you don't crawl out of this so easily. Were you in here this morning?"

"I—I can't remember."

"Try, Till, try." He shook her. "Did you make my bed this morning?"

"Did I make your bed?" she repeated, parrot-like. "No, no, Ted, I didn't make your bed. Let go my arm. You hurt. I didn't even make my own bed. I forgot."

"Who did?"

"Mother made the beds."

"Mother! I don't believe it. Mother wasn't in here this morning."

"Ted, I saw her."

"You're lying! Doing business at the same old stand. Business as usual won't do, Till. This time . . ."

"Ted, what's wrong with you? I did see Mother in here this morning making your bed, sweeping your floor. . . . What does it matter? Let me go!"

As Ted shook her again, Till, wriggling to escape, saw something else around his shoulder. Through an aperture between the trunk and wall, she caught a shadowy glimpse of an irregular-shaped parcel, wrapped hurriedly in newspaper, without string, like the parcels one drops in garbage cans. So insignificant a parcel, stowed behind Miss Mitchell's funny-looking

trunk in Ted's funny-looking sleeping quarters, had caused this dreadful trouble. Till's voice shrilled. "Ted, what's behind the trunk?"

At once he stopped shaking her. In one violent thrust, he pushed his sister from the storeroom and out into the hall. He let go her shoulder.

"Never you mind what's behind the trunk. I suppose you'd like to go running to Alec and . . ."

"It was something," Till said, "wrapped up in this morning's paper."

"Ah, so it's something wrapped up in this morning's paper. You seem to be pretty well informed, Till," Ted said, and now he spoke emotionlessly. "You always were a rotten liar."

Perhaps he wanted to hide his face. For he turned away from her. He was done now. Till wasn't done. She grabbed his wrist and held on.

"Ted, I saw the headlines on the newspaper. That's how I know. Listen to me! You've got to listen. Look at me, Ted. I don't know what's in the package. I didn't hide it in your room, if that's what you're thinking. . . ."

Ted turned back.

"I hope that's true," he said. He looked at her without affection, without feeling, almost without interest. "For your sake, Till, I hope that's true. If I find out different, and I will find out, Till, I swear I'll track you down, I'll turn you over to the police without a quiver, I'll turn your Alec over if he's the one, I'll . . ."

"What's in the package?" she whispered. "What did someone hide in your room? Ted, what is it?"

"Just a little present," Ted said, "that I don't propose to keep. Just a little gift from someone who thinks I'm dopier than I am. Do you remember my fine talk about self-preservation? Baby, I've changed my point of view."

"Ted . . ."

"I won't take this rap," Ted said. "I won't give my life or any part of it to save trash. I'll fight. I won't die for anybody

who thinks it's bright to assist me to the death-house with a little personal fancy work. Till, I tell you here and now I won't. Not," Ted said then, "not if I can help it."

"Ted, you've got to believe me," Till said desperately. "Sometimes I don't tell the truth, but now I am. I don't know what's in the package, I don't care. Just let me help you, that's all I ask. Let's get rid of the thing, let's do it right away, let's hide it somewhere else. Or," Till asked then, "have I told too many lies? Don't you believe me even now?"

She received no answer. Downstairs Dorritt called that dinner was nearly ready. Till went and collected her mother's birthday gifts. Ted went in the storeroom and shaved.

Twenty-one

CLAUDE WASN'T invited to Miss Mitchell's party, but Claude came anyway. He walked into the dining room with a laden suitcase and an air of some embarrassment. As he viewed the festive table, the pretty heaped-up packages at Lucy's plate, it struck Claude that his own offering might be considered a little inappropriate. Claude set the suitcase on the floor. He smiled nervously at the birthday child.

"Lucy, apologies are due you. The point is I'm afraid I owe you a regular present. You must tell me what you want."

"Now, Claude, please . . ."

"Really, I insist," insisted Claude, and undertook to make a projected gift outshine gifts on hand. "Arabella was planning something particularly fine for you this year, Lucy. She told me so, though she didn't tell me what. Unfortunately Arabella—well, it seems Arabella didn't get around to buying it."

"Uncle Claude, what's in the suitcase?" Till asked suddenly.

"Some—some clothes of Arabella's," Claude stammered, "that I thought your mother and you, too, might make use of. They're hardly worn at all, though of course they'll need cut-

ting down. Today when I was cleaning out Arabella's things," he finished lamely, "I remembered Lucy's birthday. It—it seemed like a good idea."

Even gentle Lucy managed no immediate response. Harby turned a dull red. His chair scraped back from the table. Lucy shot her husband a glance of wild appeal. Don't do it, Harby. Don't waste your nerves and strength, don't spend yourself on a witless, blundering, unfeeling fool. Claude isn't worth it, Harby dear. Lucy found her tongue.

"Claude, pull up a chair and eat some birthday cake. You should taste Dorritt's lovely icing."

"No, no, I haven't time to bother with the cake. Oh, well, to please you, I'll try a small piece with a glass of wine. I just stopped by to leave the—the things."

"Harby, another glass of wine, please."

Harby didn't move. Slow to anger, he was struggling to hold back the building anger that was pushing hard at his self-control. Claude was about to leave. If he'd get out fast, Harby would win. Claude would be wise to hurry. Don't spoil Lucy's party, you musn't, you can't, don't make an ass of yourself on Claude's account, Harby was saying over and over somewhere deep inside. Thus lost in himself, oblivious, Harby sat motionless, silent.

It was Jessie who hastened to pour Claude's wine. Unaware of his danger, Claude ate the cake, gulped the wine, smacked his lips appreciatively.

"Very good, Lucy, very good indeed. A real treat. Some day I must show you through my wine cellars in Spring Valley. Now I'm afraid you've held me up long enough. I should be downtown at my office now."

And then Alec, injecting himself into this explosive situation, gave it still another twist.

"Business again? Claude, I hate to speak to you," Alec said. "But I told you this morning you should leave those files alone and not mix things up before the appraisers come around. Not that it's my affair . . ."

"It certainly isn't," Claude said.

"You're the doctor." Alec shrugged. "I've warned you, you may be in difficulties with the appraisers. Sometimes, Claude, a man can be too—impatient. Other people don't always understand. They'll probably show up tomorrow to seal the files and then . . ."

"I'll chance it!" snapped Claude. "If a man can't look after his own wife's estate, an estate that's coming to him, if he can't examine papers in his own office, it's a damn funny country."

"Okay, okay. You know more than your lawyer. But so long as I *am* your lawyer," Alec said levelly, "I'll thank you to return my keys you borrowed last night right now. If you must get in the office and meddle, you can annoy the building superintendent, or have some extra keys made. I don't like being locked out of my own office, Claude. So long as it is *my* office, too."

Furious, Claude was inclined to fire his lawyer on the spot. Certain rudimentary instincts of caution stopped him. This was hardly the proper time, Claude decided, to fire one's lawyer. It wouldn't look well, Claude was afraid.

On the other hand, take Alec Bates. Why, feeling as he did about his employer, didn't Alec up and quit? Was Alec afraid, too? Suppose the brilliant young lawyer had a proprietary interest in lingering in the vicinity of those files he understood so well; after all, the filing system was his own invention. Suppose some of Arabella's complicated papers, some of Arabella's numerous banking and brokerage accounts, weren't exactly in order. It could happen.

Ted's eyes narrowed, as he stared with sudden interest at his sister's sweetheart. Ted looked alert, aware, a little inhuman, like an animal scenting the approach of unexpected prey. Till, watching both, looked vaguely frightened.

"I'd like those keys, Claude," Alec said.

Claude shrugged. He set down the wine glass and brushed a cake crumb from his lapel. He took his time fumbling in his pocket. He tossed over Alec's keys to Alec.

"They're all yours," Claude said coldly. "I found my own keys today. My trousers came back from the cleaner this afternoon."

"Gracious," said Jessie in surprise. Perhaps because she listened a great deal and usually spoke little, Jessie was the first to recall Claude's tale of the keys that went out with his trousers on Monday morning. "Back so soon," Jessie said in pleased surprise. "My, Mr. Rixey, I'd like an introduction to your cleaner. He must be awfully fast. It takes us a whole week, even now, to get our things back."

Claude's partisan ruined him. The lie was plain upon his face. The truth was clear to everybody. If Claude had found his keys, he hadn't found them in trousers sent out on Monday, back on Wednesday from the cleaner. It seemed more than likely that Claude hadn't found his key ring at all, but had had new office keys copied from Alec's keys. Why had he lied about it?

Ted transferred his attention from Alec, turned this new awareness of his upon dear old Claude. Ted felt oddly exhilarated, like a man who suddenly awakes and finds himself the possessor of an X-ray eye. It can be exhilarating, thought Ted, to divorce yourself from any feeling for the human race, from sympathy with any member of it. Claude was scared stiff. It would be a cinch to find out why, break Claude down. Let's investigate those keys right now! Make way, folks, make way for the man who doesn't give a damn for any one of you.

And then Ted glanced at Lucy. The white line showed plain around her mouth. Lucy was looking at Harby, begging him with her eyes. Ted looked at his father, too.

Harby was about to lose his personal struggle. His whole body felt hot. Blood was drumming in his ears, in his brain. Harby stared first at the suitcase filled with Arabella's cast-off clothing, and then at Claude.

A glance told Ted the story. Ted could recognize deadly anger when he saw it. He'd felt the same himself—at times. Father was about to blow his top, and Mother was worried sick.

Ted hesitated, and the man with the X-ray eye exited. A very recent secessionist from the human race returned to it. A son was reminded of his mother and her birthday party. Lucy's son could give or not. It was strictly up to him. Ted gave.

"If you're going, go," he said sharply to Claude. "Don't just hang around. Can't you see how you're holding us all up?"

Claude himself sensed menace. Instinct was overridden by the habits of a lifetime. Claude hesitated uncertainly. It seemed that Claude wanted back the suitcase. Claude shoved aside Miss Mitchell's silver-plated teapot, smacked the suitcase down on Miss Mitchell's sideboard, unfastened the catches.

"Since I'm in a hurry, I'll just dump the things," he briskly informed Lucy. "You can sort them later. What you and Till don't need yourselves, you can pass on to one of the relief societies."

That did it. Inside Harby the explosion occurred. A great flash of blinding white filled his brain. His whole body, every nerve and muscle, felt illumined, extraordinarily competent. In one stealthy movement, he was out of his chair. With another stealthy, beautifully co-ordinated movement—golf had taught him grace—Harby took hold of the chair, raised it high above his head. Harby was insane with rage. Murder, nothing less, was in his mind. He meant to brain Claude.

Everybody knew it. Everybody saw. Claude squeaked in terror, backed away from the suitcase, turned and ran around the table. Harby's step was swifter. The distance between the two shortened fast. Ted's chair went over, as he leaped to hurl himself between them. The son was clumsier than the father. Ted caught his heel in the chair rungs, tried to save himself by catching the table. The damask cloth skidded. The remains of Lucy's birthday cake went off on the floor. Ted fell. Dorritt screamed.

None of these incidental effects got through to Harby, filled as he was with grave and terrible intention. He had his enemy cornered now. Backed against the wall, Claude was crying like a fat and unattractive child. His soft white hands flapped crazily, futilely. Harby raised the chair a little higher.

And then, in the hall, Miss Mitchell's doorbell chimed.

Habit is a strange thing. As earlier it had betrayed Claude, now it saved him. Harby had always answered the doorbell at home for Lucy. For the fraction of a second, listening, he hesi-

tated. In the fraction of a second, the white light retreated and he came back to himself, remembered where he was and who he was. He was Harbison Greer, father of two children, Lucy's husband. He'd been about to kill a man.

Stupidly Harby set down the chair. Claude rushed out of the corner and sobbing ran to crouch at Lucy's side. Harby went out in the hall and answered the doorbell.

He felt dazed and ill, like vomiting. Harby had come back from such a long way that the man standing outside on Miss Mitchell's porch made no sense to him. Who was the fellow? What did he want? What was he saying, anyhow?

The man was working with a salvage crew next door, engaged in cleaning up the last of the debris. Well, what of that? Why should Harby care? If the man had complaints to offer, let him report to the police. Harby hadn't hired the salvage crew, though in the end he'd probably be presented with the bill. The city would see to that. This wasn't a complaint. In the splintered remains of what looked like a bedroom desk—it was painted ivory color—they'd found valuables.

"If you've found Mrs. Rixey's purse," Harby said dully, "you've come to the wrong place. The police are interested in the purse. We're at—at dinner. But if you care to use the phone and get in touch with Headquarters . . ."

"Mr. Greer, you don't understand. This isn't the purse or anything on the police list. It's something belongs to you, or rather to your wife, I guess. It looks like her jewelry case."

The man standing on the porch held out a small, filthy box, oblong shaped, crushed in at one corner.

"Lucy," Harby called into the dining room in the same dull voice, "someone has found your jewel case. Did you keep it in our bedroom desk?"

"I thought I kept it in my dressing table," Lucy called back. "But then I'm so featherheaded and careless, so much has happened since. . . . Harby, bring it in and let me see."

Harby closed the door. Harby's feet moved back through the archway. His hand dropped the box at Lucy's place. His body sank into a chair.

"Harby, this isn't mine," Lucy said, looking with surprise at the dirty box. The birthday child went to work to save the party for everybody else. Lucy giggled. "You silly darling, don't you remember? My jewel box was wood, and much larger. This is leather, or it feels like leather, anyway."

"Does it, dear?"

Claude was still sitting beside Lucy, shrinking to make himself as small as possible. He saw the dirty leather box. At once Claude's hand shot out.

"Here, give me that!"

Harby didn't move. But, "Claude, I wouldn't," Ted said.

Claude drew in the hand.

"Mother open it!" Till cried impatiently. "If it was in your desk, it's yours. Go ahead and open it. Or else I will."

Lucy's daughter couldn't wait. Her eager curious fingers reached over and picked up the box. The crushed corner held. Till jerked. The two sides of the narrow box parted.

A string of pearls slid upon the table. With them fluttered a small card. Arabella's pearls had come through the explosion better than had Arabella. Intact and perfect, whiter than Till's softly rounded neck, brighter than Till's eyes, gleaming with sparks of rosy light pinker than her cheeks, the necklace coiled in beauty on the damask cloth.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" said Till. "Look! Look! Look," said Till. "Have you ever seen anything so utterly divine?"

Dorritt and Jessie never had. Turned in fascination upon the pearls, the eyes of the two young women looked just like Till's. As though heaven and heaven's stupendous possessions had drawn close enough to touch. Heaven gently lay there, coiled upon the tablecloth. Lucy didn't speak. Claude did. Claude spoke to Till.

"They're Arabella's pearls, you funny child. Put them back in the case. They're mine now."

"I wouldn't be too sure," Dorritt said in a peculiar voice.

"But Claude," said Alec in astonishment, "you never said a word about the necklace being gone."

"I—I hadn't missed the necklace until now."

Claude had spent two busy days going through Arabella's effects. It seemed strange indeed that he would overlook the absence of the pearls. Alec and Ted stared at Claude. At that point Till pounced upon the card—a calling card with writing across the back. Her eyes got bigger still. She was beside herself with excitement.

"Mother! Mother! Look at this! The pearls are yours. Yours!"

"Mine?" Lucy said stupidly. "No, darling . . ."

"Yes! Yes, Mother! A birthday present. Aunt Arabella gave them to you. Just before she—she died, she must have thought of your birthday. Did you ever hear of anything so incredibly lucky?—"

Sure enough the calling card, tucked into the jewel box along with the pearls, was Arabella's card. Sure enough the uneducated scribble across the back of the card was Arabella's. Only a few minutes before she made that unhappy journey to the cellar, Arabella Rixey must have gone upstairs and left in Lucy's desk a surprise for Lucy. For the last words Arabella wrote on earth, inscribed on her calling card, plainly said:

"Happy birthday, Lucy,
From your loving sister, Arabella."

Dancing with excitement, Till thrust the card upon her mother. Lucy didn't speak. She didn't touch the card. Her hands were folded in her lap. She was looking at the pearls.

For a moment Claude was too appalled to speak. Almost too appalled to think. Had Arabella suddenly taken leave of her good senses on Monday? A $20,000 string of pearls for a birthday present! Whoever heard of such a thing? Arabella must have been getting back at him, thought the distracted man. That was the answer. Well, Arabella's day was over.

Claude Rixey refused to stand idly by while $20,000 slipped out of his fingers. No court in the land would approve such a gift. Claude's first coherent thought was of his lawyer. He jumped up from his chair, shook his fist at Alec.

"Talk! Talk! Don't sit there like a dummy. For God's sake, say something. Tell Lucy, tell Till . . ."

"What?" inquired Alec.

Perhaps the tone calmed Claude down. He pulled his scattered wits together.

