
A BANTAM BOOK
Every Book Complete
863
Moonlight...Magnolias...a Family Skeleton
that meant DEATH
The HANGMAN'S TREE
DOROTHY CAMERON DISNEY
complete and unabridged

The Dead don't tell!

Scandal was buried with the body of Rose Fairlee—but the grave couldn't keep the dangerous secret. Too many people knew the truth —and wanted to be paid for it . . .

Only one of the Fairlees was terrified by the family skeleton, but that one knew the answer to blackmail . . . The first person who asked for money got a dose of morphine. The second got a bullet through the head . . .

The killer was laughing at the law—because there were *four confessions for every death!*

About THE COVER

The fallen tree cast a monstrous shadow. She was almost concealed in the darkness . . . But the silver ring—the ring he had to have—glittered in the moonlight. She waited, sure of herself, arrogant—and suddenly he was behind her . . .

The HANGMAN'S TREE

by

DOROTHY CAMERON DISNEY

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THE HANGMAN'S TREE
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All the characters and incidents in this novel are entirely imaginary

Printed in the United States of America

For

Charlotte *and* Doug

CAST OF CHARACTERS

VICTORIA GRANT, a Yankee who lifted the lid off a Southern scandal.

RENA MAE THRIPP, a girl who would give her life to be Azalea Queen—and did.

STEPHEN FAIRLEE, a gallant gentleman with too many girls.

DEBORAH PARR had Stephen's ring—and intended to keep it.

VALERIA TREVELYN loved Stephen, even when he confessed to murder.

TRADD FAIRLEE, an old Charlestonian whose first marriage ended in scandal.

MARGARET, the second Mrs. Fairlee, was an outsider—but she was rich.

CONWAY COLLISON, a newspaperman who wasn't afraid of family skeletons.

ELIZABETH COLLISON was determined to keep her place in society.

PHILO and PENELOPE HIGGS, a pair of polite blackmailers.

LT. SANFORD CLAYTON, of Homicide, wanted to know who killed his cousin—and why.

1

THE NEW YORK car turned with considerably more confidence than did I into the rutted private road which led through a matted tangle of trees and brush toward the expensive, if unkempt, hospitality of Harmony Hall. My shabby coupé was dusty and travel-worn, and one spark plug had given up the ghost. I'd been too anxious to arrive at journey's end to stop and have it replaced.

Against the lush tropical background, the dripping moss, the crawling yellow jasmine and wisteria, amid the cheery hum of thousands of gnats and mosquitoes, I suspected that Victoria Grant, M.D., fugitive from Milford, Connecticut, looked somewhat out of place. I didn't mind a bit. My heart was high. I was on vacation, done with northern snow and sleet, done with fussy patients, done with flu, the common cold and pneumonia. It was my first trip south.

My fellow-vacationers from New York fitted into my mood exactly. I waved at them. They went by too fast to see me. Suddenly appearing out of nowhere, as I cautiously approached the rusted iron gates which marked the entrance to the old plantation, the jaunty cream-colored convertible flashed on through, whisked unhesitatingly around a boggy, treacherous curve and disappeared in the riotous jungle ahead.

Clearly New York would be at home anywhere. This year's model was fresh off the assembly line, so dashing in its unblemished chromium and brand-new paint that the one slight dent in the rear left fender seemed merely a decoration, like a beauty patch. The top was folded back. The radio was playing. Two girls in cotton frocks—one yellow, one slate blue—shared the leather seat. Both wore

brightly colored scarves and ridiculous outsize sun glasses, but one felt sure that the outer trappings covered pretty hair and pretty, untroubled faces. South Carolina in the spring was made for such as these. Youth and gaiety rode with them. Or such was my romantic thought.

My spirits rose even higher. I pulled off my own hat and tossed it in the seat. The soft warm breeze blew pleasantly through my hair. My radio was out of order, but all around hundreds of birds were singing. I joined in with my slightly off-key contralto. As I drove singing along the "centuries-old live oak avenue"—so the guide book described the atrocious road—I felt that my visit to Charleston at azalea time had really begun. Harmony Hall, about which I'd had some initial doubts, was going to be all right. New York had set the seal of success on it.

Ordinarily when I'm prepared to pay out ten dollars a day for bed without board, I prefer comfort and unlimited hot water to Spanish moss and atmosphere. Also I usually prefer a central location. After glimpsing my fellow-guests, I was willing to forget that Harmony Hall was a good eighteen miles outside of Charleston.

Margaret Fairlee was responsible for my arrangements, and at first I hadn't thanked her for them. When I sat down and wrote to Maggie, I'd had in mind an altogether different kind of visit. Frankly, what I had expected was an immediate invitation to stay in town—with the Fairlees. From my point of view, the expectation hadn't seemed unreasonable. Maggie was one of my oldest friends; we'd known each other practically forever, and through many vicissitudes. We grew up on the same block in Hartford, finished high school the same year with Maggie the class beauty and me the valedictorian. Later on we roomed together in New York while I was struggling through medical school and she was starting as a stock girl in a department store. I'd watched the talented Maggie climb to be the executive of that store and vice-president and the chief stockholder of

two others. She managed this by great ability (she had no financial backing), cold concentration, and an uncanny merchandising knowledge of what women would buy. She seemed to live her life in the store, but somehow she managed, and on her own terms, to charm any man who might be important to her career. She hadn't found time for marriage until she reached her middle thirties. Four years ago, unexpectedly, impetuously, Maggie had changed the whole pattern of her busy, complicated life.

Maggie met Tradd Fairlee in New York, the summer I took a patient to Canada. Two weeks after that first meeting she sold out her business interests, married the handsome Charlestonian, and swept down like Sherman to conquer the South. I hadn't seen my old friend since the marriage, nor had I met her husband, but within recent months I had seen a great deal of Maggie's six-foot stepson. Stephen Fairlee came north to Yale after he left the Army, and I'd entertained the boy and his astounding appetite on many a Connecticut week-end up to the time he was graduated and returned to Charleston. He was a friend of my youngest nephew. I was almost as fond of Stephen as I was of Jack.

In my note to Maggie, I'd rather shrewdly (so I thought) mentioned that it was her red-headed stepson who'd aroused my interest in taking in the Charleston Azalea Festival. While he was enjoying New England cookery, Stephen had done a good job of selling the beauties of his native city. He'd been considerably more reticent on the subject of his recently acquired stepmother.

Stephen's silence about Maggie hadn't surprised me particularly. The first Mrs. Fairlee had died while the boy was in the Army, and Maggie had met the grieving widower very shortly afterwards. Any normal young man of twenty-three might resent coming home to meet his own mother's successor. Not that Stephen had seemed resentful about his father's marriage, just rather quiet. Stephen Fairlee was

quiet about all his personal affairs. For instance, I would never have known that a New Haven girl was claiming a share of Stephen's time, except for one week-end when I'd expected both young men and only Jack had appeared. My nephew told me about Stephen's girl, but little enough. He hadn't met the young lady himself.

Certainly whenever the second Mrs. Tradd Fairlee had been mentioned on last year's Connecticut week-ends, I'd done most of the talking myself. That being the case, possibly I should have recalled that Maggie—known to me and everybody else as Margaret in the long gone days when we were growing up in Hartford—seldom put herself out on any other woman's account. With men, it was a different story. But Maggie always felt that the ladies could take care of themselves. Unless, of course, she needed an ally.

In response to my note she'd promptly written back that Mrs. Penelope Higgs, the chatelaine of Harmony Hall, was in the business of receiving a few discriminating and presumably well-heeled guests. Thanks to Maggie, I was to be one of the elect. She'd clinched a reservation for me—a lovely room with view, and the bath only a few convenient steps down the hall. Lest this good fortune go to my head, my old friend had gone on to warn me that during the week of the Azalea Festival, Charleston was a madhouse, that I wouldn't be seeing the city at its best, that most of the local residents wisely closed their houses for the period and fled the tourists.

"If Tradd's sister weren't on the Festival committee," was Maggie's hospitable closing, "and if Tradd weren't so stubborn about family loyalty, we'd be pulling stakes ourselves. But Elizabeth's husband owns the morning paper, and since the newspapers and the C of C are doing their annual swoon over this festival thing, Elizabeth feels morally obliged to make a holy show of herself and run everything personally. Frankly, the whole business is out of my

line though I suppose, like most visiting northerners, you will enjoy the parade.

"Naturally I want you to meet my darling Tradd while you're here, and of course Stephen is dying to see you again. So am I. Four years is a long time, isn't it? Communicate when you get settled."

With that background, I hardly thought I'd be seeing much of the Fairlees. Young Stephen would undoubtedly drive out to call, assuming that Maggie remembered to let him in on the news of my arrival. And if I got up early enough on the morning of the big parade, I was fairly sure to get a look at Tradd Fairlee's older sister. A copy of the Charleston *Banner,* which I'd picked up at a roadside breakfast, lay on the seat beside my hat. I glanced at it and grinned.

The society page was devoted to the forthcoming Azalea Festival, with special emphasis on the doings of the newspaper owner's wife. Elizabeth Fairlee Collison and Mr. Tartleboro, the beaming, bald-headed president of the Chamber of Commerce, appeared in every picture on the page. They had been snapped arm in arm at the local railroad station, as they welcomed the first contingent of pretty girls who were flocking in from small towns over the state to reign as Azalea Queens at the week-long festival. Surrounded by youth and beauty, Elizabeth Collison, with her stout, tightly corseted waist and with her prim clubwoman's hat shadowing an outthrust jaw that required no corseting, presented a decidedly formidable figure. I wondered whether Maggie, who had always got around me and her northern associates with ease, might be having her troubles with that jaw. The *Banner* society page displayed no pictures of the second Mrs. Tradd Fairlee's beautiful and photogenic face. Unless five years had wrought more change than I anticipated, Maggie was still operating with the assistance of those big brown eyes and that marvelous silver-blonde hair.

Suddenly, with a queer little pang, I found myself hoping that Maggie hadn't changed. I wished her well. I hoped that she was still beautiful and that she was happy. I hoped that she was getting on with her in-laws and that her husband adored her. There was no malice in my heart toward Maggie. There never would be.

In this life, we seldom give affection and devotion to people because they deserve it. Whatever Maggie did or didn't do to me, I was likely to go right on loving her.

I went around a final curve, stopped my car with a jerk. In the distance ahead, framed in beauty, was the old plantation house. According to the guide book, Harmony Hall had once been the home of a gentleman planter, a Colonel Philo Higgs who'd made and lost his fortune growing rice and indigo. After my introduction to the so-called live oak avenue, I'd set myself to enjoy picturesque dilapidation. I rapidly readjusted my impression.

It was plain that Mrs. Penelope Higgs was finding the pickings in the tourist trade profitable, if not perhaps as profitable as her husband's great-grandfather had found rice. A goodly portion of the money which had been taken from the public and saved on the road must have gone into a complete and effective restoration of the house and adjacent grounds. Order had been wrested from the wilderness. There were no flapping shutters, there was no peeling paint, no down-at-heel air about the mansion which rose in elegance from a smooth and grassy stretch of level land ahead.

The planting fairly took my breath away. In no New England town, in no city in all my travels, have I ever seen such flowers. The camellia bushes that flamed like giant bouquets at the piazza steps towered fully twenty-five feet tall. In a flanking border azaleas, pink, red, white, grew like trees. A torrent of wisteria gushed down from an iron-grilled balcony like a purple waterfall. There was so much color that the eye was dazzled, the senses overwhelmed.

In the midst of all that sumptuous and yet ordered beauty was a single jarring note, one startling discord. Toward the house, the live oak trees had been cleared of undergrowth. But one of the monsters had evidently been the victim of some savage storm. The tree had fallen to the ground. Twisted roots, thicker than a man's body, taller than a man, reared up into the air from the base of the stricken tree and then bent backward in agony to grasp the earth again. Uprooted, wounded unto death, the fallen giant nevertheless lived on, a great hump-backed thing with a mass of green and twisted branches growing from the supine trunk. They were forest-thick, entwined like monstrous fingers.

This unpleasant invalid, engaged in mortal struggle for survival, lay collapsed beside a well-kept graveled driveway, which presumably wound around to the rear of the dwelling. Some of the thrusting branches, the writhing roots, overlapped the drive. I wondered they didn't cut out the old tree and burn the debris.

And then I picked up my hat and put it on, got out my powder and lipstick and did a clean-up job on my face. Refurbished, abruptly wearied of the color, anxious to escape indoors from the dazzling brilliance, I started up again.

At that very moment, like a cream-colored cannon ball, New York shot into view. The convertible came so fast around the curve of the drive ahead that I gasped in fear it would strike the tree. The nearest branches must have whipped the driver's face, but the car got safely by. In an instant it had zipped into the road and was rushing toward me on the way out. The car was traveling at such an excessive speed and I was so concerned with giving it ample room that I had barely time to observe that one of the passengers had stayed behind. The girl in yellow? I thought the slender figure crouched at the wheel was wearing blue.

Yes, she wore blue. Mysteriously, perhaps because she

was alone now, perhaps because my own mood had subtly changed, I had the absurd and fleeting fancy that she'd lost her previous gaiety. It was as though the girl in blue had left behind with her companion the joyous high spirits with which my imagination had endowed them both. The radio wasn't playing. There was only the rushing sound of oncoming wheels, the sharp toot of the horn. Hot wind fanned my face, I coughed in the choking dust, and then the car sped by.

As the speeding car flashed past, something bright and shiny hurtled from it and spun off the road among the live oak trees. It was useless to scream at the driver. Indeed I thought it possible that the girl herself might have tossed the shiny thing into the brush: But I was curious.

Feeling rather foolish, I stopped my car and walked back to investigate. The tire marks, hers and mine, were plain in the rutted dirt. I walked for several yards, peering into the thick rank growth which bordered the road. I located the shiny object almost immediately. The girl hadn't thrown anything away. Swinging in a festoon of Spanish moss, twinkling even in the heavy shade, I spied a brand new hub-cap.

Automobile parts cost money. The convertible had vanished, the girl in blue was gone, but the girl in yellow would be a fellow-guest at the plantation house. She could get in touch with her companion. The hub-cap would serve nicely as an introduction. Quite pleased with myself, I found a stick, knocked the shiny thing into reach and tossed it in my car.

A few minutes later, I was passing the hump-backed tree. Beyond, in a graveled parking area, I discovered half a dozen other cars with out-of-state licenses. A solitary Negro dozed pleasantly in a patch of shady grass. He opened an eye when he heard my car door slam, hurriedly closed the eye. Unwilling to disturb such somnolent bliss, I walked around to the front piazza.