"You're the lawyer! You ought to know how to protect my interests. Tell Lucy she can't keep the pearls, tell her Arabella was of unsound mind, tell her we'll carry this thing right up to the Supreme Court, if necessary; tell her . . ."

Claude paused for breath. Alec had no opportunity to reply. Scarletfaced, Till had whirled on her sweetheart.

"Alec, don't you dare! Unless you want me to hate you. If you side with Uncle Claude, if you say the pearls don't belong to Mother, I'll—I'll . . ."

"Don't listen to her!" screamed Claude. "You're *my* lawyer. Who pays your salary? The pearls are mine."

"They're ours!"

Simultaneously, Till and Claude grabbed for the necklace lying on the table. And then something in Ted's eyes stopped Till. Something in his lawyer's eyes stopped Claude. Panting, glaring at each other, Till and Claude paused beside the table. Between them, at Lucy's place, lay the pearls.

Still Lucy hadn't spoken.

"I'll sue, I'll sue," Claude was babbling.

"We'll sue back," shrieked Till. "If Alec is on your side, we'll get a lawyer ourselves. Aunt Arabella gave the pearls to us. Mother should have had them years ago . . ."

"Young lady, we'll see in court just who gets the pearls. Ask your sweetie here if you think I'm fooling. We'll go into court tomorrow. . . ."

Claude glanced at Alec for confirmation. Alec looked at Till in an odd way. The gaze he turned upon his employer was also odd—but in another way.

"In your position," Alec said to Claude, "I don't believe I would. In your position, Claude, I don't believe I'd sue or do anything to make myself conspicuous."

Claude opened his mouth. But suddenly another voice spoke.

"I wonder," said Miss Mitchell, puzzled, "why Arabella left the pearls on Monday. I thought she was expecting to be at Lucy's birthday party."

Claude jumped. For no particular reason, Miss Mitchell added, "It's a pity Arabella didn't leave her purse in the desk, too. The police would have been so pleased to find it."

Mysteriously, with those few words, Claude seemed to shrink, as though in a physical effort to make himself—inconspicuous. Claude said no more.

Till saw, with a spurt of wild delight, that Claude had given up. His reasons for giving up didn't at the moment interest her. Till smiled exultantly, as her thoughts sped arrow-straight to the dance next Friday. Adorned by a string of real pearls, she'd go gladly in the sleaziest borrowed frock. Why, none of the other girls had even dreamed of ever wearing *real* pearls.

"Mother," Till said aloud. "It's fixed. Alec fixed it. The pearls are yours."

"Lucy . . ." said Claude.

Lucy was silent. She was still looking at the pearls. For once Lucy wasn't settling disputes, smoothing the path of others, bringing out the best in Till, the best in Claude, trying to make everybody happy. She was only dimly aware that once again the pearls were causing trouble and distress. As she looked at the gleaming necklace, Lucy was thinking of another distress, an old distress, long gone now. Her own.

These were the pearls she'd wept for thirty years ago. The pearls she'd longed so passionately to wear around her pretty neck the day she married Harby. The lack—so sharp and keen was her desire—had almost spoiled her wedding. There they lay gleaming on the cloth—as beautiful as she remembered. As lustrous and shining, glowing with rosy, magic fires. The same. The pearls hadn't lost their loveliness. The pearls hadn't changed. Only Lucy had changed.

Lucy didn't touch the pearls. Her fingers crept upward to her throat.

"Lucy!" Harby said sharply.

Her husband's voice aroused her. Lucy started. Confused

and lost in her own despair, she strove to push it back into the secret places of her heart. She steadied a mouth that quivered. The fingers that had reached her throat spread and closed around her neck, as though to cover and hide something shameful. On her wedding day, on the day she'd sobbed for the pearls, Harby had argued that the prettiest neck in the world had no need for pearls. She'd been prettier than Till—once. Lucy looked at her husband, at her daughter, at Claude.

"It was kind of Arabella," Lucy said. "I'll always be glad to remember her kindness. But Claude, I don't want the pearls."

"Lucy!"

"Mother!"

Incomprehension and overwhelming relief rang in one voice; incomprehension and agony in the other. As she reeled under the blow, Till couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that she'd heard correctly. Was Mother stark raving mad?

"Mother," Till began in desperation. "Mother, listen . . ."

And then the stillness of the mother's eyes pierced the daughter's tumult. Mother was trying not to cry. Till saw a pain she couldn't understand and that Lucy couldn't hide. It was true. Mother really didn't want the pearls. Fantastically, incredibly, unreasonably, Mother proposed to throw away the wonder necklace of the world. Somehow the necklace hurt her. She didn't want it near her.

Till braced herself for struggle. She could change Mother's mind. She knew she could. Mother wasn't selfish. Mother simply hadn't thought. Even as the beseeching, the winning words were forming on Till's tongue, she recalled that puzzling talk with Ted. The talk made sense now, sense as bitter as gall. Till hesitated and was lost. The words that would change Lucy's mind refused to come.

Lucy and Harby and Ted, too, had done better with the daughter of the house than they imagined. Till was helpless before her destiny. Unwillingly and gracelessly, the girl took her first reluctant step toward the woman she would some day be, as she turned spitefully on Claude.

"Take your old pearls," Till said, "and see if we care!"

Lucy missed the first truly selfless act of her daughter's life, simply didn't notice. For once, Lucy was thinking only of herself. Or rather she was thinking of a vanished girl, prettier than Till, who once had wept for pearls.

"Yes, Claude, do," Lucy said.

"Well, Lucy, if that's how you feel," Claude said, and snatched the necklace, and quickly pushed it in his pocket. But Claude himself couldn't just let it go at that. Otherwise the question would have bothered him forever. "Lucy, why?" asked Claude, perplexed. "Why don't you want the pearls? Arabella always thought . . ."

"It's too late, Claude," Lucy replied in slow bewilderment. "Much, much too late. It's thirty years too late for me to want the pearls. Why, they'd make me look ridiculous. Harby," said the birthday child to her husband, "Harby dear, I'm old."

And then Lucy cried. She cried because the dreams and hopes and loud demands of hungry youth amount to nothing really and are so soon over. She cried because freshness fades, and wisdom comes. She cried because you learn so soon the truest love isn't perfect. Your man fails and you fail too, so often. She cried because your babies grow and walk away from you and so soon your children become puzzling strangers. She cried because in this world you own nothing. You only think you do, at rare and lucky times. In this world no man and no woman triumphs and, in the end, all of us are empty-handed and lonely. Lucy cried because she had a stringy, wrinkled throat and would look ridiculous in pearls. Toward the last she was crying in Harby's arms.

"Take the pearls," Harby said to Claude. "Take Arabella's pearls and Arabella's clothes and go."

All things considered, Lucy's birthday party was not successful.

Twenty-two

THAT NIGHT Miss Mitchell fell headlong into sleep and dreamed of murder. She saw Ted with manacles on his hands and heard Lucy wailing and felt her own tears fall like rain. Near by Till and Alec were embracing, while Dorritt and Jessie with naked envy in their eyes watched Claude stuff a string of pearls into his pocket.

And then the scene shifted and it was Harby who stood with an upraised chair, and insane fury on his face. The chair changed into a wrench and Timothy Dwight chortled, "Killer, killer, killer," as her own voice screamed, "No, no, Claude is the one. Ask about his keys, ask why he's afraid to find Arabella's purse."

She awoke drenched in perspiration, yet cold with the realization that, in her sleep, she'd been so willing to pass mortal judgment on another human being. Willing? God help her, she was eager. Awake and fully conscious, self-revelation overwhelmed her. Miss Mitchell knew she hoped with all her heart that Claude Rixey had killed his wife. Against facts and logic, against the evidence of an unassailable alibi, she hoped Claude Rixey was a murderer. It wasn't the truth she wanted. To spare the ones she loved, she wanted to hurl a self-appointed victim into the pit.

She lay a moment in the darkness open-eyed and trembling, appalled, sickened by herself. Outside on the sidewalk a solitary policeman was walking up and down. To watch Miss Mitchell and Miss Mitchell's guests was his business. All the forces of society, all the forces of right, were on his side. He was there because Arabella Rixey had choked to death in a locked, gas-filled cellar, because an unknown, unnamed murderer was at large.

Miss Mitchell closed her eyes. And then, at a slight noise from the hall, her taut nerves jumped in crazy unfamiliar fear. She listened. Someone was coming cautiously on tiptoe down the stairs. Creak, creak—the cautious footsteps passed the one bad tread in the middle of the flight, descended soundlessly and swiftly the rest of the way, turned toward the kitchen. Miss Mitchell pulled herself together. She started to call out, did not. Again she listened.

Someone else was tiptoeing down from the second floor. Creak, creak—the second pair of footsteps passed the one bad stair. A second person, moving cautiously in the darkness, turned toward the kitchen. A second time the kitchen door opened, softly closed.

Miss Mitchell sat up and put on her slippers. She, too, padded down the hall. There was no reassuring line of light underneath the kitchen door. The hall was black and very still. She strained her ears. In the darkness of the kitchen, two people were talking in furious whispers. In one voice the listener thought she detected tears. A man and women met in darkness were quarreling, arguing over something.

Miss Mitchell raised her hand to knock, hesitated, suddenly very wide awake. Supposing it was Lucy and Harby; she hardly cared to go bursting in on them. Nor did she desire to catch out Dorritt and Ted in one of the quarrels so often bubbling beneath the surface of that untranquil relationship.

Miss Mitchell retreated to the stairway, went up. In the upper hall, she heard Lucy's light cough, heard Harby turn in bed. So it wasn't Lucy and Harby, Miss Mitchell opened the door of the girls' room, looked in. Dorritt muttered in her sleep, sighed. Unstirring, hardly seeming to breathe, Jessie lay in the other bed, apparently in the paralysis of profound slumber.

The missing from the second floor were Ted and Till. Miss Mitchell trusted the judgment of neither. Immediately she retraced her steps and descended to the kitchen. She didn't knock this time, nor did she hesitate. She flung open the door, stepped inside, and switched on the light.

The kitchen was empty.

The back door was open. Miss Mitchell went there, stopped on the threshold in foolish surprise. At first, in the obscurity of the small back yard, she didn't see Ted at all. But the kitchen light shone full upon Till and the policeman who stood guard at the alley gate. Wrapped in one of Dorritt's dressing gowns which fitted, her bare feet lost in a pair of Dorritt's slippers which didn't fit, Till had apparently sallied forth at two A.M. to air her dog and to lighten the boredom of the policeman. Till was holding Mickey's leash and leaning casually against the gate, as she asked in her sweet young voice if her companion could spare a cigarette.

The policeman obligingly fumbled in his pocket. Simultaneously Miss Mitchell located Ted. Hidden from the other two but not from her, Ted was the dark huddle crouched in the lee of the ivy-covered garage. His body was bent forward at a rigid, curiously expectant angle; he was holding something between his hands. The policeman's back was to him. The grouping of the three figures in the menacing half light cast from the kitchen almost duplicated a scene Miss Mitchell had observed in a recent motion picture. Her first horrified thought was that Ted had picked up a heavy piece of broken masonry, that he meant to leap upon the other man and crush his skull, as Till decoyed the unsuspecting fellow with conversation. It was an ambush. Miss Mitchell opened her mouth to cry a warning. No sound came.

Fortunately for the paralyzed observer, Ted and Till had a less sanguinary plan. Even as Miss Mitchell tried and failed to scream, Till went into action. As Till reached for the cigarette, she pushed the gate ajar and let go Mickey's leash. Instantly the dog rushed out into the alley and off.

"Stop him! Stop my dog!" shrieked Till and darted through the gate and in pursuit. It was adroitly done. The obliging policeman accompanied her.

Poised and ready, Ted slid around the garage, stepped into the alley, turned and walked the other way. Again Miss Mitchell didn't hesitate. At the incredible hour of two A.M., without her

hat, without her gloves, wearing bedroom slippers, she left the house, walked through her back yard and went down the alley after Ted.

Frankly, Miss Mitchell was at the end of her string. She could no longer exist in the kind of a world where even briefly and mistakenly she suspected a boy and girl who'd grown up next door of plotting to ambush someone who'd never harmed them. It hadn't been a stone in Ted's hand. As he passed swiftly through the gate, Ted had seemed to be carrying some kind of parcel. Nevertheless, the thought had been in Miss Mitchell's head. She could deal with no more such thoughts. They were destroying her.

She meant to find out where Ted was going, what Ted intended to do, and whether she approved. If he was planning to run out on the police, as she now surmised, she meant to bring him back. The boy had no chance to carry through an escape, whatever he might think. He'd be caught within a few days, possibly within hours. His flight would be at once interpreted as a confession of guilt.

If Ted had knowledge of Arabella's murder, Miss Mitchell was going to plead that he give it to the authorities. She herself would go to them with her own scraps of information. There had been too much concealment, she decided hysterically. The weight of it was crushing all of them, turning all of them into different people. Anything would be better.

The 2700 block of Woodland Road leads into Rock Creek Drive which in turn drops steeply down hill into the cultivated wildness of Rock Creek Park. Starting some yards in advance, Ted was walking fast and erratically, dodging around garbage cans, hugging the walls of the brick garages that lined the alley. His rapid step was light.

Overhead was a sprinkle of dim exhausted stars, no moon. The densely clouded sky was a dull, lusterless, oxford gray. The humidity was unbelievable. Within seconds Miss Mitchell's face was dripping with perspiration. Twice she lost Ted, picked him up once by the muted clink of a garbage can, and then again by

the sudden shine of a distant street lamp gleaming through a break between the crowded garages.

The alley curved. Again Ted disappeared. Miss Mitchell put on a burst of speed, rounded the curve gasping for breath. As her speed increased, Ted's had evidently slackened.

There he was, only a few feet ahead. In the gloom she saw his shadowy figure flit around the open door of the next garage. Her slippers were felt-soled. In a noiseless rush she was upon him. She put her hand on his arm.

Only it wasn't Ted.

The arm she touched wasn't Ted's. The hand she'd reached for seized her own arm in a cruel grip. Half fainting with terror, she tried to pull away. The hand that held her tightened, and then, amazingly, swung her stumbling, unwilling feet into step. Almost without interruption, even as she vainly scuffled to free herself, she and the other were moving arm in arm along the alley together. Miss Mitchell recognized the touch before she turned her eyes and saw beside her the policeman's glistening, gleeful face, the white shine of his teeth.

"Glad to have your company, sister," said Timothy Dwight in her ear, and the whispered voice was filled with raw delight. "Mighty glad you declared yourself in on this. Looks like you're due to make a dandy prosecution witness."

Two other policemen, emerging soundlessly from the garage with the open door, fell in behind them. Timothy Dwight hadn't been so stupid after all. It was Ted who had walked into an ambush, though he didn't know it yet.

In the murky radiance ahead where the alley terminated at the street-lighted brilliance of Rock Creek Drive, Miss Mitchell saw Ted. Oblivious and unsuspecting, wholly intent upon his own business, he was walking fast and almost jauntily, the parcel tucked underneath his arm. For the second time that night Miss Mitchell opened her mouth to scream.

"Sister, I wouldn't," spoke the voice chidingly into her ear. "One cheep, and I'll knock you cold. If that don't faze you, you might think about Greer."

"I—I . . ."

"You spoil my party, and I'll sure as hell spoil Greer. Ain't you ever heard about resisting arrest?"

"Resisting arrest?" she mumbled.

"I've got the warrant in my pocket, see. And I ain't planning to lose Greer. If he starts running, I'll shoot. It would be a pleasure."

There was a gun in Dwight's other hand. Behind them, moving in careful stealthy step with them, came two other men with guns. Ahead, unarmed, setting the rapid, almost jaunty pace for those who stalked him, went Ted with the parcel.

There was no further conversation on this journey into nightmare. Spiritless, drained of volition and will, quite hopeless, Miss Mitchell got out of touch with reality, lost track of her own identity. It wasn't her feet stumbling through the shadows that thronged the paved descent into the desertion of the park. It wasn't her arm throbbing with the pain of a hand that gripped and ever pulled her on.

This wasn't Rock Creek Park, where babies and nursemaids gathered, where lovers frolicked over picnic baskets, where riders cantered on the bridle paths. She and Timothy Dwight, and the dark pair behind them, were following Ted down the descent into hell. The night smelled of burnt dusty foliage, of melting asphalt, gasoline. To Miss Mitchell it smelled of sulphur and brimstone.

The fires of hell, however, weren't leaping from the cracked, parched bed of the creek where at last, abruptly, Ted halted. Among the clustered shrubs and trees, among the vague projecting shapes of naked rocks, the young man was only a darker shadow. The four who stopped as he stopped were themselves motionless shadows in the steaming night.