Harmony Hall looked so little like any tourist home in my experience, or perhaps I should say "guest house," as Charleston does, that I hardly knew the proper procedure. Should I knock or walk on in? I tried an uncertain little tap. At once the door sprang open.

A plump little woman with curly gray hair cut very short, squeezed into a light-colored, extremely girlish dress, was revealed. Penelope Higgs greeted me in person and with such instant and overpowering cordiality that I wondered at first if she'd mistaken me for someone else. She hadn't.

"You're Dr. Grant? Dr. Victoria Grant?" the little woman cried with passionate enthusiasm, as she seized both my hands, drew me into the airy hall, and thence into a book-lined octagonal library. She pushed me into a chair, as though at any minute I might get away from her. Cocking her curly head, Mrs. Higgs stood guard and viewed her prize. "You look mighty young to be a doctor. Mighty pretty, too. I've been expecting you for simply hours. Rest yourself, my dear, while I ring for lemonade. Or would you rather a cup of tea? I declare I'm so flustered meeting a real professional lady I hardly know how to act. Now don't go telling tales on me to all your Charleston friends."

My Charleston friends? Light dawned. Maggie must have taken the trouble to give me quite a build-up. It quickly developed that Mrs. Higgs was under the impression that I was intimately acquainted with the entire Fairlee clan, with dear Stephen, with dear Tradd, and in particular with Elizabeth Fairlee Collison, patently a Higgs favorite.

"Lucky me to have you for a guest!" caroled Mrs. Higgs, and impatiently tugged the bell a second time for lemonade. "I know very well you'd be stopping with dear Elizabeth if she wasn't giving her whole week to chaperoning and looking after the little Azelea Queens. Not our own class, of course, some of them, but such sweet pretty girls. Elizabeth is so democratic. *Noblesse oblige* is such an admirable trait.

Anyway, don't you find these days that blood and breeding matter less and less?"

Bewildered by the rapid monologue, which Mrs. Higgs achieved by opening her mouth and allowing unassorted words to pour out, I scarcely knew what she was talking about. Mrs. Higgs soon made clear that the Azalea Queens who were to be honored by the city and spotlighted in the week of celebration and parades weren't necessarily selected from the first familes of South Carolina. In the smaller towns, where the mayor and council members named the lucky girl, one could usually trust His Honor's discretion. Aiken had chosen a gilt-edged debutante; so had Florence. The great-great-granddaughter of a colonial governor was coming from Beaufort. But in the larger factory towns, particularly if the matter was put to popular vote, one could never tell. All too often, alas, beauty and animal spirits outweighed gentle birth. I got the point.

"Such a privilege for the little visitors to meet a woman like Elizabeth in her own background. A woman with such culture, such breadth, such an interest in civic affairs. Publicity means so much these days. Elizabeth has always been a perfect darling about mentioning my own little establishment in her husband's paper."

The voice ran on, until all at once Mrs. Higgs became aroused by her unrewarding tugs at the bell. What in the world, she wondered, had become of Major? I thought I knew. Major must be the colored boy peacefully asleep outside. Mrs. Higgs frowned. I stirred in my chair.

"Never mind the lemonade. There's no hurry about my luggage. If you'll tell me how to find my room . . ."

"Nonsense, my dear. No guest in my house goes without refreshment. You need your luggage, a nice cool bath, a change of clothes. Mr. Higgs will take care of us."

Mr. Higgs? I blinked a little. So the present Philo Higgs was still mortal. Two sharp tugs on the bell rope—there had been only one for Major—brought him in on uneasy

feet. And the great-grandson of the first Philo Higgs carried with him a frosty pitcher filled with lemonade.

Mr. Higgs was a big, shambling, poorly coordinated man, cursed with the kind of clumsiness that automatically engages my sympathies because I'm physically clumsy myself. From the extreme carefulness of his walk, a certain blankness in his eye, I suspected that Mr. Higgs' naturally poor coordination was further complicated by a hangover. When he passed me, my snap diagnosis was confirmed. He reeked of cloves. His big hands shook as he set down the hobnail pitcher, and lemonade splashed the piecrust table. Mrs. Higgs was very sweet about it. She was a trifle less sweet when she discovered that he had forgotten to bring the sugar. He went to fetch it. The sugar bowl delivered, he went out to carry up my luggage.

Hurriedly draining my glass, I rose. Only then, and in her own maddeningly circuitous way, did Mrs. Higgs become businesslike. There were certain foolish regulations, so stupid among friends, that must nevertheless be complied with. It had almost slipped her silly mind that I must sign her little guest book.

Turning to a desk that was in perfect order, Mrs. Higgs made a pretense of searching for a morocco-bound register that practically leapt into her hands. I don't recall exactly how she managed to work around to the commercial aspects of our situation, but it was swiftly done. Before she even handed me the register and pen, I found myself parting with two twenty-dollar bills—four days' payment in advance. Mrs. Higgs would have preferred the whole week. It made the bookkeeping easier.

"My dear, you have no idea how silly and forgetful I am about money matters."

"I'll remind you," I said, and signed the register.

The name which appeared on the register, immediately before my own, was Deborah Parr. It was a finishing-school signature, not too legible, but appealing and attrac-

tive. Deborah Parr. An attractive name, I thought. The girl in yellow was assigned the third-floor room next to my own. I was pleased by that. Since Deborah Parr was left without a car, I thought perhaps I could be of service with my car and be well paid by youthful reports on dances, excitement, fun.

"I don't like to seem stubborn, my dear," Mrs. Higgs was saying, "but a week does seem a happier arrangement. Suppose you should suddenly change your plans, and leave me high and dry with an empty room?"

"You needn't worry. My plans won't change."

"I was thinking," Mrs. Higgs said reflectively, "that you might be moving in to town to stay with your friend, Mrs. Fairlee."

"It's most unlikely," I said dryly.

"Perhaps it is," admitted Mrs. Higgs. "But I did wonder. Mrs. Fairlee has been telephoning you all morning. Possibly I should have mentioned earlier that you were to call the moment you came in."

From the tidy desk, Mrs. Higgs pulled out a sheaf of messages, neatly tabulated and timed at intervals half an hour apart. Maggie had begun telephoning at eight o'clock that morning. The last call had come in at two o'clock, only a few minutes before my own arrival.

"Now you see," Mrs. Higgs explained with a sunny smile, "why I was a little worried that your friend might steal you away from me. Mrs. Fairlee was most anxious. No doubt you will want to phone her now."

With which she graciously picked up the instrument on the desk and handed it to me. I handed it right back. I had no intention of satisfying the Higgs curiosity. When I got around to telephoning, I would do my telephoning from the third floor. All things considered, I thought it wouldn't hurt Margaret Fairlee to wait for once on me.

2

UPSTAIRS, IN AN AIRY third-floor chamber, fully twenty feet square, my luggage awaited me. Mr. Higgs also awaited me.

In the strong sunlight of the bedroom the eyes I had noticed downstairs seemed even blanker and more remote, with the pupils contracted almost to pinpoint size. Drugs? I wondered with sudden shock. I looked sharply at those eyes. Mr. Higgs looked right back at me. And then he gazed hungrily toward the shabby black bag, the badge of my profession, that accompanies me everywhere.

"You're a doctor, aren't you?"

"Why, yes. As a matter of fact," I said carefully, "I thought downstairs that you must be suffering from a . . . a severe headache."

"Sinusitis," Mr. Higgs reported huskily. "Chronic sinusitis. Had it for years. This damn climate . . ."

So it was a hangover after all. I relaxed. While Mr. Higgs described the symptoms of an acute sinus attack, I unlocked my bag, found a triple bromide tablet and mixed it with a glass of water. I followed the mild remedy with a two-ounce jolt of bonded whiskey. In Mr. Higgs' case, the whiskey made all the difference.

I acquired not only a patient but a friend. Mr. Higgs was grateful in a rather peculiar way. Again he looked me up and down.

"You're a nice woman, Doc. Can I give you a piece of advice?"

"Why . . . why, certainly."

"Then get out of here," said the master of Harmony Hall. "Leave this damned house. Make tracks as fast as you can!"

"What an extraordinary suggestion," I said blankly. "I've only just arrived."

"So have other people. They can stay for all of me but

you . . . you're a decent human being. You'd better listen to me and clear out."

"But Mr. Higgs, why?"

"Harmony Hall is unlucky," Mr. Higgs replied, weaving so on his feet that I wondered if the whiskey had been really a bright idea. He gestured vaguely toward the big front window. Deep down in the bloodshot eyes, deep within the ruined brain, some thought or memory flickered. It wasn't a pleasant memory. Mr. Higgs spoke.

"I suppose you saw that tree out there. You couldn't miss it. Do you know the tree I mean?"

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"That," said Mr. Higgs with solemnity, "is the Hangman's Tree. Ask me sometime to tell you about that damn tree. Ask me why it's there. Ask me why it doesn't die."

"Tell me now."

I addressed the empty air. Mr. Higgs lurched out the door and went stumbling off downstairs. I rose to close the door he had left wide open, feeling sad rather than uneasy. Harmony Hall unlucky? Philo Higgs was the unlucky one, living with bankrupt nerves in an abnormal, liquor-soaked world of terror and fantasy, and to companion him in that world the flute-like endless insincerities of Mrs. Penelope Higgs. But then I went over to the window and looked down at the sprawling gray-green mass of the hump-backed tree. The fallen tree wasn't just unsightly. It was actually repulsive, unsettling even to normal nerves. What had Mr. Higgs meant by calling it the Hangman's Tree? I drew the window shade.

I had intended to unpack and get straightened out, but I felt oddly restless. Only a few yards away, in the room beyond the bath, Deborah Parr was probably settled now and wouldn't mind a caller. I went to find out. There was no answer when I knocked.

But from somewhere near by a muffled, indistinct voice came to my ears. I looked around the wide, dusky hall. Just

across from the curve of the wide stairs, a built-in telephone booth occupied a space which must once have been a linen closet. Through the glass door I spied a shadowy yellow back.

I hesitated and then decided to wait until Deborah Parr finished her conversation. A minute went by. Suddenly the glass door flashed open and the girl danced out into the hall. Dancing is the only word to describe the way she left the booth. She had taken off the scarf and sun glasses. A cloud of silky black hair framed her face, her dark eyes. The smart yellow frock suited her coloring. She had a slender figure, slender well-shaped feet. I suppose she was a pretty girl, but, at the moment, I wouldn't have said so.

The smile that curved her lips and sparkled in her dark eyes spoiled her face for me. It's hard to explain how a smile can be unattractive. This wasn't a young girl's smile at all. It was filled with gleeful triumph, with conscious power, the same malicious jubilance that marked her dancing step. A conqueror's smile, it was. She was almost rubbing her hands together in her joy. I knew at once that Deborah Parr had got the better of somebody.

I knew also that this was a selfish girl, that my sentimental notion of friendly companionship had been sheer poppycock. This girl would have no time for a Yankee doctor, a middle-aged woman at that. Something warned me that I was looking on at a moment of very secret and evil triumph . . . and that retreat might be wise.

The bathroom was right behind me. I ducked inside, intending to stay there until I heard the girl pass by. I listened. There was no sound from the hall. At first the silence puzzled me and then suddenly, with a strange little chill, I realized that she must have glimpsed the closing door. With equal suddenness, I guessed how she would react. Noiselessly I dropped the wrought-iron bolt. I was just in time.

In absolute silence, the girl reached the bathroom door.

With fascinated eyes, I watched the solid crystal doorknob. The knob turned so slowly that it hardly seemed to turn at all and without a sound. It was clear that Deborah Parr was very anxious indeed to discover who had watched her in the phone booth. Or to put it another way, she was anxious to find out whether that secret, highly important conversation had been overheard, and by whom.

A short hesitation followed, when the girl in the hall discovered that the door was locked. The knob stopped moving. Stealth failed. She carried the battle into the open. There was an imperative knock on the locked door.

I made no reply. Again she knocked violently. I felt the door shake beneath my shoulder. My heartbeat quickened. The struggle of our two wills was undignified and humiliating, but frightening, too, in some queer way. My breath was coming faster and hers was, too, for all the command and arrogance in her voice.

"Let me in, I say! I've left some things in there."

That was true enough. On the hand-hooked mat reposed her yellow scarf. The sun glasses, a vanity case and a generous sprinkling of face powder, a smear of lipstick, the lipstick itself, adorned the washbasin. A pair of stockings dangled from the towel rod.

"I want my things!" cried the girl.

Want away, I thought. Making all the noise I could, I walked over to the tub and turned on both taps full blast. The knocking stopped. There was a last indignant remark pitched to top the rushing water, and highly uncomplimentary about some people's manners. Deborah Parr departed.

I didn't understimate the girl then or ever. I'm not ashamed to admit that I waited out the full time necessary to take a bath. I even rolled up my sleeve and splashed the water.

A good ten minutes must have elapsed before I ven-

tured into the hall and scuttled back to the safety of my own room. After I unpacked and put my clothes away, my well-known conscience—as Maggie calls it—began needling me. I had lost all desire to meet Deborah Parr. But the hub-cap was still in my possession, lying on the rosewood desk beside my empty bags. I walked reluctantly to the desk, picked up the hub-cap.

Half-amused at my own caution, half-sorry that a young girl should arouse such strong self-protective instincts in others, I also picked up a terry cloth robe, a bath towel and a bar of soap before I stepped out into the hall. A moment later, I stopped a second time at Deborah Parr's door. I rapped twice before I had an answer. Apparently the girl was lying down.

"Who's there?" she called crossly.

"Victoria Grant."

"I don't think I know you. I'm resting."

"Of course you don't know me," I called snappishly, "but I'm your neighbor. And I've got . . ."

"My neighbor! Oh!" There was a sudden change in her voice. It became sharp, alert. "Come in. Come right on in!"

When I opened the door, Deborah Parr was no longer lying down. She sat tensely on the edge of the bed, gazing at me with hard, unfriendly, suspicious eyes.

"Did you take a bath just now?"

"What a strange question," I said blandly. "Why do you ask? I am just on the way to bathe now."

"Someone locked me out of the bathroom about half an hour ago."

"How awkward for you," I said gently. "I prefer a private bath myself. We'll have to arrange a schedule for bathing."

She looked hard at the towel, the robe, the slippers I carried. The bar of soap was probably the last convincing touch. Some of the tenseness left her. The frown that

creased the brow beneath the silky black hair was slowly erased. The worry faded from her dark eyes. The unfriendliness remained.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Why did you disturb me?"

"I am sorry if I did. But on the driveway coming in, your friend drove past me, and . . ."

"My friend? Oh, you mean . . . my sister. She's gone on to Florida," Deborah Parr said indifferently.