There was a tiny clatter of pebbles as Ted knelt on the ground, a louder clatter as he started scrabbling in the hard, baked earth. In a kind of hurried frenzy, like a dog with a treasured bone. Ted was digging. He intended to bury the parcel. Timothy Dwight let him get well started.

Then Miss Mitchell felt the hand release her arm. Dwight bounded forward. His police whistle shrilled the signal. In-

stantly, two flashlights clicked. Two long fingers of light, coming from either side of him, impaled Ted. He was on his knees, the awkward bundle beside him.

"Hand that bundle here," the policeman said. "Greer, you're under arrest."

It was as though Ted didn't see or comprehend the gun. Springing to his feet, he clumsily swept up the parcel. He hurled the bundle from him toward the encircling brush in a last futile senseless effort at concealment.

The newspaper wrappings parted. The Stillson wrench fell almost at Miss Mitchell's feet. The other object, an awkward thing of straps and buckles, rubber and canvas, landed in a bush. One of the buckles caught on a projecting twig. The twig sagged. Ted's gas mask slid gently to the ground to rest beside the Stillson wrench.

It was catastrophe, total and complete.

"Well, well, well," said Timothy Dwight, regarding his exhibits and his prisoner with rich satisfaction. "So you did use your gas mask! You fixed it so your auntie would choke to death, but took no chances yourself. A tough guy, ain't you?"

With that, casually, he hit Ted with the gun and then, as the young man slumped, reached out and grabbed hold of him. The blow was glancing. It left Ted dazed but conscious. The blood zigzagging down his forehead and across one eye gave his face a strange lopsided look. Miss Mitchell never forgot the expression on the lopsided face when Ted saw her.

"Hello, there," Ted said in a dead man's voice. "You and Till certainly fixed me. I suppose I should have had my doubts about Till, but someway I never thought that she and you . . ."

Miss Mitchell ran forward, held on to Lucy's son as though he were her own son.

Incoherent speech poured out of her. She talked simultaneously to Ted and to Timothy Dwight. To Ted she defended herself and Till. She told him they weren't responsible for this, that his neighbor and his sister hadn't conspired to betray him, that she and Till wanted only to help, but Ted seemed not to hear.

To Dwight she defended Ted. She told him that Ted was innocent, that Timothy Dwight was making a terrible mistake, a mistake he'd regret to his dying day. This boy was no murderer. He couldn't be. Elizabeth Mitchell had known him since he was in the second grade.

"Speak up!" Miss Mitchell screamed at Ted. "Fight! Talk! Explain! Tell the truth! Tell him where you got the wrench and gas mask. Tell him . . ."

Ted just stood there, silent. She launched another attack on Dwight, frantic to make him see what now, with the evidence lying at her feet pointing definitely the other way, she perceived so clearly. The boy who'd roller-skated on her block and shattered her nervous system, the boy who'd trampled her flowers and walked across her grass, hadn't grown up and become a murderer. That boy hadn't become a man who filled a cellar with gas and locked a helpless woman in, while he protected himself with a mask. It wasn't possible.

"Whatever your warrant says," she screamed at Dwight, "it's wrong. Ted wasn't even in the house when Arabella was, he was at the Veterans' Bureau."

"Says who?" retorted Dwight, and snapped the handcuffs on his unresisting prisoner. "Says Greer maybe and a government clerk who'll go to pieces under cross examination. We've dug up a witness who was sitting in Greer's chair."

The prisoner was silent. At a nod from Dwight, one of the policemen picked up the Stillson wrench and the gas mask, rewrapped them in the crumpled folds of the newspaper that proclaimed in headlines the morning's news on the Rixey murder. There would be taller headlines tomorrow.

Miss Mitchell was still talking.

"You're doing a stupid, wicked thing. God will punish you. Ted had no reason to kill his aunt."

"Wait and see," Dwight replied, and his teeth showed in a sudden smile. "We've got another witness flying in by plane tomorrow. My guess is this witness can maybe tell us something about Greer's motive."

"Another witness?"

"A lawyer," Dwight said. "A lawyer named Rufus Pomerane."

With that, Ted collapsed. They dragged him up the hill to where the police car waited. One of the policemen remained behind and took Miss Mitchell home. Then he, too, went.

For a few minutes she sat alone in the living room of her sleeping house. Then she rose, went upstairs and aroused the household. Lucy and Dorritt, Harby and Till and Jessie learned from her that Ted had been formally arrested for the murder of Arabella Rixey.

She told them everything. Nearly everything. She didn't mention Rufus Pomerane because she had no idea what the arrival of the lawyer was to mean.

Lucy and Dorritt, Harby and Till, dressed at once and went downtown to the District Jail. They waited until morning, but they didn't see Ted. It wasn't prison regulations that barred them from the prisoner.

It was Ted himself. He refused himself to visitors, his father, his mother, his sweetheart, his sister. At dawn the four returned to Woodland Road.

Twenty-three

RUFUS POMERANE alighted at the Washington airport at nine A.M., red-eyed and sleepless. Pomerane hadn't closed an eye since leaving Kansas City, where he'd picked up a newspaper and abruptly discovered that he needn't rush back east to look after Arabella Rixey's affairs. He had lost his most important client the very day he landed her.

Arabella Rixey had spent the last morning of her life in Rufus Pomerane's office. Barely a quarter of an hour before the lawyer received the telegram that took him west and out of circulation, she had concluded her business, left the office and gone off to lunch.

Pomerane knew Arabella's state of mind on Monday and what she was planning to do. He also knew, although he didn't yet realize the significance of this information, all about Arabella's luncheon arrangements, and the last-minute change that had sent her to her sister's house instead of to the Shoreham Hotel. It was clear to the unhappy lawyer that he was slated to play an important part in a sensational murder investigation.

Pomerane telegraphed the Washington authorities from the Kansas City terminal, climbed back aboard the plane, and for the remainder of the flight attempted to resign himself to the inevitable. He was angry at everybody in general. He was angry in particular with Janet Culp. Why hadn't his secretary notified him at once of the tragedy?

When the plane landed in Washington, the field was swimming with photographers, reporters, police. Heading the police delegation, surrounded by the press, was Timothy Dwight.

Rufus Pomerane held his hat across his face until the police got him safely into an official car and off the field. The "mystery witness" was a lawyer, and knew his rights. He proposed to tell his story with only police officials in attendance.

"You'll want to see my secretary as well as myself," Pomerane put it coldly. "Frankly I'm surprised that Miss Culp hasn't come to you already. After you talk to me, I suggest you stop by my office and see Janet."

"Just as you like," Dwight said meekly, and immediately proceeded to inform the lawyer of the sensational, few-hours-old arrest of Ted Greer.

When he heard this latest development, Rufus Pomerane relaxed a little. If the case was open and shut, as the circumstances of the arrest seemed to show, perhaps his own role might not be so prominent. Pomerane was relieved but surprised. Until he learned the damning details of Ted's arrest. Pomerane had been inclined to think that Arabella's husband was the guilty man.

"Her husband!" said Dwight, shocked and startled. "Oh, no, Mr. Pomerane. Rixey has an iron-clad alibi. We haven't got a thing against him."

"Mrs. Rixey had," the lawyer said dryly. "When she came to my office on Monday morning she was prepared to start divorce proceedings at once."

Dwight, to put it mildly, was thunderstruck. He'd suspected, of course, that Rixey had quarreled with his wife on Monday. But he had no idea that the quarrel had reached such serious proportions. Divorce!

"Mrs. Rixey was leaving for Florida on Tuesday to file suit," the lawyer said. "Apparently the trouble was over money. According to my client, she caught her husband juggling her household accounts, padding the bills, using charge accounts unauthorized, that sort of thing, and gambling away the proceeds on the races. At any rate, she was out of her mind with rage.

"Did Rixey know all this? Did he know she was planning to divorce him?"

"Certainly he knew," snapped Pomerane. "Mrs. Rixey called her husband twice from my office, first to tell him she'd employed me as her counsel and was off to Florida, and next to advise him to pack his clothes and leave her house."

It took Timothy Dwight a minute or so to grasp the magnitude of Claude Rixey's treachery. Claude had lied to the police and in a big way. From the first Claude had known that Arabella was closeted with a lawyer on Monday morning, had known Arabella's business with the lawyer. On Monday morning Claude was about to be thrown into the cold world after five years of living soft. On Monday afternoon Arabella had died. Claude had an excellent motive for murder. If Claude had been without that excellent alibi or if there had been any practical way of charging two men with murdering a single victim, Dwight would have been glad to put Rixey in a cell adjoining young Greer's.

But Dwight already had the man he wanted.

"I don't understand it," the policeman said bleakly. "Maybe Mrs. Rixey just lost her temper, and would have got over it. She left all her money to her husband."

"Is that what Rixey thinks?"

"It's all on record," Dwight said. "Mrs. Rixey's last will and

testament was offered for probate yesterday. The Rixey fortune goes to the widower."

"I'm afraid," said Pomerane, with a sudden sardonic little chuckle, "the widower is due a sad surprise. There's a later will. Mrs. Rixey's last will and testament was made out in my office on Monday."

"On Monday!"

"Just a few hours before Mrs. Rixey's death," the lawyer said, "I drew up a new will for her and my secretary witnessed it. The will is in my office now, signed and sealed. Claude Rixey inherits nothing."

For a moment Dwight's astonished face was blank as a china plate. But he wasn't the man to lose sight of an objective. Suddenly in the small deep-set eyes, fresh bright hope flickered.

"Who does get the money?"

"The estate is split in three parts," Pomerane said rather slowly. "One part is bequeathed to Mrs. Rixey's stepsister, Lucy Greer, one part to her niece. The third part goes to her nephew, Ted Greer."

"What is the value of young Greer's share?"

"Around half a million dollars," Pomerane replied.

Dwight's round face was glowing now, as though suffused with inner light. He dropped a plump affectionate hand on Pomerane's knee, nor did he notice how the other man drew away.

"Between you and I," Dwight confessed in a relieved voice, "we've been worried about Greer's motive. But you've fixed that, Mr. Pomerane, and how! Half a million bucks with his auntie dead! When you drew up that new will, you handed Greer an air-tight motive."

Pomerane was silent.

"The new will does it," mused Dwight. "I suppose the defense will claim Greer didn't know a blessed thing about his auntie's intentions, but still . . ."

"Unfortunately," Pomerane said reluctantly, "I believe Greer *was* aware of the terms of the will. He found out on Monday. My secretary is responsible."

"Your secretary?"

Pomerane explained. The moment he received the ill-timed telegram summoning him out of town, he had asked Janet Culp to get in touch with Arabella Rixey at once. Arabella had already signed the will, left the office and started off to lunch. The secretary telephoned the Greer house. Arabella had not yet arrived at her destination. Ted Greer had answered the phone. After leaving word for Mrs. Rixey, Janet should have hung up. Instead she had gone brightly on to congratulate Ted on his expectations. In short, she had told him the terms of his aunt's new will.

"I was in my private office," Pomerane said bitterly, "throwing a few things into a briefcase, but I stepped out in time to catch the tail end of the conversation. It was too late to stop Janet. My secretary of course had no right to disclose a client's private affairs, but Janet is a very irresponsible, unprofessional young woman."

Again Dwight's interests were confined and concentrated. He was indifferent to Pomerane's low opinion of his secretary, and to Janet's slip from discretion. What interested Dwight was establishing two important facts—first, that Ted Greer had known of his financial expectations; second, that Ted Greer had been at home on Monday almost simultaneously with Arabella Rixey's arrival. They'd already cracked that phony Veterans' Bureau alibi. Now, through an incredible stroke of luck, they could place the young man in the house at the proper time.

"Can we count on Miss Culp to testify that she got Greer on the family phone just before one o'clock?"

"You can count on Janet," Pomerane said tartly, "to testify to the facts. It was somewhere around half past twelve."

"That's plenty close enough. By the way," Dwight asked, suddenly curious, "how does it happen you tried to reach Mrs. Rixey at her sister's house?"

"Because I wanted to let her know I'd been unexpectedly called out of town."

"You haven't got my point. What made you think you'd find Mrs. Rixey there? At her sister's house, I mean."

"I understood she was lunching with Mrs. Greer. In point of fact, she telephoned her sister during the morning and made the appointment from my office."

"Mrs. Greer," Dwight said, "swears up and down that the appointment was at the Shoreham Hotel, that she was supposed to meet Mrs. Rixey in the lobby."

"But the arrangements were changed," Pomerane began impatiently. He paused. His impatience died. A peculiar look came on his face. "The arrangements were changed," he repeated.

"How were they changed? When were the arrangements changed? Mr. Pomerane, you've thought of something. What?"

"While Mrs. Rixey and I were in my private office discussing the divorce," the lawyer said very slowly, "a phone call came in for her. She'd asked not to be interrupted. My secretary took the call out in the reception room."

The phone message that Janet Culp had received and passed on to Arabella Rixey was on the surface quite simple: Mrs. Greer wished to change her luncheon arrangements with Mrs. Rixey. On such a hot day, Mrs. Greer felt it would be more pleasant to avoid the crowded dining room of the Shoreham and to lunch quietly at home. Lucy would await Arabella at the house on Woodland Road. Such had been the message.

"Mrs. Rixey was pleased," Pomerane said. "In her emotional state, she dreaded a public dining room, even though she'd suggested the Shoreham earlier."

"Did Mrs. Rixey ask your secretary whether it was her sister who made the call?"

"No. She and her sister had discussed the engagement only a couple of hours before. Naturally she leaped to the conclusion that it was Mrs. Greer who'd called back and changed the plan."

"When Mrs. Rixey first called Mrs. Greer and invited her to lunch, did she say where she was phoning from?"

"I don't know, I don't remember," the lawyer said distractedly. "I wasn't paying attention to my client's various personal calls; I was trying to get her business in shape."

"Lucy Greer says she doesn't know where Mrs. Rixey spent

Monday morning," Dwight said. "If that is true, she couldn't have called your office back and left that message."

"I see that now," the lawyer said.

"The phone call was a trap," Dwight said. "Someone who knew that Mrs. Rixey was in your office called there. Someone who knew about the lunch date. Someone wanted to get Mrs. Rixey to the house on Woodland Road, and someone did."

The lawyer was silent.

"Lucy Greer didn't leave that message," Dwight said flatly. "Lucy Greer didn't talk to your secretary. You know, of course, who did."

"I expect I do," Rufus Pomerane replied. "Janet talked to Mrs. Rixey's murderer."

"She must have talked to Ted Greer!" declared the single-minded Dwight. "Your secretary can probably identify his voice."

Shortly before ten o'clock, the police car stopped at the Hibbs Building. Pomerane's third-floor office was unoccupied, and just as he'd left it on Monday. The untouched morning mail was heaped up on the carpet. Janet wasn't at her desk.

Half an hour later, the police party entered the loft building a few blocks down the street. After they rang in vain, they forced the door of the studio apartment. Janet's body lay quiet and undisturbed in a patch of sunlight which fell brightly on the painted floor. Janet had been dead since Tuesday afternoon.

In the old-fashioned bathroom the electric fan still played on a pair of stockings. One of the policemen turned off the fan. It was he who later found the gun in the varnished flush-box high up on the wall.

The Japanese gun, with the pattern of silver storks embossed upon the grip, was slimy and specked with rust. But one glance was sufficient to make Timothy Dwight recall that Ted had kept in his basement locker a Japanese pistol decorated with silver storks.

This was at eleven o'clock. By noon the police and the prosecutor's office, conferring together, decided their case was strong enough to charge Ted Greer with the second murder.

Twenty-four

AT NOON Lucy was putting on a plain black dress of Dorritt's. Her son was downtown in the District Jail charged with her sister's murder, and at two P.M. she was going to her sister's funeral. Consequently Lucy was getting ready.

Lucy examined her reflection in Miss Mitchell's bevel glass mirror. The dress fitted at the waist and shoulders but she'd been obliged to borrow a needle and thread to stitch up the hem. She'd made a ragged job of it, perhaps because her eyes were too blurred with uncomprehending pain to see.

Harby, who was sitting on the edge of the double bed, wasn't going to Arabella's funeral. Till had announced that she wasn't going either. Harby's voice was dull and angry.

"Lucy, why must you torture yourself this way?"

"Because," she said.

Because can be a big word. Harby dear, can't you see? Please, please try to see. I must go on talking, being, acting like myself, or there will be no Lucy Greer.

Harby got up from the bed and walked over to his wife. He put his arms around her, laid his unshaven cheek against Lucy's neatly combed gray-blonde hair.

"Lucy, don't go."

"I must," she said.

"Darling, why?" he asked, and pressed his cheek harder against her hair. "Why must you drive yourself so hard, spread your strength and energies so thin, spend yourself on what doesn't matter. Sometimes, Lucy, I don't understand you."