I felt sure she had uttered the first words that came into her head, and she had spoken untruthfully. Not that I cared. Rudeness is contagious. My voice was as cool as hers.

"Then you'd probably like to send your sister's hub-cap to her. It fell off her car. Where shall I put it?"

"Put it anywhere," said Deborah Parr. "Keep it, if you like. I don't want to be bothered."

"That makes it unanimous," I snapped, flipped the hub-cap into her wastebasket and went out.

A tepid bath cooled both my body and my temper. Deborah Parr's rudeness had the excuse of youth. She hadn't exactly invited me to come barging in on her. She was preoccupied, completely absorbed with her own busy plans. No matter that I suspected those plans boded ill for somebody else. Deborah Parr's affairs were not mine. I should attend to my own business.

In short, what I should do was to get in touch with Maggie. When I left the bath, I crossed the hall and stepped into the dusky phone booth. On the shelf which held the instrument, the directory was lying open. I reached out for it, paused abruptly, slowly pulled the electric chain. The booth sprang into light.

Face up, the directory lay before me exactly as Deborah Parr must have left it. A stubby pencil, fastened by a string to the wall, divided the open pages. The workings of the girl's subconscious mind, so troubling to me in that

unguarded instant when I spied her in the hall, had been betrayed a few minutes earlier by the medium of a pencil.

One name in the double column on the left-hand page of the directory was heavily underscored. The name was Fairlee.

The telephone number opposite the name was deeply ringed in black. Repeatedly the busy pencil had circled the Fairlees' number, and then traveled on to decorate the white space of the margin. The scrawlings in the margin would have delighted a psychiatrist. From the top of the page to the bottom paraded a series of little drawings, differing in size and in execution, but repetitive just the same. Again and again, Deborah Parr had drawn a dollar sign.

For what seemed like a long time, I stood staring at the Fairlee name and at Deborah's grim doodling. Tradd Fairlee hadn't any money. His once successful cotton business had failed before Maggie met him. Stephen Fairlee had no money, either. He was working as a reporter on his uncle's newspaper.

I presumed that the Collisons must be fairly well off. Over the past few years, Conway Collison had been able to build the *Banner's* circulation to the point where Charleston's rival morning and evening newspaper owners were aware of the *Banner's* existence. Most of Charleston still loyally preferred to buy the *News and Courier* in the morning, the *Post* in the evening. The *News and Courier* and the *Post* had been founded some decades earlier than the *Banner,* and were published by dyed-in-the-wool Charlestonians.

At any rate the financial status of the Collisons could hardly figure in Deborah Parr's calculations. It was the Fairlee telephone number she had ringed in pencil. Maggie was a very rich woman. If Deborah Parr's secret dreams were of money, it seemed to me that my old friend must figure in those dreams.

With a quick, almost violent gesture, I closed the telltale

directory and shoved it out of sight. I picked up the phone to call the Fairlee number myself. I then discovered that the instrument required a coin to operate. My purse was in my room.

A moment later I was opening my bedroom door. I stopped at the threshold. I'd left the shades drawn. They'd been run up again. The room was bright with sun. The dressing-table chair had been pulled beside the window, looking out on the humpbacked tree. A slender figure, clad in a frilly gown of faded pink, wearing an enormous floppy hat, sat in the chair, staring down below.

Margaret Fairlee awaited me.

3

IN A WOMAN'S LIFE, the years between thirty-six and forty can be hazardous years. Maggie was still beautiful. Beautiful but . . . changed. One of her greatest charms had been her abounding vitality, her radiant health. There'd been nothing manufactured about Maggie's looks. Natural color had flushed her cheeks, stained her lips, and she'd used little make-up.

This woman was a creation of artifice. She was lovely but fragile in appearance, thin to the point of emaciation, almost haggard. The haggard look was emphasized by heavy pancake powder as smoothly applied as veneer. In that pale face was painted a deep red mouth, effective, I suppose, but not like Maggie. And what had happened to her wonderful blonde hair?

Maggie glanced at me and smiled. Then she pulled off the floppy pink hat and dropped it in her lap. She spoke as though we had parted half an hour earlier.

"Four years flash by, darling, and you look just the same. A little thicker through the middle, maybe, but then, you never cared. How do I look?"

"Much too thin," I said. "What in heaven's name have you done to your hair?"

The question was academic. She had radically changed its color. That marvelous silver-blonde mop was dyed red —a dark lusterless red which subdued Maggie's big brown eyes and dulled her glowing skin. The loose, fly-away bob had also gone. Parted in the middle, the red hair lay sleekly in a flat roll on her neck.

"You can't have gone that gray!" I exclaimed. "And of all things, with your eyes and skin, why take to henna? Don't they touch up with peroxide down here?"

"My hair has been much admired," Maggie said.

"Then people must be blind," I remarked with the privileged candor of an old friend. "And I never saw you wear pink before. You used to hate those dying swan pastels. You liked strong, bright colors."

"Tradd likes pink," Maggie said. "It's his favorite color. His first wife always wore shades of rose. Her name was Rose."

"Your name is Margaret, as I remember."

"Maggie to Charleston. Maggie to you, too," my friend said, with a little giggle that was like the old Margaret. She hesitated. "By the way, do me a favor, Vic. Please don't say anything to anybody about Father."

I stared. So far as I knew, there was nothing to say about Maggie's long-buried father except that he had been an honest, hard-working, undistinguished grocer, overshadowed by his brilliant daughter. Maggie looked embarrassed.

"The fact is that most people down here, even Tradd's sister, don't know that I used to be a . . . a big, successful businesswoman. They think Father left a little money."

"Well, of all the absurd things! Maggie, I must say . . ."

"It isn't absurd at all," Maggie cried in sudden passion. "You just don't understand. Tradd's cotton business went to pot with the war and I won't have people thinking

he went north and found himself a rich Yankee wife. I won't have it, I say!"

"What's wrong with your having money?" I asked slowly, and my thoughts were upon the young lady down the hall. Maggie's reply took me completely by surprise.

"Rose Fairlee hadn't any money," she said.

"What has that to do with you?" I asked, bewildered.

"Rose Fairlee," Maggie told me passionately, "wasn't a big, successful businesswoman, reeking of money. She wasn't a bit like me. Rose Fairlee had family going back to the royal Stuarts and she never worked a day in her life. She hadn't a dime when Tradd married her. Tradd had money then. He married Rose for love."

Abruptly I understood a great deal. Maggie loved her husband. The woman who had always kissed and laughed and run away had been caught at last and with a vengeance. Maggie was mad about Tradd Fairlee. The knowledge struck me with shock.

For suddenly there came to me the explanation of the hennaed hair, the heavily made-up face, the baffling change in Maggie's appearance. In Stephen's room at Yale had hung an oval miniature of a pale pretty woman in pink who held a pink rose in her hand; dark red hair was gathered in a flat roll at her neck. Stephen had got his own red hair from his mother. Plainly Maggie had copied from the same model. My heart ached for my friend.

Independent, high-spirited Maggie, whose self-esteem was enormous, had become a second wife in a peculiarly disquieting way. The classic model, jealously seeking to erase all memories of her predecessor, would have been less disturbing. For her husband's sake, or so she must have argued, Maggie was struggling with all her vitality and will to extinguish her own personality and rise, phoenix-like, another woman. She was striving to transform herself into Tradd Fairlee's beloved first wife, to reproduce in herself what was gone forever. She was making a grave mistake.

Tradd Fairlee hadn't married Rose four years ago. He had married Maggie.