"I wonder," Lucy said sadly from the circle of his arms, "if people ever really do understand all about each other. Even people like us with love to help. Harby, aren't there moments and feelings of yours that I can't reach?"

"No," he said. Then, "Yes, Lucy, I suppose there are. Not many. A few."

"Then, Harby dear, won't you accept the way I am? I can't let Claude go to the services alone. I can't let Arabella be buried, with no one there who knew her when she was young."

He held her closer, looked deep into the pain-blurred eyes.

"Lucy, let me ask you something. Have you ever hated anybody?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "No," Lucy said. He felt her tremble in his arms. "No, I've never hated anybody," Lucy said. "Maybe it's because I've been an—an exceptionally lucky woman—up to now. Maybe it's just never been necessary."

"I hope it never is," Harby said. "But sometimes, Lucy, loving everybody won't work. Loving everybody isn't always the answer."

Downstairs they heard the tinkle of the chimes. The Spring Valley limousine had pulled in at the curb. Claude had collected Alec, and the two of them had arrived early to pick up the other mourners. Harby and Lucy could hear Jessie's excited, important voice bustling the men into the living room. Lucy put on her hat. There was a rap on the bedroom door, and Miss Mitchell and Dorritt came in. Miss Mitchell wore her customary flower-sprigged morning housedress. Dorritt, tall and pale, was in black. Black dress, black hat and gloves.

"I thought you'd like another woman with you," Dorritt said to Lucy. "Jessie offered, but I thought you'd prefer me."

Only Dorritt's pallor betrayed her inner strain. Like a person walking over glass, Dorritt had got safely through the news of Ted's arrest, she had got through the dreadful futile hours of waiting downtown at the jail. The funeral might be the one thing too much. But Lucy had to have somebody.

Dorritt had reached the difficult decision without urging from Miss Mitchell. Dorritt's aunt, who couldn't possibly have played the hypocrite by attending Arabella's last rites, was grateful to her niece. Grateful and vaguely surprised. In ordinary times Dorritt wasn't always thoughtful and unselfish, and Miss Mitchell was pleased that her niece should think of Lucy instead of thinking of herself. Lucy kissed the girl's cold cheek.

"You're very sweet," she said. "Thank you, my dear."

"No thanks called for," Miss Mitchell cut in crisply, and then earned Lucy's gratitude by choosing this inappropriate time to bring up a topic that everybody else, except Harby, had been sedulously avoiding. Miss Mitchell spoke right out about Lucy's son. "We all know," Miss Mitchell began, "there's been a terrible miscarriage of justice, that Ted isn't guilty. But after what happened last night the defense will need more than our —our opinion. Ted's lawyer will need facts."

"Yes," Lucy said.

Miss Mitchell's mind returned for the thousandth time to the moment of Ted's arrest. Once again she saw him frantically hurl away the wrench and gas mask, saw his hopeless face when the paper wrappings parted. Then and there, the boy had given up the fight. It was left to those who loved him to prepare, as best they could, Ted's defense.

"All morning," Miss Mitchell said, "I've been wondering why Ted was foolish enough to get caught burying those— those things. How it happened that he had the wrench and gas mask. Till says he found the parcel hidden in his room but . . ."

"But that is impossible to prove," Harby said heavily.

Lucy said nothing.

"Aunt Elizabeth!" Dorritt said sharply.

"Be quiet, Dorritt. Lucy and Harby would rather talk things out than pretend they don't exist. The wrench exists. The gas mask exists. Now we all know what the prosecution is going to say. . . ."

Yes, they knew.

"It's absurd on the face of it," Miss Mitchell said. "In thirty seconds the murderer could disconnect the joint, and leave the cellar. It would be a good while—fifteen minutes at least —before the place would be dangerous. Ted wouldn't have needed to wear that mask."

"Miss Elizabeth, the gas mask was in Ted's possession," Harby said. "Someone must have worn it."

"I don't doubt that," Miss Elizabeth said.

In those hours of despair since returning from the jail, faith

alone had sustained Lucy. Logic had abandoned her. It came back, as she clutched at the first straw of hope. Someone must have worn the mask. Who? Someone had needed the protection of the mask. Why? Lucy thought back to Monday.

She had left the house at noon. Suppose shortly afterwards someone had slipped in, disconnected the pipes and begun the deadly flow of gas, started promptly to leave the cellar, and then, with terror and dismay, heard unexpected sounds overhead. It was too early yet for Arabella. She wasn't due until one o'clock. By one o'clock the cellar would be ready for Arabella's reception. It was twenty after twelve when Ted came home and walked into the kitchen. While he was in the kitchen, Ted thought he'd heard someone moving down in the basement. He'd told his mother so.

"Ted trapped the murderer in the cellar," Lucy cried. "So long as Ted was upstairs in the kitchen, no one could leave the cellar without being seen. I see what happened now! The murderer put on Ted's gas mask and waited until Ted was gone and the way was clear."

"My point exactly," Miss Mitchell said triumphantly. "With Ted walking around the kitchen directly overhead, with the way out blocked, the murderer must have had a bad few minutes. The broken connections couldn't be restored, the cellar was filling with gas. But Ted's locker was down there, and in the locker was Ted's gas mask. So this person went to the locker and . . ."

"But Aunt Elizabeth," Dorritt said, "but Aunt Elizabeth, how did the murderer know . . .?"

"How indeed?" Miss Mitchell inquired. "No stranger would have known where to find Ted's gas mask, or even that he owned such a thing. Whoever went to his locker and got out the gas mask—well—it was someone who knew Ted very well."

The words fell into a pool of silence. Lucy looked at Harby, and her face was very pale. Dorritt's face was also pale. She wished that Aunt Elizabeth would stop.

"But that—that's horrible," Lucy whispered.

"Horrible things happen," Harby said harshly to his wife. "Lucy, this isn't a perfect world. Can't you get it through your head that some people aren't good? Human beings can be altogether evil; you can dig and dig in them and break your heart and uncover nothing that is good. Human beings can do things that neither you nor God Almighty can find excuses for! Lucy, why do you suppose the gas mask and wrench turned up in Ted's possession? The answer is they were planted here. Why wasn't such telling evidence left behind in the house to be destroyed, blown to bits?"

"I don't know," Lucy said.

"Lucy, you do know," Harby said. "You can't shut that stubborn brain of yours forever to the truth. The gas mask and wrench were deliberately carried away from our house and kept because they might be needed—later. The mask could be easily traced to Ted. From the first, someone intended that if murder was established Ted should take the blame for it."

"I see," Lucy said quietly. "I see, Harby, that it isn't a perfect world."

Downstairs Claude was impatiently pacing back and forth, ignoring Jessie's efforts to be gracious and charming. Alec, equally restive, was looking out the window when Timothy Dwight walked lightly up the porch steps and came on in.

Timothy Dwight brought the first news of the second murder to Miss Mitchell's house. Jessie went upstairs to fetch the others and Dwight at once began to talk, but he brought out his new information piecemeal, in tantalizing dribbles. The policeman watched Rixey as he talked. Claude listened nervously. From the rambling account, he gathered that Ted was to be charged with a second murder, that an iron-clad motive had been discovered and fastened on him, that the prisoner hadn't a chance. That suited Claude fine. Briefly, Claude relaxed.

And then, with a wolfish grin, Dwight proceeded to explain Ted's motive. It was money. He wanted money to marry. Upon the death of his aunt, he would inherit a tidy sum. A very tidy sum indeed. Perhaps Rixey wasn't aware of this. Young Greer

was. On Monday Greer had found out that Mrs. Rixey had drawn a new will.

"A new will?" Claude echoed faintly. "Arabella's last will has already been offered for probate. It was drawn just ten days ago. Ask Alec here. Ask . . ."

"This will is later. This will was signed and witnessed in Rufus Pomerane's office on Monday morning. Mr. Rixey," Dwight asked softly, "why didn't you tell me you and your wife had had trouble?"

Claude turned white.

"Mr. Rixey, you knew your wife was with Rufus Pomerane on Monday morning. You and she had quarreled. You . . ."

"Arabella frequently lost her temper. The quarrel wasn't serious."

"Mr. Rixey, your wife was planning to divorce you, and you knew it. That sounds plenty serious to me. With her dead in the afternoon, it might sound serious to a jury."

"To a jury!" repeated Claude, aghast. "Supposing I did have a little difference with my wife, what married man hasn't? Arabella would never have divorced me. She'd have changed her mind, as she'd done before."

"So you say now, Mr. Rixey. But you've changed your tune considerably. It might strike a jury that your word ain't worth much."

"I'm not before a jury! This is preposterous. You've charged Ted Greer with murdering my wife."

"That's true. But your conduct looks mighty funny to me. It might be a good idea," suggested Dwight, "for you to explain this little quarrel you had with your wife a few hours before she died."

Claude's forehead was beaded with sweat. For a moment he was silent.

"Dwight, you're a man of the world," Claude said at last, with a ghastly effort at a smile. "I'll come clean with you. My wife wasn't exactly a generous woman. My allowance from her was inadequate. Unfortunately I—I have a weakness for gambling. I may have given you the impression I'd quit the races,

but the truth is I hadn't quit. On Monday morning Arabella went through my trousers pockets and—and found a bunch of mutuel tickets I'd forgotten to destroy. Arabella discovered I'd dropped more on the ponies than she thought I could afford, and lost her temper. That's the story."

"Mrs. Rixey told Pomerane she'd caught you stealing her money. Did you steal from your wife to play the races?"

Before Claude could answer, Alec suddenly took a hand.

"I can't vouch for Mrs. Rixey's personal funds," Alec said to Dwight, "but I can assure you that her estate—the part under my management—is in proper order. Claude hasn't got his hands on a penny. I've stayed on the job day and night for months, so that Claude couldn't dissipate the assets."

"Thank you for nothing," Claude said to Alec. "You can start right now hunting another job to stay on."

"My guess would be," said Alec, ignoring the interruption, "that Claude probably kept himself in funds by pilfering from the household accounts or padding them, and blaming the servants. I know Mrs. Rixey had been dissatisfied about the size of her bills. She'd complained in particular of several department-store accounts . . ."

"Get out!" Claude shouted in fury at the lawyer. "You're fired as of now. From here on out, I'll look after Arabella's estate myself."

A broad smile split Dwight's broad face. His teeth gleamed whitely as he turned to Claude.

"Mr. Rixey," Dwight said gently, "it looks like you haven't caught on yet. Maybe you'd better wake up. I haven't told you the exact terms of your wife's new will."

Whereupon, Dwight told Claude. Incredulous, the widower listened as the policeman explained how excellent indeed was Ted's motive for murder, how tidy was the sum which had led young Greer to disaster. Upon Arabella's death, by the terms of Arabella's last will, Ted and his family would take it all. There was nothing left for Claude. On Saturday, treacherously and secretly, without advising him, Arabella had cut her husband off without a penny.

Ted was provided with a motive for murder, but Claude was paying for it. The highly probable and much to be desired end of Arabella's obnoxious young nephew, accompanied by the blessed end of the investigation into Arabella's death, was going to cost Claude all he had. Ted would lose his life, but Claude would lose a fortune.

The others were coming down the stairs when Claude's slow wits comprehended his hideous dilemma. The widower cried out in agony. From the stairway Lucy glimpsed Claude's purpling face. She thought he'd suffered a sudden heart attack.

Lucy ran to the rattan sofa where Claude collapsed, hysterical. Dorritt stopped short. The living room was full of people, swirling with confused and broken words, confused and broken voices. Everybody was talking at once.

For several minutes Dorritt made no sense of anything. Temporarily shock defeated both her brain and her emotions. She felt nothing. She was unable to draw a coherent pattern from the scraps of phrases that drifted in to her.

Dorritt stood very still, a little withdrawn from the group crowded around the sofa. She stared and listened. Dwight was talking about a second murder. Ted had been charged with killing a girl named Janet Culp. They'd found his gun concealed in the lavatory. A foolish place to hide a gun, if you want to keep it hidden. Police in search of evidence always tear a place to pieces. Dwight was telling Harby—or was he talking to Lucy?—that they'd established Ted's motive for both murders. One crime tied into the other. The weak point in the case against Ted, his apparent lack of motive, was now the strongest point.

Without telling anybody, moving swiftly and in secret, Arabella had made a new will. Claude was carrying on in that lunatic disgusting way, because he'd just discovered he was penniless. The Greers would inherit everything. All of them would be rich, except Ted. Ted wasn't going to be rich. Very soon now, Ted would be tried for murder and sentenced to die. Very soon, Ted would be dead.

Dorritt stood there, silent, drained and empty, sunk in languor and despair. She couldn't think. Rebellious Dorritt, who'd

learned long ago that you must fight for what you want, was beyond rebellion. Beyond protest. She only wondered with vague amazement that life could be so cruel and unfair. How long and how bitterly had Ted longed for money to buy her lovely things. All the money in the world was now at his command. All the money in the world couldn't save Ted for her.

Dorritt wished numbly that Claude would stop yelling how he'd go to court and break the will; she wished that everybody in the room would disappear, sink out of sight and out of hearing, so that she could be alone. Maybe then she could cry. Maybe then she could plan. Surely somewhere, somehow, if she could only think, there must be a plan for her and Ted. Some miracle that would return him safely to her arms. With love and youth and money, the whole world could be theirs.

Dorritt became conscious that someone was pressing against her. Slowly she turned her head. It was Jessie, avid-eyed and watchful.

"Dory, how can you be so brave?" asked Jessie of the avid, watchful eyes. "I should think you'd be nearly crazy. I'm so awfully, awfully sorry for you. To think that the Greers will get the money, but that you and Ted . . ."

"What does money matter now?" Dorritt said dully. With loathing, she looked over at the couch and at the man to whom money mattered very much indeed. The glass she'd been walking over since morning was splintering beneath Dorritt's feet. She hardly knew which she hated more, Claude or Jessie. If Claude's insensate yelling didn't shatter her control, Jessie was determined to break her down with pretended sympathy.

"Dory darling—I'm your friend, your best and oldest friend. I'm sick about this. It's like a nightmare. I simply can't believe you and Ted will never have each other."

Dorritt shook off the affectionate arm.

"Do you think I'd walk out on Ted now?" she demanded of Jessie. "Is that what you think, Jessie?"

"But Dory, what can you do?"

"I can stick by him," Dorritt said savagely. "I can! I will!

I'll marry him tomorrow. Nothing can stop me. Ted is innocent. I'll show the whole world that I know he is. I'm going to be Ted's wife, if we have to hold the wedding in the deathhouse."

Frightened by the brilliance of the eyes glittering in Dorritt's ashen face, Jessie drew back. Just then Claude got up from the sofa, got up and sat down again. Calm hardly returned to him, but practicality did. Belatedly Claude realized and conceded that he couldn't afford to rush out of the house and off to court in an attempt to break the will. The only solution was compromise.

Obviously Ted wouldn't need the third part of the estate allotted to him. Legally, once he was convicted, Ted *couldn't* inherit. If the Greers would sign over the one small third, the widower would be satisfied. Surely that wasn't much to ask. Claude turned to Harby, a lawyer, presumably a man of business, and suggested compromise.

"Leave this house," Harby said. "Do you suppose my wife, my son, my daughter, would touch Arabella's money now? You can take the rotten money, every stinking penny . . ."

And then Harby paused. Lucy hadn't said a word. Like Dorritt, she had merely stood and listened. Lucy spoke. Her voice wasn't loud, but it hushed every other voice and rang in every ear. No one present had ever heard such a note in Lucy's voice. A note as hard as iron.

"Claude—I'm sorry to disappoint you," Lucy said. "But Arabella's money is ours. We mean to keep it. Even though you starve, we mean to keep the money. You see, Claude," Lucy explained, "it will take a great deal of money to save our boy's life. Maybe all that Arabella left. If it costs a million dollars, or more, we intend to see that justice is done . . ."

"But, Lucy . . ."

"Somebody," Lucy continued quietly, imperturbably, "went to considerate trouble to make my son look like a murderer. Somebody killed Arabella, and arranged that my son should take the blame. Well, it's my turn now. I intend to use Ara-

bella's money—our money now, Claude—to find out who that person is. With Arabella's money, I feel confident I can either find the truth or, if necessary, buy it."

Claude shrank under her cold and steady eye. Lucy's gentle mouth curled. So this, she thought in surprise, is what hatred is like. Hating isn't difficult, after all. Lucy had believed that to hate would destroy her. She had been mistaken.