Instinct warned me to hold my tongue. The situation was too complex for ill-timed advice. There were too many things I had yet to learn. Maggie spoke quickly. I was as pleased as she to change the subject.

"And now," she said in an injured voice, "I'd like to know why you didn't ring me up when you first came in instead of making me drive all the way out from town."

"You know very well," I said, refusing to be put on the defensive, "just as I know, that you drove out because something's come up and you need my help. What's wrong? In other words, what can I do for you?"

Maggie had the grace to flush, but she spoke promptly. "Pack your clothes," she said. "Leave this money trap, Vicky, dear, and come in town and stay with us. A pity you've dug in so thoroughly, but I'll help you pack. I'm rather in a hurry."

"Not so fast, my girl. Keep your seat. I haven't heard just what you're letting me in for."

"Well, if you must have it," she said slowly, "I am in rather a mess. I thought your being in the house might make it easier all around. For me, of course. But for Stephen, too. Particularly for Stephen. He is so fond of you."

"Stephen!" I repeated sharply. "Is Stephen in trouble?"

"Not that I know of," Maggie said, with a puzzled look at me. "Stephen is happily at work down at the *Banner* City Room this very minute. But this evening may be something of a problem. Stephen's girl arrives in town this afternoon to appear in the Festival. I've invited her to stay at the house and . . ."

"Do you mean to say," I demanded, abandoning a hazy notion about Deborah Parr in my surprise, "that New Haven, Connecticut, is sending a girl all the way down here just to ride in a glorified parade?"

"New Haven?" she repeated blankly.

"You said Stephen's girl was coming to the Festival."

"Oh, oh," Maggie said. "You must be thinking about the girl Steve met up at New Haven last year. That girl. He's long since forgotten her. Steve wasn't ever serious in that direction."

"Jack seemed to think differently," I said dryly.

"Then Jack thought wrong," my friend informed me with emphasis. "Steve didn't tell you anything about her, did he? I thought not! Why, *that* girl was just a cute-looking little stenographer."

This, in horror, from Maggie, the ex-stock girl. Maggie was changed. She shifted uncomfortably under my steady gaze.

"Vicky darling, I know how that sounds. But you simply don't understand Charleston. Steve can't make his life down here with a New Haven stenographer. It's out of the question. The bare idea would have broken his mother's heart."

"What's so marvelous about your prospect?" I inquired coldly. "What does she do to justify her existence? Play the spinet? Who is she anyhow?"

"Valeria Trevelyn," Maggie replied with an air of sickening satisfaction. "Val Trevelyn is Stephen's girl, always has been. Now don't pretend you haven't heard of the Trevelyns. You know, they are the old Huguenot family."

As a matter of fact, the name was familiar to me. I was aware that two Trevelyns had been governors of South Carolina, and that a Trevelyn had signed the Declaration of Independence. But I wasn't aware, until Maggie told me, that one Dick Trevelyn had been a direct descendent of these distinguished gentlemen. Nor was I aware that Dick Trevelyn had been Tradd's partner in the cotton business until the business went bankrupt. Until Maggie told me, I hadn't known that Valeria was Dick Trevelyn's daughter,

that Valeria was Elizabeth Collison's godchild, that Valeria and Stephen had been practically inseparable as children.

"Both families," Maggie said, "used to summer every year in Bodes Crossing. Val was the first girl to wear Steve's fraternity ring, that sort of thing. It was the dearest dream of Stephen's mother to see them married. . . ."

"What happened to the idyl?" I managed to put in. "Did Stephen forget Valeria, too?"

"The war happened," Maggie said, annoyed. "Steve went away and so did Val. After the firm failed Dick Trevelyn went out to Egypt on a job for a northern cotton brokerage firm and his daughter went along. Poor Dick died out there a few months ago. Val just got back last Tuesday and opened their place in Bodes Crossing. She's representing Bodes Crossing at the Festival."

It struck me that Valeria Trevelyn wasn't mourning the death of her father over-long. Something else also struck me: With all the hurrah over the Azalea Festival, the elaborate advance preparations, I was surprised that the little town of Bodes Crossing hadn't chosen its queen weeks ago.

"Does Valeria just walk in from Egypt and find the Bodes Crossing crown waiting?"

Maggie fixed her eyes on the floppy pink hat in her lap.

"They did have another girl in mind, I believe," she said vaguely. "It didn't amount to anything. I soon fixed it for Val."

"You fixed it! In heaven's name, how?"

"When Valeria's boat docked she phoned me from New Orleans. So," said Maggie, "I rang up the Mayor of Bodes Crossing right away and explained the situation. The Mayor was delighted to have Valeria serve. And why not? The Trevelyns practically founded Bodes Crossing. The other girl was glad to withdraw in Valeria's favor."

I wondered, but only fleetingly, about the joy of a young lady dispossessed of her crown by a Trevelyn unexpectedly dropping in from Egypt. I had wonders more immediate.

Obviously there was more behind Maggie's activities in Valeria Trevelyn's behalf than I had heard. Even assuming that a Trevelyn-Fairlee union had been the dearest dream of Stephen's mother, and that Maggie was slightly demented on the subject of Rose, it seemed to me there must be some other reason why my friend would take such trouble to bring together Stephen and a Valeria he hadn't seen since the war. As my father often said, Maggie had too much respect for the truth to wear it out with over-use. Maggie's truth usually came forth in reluctant dribbles, as a sort of reward for persistence and ingenuity.

On re-examining her behavior and the situation as a whole, I suddenly recalled that Elizabeth Fairlee Collison and Mr. Tartleboro considered themselves to be in full charge of the Azalea Festival. Furthermore, Valeria was Mrs. Collinson's godchild. I wondered whether Maggie's sister-in-law was aware that Valeria Trevelyn expected to take part in the celebration. I asked.

"Elizabeth will learn soon enough," Maggie announced, with a wicked little giggle. "The Collisons live right across Alexander Street from us. Perhaps I should give Elizabeth a ring this afternoon. If Elizabeth happened to see Valeria arriving before she was prepared, it might upset her."

"I dare say it might," I said, still far from satisfied that I had got to the bottom of the matter. Pleased as Maggie plainly was to capture the prize guest from her sister-in-law, she had gone to an enormous amount of trouble to obtain this guest. "You don't need to tell me," I said, "that you're also catching Stephen unprepared. Stephen doesn't know, does he, that Valeria is to be a house guest?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Does Stephen even know that this precious childhood sweetheart is back in the United States?"

"Well . . ."

"In short, Stephen doesn't know."

"I'm doing it all for Tradd," cried Maggie, and again

there was passion in her voice. "Stephen doesn't know his own heart. His father worries. Tradd isn't really well. It will mean everything to Tradd to have Stephen settled. You'll see."

With which she jumped to her feet, went over to the dressing table and started throwing my toilet articles helter-skelter into a bag. I sent her off downstairs to break the news of my departure to Penelope Higgs.

After I closed my bags I went to the wastebasket to discard some cleansing tissues. Once again I was reminded of my neighbor down the hall. While I was in the bath, or perhaps while I was studying the telephone directory, Deborah Parr had paid a visit to my room. She had meant me to know it, too.

At the bottom of my wastebasket, gleaming in defiance, lay the hub-cap. Deborah had declared war.

I was so annoyed that I was tempted to carry the hub-cap straight back to her room. I remembered that I was a grownup woman and thought better of the impulse. But when I opened my door to leave, I glanced involuntarily in the direction of her room. And then I caught my breath.