Lucy felt perfectly intact as she looked at Claude and hated him. Claude, like Arabella, was worthless, selfish, wicked. Years and years too late, Lucy perceived what Arabella had been. Years too late Lucy saw how Arabella had robbed her, stolen the strength and devotion and energy that belonged to Lucy's family, spread dissension among them, and given nothing in return. Harby was right. Loving everybody isn't always the answer. Love hadn't changed Arabella a whit. Love wouldn't change Claude. For once, Lucy sought no excuses for Claude. None existed. Gazing at her brother-in-law, Lucy was coolly certain that Claude knew Ted was innocent, but that he'd be overjoyed to see Ted convicted.

"I'm glad I have the money," Lucy said aloud. "With Arabella's money, I'm going to find out who killed her. Claude, I don't want to frighten you," Lucy said, "but I'm by no means sure it wasn't you."

Claude sprang to his feet.

"Lucy, have you lost your mind? What's come over you? Why would I kill Arabella and leave myself a pauper?"

"Ah," said Lucy cruelly, "but you've forgotten something, Claude. You didn't know about the new will on Monday. Until an hour ago you thought you'd be rich."

"I—I . . ."

"Why bother to deny the truth, Claude? It would be funny, wouldn't it, if you did kill Arabella for money—and if we got the money and used it to find you out?"

"Lucy, I beg of you . . ."

"You can save your excuses for your lawyer," Lucy said. "For I intend to do my level best to show you're guilty of murder."

The gathering at Arabella's funeral was small. Lucy had been put to bed with a migraine headache. Dorritt, Harby—the man who had said he wouldn't attend—and Alec sat in a stiff pew at St. Anthony's. Across the aisle Claude sat by himself. When the benediction was pronounced, when the choir had sung the last requiem, when the organist had finished the processional, Dorritt, Harby and Alec followed the luxurious hearse to the cemetery. Claude stood also at the graveside. So Arabella Rixey went to her final rest.

Twenty-five

THE SAVAGE heat wave which had begun on the day of Arabella's death continued through Friday. For the first time since Monday, the site of the explosion was deserted. The last workman, the last policeman had gone. Such rubble as remained was neatly stacked.

Two cars drove by on the street, and the passengers didn't even glance out. Public interest in the explosion had evaporated. The chase was over. The police had got the guilty man. A young veteran back from the wars—he'd probably plead battle neurosis and insanity—had killed two women so he could inherit a fortune and marry his girl. For a while the story seemed mysterious and exciting, but it was finished.

Miss Mitchell had just arisen from the rattan sofa. She was turning toward the kitchen and badly needed coffee, when Till tiptoed down the stairs. The girl jumped, and then smiled wanly.

"Mother told me not to wake you. I hope I didn't."

"Where is everybody?"

"Mother and Dad went downtown to arrange for a lawyer and—private detectives. I don't know where Jessie went. Dorritt was going to City Hall to see about a marriage license."

"Oh," Miss Mitchell said.

"I think Dorritt is just wonderful," Till said, and plucked

up a little spirit. "Miss Mitchell, she just won't give way. She's going to marry Ted in spite of everything."

Perhaps Dorritt was wonderful. Miss Mitchell wasn't sure. A wedding ceremony conducted behind prison bars apparently appealed to Till's romantic heart, and might possibly appeal to the sympathies of a jury, but the idea left Miss Mitchell a little cold. It seemed to Dorritt's aunt that Dorritt could prove her faith and trust in some less melodramatic way; that Ted had troubles enough without taking on the responsibility of a wife whom he might soon leave a widow. But then, the young are convinced that true love will conquer all. Miss Mitchell wasn't young, and it wasn't her affair. She kept her sentiments to herself.

Till followed her into the kitchen. The girl felt lost and miserable, left out of the portentous business that concerned her brother. Harby and Lucy had vetoed with vehemence a personal plan of Till's. She had wanted to go to the police and explain that the Japanese pistol belonged to her.

"Mother says it's too late, that the police probably wouldn't believe me. She says my telling now wouldn't help Ted anyway."

"Your mother is right," Miss Mitchell said. "If the pistol was in Ted's locker, he could have been the one who removed and—and used it."

She stirred her coffee, reflecting that she, too, had withheld information until it no longer seemed to matter. To reveal now that the Stillson wrench had been purchased at the Uptown Hardware Store would hardly help Ted. It could too easily be argued that it was Ted himself who had used his father's account.

In any event, by now the police had undoubtedly traced the wrench to its source, with no assistance from Miss Mitchell. Of course the defense could point out that the wrench had been acquired five days before Arabella's will had been changed, and hence *before* Ted's motive existed. On the other hand, the wrench had also been bought before Arabella decided upon divorce and unexpectedly invited Lucy to lunch. It almost

looked as though Arabella's murder had been premeditated and prepared for in advance of anybody's motive. The point was puzzling.

In comparison, the explanation of Arabella's department store charge account seemed simple. Apparently Claude had systematically kept himself in funds by juggling his wife's bills and using her accounts. Or so Arabella had complained to Rufus Pomerane, and Claude had entered no denial. It was almost certainly Claude who'd taken advantage of last January's confusion and charged to Arabella the item Arabella had not received. By returning the merchandise to the store for cash, Claude could finance himself, in a somewhat limited way, to pay another visit to the race tracks. Still and all, the risk seemed great for such a small reward. So the Gawaine's episode was also puzzling.

"Mother believes," Till was saying, "that Uncle Claude's alibi is a phony. I wish I could. Miss Mitchell, I can't. I simply can't believe he killed Aunt Arabella. He hasn't got the guts."

Miss Mitchell wouldn't have chosen Till's language, but reluctantly she was inclined to share Till's opinion. In any situation where Claude had the upper hand, there was no doubt that he could be bold, vicious, without mercy. With Arabella, Claude had never had the upper hand. In Miss Mitchell's opinion Claude Rixey was capable of murdering almost anybody except—his wife.

"Uncle Claude was always scared to death of her," Till said. "It seems to me he'd never have got up the nerve to kill her; that he'd have just moaned and cried and hoped the quarrel would blow over. Furthermore," said Till, "I don't believe they had that fight over Claude's gambling."

Nowadays ugly thoughts and suspicions came easily to Till's mind.

"You know Uncle Claude," Till said, "what he's like. You've seen gamblers in the movies, real gamblers—the kind that bet their last dollar and steal to get another dollar, the kind that have to gamble to live. Uncle Claude certainly doesn't seem the type."

No, Claude didn't seem the type. Sure-thing Claude, the man who married a wealthy, much older wife and kept her satisfied or at least quiescent for five long years, didn't seem the type to be attracted by the risks of the most risky recreation in the world. Yet to play the races and lose more money than he could afford, Claude asked them to believe that he had risked his whole marriage. The quarrel which had sent Arabella off for a divorce, as Claude explained it, had occurred because Arabella went through her husband's pockets and found a bunch of worthless mutuel tickets.

"I don't believe it," Till said. "Maybe Aunt Arabella found something in his pockets, but it wasn't pari-mutuel tickets. That isn't why Claude was so terrified the police would find the purse."

Simultaneously, Miss Mitchell and Till glanced out the kitchen window, and at the almost orderly scene of ruin next door. Everything concerned with Arabella had come to light except Arabella's purse. The Stillson wrench, the gas mask, the string of pearls that Arabella had left as a surprise for Lucy because she'd expected to be away in Florida on Lucy's birthday. Even the souvenir pistol. Only the gold mesh purse had defied a search that was ended now.

Till's eyes withdrew from the window. She got up from the kitchen table.

"If you don't mind," she said dully, "I believe I'll go out a while myself. One thing, I don't have to ask some policeman's permission!"

Five minutes later, Miss Mitchell was alone in her house.

Downtown, Harby and Lucy left the office of the lawyer whom they had engaged to defend their son. Harby wanted to make another visit to the District Jail, but Lucy refused. They would wait until Ted sent for them. Just now, his mother thought, Ted needed to be alone.

"But Lucy, why? He should have sent for us already. He should have seen us yesterday. I don't understand Ted."

"Don't you?" Lucy said. She looked steadily at her husband. And then her voice broke. "I expect Ted is—is making up his

own mind who put him where he is. Until he does, it's natural he would suspect—everybody."

After that, Ted's parents went to hire detectives to search for evidence that Claude had killed his wife.

By noon the temperature was in the upper nineties. After Dorritt visited City Hall and made inquiries about a marriage license, she started for the jail. It was as difficult for her as for Lucy to go there again, but she knew she must. Independent Dorritt, who'd learned during the years of Ted's absence to stand on her own two feet, needed Ted's help now. She had to have it.

Ted had lost faith in the world. If he had lost faith in her too, if in his secret mind he blamed her for what had happened to him, Dorritt thought numbly that she didn't care to live. Ted could prove his trust by offering her the consolation of marriage. If he refused, she would know what he was thinking. Unless she could assure herself that Ted still believed in her, Dorritt felt that she could not go on. She'd buy poison and she'd kill herself. There was no other answer.

With these thoughts, she walked the long white blocks of downtown Washington. In her disordered state of mind, it seemed to her that every stranger had become an enemy. The languid crowds of people moving sluggishly along the sidewalks were banded in subtle association against her. Everybody knew where she was bound and why. Every stranger hoped slyly for her defeat.

In vain she struggled to rid herself of the delusion that hostility surrounded her, that on her way to see her sweetheart she was being tracked and followed. Once, in the crowd, she thought she caught sight of Jessie. But it was only a plump housewife with a shopping bag, dragging a whining child by the hand. The mistake helped the girl pull herself together. Her own imagination, Dorritt decided, and not for the first time, was her curse.

After the glaring heat outside, the air-cooled marble dimness of the District Jail was grateful to her. Arranging an interview with a prisoner requires, of course, certain formalities. Dorritt

walked slowly up the marble stairs and turned into an office on the second floor. A not unsympathetic official courteously heard her through, lent her paper and pencil, nodded to a chair.

"You can write out your request over there. Just fill in the blank. I'll send up your note for you to the prisoner. Sorry, but I'll have to read it."

Dorritt wrote her note to Ted rapidly, almost without care. It was too late now to weigh words and phrases. She handed the note to the man at the desk. His eyes ran through the almost formal words in which she offered, indeed begged to marry Ted at once. He frowned slightly, reflected that it wasn't his business to advise the girl. He did wonder angrily at the appeal cold-blooded killers seemingly had for women. Subtly, though his sympathy for Dorritt didn't lessen, his respect did. He rang a bell on his desk. A uniformed policeman came in, took the note and went.

Dorritt looked at a round clock on the wall. Yesterday she and Lucy and Harby had sent in many notes, had waited many futile hours in the hope that Ted would change his mind. This ordeal would be brief. This one note was the last she would send. She would wait thirty minutes, no more, and then she would go away, realizing that Ted doubted her, too, and that she had nothing left in this world to live for.

In twenty minutes the policeman came back. Ted would see her. Emotionlessly Dorritt let them search her, let them go through her purse, lest she be carrying weapons, drugs, contraband, to the prisoner. She followed the policeman's back from the office and down the cool length of the marble corridor.

There were no windows in the visitor's room, only the single door through which she entered. A long table flanked by facing chairs ran the length of the electric-lighted room, its sole furnishing. Latticed steel, cut at regular intervals by holes large enough to reveal a face, rose from the center of the table and divided it into two neat sections. Thus, seated comfortably, you could hold a vis-à-vis conversation with a companion whom you couldn't touch. The conception was ingenious, though hardly planned for lovers' meetings.

Ted was already seated on his side of the table. Beside the prisoner stood another policeman who stepped out in the hall as Dorritt came in. He didn't close the door. He posted himself so he could watch the pair but not overhear a low-voiced conversation.

Ted didn't rise. Dorritt sank into her own chair at the divided table. She looked through the aperture at Ted's face, framed in steel. He looked at her face. Sudden tears came into both their eyes.

"Darling," Dorritt said. Then, "Darling, hello. I'm glad you let me come. I wasn't sure you would."

"I wasn't sure myself," Ted said. "Maybe, Dory, I was curious."

"Curious?"

"Curious about you, and how you were bearing up. Somehow," he said, and now regarded her pale drawn face almost impersonally, "I thought grief would become you better. You look like hell. You've cried, darling, cried a lot. Was it for me or for yourself?"

His eyes were now dry. Dorritt's tears flowed faster. With effort, she stopped them.

"Why must you torture me this way?"

"Maybe," he said with a wry twist of the mouth, "it's because I love you. Is that why you torture me, Dorritt? Is that why torturing me gives you pleasure? I've often wondered."

"I never have. That isn't true."

"Oh, isn't it? Tell me, dear. Do you really think that I enjoy having you see me here? Haven't you ever heard that men have their pride?"

"I had to come."

"Why? Why not leave me peacefully in my peaceful cell to figure things out? These days I've got important things to think about."

"Ted, you need me. Don't pretend you don't. I want to help you. You can't fight this thing alone. You're here in prison. But I know—I *know* that you aren't guilty."

"Thank you very much. As it happens, I know that myself,"

he said. "Which doesn't mean there aren't plenty of things I don't know. Darling, may I ask you one?"

"Do," she said. "Ask me anything."

"You look worried," he said unkindly. "Are you afraid I won't be a gentleman? After all these years, you should know me better. I won't take advantage of your generosity and ask if you know *who* is guilty, though I must confess I've wondered."

"Ted!"

"Yes, I've wondered," he said. "You'd be surprised to hear the things I've wondered these last few days. But let me ask my question. It's fair, my dear. Why," he asked, "why at this late date, with me where I am, with nothing in it for you, or nothing I can see, are you so hell-bent for marriage?"

"If love won't do for the answer . . ."

"Love won't," he said. "Yes, I think you love me—in your way. The trouble is, Dory, you never had this burning interest in the legalities before."

"I did! I always wanted marriage. When you came back from overseas, I practically begged you on my knees . . ."

"You didn't mean it. You were just pretending. You're a clever girl, Dorritt, but I'm clever, too. You always set up the deal so I wouldn't play. Just like you talked up all my jobs as so impossibly wonderful that I had to quit. I knew it all the time."

"Then you knew wrong."

"Dorritt, you disappoint me. It isn't clever to keep on lying when you're caught. A man knows when a girl really wants to marry him. He can tell. That is, he can tell if—he loves the girl."

"You've got a funny way of showing love."

"You never wanted to marry me before," he said implacably. "You do now. Is it because you think Mother will hand over to you the third part of the estate that I won't get, if I'm executed?"

Dorritt was silent.

"Tell me, Dory. Why?"

"Call it a sudden whim," she said at last sullenly. "Call it a

sense of duty. Call it anything you like. I see you aren't interested. So why continue the discussion?"

She started to push back the chair, but the chair was fastened to the floor. Ted leaned forward toward the aperture. His eyes caught hers. He was the prisoner, but momentarily it was she who had the panic feeling of the trapped. She couldn't tear her eyes away. She couldn't move the chair.

"Something happened while I was overseas," Ted said softly. "While I was overseas, you changed. Dory, what happened?"

Dorritt got up awkwardly from the chair.

"Good-bye, Ted," she said. "I hope you go free. That's true, anyway. I'm sorry I came here and bothered you."

"Sit down," he said savagely. "Dory, you're not going now. Why, we've got fifteen minutes to spend. Sit down."

She sat.

"Ted, what's the use? We've got nothing more to say to each other."

"We never had much to say," he said bitterly. "Sweetheart, when I think of you it's not our conversations I remember. Maybe that's our trouble. Even now, I have no idea what goes on inside you. Or maybe—and this is what scares me—I have too good an idea."

"I won't stay here to be insulted," she said, but made no move to rise. "Ted, you don't understand me because you hunt—ugly reasons for everything. Or invent and imagine them. You simply can't believe that I've always and always had a dream of being your wife . . ."

"Curiously enough, I can," he said slowly. "Provided I'd been equipped with the proper fixings, meaning pots of money, you'd have married me like a shot. Money means so much to you, Dorritt."

A second time, utterly defeated, she got up. In the moment of her defeat, without glory, came triumph.

"Okay, okay," Ted said tiredly. "If it means so much to you to make an honest man of me at this late date, Dory, go ahead. You can go ahead and get your license."

"Ted, if you don't want to . . ."

"Haven't I agreed? But," he said, and gave her a strange, unloving look, "I wouldn't count on wearing widow's weeds for yet awhile. Things can happen. It's a long time, my dear, before the trial."

When Dorritt left the jail, she thought vaguely of returning to the District Building. In her purse was the power of attorney necessary to obtain a marriage license, without the presence of the groom. But she had another and more important errand first. To prepare for it, to rally her strength again, for she was exhausted, she went into a drugstore. She sat at the counter, ordered a sandwich and coffee. The food gagged her. She had a blinding headache. She bought aspirin, took two tablets. She made another purchase, and left the drugstore.

It was lunchtime in downtown Washington. Crowds of government employees streamed along the sidewalks. Five days ago Dorritt would have been among them. In the heat she started walking again.