At the rear of the long wide hall was the servants' stairway. A tall young man in a white linen suit was coming quickly and yet furtively up the narrow stairs. The young man wore no hat. He had bright red hair.

It was Stephen Fairlee.

The expression on his face stilled the words of greeting on my lips. I ducked behind the sheltering door. I peeped through the crack. In furtive haste, Stephen came along the hall, reached my neighbor's room. He didn't pause to knock. Unannounced, he quickly opened the door and walked in on Deborah Parr.

In the set of his jaw, in the hard light in his eyes, in the very way he opened the door and strode in on Deborah Parr, was the announcement that Stephen Fairlee didn't intend to be pushed around. If it was Stephen with whom

Deborah Parr had spoken on the telephone, if it was Stephen from whom she hoped to extract some unknown sum of money, her jubilance was premature. Unless I was much mistaken, Deborah Parr wasn't going to have everything her own way. Nor, for that matter, was Maggie. Clearly, Maggie wasn't in the confidence of her stepson.

Disturbed and uneasy, I went on downstairs. Major and two colored girls I hadn't previously encountered were in the lower hall, panting to help with the luggage. We made quite a convention as we packed the car and I handed out tips three ways. I didn't see either of the Higgses as I departed. No doubt Mrs. Higgs was engaged in selecting a tenant to occupy the room for which I had already paid.

By some oversight I wasn't charged for the lemonade.

4

LIKE MANY RESIDENCES in downtown Charleston, where ground space is at a premium and, if available, utilized for shrubs and flowers, the Fairlee house had no private garage. Maggie and I parked our cars in space the family rented at a public garage a few blocks away, left my luggage to be collected by the Fairlee butler, and walked to Alexander Street.

The Battery section of Charleston is one of the prettiest residential areas in the world. Alexander Street, lined by the famous "single" houses with side piazzas which turn their shoulders to the street to look on tiny walled-in gardens, was charming. I enjoyed the walk. The Fairlees had a single house. Directly across the narrow street, set behind a brick wall in a large garden, the Collisons lived in a double house of the symmetrical center-hall type.

"Elizabeth and Con have the original Fairlee town house," Maggie explained ruefully. "The family lost it after the Civil War, but Elizabeth snapped up the place

three years ago before I ever knew it was on the market. Con is doing awfully well with the *Banner*. I wish Tradd felt like going back in business."

Her expression changed. Just as she pointed out the facing residences to me, we simultaneously observed the car parked at the curb before her own home.

It was a police car.

Quite illogically, my mind flashed back to Stephen. I felt a throb of ridiculous terror. Maggie jumped a little, too, then recovered herself. She walked over and spoke to the middle-aged man sitting in the car. He was in plain clothes, broad shouldered, with tan hair turning gray and a rather pleasant freckle-spattered face.

"Hello there," Maggie said, and produced her very nicest smile. "You're Sanford Clayton, aren't you? I saw in the paper that you're to handle all the Festival traffic. I expect," Maggie went on, "you must be looking for my sister-in-law. Mrs. Collison lives on the other side of the street."

There was no answering smile. The policeman stubbed out his cigarette.

"Yes, I'm Sanford Clayton," he said courteously. "But I'm afraid you've got me confused with my brother. He's the Clayton traffic expert. I'm in the homicide division myself."

"The homicide division?" Maggie repeated faintly.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Fairlee," Lieutenant Clayton said, and now did smile. "I'm off duty. I've carried a couple of afternoon callers to you. They're waiting in your drawing-room."

"Now who in the world?" asked Maggie, but I fancied she was less surprised than she pretended.

"Mr. Tartleboro for one," Lieutenant Clayton replied. He hesitated. "Also I brought a young lady from Bodes Crossing, who happens to be a sort of cousin of mine. Miss Thripp is very anxious to talk with you. Some little trouble about the Festival, I gathered."

"I see," Maggie said. "How kind of you, Lieutenant, to take the trouble for your young relative. I believe I can promise that Miss Thripp and Mr. Tartleboro won't be long."

With a last dazzling smile at the policeman, Maggie gripped my arm and pulled me through the gate opening on the sidewalk. Hardly allowing me time to catch my breath, she led the way through a pocket-handkerchief garden and up a flight of old iron steps to the second-floor piazza. A series of doors opened off it. At the door leading into the drawing-room she paused.

"Get set, Vic. There may be fireworks. Rena Mae Thripp is the Bodes Crossing girl who withdrew in favor of Valeria."

"What rotten luck," I said, "that Rena Mae also seems to be in solid with the Charleston police force. You'd better mind your driving habits, dear."

But Maggie had opened the door. She stepped inside. I followed.

Maggie's money had redecorated the Fairlee drawing-room, and the Rose motif was everywhere in evidence. Rose-colored draperies hung at the windows, a carpet in lighter hue covered the floor, the damask wallpaper was like the first flush of dawn. The room was choked with flowers. Pink roses, dozens of long-stemmed pink roses, nodded from the grand piano, from a Sheraton coffee table, from a handsome credenza. Even the big crystal vase of magnolia leaves, placed on the floor, was starred with the pink of tall roses.

Mr. Tartleboro stood before the Adams mantel, a most unhappy man. His normally cheerful mouth turned down, his bald head was dewed with sweat. The President of the Chamber of Commerce looked as though he had just received a weather report predicting a solid week of rain.

Rena Mae Thripp sat on the pink-striped sofa. She was a pint-sized blonde, with a long gilt bob the exact color of

a brass bedstead. Rena Mae was fond of crochet. A belt of crocheted butterflies clasped her slender middle, a large crocheted butterfly stiffened with wire perched in her remarkable hair. Between her hands, she gripped crocheted gloves, a crocheted purse.

As a final touch, two crocheted butterflies dangled helplessly from her ears. Rena Mae had waited quite a while and she was beside herself with rage. She sprang to her feet as we entered. Rena Mae made her point at once.

"Where is Valeria Trevelyn?" she shrieked at Maggie. "Where have you hidden that stinker? Just let me at her, that's all I ask. . . ."

"My dear girl . . ."

"Don't you go 'dear girling' me! You're the one phoned the Mayor and sweet-talked that old drip into throwing me in the ashcan. Why, it was all set!" cried Rena Mae, hysterical in her agony. "Why, I was *picked*. My costume was made. Everybody knew about it. Everybody wanted me to be Miss Bodes Crossing."

I pitied the girl. There was no mercy in Maggie. She turned a look of helpless appeal on the wretched Mr. Tartleboro. I knew that look from way back . . . the look that said Maggie needed a man's assistance, the assistance of a man exactly like Mr. Tartleboro, big and strong, and never mind if he had lost a little hair. Mr. Tartleboro at once threw out his chest and undertook to pour a little oil on really troubled waters.

"Now, now, Miss Tripp, this won't get us anywhere. When I said I would bring you here, you promised to discuss the matter calmly so the three of us could work something out. . . ."

"Thripp! T-H-R-I-P-P! Call me Thripp!" Rena Mae whirled on the peacemaker. "Maybe my name isn't as fancy sounding at Trevelyn but it suits me and everybody else except a few damned snobs like you."

"Control yourself, Miss Thripp," Mr. Tartleboro said

sharply. "You're distressing Mrs. Fairlee. This is her home, remember. You must keep calm. Now my idea of the fair way to settle a dispute," he said, "is by compromise. You can ride on the Bodes Crossing float, wearing your costume and carrying the Queen's bouquet; you can act as Miss Trevelyn's maid of honor."