Twenty-six

STEADILY THE day grew hotter. The town's suffering population gazed upward at the brilliant burning sky. Surely soon a thunderstorm must come and bring relief. But there was not a cloud in sight.

Miss Mitchell had gone upstairs because she thought it might be cooler there. She sat limply in her bedroom rocker, with all the windows open. An unpleasant combination of physical and mental distress left her feeling light-headed, and yet peculiarly acute and aware. The buzzing of a fly against the ceiling was maddening to her ears. Motes of dust circling in the crashing sunlight affronted her weary eyes.

Like the town awaiting the thunderstorm, she also seemed

to be waiting, expecting. She dragged herself out of the chair. The squeak of the rocker in the silence of the empty house was so loud that she started at the noise.

"Something is going to happen," Miss Mitchell said.

Instantly, without sensible reason, she knew it was true. Somehow and soon, something would happen and the guilty would be brought to justice. Miracles have gone out of fashion; but Miss Mitchell believed in them. She believed in a God who is both merciful and just. Soon, very soon, the truth would be revealed to them. She knew it.

Work is an antidote for nerves. Miss Mitchell tried it. She made the beds upstairs. She wiped up the powder Lucy had spilt on her mahogany bureau. She swept Mickey's white hairs from the rag rug. She picked up Dorritt's scattered clothes, shaking her head that the girl could be so careless with such pretty and expensive things. Jessie's modest wardrobe required no attention. In the suffocating heat of the storeroom, Miss Mitchell folded and put away the camp cot. Whatever happened, Ted would hardly be sleeping there again.

Downstairs she dusted the living room, and threw out the wilted flowers bought for Lucy's birthday. The empty bowl offended her. She stepped into the back yard with a pair of scissors. What the explosion hadn't done to her narrow flower border, the heat had since accomplished. The fuchsia plants and the forget-me-nots were brown and shriveled.

Miss Mitchell couldn't let it rest at that. A frenzy of activity drove her on, as though she was afraid to sit down in the empty house, fold her hands and think. She went upstairs to water the petunias in the window-box. She stepped into the bathroom and drew a glass of water at the tap, pushed up the screen and leaned out.

She frowned. The petunias were drooping in the heat, their long shapeless tendrils and bell-like flowers sprawled and parched. She'd expected that. What she hadn't expected to see was a patch in the center of the window-box where the plants were snapped and crushed and broken off. Among the pallid survivors, the crushed broken stalks and blossoms lay heaped

and tangled together, like a handful of dead flowers on a grave.

Obviously heat wasn't responsible for the damage. Miss Mitchell's frown deepened, as she poured the water from the glass upon the living flowers. The water was sucked at once with a protesting gurgle into some hidden cavity in the dry earth.

She parted the covering foliage. She found the hole, deep and ragged, messy now with water. In perplexity Miss Mitchell glanced toward the splintered cornice of her porch. Had some flying fragment from the explosion landed here?

Her fingers explored the muddy hole, dug deeper. She rolled up her sleeve, clawed through the dirt to the bottom of the box. At last she touched the object that had come hurtling through the air on Monday and buried itself among the petunias.

Miss Mitchell drew out a slimy, dirty, blackened thing that lay heavy in her hand. The thing was metal but flexible, repulsive to the touch like a rubber glove filled with sand. She wiped it with a towel before she knew. She was holding the remains of Arabella's gold mesh purse.

The chain and old-fashioned fringe had been sheared away. Most of the chip diamonds and amethysts that had decorated the elaborate frame were missing, and the frame was jammed. The gold-linked sack was full of rents and holes but still stubbornly encased its heavy contents.

Suddenly her nervousness was gone. She felt calm, unhurried, confident and yet excited, like a person on the verge of some ultimate discovery. Miss Mitchell was convinced that she had been vouchsafed a miracle. She believed that she had been guided to the window box and—the truth.

She pried the frame apart, tipped the golden sack, poured the contents on the edge of the wash basin. There was the clank of keys, the jingle of silver, the thud of a leather-backed engagement book. Mixed together, unrelated, lay the things Arabella had stuffed into her purse on that last morning when she rushed off from Spring Valley to make a will and see a lawyer about a divorce. A slender lipstick, a tiny jeweled vial of perfume, a youthful shade of rouge, a box of digestive pills.

In the engagement book, which Miss Mitchell leafed quickly

through, a notation read: "Lunch with Lucy." Arabella hadn't bothered to jot down the time or place. A damp mildewed wad of paper turned out to be the bill from Gawaine's. A vigorous pencil had checked the hostess gown item. Naturally a woman bound for a divorce would take along her evidence. She would also take her checkbook, her billfold. Miss Mitchell examined Arabella's checkbook, her coin purse, a billfold fat with currency.

Slowly the searcher's dry excitement and her sense of certainty vanished as she carefully examined and laid aside everything that seemed remotely promising. Not until she picked up the keys to return them to the purse did she observe that two separate keyrings were caught and tangled together. She shook the two rings apart. The smaller bunch of keys fell into the washbowl. The ring in Miss Mitchell's hand held Arabella's keys. The other keys belonged to Claude. A silver disk fastened to the ring was inscribed with his initials.

Miss Mitchell's mind flew to Claude's tale of missing keys sent off by mistake to the cleaner, another tale he'd told of a bitter quarrel which started when Arabella went through his trousers on Saturday morning. It seemed that what Arabella had found in Claude's trousers pockets was not evidence of gambling but Claude's keys. Why in the world would a woman rush off to a lawyer with her husband's keys?

Feverishly Miss Mitchell compared the two bunches of keys. At once she made a discovery. Arabella's crowded ring held many keys that Claude's ring did not—half a dozen thin safe-deposit keys, a jewel-box key, what looked like a lock-box key, three trunk keys, a plump squat impersonal key that Miss Mitchell shrewdly guessed might open a liquor cabinet. Without difficulty, merely by comparing the keys, you could tell who had run the Rixey marriage. The meek collection of keys dangling from Claude's ring was duplicated on the ring that had belonged to Arabella. Claude had been allowed a key to his own office, keys to the Spring Valley house, front and back, a key to the limousine, a key to the garage, but he had shared the privilege with his wife.

And then Miss Mitchell saw the solitary exception. She caught sight of the one key owned by Claude that was not duplicated on Arabella's key ring. It looked like a house key, but a strange kind of house key.

The metal, though dirty and discolored, was too soft and lustrous in hue for brass. Engraved on the head of the key were numerals in fancy, embellished script—507. So it wasn't a house key, but the key to an apartment.

Miss Mitchell slipped the key from Claude's key ring. She rubbed the discolored metal, blinked. The key was made of gold, skillfully cut and fashioned by jewelers' tools, as though some empty mind had conceived a particularly absurd, extravagant gift. For a moment Miss Mitchell studied the elaborate numerals, picturing somewhere in the city a door marked 507. Then she turned the gold key over. On the other side a line of engraving read: "Dearest, I give you the key to my heart."

Miss Mitchell knew then what had sent Arabella Rixey to a lawyer. Arabella had come upon a key to a door in Claude's life which was closed to her. She hadn't caught her husband gambling. She had caught him in adultery.

Arabella might have forgiven Claude for gambling; she might have forgiven him for theft. Vain and arrogant Arabella had come upon a key she wasn't meant to see and had suffered an injury which she could neither tolerate nor admit. Pride would never have permitted her to admit that another woman, a younger, prettier woman, had bested Arabella Rixey in the only contest that matters much to women. She had complained to her lawyer of theft and gambling; theft and gambling would have figured in her divorce complaint.

Nevertheless, Arabella had carried off the tell-tale key. Why? The answer came swiftly. Arabella had been determined to track down the guilty lovers to satisfy and perhaps to torture herself; certainly to torture and wreak a terrible revenge upon Claude and the other woman. The determination had killed her.

Miss Mitchell felt no surprise, beyond surprise at her own blindness. She had not suspected Claude of the dreary so-called "secret life" that often figures in marriages like the Rixey mar-

riage, because Claude was physically unattractive, appallingly selfish, unappealing in every way—except the one way. A man with a wealthy wife can usually afford a mistress. Particularly if he adds to his allowance by padding the household accounts, making deals with the grocer, the liquor salesman, charging with sufficient circumspection at the department stores. Miss Mitchell now perceived a different explanation for the hostess gown that went on Arabella's bill in January. It might have been returned for cash. It might have been a gift from Claude to Claude's lady.

Miss Mitchell returned everything to Arabella's purse, except the key. The purse she hid in the laundry hamper. The key she carried to her bedroom, and put in her own purse.

Somewhere in the city was an apartment numbered 507. In that apartment, where Claude had met a mistress, was the answer to Arabella's death, the end of darkness and mystery.

Among the thousands of apartments in Washington, among the scores which must be numbered 507, was the one right apartment. The police would know how to locate it. But Miss Mitchell had no intention of carrying her problem to Timothy Dwight. She thought she knew where she could find help.

Twenty-seven

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour later Miss Mitchell was sitting in a littered, untidy office with Dr. Kenneth MacNab. On the desk between them lay the gold key. Dr. MacNab had heard the whole story. He rose from his chair.

"My dear lady, this is a job for the police. I wouldn't know where to begin."

"Begin with the key," she said a little impatiently. "It should be easy to locate the apartment through the key. How many people do you suppose go to jewelry stores and order handmade, solid gold apartment keys?"

"Not many," he conceded. He picked up the key and put it in his pocket.

Satisfied, Miss Mitchell rose. Dr. MacNab also rose. He took her arm. She looked at him in surprise and alarm.

"Not so fast," the doctor said. "You're coming along to tour the "F" Street jewelry stores with me."

Washington is too near the fabulous splendors of New York to support many luxury shops of its own. By four o'clock, the two investigators had passed along the length of "F" Street and made six brief stops. Six surprised jewelers had never heard of a gold house-key.

In the dead, unstirring air of the late afternoon was now the faint, far-off promise of the delayed and tediously gathering storm. No one was on the street who didn't have to be there. Dr. MacNab wiped his dripping forehead, and suggested postponing further canvassing until the morning.

"We haven't tried Wade's," Miss Mitchell said.

Wade's was out on Connecticut Avenue, the oldest and perhaps the smartest jewelry store in Washington with a name so well established that it required no convenient downtown address. Dr. MacNab sighed.

He led her to the District garage, and they got in his car. They drove through the sweltering town, beneath dusty, drooping trees where no leaf moved, to upper Connecticut Avenue. They entered a massive, old-fashioned building more like a bank than a jewelry store.

In the hushed cathedral quiet, a clerk in a morning coat came swiftly toward them. A gold house-key? Clerks in morning coats are adept at concealing surprise. There was the merest flicker of the courteous, interested eyes, followed by an apologetic admission that Wade's didn't carry a line of house-keys in precious metals. However, if the customers cared to leave the key to be copied a special order could be arranged.

"I'm sorry. You've misunderstood," said Dr. MacNab, irritated to discover that his voice was growing hushed and apologetic too. "This lady and I aren't in the market for a gold house-key. We're attempting to learn something about one."

"Yes?"

"Is this your work?"

Dr. MacNab produced the gold key. The man in the morning coat picked the key from the doctor's palm, studied the size and shape, the balance of the head and shaft, glanced at the engraving of the numerals. 507.

"In my opinion the key is definitely ours," he said at last, incurious, innocently pleased to please the customers. "It lacks our signature, but you can always tell fine workmanship. This looks like the work of our best goldsmith—Jonathan Timberlake."

"Who bought the key?" asked Dr. MacNab baldly. "And when?"

The clerk stiffened. He now allowed himself a look of surprise, strongly tinged with disapproval.

"My dear sir, I couldn't possibly help you there. Wade's has thousands of customers. How in the world could I recall an individual purchase?"

"Won't your records show?"

"I'm afraid," said the other crisply, "that Wade's records are not at your disposal. To Wade's the privacy of every customer is sacrosanct."

"It's a police matter," the doctor said.

The man in the morning coat lost his crispness. Painfully shocked, he withdrew. An agitated conference took place between him and another gentleman, similarly apparelled, before on lagging feet he retired to consult the sacrosanct records of the oldest jewelry store in Washington. Fifteen minutes later he was back, beaming with relief.

"Sir, I'm sorry to say," he announced happily, "that Wade's can't be of service to the police. Our records show the key was bought here on special order three years ago, but it was a cash transaction. The key was picked up by the customer at the store. There was no delivery, no charge. In consequence no name appears in our records."

"Then we must ask to see your goldsmith."

The clerk sighed.

Jonathan Timberlake was almost as old as Wade's, a white-thatched, incredibly wrinkled man, hunched at a workbench in the busy, humming heart of the great store. He got up from his bench and peered at them through spectacles as thick as the glass he used to search out the flaws in diamonds.

"Jonathan, these people are inquiring about a gold key you designed three years ago. After all this time," suggested the clerk, with a little cough, "I told them it was doubtful you would remember . . ."

"Some things I forget," the old man interrupted testily. "My own work I do not forget. Where is this key?"

He took the golden key between his wrinkled palms. A stain that marred the numerals annoyed him. He rubbed the stain away with a corner of his leather apron.

"Yes, the work is mine. December, three years ago. A rush order. Quick, quick, she wanted the key. She said it was for a Christmas present."

"She?"

"The woman who bought the key," the old man replied irritably. "Who else?"

"Then you met her?"

"Naturally," the jeweler said with rising asperity, as though some vague recollection of the episode troubled and displeased him. "First, in early December when she came in with the order. We worked out the design and selected the style of the engraving. I'm afraid the customer was less interested in the design than in haste. I understood," the old man said slowly, "she was anxious to be ready with the key by the time the apartment was ready for occupancy."

Dr. MacNab looked puzzled.

"This apartment needing a key," the jeweler explained, "was in some building that would be completed at Christmas time. I can recall the customer saying how she wanted everything to be new and—fine."

"I suppose," said Dr. MacNab, "that she mentioned no address."

"Nothing except the numeral to be engraved on the key. I

saw her the second time, and only for a few minutes, when she came back to pick up the finished order."

"Would you recognize this woman?"

"After three years!" The jeweler shook his head. "You ask the impossible. I couldn't even tell you the color of her hair, whether she was tall or short, fat or thin. All that I remember is her eyes."

"Her eyes?"

"They looked—unhappy," the old man said. "Unhappy and —and cold. You may wonder how I remember. The eyes struck me because . . ."

They waited. He turned the key in his hand.

"She told me she was a bride," he said. "That the key was to be a Christmas present to her groom. I found it difficult to believe."

With that the old man handed back the key, and sat down at his bench. So far as he was concerned, the interview was over. Miss Mitchell touched his arm.

"It is—very necessary that we identify and locate this woman quickly. When she left the order for the key I should think she would have been obliged to leave a name with you."

"Madame, she did."

"But you have forgotten the name?"

"On the contrary, I remember it well. The name won't help you."

"Why not?"

"She said her name was Smith. Mrs. John Smith."

"Strange," remarked Dr. MacNab, "how unoriginal sin can be and how unimaginative."

He perceived what Miss Mitchell did not. The discreet "Mrs. Smith," for all her determination to remain anonymous, had slipped in imagination and in discretion in one slight but important respect. Vague as was her description of a single apartment in a city of a million people, the apartment was located in a building completed around Christmas time three years earlier. That narrowed the field—considerably.

When they left the jewelry store, Dr. MacNab guided Miss

Mitchell to the nearest public telephone. While she waited, he spent twenty minutes on the wire. The first call he made was to the Building Permits Office. A clerk looked up the files while he held the line. Five large apartment buildings had been under construction in Washington three years earlier. Three apartment buildings had been completed around Christmas time. Dr. MacNab copied down the addresses of the three apartment houses, the telephone numbers.

He called all three. Only one of the apartment houses—the largest and the smartest—listed a tenant named John Smith. According to an obliging switchboard operator Mr. John Smith occupied Apartment 507.

"Will you ring his apartment please?"

The operator rang in vain. If anyone was in Apartment 507, that person didn't choose to answer. Thirty seconds, and the girl confessed defeat.

"Can you tell me when to expect Mr. Smith?" asked the doctor.

"Really, I can't. Is he expecting a call from you?"

"No," replied the doctor with a certain grim humor. "I hardly think John is expecting a call from me. This is an—an old friend of his."

"I can take a message," the operator offered doubtfully. "But if you ask me and really want to reach your friend, you'd better write a letter to his home."

"His home? Doesn't he live there?"

"Mr. Smith is one of our out-of-towners," explained the girl. "Lots of New Yorkers still keep apartments here at Brighton Arms to beat hotel reservation headaches. From the calls, I don't think your friend is around much."

Dr. MacNab made one more call. He telephoned the Police Department, and talked to an official who wasn't Timothy Dwight. A moment later when the doctor emerged from the telephone booth, Miss Mitchell knew from his face that he had located the apartment which would open to a golden key. Out on the street, she discovered something else.

The amateur investigation had, if in a somewhat extra-legal

way, become official. A roving police car was just pulling up beside the doctor's car. In it were two uniformed policemen. Dr. MacNab went over and spoke to them. One of them handed him something.

Miss Mitchell wondered why the doctor thought he might need a gun. She didn't ask. They got into his car and started toward the Brighton Arms. The police car followed.

Twenty-eight

AN ENORMOUS building, composed of five rambling wings thrown together in a pattern almost as complicated as the Pentagon, the Brighton Arms filled two city blocks in the fashionable Georgetown area. Here twelve hundred people lived as they pleased, so long, that is, as they didn't disturb the neighbors.

"A perfect hideaway," commented Dr. MacNab. "Pay your rent on time, and you're lost in the multitude. No one's interested."

Miss Mitchell regarded the Brighton Arms.

"I wonder how the manager sleeps."

"Quite well, I imagine," he replied dryly. "My dear lady, surely you realize that morals are old-fashioned."

"Not to me," Miss Mitchell said.

He smiled a little grimly.

"Come now. You and I, as prospective housebreakers, are on rather shaky ethical grounds ourselves."

"We have a key."

"A quibble, unworthy of you. We have no warrant. In a few minutes, we will be guilty of not breaking—but entering."

"Only to right a wrong," she said uncertainly. They had alighted from the doctor's car, and were standing on the sidewalk beside the vast, red bulk of the apartment house. Down

the block, the other car pulled in at the curb. She asked faintly, "Why did you bring along the policemen?"

"First," he said, "to lend a little spurious authority to this unlawful expedition. Frankly, I'd hate to go to jail. Second . . ." he hesitated. "Perhaps," Dr. MacNab said slowly, "I am afraid of what we might find. Do you believe in premonitions?"

"Yes," she said.

"I don't," said the doctor. "Nevertheless, I believe we are about to learn the answer to two brutal murders, and I'm—afraid. Sometimes the truth can be hard to take."

"I know," Miss Mitchell said.

She, too, was afraid. She wanted to turn and run away from the Brighton Arms, run and hide herself from further evil knowledge. The doctor's fingers felt the slight quiver of her arm. His own hand dropped.

"If you wish," he said quietly, "you are free to go. Indeed, I advise it."

"No," she said. "We're in this together."

A gust of wind came swooping down the street, as the two policemen got out of the other car. Dr. MacNab looked up at the sky. Black clouds were racing toward the sun. The drooping branches of the tall trees surrounding the Brighton Arms clashed and rattled. A dead bough snapped. A handful of twigs and leaves blew wildly along the sidewalk, like drops of rain. The air was full of dust.

The policemen disappeared into the service entrance of the building. Miss Mitchell and Dr. MacNab walked around the corner to the front. She held her whirling skirts as they went past a uniformed doorman into the cramped but garishly furnished lobby of the Brighton Arms. It wasn't yet six o'clock, but the electric lights were burning.

A dark-haired, red-lipped girl at the desk glanced at them incuriously, then sprang up to close a window and to subdue a flying crimson drapery. There was a vivid flash of lightning, a clap of thunder. Then curtain rings tinkled along a rod, folds of crimson velvet surged together, and at once the darkening world outside disappeared.

A painted arrow pointed toward the distant elevators. A block-long corridor led them there. They alighted on the fifth floor. Another block-long corridor, lined with closed and numbered doors, stretched between them and 507. Like a carpeted tunnel, airless, electric-lighted both by day and night, the corridor seemed to stretch endlessly forward. They began at 597. In silence they advanced, the sound of their footsteps lost in the thickness of crimson carpeting. Miss Mitchell wondered vaguely what had become of the policemen. 537 . . . 523 . . . 517 . . .

507 was at the very end of the corridor. They reached the apartment door. Abruptly they paused. Inside, softly but clearly and sweetly, a radio was playing.

Simultaneously, as they realized that someone was in the apartment, as the sound of the radio stopped them in their tracks. Dr. MacNab caught from the corner of his eye a flicker of distant movement. Far down the long hall, a door was opening. It was the heavy brass door that hid the service stairs. Someone had walked up.

Dr. MacNab jerked Miss Mitchell around the corner, and out of sight. Even from a block away, he had recognized Claude Rixey.

Claude was panting from the five-flight climb. Claude was nervous. He kept looking behind him, as though he feared pursuit from the stairs. But on the moonlike face was a look of sullen, ugly and set determination. He walked swiftly, reached the door of 507. Claude's knuckles rapped three times in succession, a quick, light, panicky tattoo. The door opened. He went in. The door closed softly.

For several minutes, Dr. MacNab and Miss Mitchell waited. Then they moved back around the corner to 507. As the doctor laid his ear against the door, Miss Mitchell saw the two policemen. They had followed Claude up the service stairs and they now stood at either end of the long carpeted corridor, blocking off escape.

Inside the apartment the radio was still playing. But Dr. MacNab could hear Claude's voice, shrill with anger and with menace, rise above the music.

"A damned good thing you showed up today! Try and shake me off now I'm down and out, just try it, and you'll never play another dirty trick."

The answering murmur was too low for the doctor to catch.

"Okay then, But I'm telling you. Before I lose out with you, I'll see you in hell. And don't forget, my sweet, I can put you—in hell."

Distinctly, Dr. MacNab heard a woman's sweet, soothing voice.

"Dearest, you have the jitters bad. Me, too. We need a drink."

The music played louder. In apartment 507, a soda water cap popped. Ice tinkled in glasses.

Dr. MacNab put the gold key in the door. It turned noiselessly. He twisted the knob, pushed. Without a sound, the door opened.

Together Dr. MacNab and Miss Mitchell stepped inside. After the bright light of the hall, the room seemed very dim, unreal, in some strange way unlike a room. It appeared to have no windows. Then one perceived that walls and windows alike were covered by yards and yards of frail chiffon. The draperies hung from ceiling to floorboards, enclosing the place in clouds of rosy pink. Rose, they say, is the color of love.

On a rosy couch, in his shirtsleeves, sat Claude Rixey with a highball in his hand. He stared at the two visitors in the open door. He didn't move. He held his glass halfway to his lips, suspended at an awkward angle in the air.

The girl who shared the couch with him wore a printed hostess gown. Her fair hair floated loose around her shoulders. In terror, or perhaps in shame, her hands flew up to hide her face. Briefly her head bent, her yellow hair falling forward, she hid her face from them. And then hands dropped to her lap. She raised her head.

"You'd better close the door," Dorritt said.

Twenty-nine

DR. MACNAB closed the door. The knob slipped from his fingers and the door slammed. All around the room the frail pink draperies fluttered. Employing some numb, far-off region of her brain, Miss Mitchell picked out beneath the gauzy flutter the outlines of the covered windows. Two of them were open. It was raining now.

At last Claude managed to set down the suspended highball glass. It clattered on a big, round coffee table. A few drops of the liquor spilled.

"Well?" Dorritt said. Her yellow head was high, but she pulled the gown more closely around her as though she felt cold. She stood up. "Well?" Dorritt said. "Are we supposed to bid you welcome after this intrusion? Now you've come bursting in, I think the explanations are up to you. I've never heard that a love affair is criminal."

Dr. MacNab made no reply. He was watching Claude.

"Claude, order him out," Dorritt said, her voice rising against the sounds of the storm and the music of the radio. "He's got no right here. Ask to see his warrant. This is your apartment."

She put on quite a show, did Dorritt. It was extraordinary in its way. The illusion both of injury and of calm that she managed to convey seemed to give Claude a little courage. The fat slumping shoulders tried to straighten. The chest went out, the paunch went in. But when Claude tried to speak, he failed. His shaking hand reached for the highball glass.

Dr. MacNab was now watching Dorritt. Her eyes seemed to be intent upon Claude's unsteady, groping hand. Moving closer to the table, she pushed the glass across to him. Claude sent the girl a wanly grateful glance, as she sat down beside him. Drink your drink, her reassuring eyes seemed to say tenderly; darling,

pull yourself together, look at me, just relax. Claude raised the highball to his lips.

Dr. MacNab spoke suddenly.

"Rixey, if I were you," the doctor said, "I wouldn't drink that."

For a moment Claude paused, confused. And then he found his voice and a counterfeit belligerence.

"You can't order me around in my own apartment," he said.

"Personally I'd advise pouring a new drink," the doctor said. "I rather fancy your mistress has poisoned that one."

Perhaps the most dreadful part of Claude's reaction was that he believed the doctor at once. Claude's round face went the color of putty. This time half the liquor spilled as the bottom of the glass struck the table. Dr. MacNab barely caught the tumbler as it tipped. Claude clawed out his handkerchief to scrub the mouth which had barely touched the highball.

In the rosy glow cast by the pink-shaded lamps, Dorritt's face, too, looked gray. She saw that the doctor had saved the glass. The contents would be analyzed. Even then, her swift brain outran Claude's. She sprang to her feet.

"If there's poison in the drink," Dorritt cried, "Claude put it there himself. I've been trying to keep him from suicide. He's lost his nerve. He killed his wife and . . ."

The sound that burst from Claude's throat was hardly human. Leaping from the couch he charged upon Dorritt, out of his mind with terror, hatred, rage. Hands outstretched, he lunged for her throat. It is possible he would have strangled the girl on the spot. He was a younger, stronger man than was Dr. MacNab.

But there was a gun in Dr. MacNab's hand, and the hand was remarkably steady.

"Don't touch her," said Dr. MacNab, "or I'll shoot."

Claude's arms dropped to his sides. As he stood there facing Dorritt, words gushed from him in a vicious, horrifying flood.

"So you'd try to poison me! Well, I'm through! You can't pin your murders on me. You killed Arabella," Claude screamed at Dorritt. "I'll go on the stand and tell how you called the

lawyer's office, switched the lunch appointment, got Arabella to the house and . . ."

"Who told me where to call your wife?" Dorritt screamed in return. "Who begged me to figure out a quick way to save his hide? It was your idea."

"That's a lie! I didn't know you'd killed Arabella until afterwards."

"The hell you didn't! We planned it together. You made me do it."

"You slut, it was you! You! The idea was yours. It was always your idea to get rid of Arabella. You nagged and nagged till I agreed. You always wanted to marry me. You said you loved me."

"Loved you!" repeated Dorritt in a voice that stung like sleet. "You must think I'm crazy! If you had no money, do you think any woman in her right mind would touch you? You got me in this! I'd never have thought of murder, except for you. You planned it all. You bought the Stillson wrench. Remember?"

Claude quailed, rallied.

"You killed them both," he shouted. "Arabella and the Culp girl. I didn't know a thing about the girl till afterwards; I had nothing to do with that."

Dr. MacNab and Miss Elizabeth had only to listen. Within a few minutes, in the mutual accusations of the two conspirators, each determined to save himself, the whole ugly story came pouring forth. Any intelligent person, merely by ignoring the flimsy, self-serving lies each told, the hysterical denials, could piece out the truth, and all of it.

Together, five days before the Rixey divorce was contemplated, Dorritt and Claude had decided to murder Arabella. They intended to legalize their union, to marry and enjoy the victim's wealth. Together, they had arrived at a plan. Arabella was to die at the Greers' in a gas explosion. Claude had procured the wrench, using Harby's charge account at Dorritt's suggestion. It was plain, despite the girl's vehement protests, that she had led throughout.

The affair between Claude and Dorritt, which Claude didn't

hesitate to air in brutal detail, began during Ted's three-year absence. Significantly enough the affair started off with a gift from Claude to Dorritt; an expensive vanity case, a gold case that she carried often and that Miss Mitchell recalled well. After that the pattern was classic. There were luncheons, shopping trips—Dorritt did love pretty clothes—dozens of surreptitious meetings carefully arranged in the daytime hours, the only hours the guilty lovers could safely meet. Later, a few stolen weekends at fashionable resorts, weekends when Dorritt told Miss Mitchell she was visiting friends and Claude convinced his wife he must be out of town on business. Later still, the apartment.

Ted's return from the Pacific served to hasten a crime that had been germinating for many months. In the first place, his presence in Washington made incalculably more difficult the secret life that Dorritt lived, although she seemed to have taken a kind of perverse delight in the very hazards of deceit. Fooling Ted, fooling Arabella, fooling everybody, had apparently pleased her vanity, made her feel superior. It was in another more important sense that Ted's return crystallized plans for Arabella's murder inadvertently; Ted suggested a good safe method. Gas.

From the moment she first attracted Claude, Dorritt had flirted with and turned over in her head the tantalizing thought of Arabella's death. Never would she be satisfied to remain a rich man's mistress; not when she could do better for herself and become a rich man's wife. She brought up the idea of the crime, jokingly at first, then in deadly earnest. Claude shrank from killing a wife he despised, for his own Claude-like reasons. The return of her fiancé was very helpful to Dorritt in overcoming this annoying reluctance, the timidity and cowardice that Claude called his "scruples." Dorritt began insisting to Claude that she was terrified Ted would find them out. The situation was impossible. They couldn't continue like this. In short, Dorritt wouldn't. If Claude didn't agree to get rid of his wife and soon, she would go ahead and marry Ted. That last threat brought Claude around. She had known it would.

So the plan for Arabella's death was set—a simple plan that seemed highly safe to Dorritt. Safe for Dorritt, that is. Death

in a gas explosion would look like accident. But—supposing the authorities actually did establish murder—Dorritt herself would be secure. Who would suspect her? Wasn't she engaged? Wasn't she deeply in love with a young veteran back from the wars? Nobody would dream she was involved with Claude. Her engagement ring would protect her. She had nothing against Arabella Rixey. Why, everybody would know that Dorritt had only met the woman once in her life.

But then, after Arabella's death had been agreed upon, the thing happened that neither Dorritt nor the timorous Claude had taken into their calculations. Arabella found Claude out. Ironically enough, Arabella came upon the only gift Dorritt had ever made to Claude—beyond, of course, herself. Arabella found the key. When his angry wife started posthaste for a lawyer, when he was told that in three months he would indeed be free but penniless, it seemed to Claude that everything was lost.

To Dorritt, whom he frenziedly telephoned the news that Monday morning, it seemed otherwise. Waste all that careful planning! Nonsense! Awkward though it might me, the date of the crime could be advanced. Arabella could be murdered on Monday quite as efficiently as a few days later. Plainly, it was then or never.

Questioning Claude, Dorritt quickly obtained the details of Arabella's luncheon engagement. She learned from Claude that Arabella was at that moment with Rufus Pomerane. Unable to take up her troubles with Harby because of his absence in Baltimore—a blessing from Dorritt's point of view!—Arabella had gone straight to another lawyer in the same building. Arabella hadn't cared to confide her domestic problems to young Alec, preferring a stranger if she couldn't have Harby.

Well, Arabella wasn't going to get that divorce. If Claude's screaming voice could be believed. Dorritt hadn't even bothered to inform him exactly what she had in mind. She had merely advised Claude that he'd better provide himself with an alibi. After that, she telephoned the lawyer's office. Arabella might have wondered why Lucy hadn't done her own telephoning.

Speaking to Janet Culp, Dorritt made no pretence of being Lucy Greer. She didn't identify herself at all. It wasn't necessary. Dorritt told the secretary that she was calling for Mrs. Greer; that Mrs. Greer had suggested, since the day was so hot, that she and her sister lunch at home. Would Miss Culp kindly pass on to Mrs. Rixey word that she was expected on Woodland Road. Miss Culp would. Thank you very much, said Dorritt, and hung up.

Restraining her impatience until Lucy should be started toward the Shoreham and the appointment which would not be kept, Dorritt waited until she was sure the house on Woodland Road was empty. Then she left her own office, took a taxi and got out two blocks short of her destination.

She walked down the alley to the deserted dwelling, which was as familiar to her as her own home next door. The wrench, purchased five days earlier in anticipation of murder, was hidden in the Mitchell garage. Dorritt got the wrench. Fearful that her aunt might be looking out some window, she slid around the garage, crept through the Greer back yard and on into the quiet house. She went at once to the basement.

She was inexperienced mechanically. It was clumsy work for her to unscrew the lock nut from the gas pipe, though she'd practiced it thousands of times in her mind. After several minutes she finally got the nut loose, hammered out the core, heard the first roar of gas as it burst from the broken connection and began pouring from the main. As she jumped back, startled and afraid in the dusk of the cellar, the roar settled to a steady, satisfying hiss. The place should fill fast. By one o'clock surely the basement would be ready for Arabella's reception.

And then, with her preparations all complete, the very moment she turned to go, Dorritt heard something else. She heard footsteps in the kitchen overheard. It was scarcely half past twelve, much too early for Arabella. Arabella was due at exactly one o'clock. Dorritt knew: she herself had set the time for Arabella's appointment with death.

Someone was in the kitchen, and Dorritt was trapped in the cellar. If she stayed, she would die. If she left, she could never

in this world explain satisfactorily what she had been doing down there, why she was away from work. The cellar—that gas connection damaged beyond repair—would explain itself.

Seconds of awful terror must have passed, as Dorritt comprehended her dilemma. How long does it take to die from gas? Who was in the kitchen? Voices mingled with the footsteps now. God help us, Ted and Till were both at home.

Her hand pressed across her face, Dorritt backed farther and farther away from the hissing stream of gas. What was a lethal amount of gas? If Ted and Till would only go, she had a chance to get out alive! What were the first effects of poisoning by gas? Already, in her hysteria and terror, Dorritt must have fancied that flecks of light were dancing before her eyes, that her limbs were heavier, that her breath was rasping in her throat. Where was the safest place to go? Gas rises, doesn't it?

Dorritt got down on the floor. A handkerchief pressed against her face, she crawled to the farthest corner of the basement. Chance led her to what was indeed the safest place to go. As she reached Ted's room, she remembered the gas mask in Ted's locker.

She was nauseated when she put on the mask, nauseated not by the effects of gas but by her own relief. She was going to live. She wouldn't be caught. Wearing the mask she could wait out the intruders upstairs. She could wait, hidden there, for many minutes. It would be at least an hour, more probably two hours, before the explosion took place. Or so Ted had said, in that long ago but well remembered drunken conversation.

When she snatched the gas mask from Ted's locker, Dorritt had seen the gun. On a sudden impulse the girl had picked up the gun. She herself was safe now. And the weapon might be useful.

Dorritt's own terror of death was over and had taught her no mercy. The terror of another person would not concern Dorritt; her imagination worked on a different level. Dorritt wasn't beaten yet, by any means. If Ted and Till would only leave the house in time, the murder would be carried out right on schedule. If it turned out to be necessary, if Arabella proved stubborn,

Dorritt would force her victim to enter the cellar at the point of a gun.

Ted and Till left the house in time. When Dorritt emerged from the cellar, the front doorbell was sounding to Arabella's imperious finger. The girl didn't appear at the door wearing a gas mask, with a gun in her hand. No, indeed. The gun lay under a tea towel in the kitchen.

With a charming smile, Dorritt opened the door to Arabella, invited her in. Mrs. Greer, she explained, was busy in the kitchen. Her habitual rudeness magnified by agitation over her own affairs, Arabella was barely civil to the pretty girl who was engaged to Ted and who lived next door. Nodding curtly, she marched upstairs and, probably then, concealed in the bedroom desk the surprise for Lucy's birthday.

Dorritt was waiting patiently in the living room when Arabella came impatiently down. A woman who has just left her sister a string of pearls, a woman who has just signed a will bequeathing to her sister's family her entire estate, is likely to be in the mood for a little extra consideration. Arabella was both exasperated at Dorritt's presence and bursting with the things she wanted to discuss with Lucy. Very much annoyed, she perceived that Lucy hadn't yet put in an appearance. She took off her hat and gloves, laid aside her purse. Still Lucy didn't come. Arabella got up and started for the kitchen. Dorritt followed. Lucy wasn't in the kitchen. Arabella was provoked beyond endurance.

"I imagine," the pretty neighbor girl suggested, helpfully, "that Mrs. Greer is probably in the basement. She was here a moment ago. Perhaps she went down to straighten Ted's room. You know how vague she is."

That was enough. Arabella sailed across the kitchen. No gun was necessary. Arabella opened the basement door herself and stepped through to the wooden landing, shouting for Lucy. Before she sensed her danger, probably before she even smelled the gas, Dorritt had quietly closed the door and bolted it.

When Dorritt returned to her downtown office half an hour later, she was nervous but fairly confident. In a couple of hours

the Greer house should blow up and with it would go Arabella. With luck, every trace of crime would also go. At any rate, no one would know that Dorritt had been there. Everything was going to be all right. She'd been too clever to be caught or even suspected. She was prepared for any emergency. She'd thought of everything. But had she?

During the long hot afternoon and the long evening while she sat with the others in Miss Mitchell's living room, some of Dorritt's bright confidence seeped away. Policemen might be stupid, but they had a certain persistence. The fact that Arabella was seeking a divorce, she realized, could not be hidden long. Rufus Pomerane, the lawyer would talk. So would Janet Culp. Claude was all fixed up with an alibi. But when the police heard about the telephone call to Pomerane's office which changed the place and time of the luncheon appointment, they would want to know who had made that call.

Janet Culp would tell the police it was a woman. Janet might be able to identify that voice. Thus poor Janet's murder, strictly incidental to the first and important crime, was settled in Dorritt's mind at just about the time that Arabella's body was removed from the ruins of the cellar. In case they might be useful later, in case the accident theory was not accepted, Dorritt had carried away both the gas mask and the gun. How fortunate she had a weapon! The secretary needn't bother her. So, on the Fourth of July, Janet heard the doorbell ring and admitted death to her bohemian apartment.

Apparently the greatest jolt of all to Dorritt was the belated and shocking revelation of Arabella's new will. In an unforeseeable way, Arabella had tricked her murderer. Dorritt had moved fast, quite unaware that Arabella had moved faster still. Dorritt had killed to prevent the divorce and her own ruin. She had killed to make Claude rich, to assure for herself a wealthy husband, but Arabella had seen to it that Claude wouldn't get a penny.

Again, Dorritt's response to the situation was typical of her nature. A rich husband, a younger, more handsome and more thrilling husband, was still possible. She had merely to change

the direction of her cold, strange heart. She could jettison Claude and switch back to Ted. And if Ted were convicted—and now definitely and desperately Dorritt didn't want Ted to die—nevertheless she could salvage something. Ted's family would be rich and they would take care of Ted's pathetic young widow.

"I'll go on the stand and tell everything," Claude was babbling. "You killed them. You killed them both. I was nowhere near."

"Try and prove it!" shrieked Dorritt. "I'll be talking, too. Wait until you hear the story I tell on the stand."

"It won't matter what you say. You can't get out of it, my girl. They're going to send you to the chair."

"You poor fool!" Dorritt said to Claude with infinite scorn. "You poor fool! Do you think any jury in the world would convict *me* instead of you?"

She threw back her shoulders. The folds of her flowing gown parted and revealed a white flash of her proud and magnificent bosom. She allowed him the one white glimpse of her lovely, compelling flesh, then scornfully, deliberately she drew the gown together.

"Aren't jurymen still—*men*?" asked Dorritt.

Claude collapsed. He fell upon the sofa, crawling deep into the pillows, burying his head and shoulders, as though he could hide himself from the day when his mistress would bring into court to testify against him, her beauty, her body and her wits.

Dr. MacNab turned off the radio, which had been playing all the while. In the sudden silence Dorritt's own voice rang in her ears, tinny, loud, meretricious as the voice of a morning commercial. She became sharply aware of herself, of her surroundings, of her—audience. She'd been screaming like a fishwife; she'd been making a poor impression. At once she stopped talking.

Dorritt didn't feel cold now. Her whole body burned like fire. She knew that she had succumbed to hysteria. What dangerous things had she shrieked at Claude? Dazedly, she looked around the room.

For the first time Dorritt really looked at Miss Mitchell. Miss Mitchell looked back at her. Perhaps then the girl felt the first pang of a terrible apprehension, perhaps then she dimly realized that it wouldn't be any use, that however hard she fought, she was done for. Her lips quivered. Tears came into her eyes.

Miss Mitchell felt no pity. She had looked at Dorritt with varying emotions, with horror, with astonishment, with a strange kind of anger at her own obtuseness. Not once had she mistrusted Dorritt. Not once had she suspected Dorritt. Yet she had never felt a real affection for her niece, sensing in her a coldness, an emptiness, a lack. Perhaps she had always known and would not admit that, inside, the girl was incurably selfish, incurably corrupt.

"Aunt Elizabeth," Dorritt said, "it looks like I'm in bad trouble."

Dorritt spoke like a child. She stretched out her hands in a gesture of childish appeal. Miss Mitchell shrank from the touch.

She felt no pity. She did feel the stir of a harsher, more righteous emotion than pity, an emotion that has been described as the great contribution of the Christian religion to all of us. She felt compassion. And certainly she felt pain that any human being must be so irresponsible, so incorrigibly, recklessly destructive, so unfeeling, so evil.

"Dorritt, why?" Miss Mitchell asked. "What happened to you?"

"Maybe it was the war," Dorritt said in lifeless search for a suitable excuse. "Maybe if Ted hadn't gone to war and we'd got married . . ."

"Don't blame the war for yourself!"

Dorritt sat down beside her aunt. She was now very tired. Her face looked puzzled, almost dreamy, as though she were seeking within herself some explanation, some defense.

"You don't understand," Dorritt said. "You're old. You don't understand people wanting—things. I've always wanted everything. Maybe you won't believe me. But I did want love, I did want Ted . . ."

"You wanted money most of all!"

"Why not? Why was it fair," demanded Dorritt, and now again in the tired voice there was passion, "that Arabella should have so much and I have nothing? Why was she entitled to be rich? Why wasn't it me or Ted or even Claude? Then there'd been no trouble. I wouldn't have wished and wished that Arabella was dead. It wasn't my fault."

Miss Mitchell was silent.

"You've known me since I was a little girl," Dorritt said in a petulant, querulous, pleading way. "Aunt Elizabeth, I'm not bad. Not really. I don't like people being hurt. Honestly, that's true. I can't stand seeing people suffer. I'm not a sadist like that Timothy Dwight. He's worse than me. Yet he's a policeman, and I'm going to prison. It isn't fair."

Again Miss Mitchell was silent.

Dorritt hunched her shoulders closer together, wincing at some memory. She closed her eyes.

"Arabella didn't suffer much," said the girl, with the closed eyes. "I fixed it so she wouldn't. You've got to remember that. I didn't want Arabella to suffer. I didn't see it at all, Aunt Elizabeth. I couldn't have borne to see. I'm not like that policeman. I just closed the door. It's nothing much really, just closing a door."

The hand that closed a door had also held and fired a gun. Dorritt's eyes remained tightly shut.

"The other woman, well, she died fast—she never knew a thing. A bullet doesn't hurt. Everybody says that. A bullet is too quick. But at nights sometimes I can't sleep for thinking of them," Dorritt said. "I'm afraid to go to sleep. I wonder if I'll dream of them both, when they send me off to prison. I wonder if I'll always see their faces."

Miss Mitchell thought it likely that in time Dorritt could arrange to forget the faces of her victims. She wondered if Dorritt was really troubled now. She said nothing.

The girl twisted her hands, pushed them deep into the flowing sleeves of her gown.

"It isn't fair," Dorritt said. "It isn't fair I should keep on thinking, thinking, worrying over what's past and done, what

couldn't be helped. I didn't really want to kill them. But I had to think about myself. Anyway," Dorritt said, "neither one of them had anything to live for. Arabella was old and ugly; even her husband hated her. The other girl was man-crazy, as unattractive as Jessie; no man would have her. Why shouldn't they have died?" asked Dorritt. "In a way, though I don't suppose the jury will believe it, I was almost doing them a favor."

Miss Mitchell shared Dorritt's doubts that the jury would grasp this particular point of view. Incredibly, Dorritt was looking at her for reassurance. Miss Mitchell asked a question herself.

"Were you doing Ted a favor," she inquired quietly of her niece, "when you tried to get him convicted for what you'd done? Or did you decide that Ted had nothing to live for?"

"I had to save myself," Dorritt muttered. "If the police were bound and determined to find a guilty person, I thought it might as well be Ted. It had to be somebody. I had those—things of Ted's. Later I was sorry, later I wished I hadn't . . ."

"But why choose Ted?" Miss Mitchell demanded despairingly. "You'd once loved him, you . . ."

"Oh, God, can't you see that's why . . ." Dorritt's tongue managed to stop itself. But the dreamy face looked different now. Her eyes were wide open now. Pale, achromatic, the eyes blazed with a feeling she couldn't hide. Dorritt had been able to regard Arabella and Janet Culp quite impersonally, without liking or dislike; they were simply people who'd got in her way and must be disposed of.

She didn't regard Ted impersonally. The blazing eyes spoke for her. Dorritt hated Ted.

Abruptly Miss Mitchell understood. In her own peculiar way, within the narrow limits of her capacity to feel or care for anybody except herself, Dorritt had once loved Ted. She had betrayed the man she loved, she had cheated him, and so he had done her an irreparable injury. Ted was to blame for his own betrayal. Once she had wronged Ted, she must hate him. Either

that, or she must face herself. She took the only choice possible to her character. She hated Ted.

Ted's mere existence distressed her. If she were to marry Claude, if she were to reap and enjoy the fruits of murder, Dorritt could not be comfortable in a world where Ted still was. So Ted too must die. The matter would pass quickly from her mind and from her memory, and Dorritt would be at peace. It was as complicated and as simple as that. . . .

Suddenly the two policemen were in the room. One of them went over to the sofa, laid rough hands on Claude and dragged him to his feet. Dr. MacNab walked over to Dorritt. She shrank back in the chair, but he didn't touch her.

"I suppose," he said, "you've got clothes here?"

"They're in the bedroom," Dorritt said, and slowly rose. She glanced toward the two policemen, struggling with Claude, waiting to take her, too. She'd not be needing pretty clothes in prison. The girl shivered. "I guess you want me to dress?" Dorritt said.

Dr. MacNab nodded.

"I'm curious about one thing," he said. "Your first plan, the plan you and Rixey worked out together, was to do away with Mrs. Rixey on the night of her sister's birthday, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course," Dorritt replied listlessly. "Arabella intended to be at the Greers'. I was supposed to slip in the basement when they all sat down to dinner. Claude knew all about it. The time and everything. Don't let him tell you different! He was going to make an excuse when they brought in the cake and leave the house . . ."

"But the others!" Miss Mitchell rose from her own chair. She stared at her niece. "Harby, Lucy, Till, Ted—what was going to happen to them?"

"Why, why . . ." Dorritt stammered.

Now again Claude was heard from. He stood between the two policemen. He had stopped shouting. His words were the more vicious, the more biting and true, because of their quiet.

"What do you suppose?" Claude said. "How do you suppose

the devil planned it? She thought the explosion would kill them all."

Briefly Dr. MacNab lost his look of impersonality. His voice cut harshly through Dorritt's fresh denials.

"Save it for the jury. Get your clothes on. Fetch your lover's coat to him."

Dorritt started toward the bedroom. Both Dr. MacNab and Miss Mitchell saw her change her mind. You could hardly say that Dorritt lost her nerve. In her unquenchable vanity, her belief in the power of her own pretty face, fair hair and beautiful body, it truly had not crossed her mind that she would ever be executed. What she feared, what she couldn't bear was the thought of prison, years and years spent in drab gray clothes behind drab gray prison walls. Years when her youth went and her ambition went, and without gaiety, without admiration, without people, she was left there to live out those years all by herself. Death was preferable to prison.

The girl spun around, ran toward the coffee table. They read her purpose in her eyes. One of the policemen jumped for her. She eluded him with ease. Dr. MacNab's first thought was of the poisoned highball. He leaped to keep her from the glass.

But Miss Mitchell had seen Dorritt swerve as she neared the table. Miss Mitchell knew. Perhaps she could have caught the flying skirts of the gown as Dorritt fled around the table and past her. Miss Mitchell didn't move.

Dorritt rushed straight at the frail inner walls that enclosed the room. She rushed headlong toward a spot where the rosy hangings were a deeper hue, damp with rain. The draperies parted.

She went like a diver through the open window. As she disappeared, the draperies billowed wildly like scudding clouds, then came together. Outside thunder crashed, the sky was lighted with vivid blue. There was no scream. With closed lips, Dorritt fell through the pouring rain five stories to the street.

Forty-five seconds of impossible shattering chaos . . .

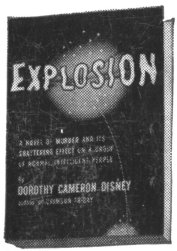
Less than one minute of blinding, burning violence . . .

EXPLOSION

. . . a horrible accident . . . or a cleverly cold-blooded murder?

At first they only knew they'd lost their home, and with it everything they owned in the world. **Then** they found that someone had died in that house, someone they didn't like. That was when the police stopped trying to explain an accident, and began looking for a killer . . . **in the family!**

This low-priced Bantam book, complete and unabridged, is made possible by the large sale and effective promotion of the original edition, published by Random House, Inc.



PRINTED IN U.S.A.

BANTAM BOOKS