"Keep calm your own self!" trumpeted Rena Mae. "I'm perfectly calm. I won't be a maid of honor. I won't! I won't! Everybody—my mother, my aunts, my five cousins, my boy friend—everybody is expecting to see me the Bodes Crossing Queen and that's what I'm going to be. So it isn't settled by any means!"

"Unfortunately, I'm afraid it is settled," Maggie interposed sweetly, and sent another of the looks at Mr. Tartleboro. "Miss Trevelyn is in and Miss Thripp is out."

"Out, am I? Well, Mrs. Fairlee, let me tell *you* something. You could be wrong. I know people, too! People that might make you plenty of trouble. My first cousin is on the traffic squad of the Charleston police force and his brother . . ."

Maggie showed no marked alarm, but Mr. Tartleboro was shocked to the core.

"Miss Thripp, I am amazed. That was a threat . . . a definite threat. There's a right way and a wrong way to do things. . . ."

Unrepentant, Rena Mae rushed across the room and stood trembling before Maggie. She must have known she had made a show of herself, must have sensed the older woman's satisfaction.

"Well, Mrs. Fairlee, here's another threat! A threat you can pass on to your precious Valeria. Are you listening?"

Maggie kept ever in mind Mr. Tartleboro's presence. She managed to look a little frightened. She shrank back. "What is it?"

"You can tell Valeria this for me. If Valeria Trevelyn rides that float," said Rena Mae Thripp, "wearing my

crown on her head, I'll kill her and then I'll kill myself." The girl burst into tears and ran toward the door. I tried to get out of her way. We collided. The big vase of magnolia leaves and roses, sitting on the floor, went over, and into the mess plunged her crocheted purse. I rescued the purse. She snatched it from my hand and, tears running down her face, dashed outside and on down the piazza steps.

It was perhaps five minutes later that Maggie and I were alone. I kept my peace until Mr. Tartleboro had departed in obvious confusion and at a loss to know what to do next. The moment he was gone I spoke.

"Maggie," I said, "that girl is dangerous."

"Dangerous? Nonsense. Rena Mae is just disappointed," Maggie said, and shrugged. "Surely you've heard about the unreconstructed South, dear. Down here," Maggie said airily, "we don't take defeat and disappointment easily. It's an old southern custom."

"You're right," I said. "Rena Mae doesn't take disappointment easily. She was carrying a gun in her purse. Is that an old southern custom too?"

Maggie was for the moment shaken.

"Vic, you could be wrong."

"I could be, but I wasn't. She had a gun in her purse. I felt it through that crocheted stuff. I know a pistol when I feel one."

Maggie sat up in her chair. "Vic, I still think you're wrong."

But I wasn't wrong. A short time later the Fairlee butler burst into the room. Boswell was a big dignified Negro, who had just returned from the garage with my luggage. Great agitation was responsible for his unceremonious entrance.

"Mrs. Fairlee," the butler began without preamble, "I just been talking to Cook. Did Mr. Tradd tote Mr. Stephen's pistol when he went off hunting this morning?

You know, ma'am, the pistol Mr. Stephen fetched back from the war."

"The Mauser?" Maggie asked sharply. "Certainly not. For pheasant? Mr. Fairlee took his shotgun. Why?"

"The little pistol ain't in the gun room. Cook and me, we ain't never touched Mr. Stephen's gun. It's been stole."

"But, Boswell . . ."

"That young white lady done took off Mr. Stephen's gun. Cook saw her a-stuffing it in her purse, but was scared to tell."

Maggie walked across the foyer to the gun room as straight as a grenadier. It took only a moment for her to assure herself that the Mauser was gone. Immediately she went to the telephone, talked to an unidentified police sergeant, and reported the loss. Everything was put on record, and I was pleased. Accurate, lean, clipped of speech, she sounded like the Maggie I once had known.

"That's taken care of," she said, hung up the telephone and, again like the old Maggie, turned her thoughts at last to me. "Vic, this is your first day in Charleston and it's certainly been a mess. You haven't had a chance to ask a single question on your own."

I meant to ask her if she was happy. I meant to ask her if she regretted the abandonment of her brilliant merchandising career for the hushed position of a second wife. I meant to ask her if, in marriage, she missed the exercise of power which had once been hers. Instead, I said:

"Have you ever heard of the Hangman's Tree?"

Maggie looked at me in surprise, and then she began to laugh.

"Darling," said Maggie, "that tree is one of Charleston's favorite superstitions. It's unlucky: the colored people are sure of it, and the white people aren't as unsure of it as you'd think."

"It's ugly," I said.

"But it's historic," said Maggie. "You should study your

guide book better. The Harmony Hall live oak is older than the Charter Oak in Hartford was. Back in the early 1700's the Carolina authorities set to sea to hunt the pirates who were wrecking their sea traffic, and those they caught they hanged. Steve Bonnet and Worley were hanged right down at the Battery, but some of them . . ."

"Some of them were hanged at Harmony Hall?"

Maggie nodded happily, pleased with the story, or pleased perhaps that I hadn't pried into her personal life.

"Isn't it romantic? That's the Hangman's Tree."

Suddenly I looked at my watch and she looked at hers. Valeria Trevelyn had been due to arrive at four o'clock. Valeria had been driving across the state from Bodes Crossing and the traffic might have been heavy. Nevertheless . . . it was almost half-past five.

5

ANOTHER HALF-HOUR dragged by before Maggie suggested taking me upstairs. I'd had ample time to examine every nook and cranny in the rose-colored drawing-room. But as I stood up, I glanced again at the Adams mantel. I blinked a little. Above the delicately carved lintel was a space of wall that fairly screamed for a portrait.

Ordinarily the eye might have passed the empty space unnoticing, but the vacancy had been deliberately emphasized. Painted upon the shell-pink surface of empty wall, outlining nothing, was an oblong frame of deep pink roses.

As clearly as though it still hung above the mantel I visualized the portrait that must once have held the place of honor there. Before my mind's eye appeared the image of a pale pretty woman in pink, holding a pink rose in her hand and with red hair gathered at her neck. Maggie was watching me with a curious expression on her face. Then,

with a sudden nervous gesture, she smoothed back her own red hair.

"The painted roses were done last fall," she said. "My own idea. Original, don't you think?"

"Very," I said. "Although your slower-witted guests might not get your point. Why not be even more original, and hang the first Mrs. Fairlee's portrait in the second Mrs. Fairlee's drawing-room?"

"Do you really want to know?"

I wasn't sure I did. But Margaret told me.

"I've never seen the portrait," she said abruptly. "Tradd won't tell me where it is. Otherwise you may be sure I'd hang it. I've only seen Stephen's miniature."

I walked over to Maggie and took her hands in mine. Her hands were icy to the touch.

"Let an old friend tell you something," I said. "Let me speak as a doctor as well as a friend. Maggie, the kind of thinking you're doing is unhealthy, dangerous. You're allowing a dead woman to direct your acts, your thoughts. You're allowing Rose Fairlee to become an obsession. It isn't wise."

Maggie's eyes left mine. She pulled away from me and went on upstairs. I followed in silence. Perhaps we had drifted too far apart for her to listen to my advice or to tolerate a serious conversation. I hadn't spoken lightly. I was definitely alarmed about her. I was afraid for her psychic stability. In her determination to become another woman and to kill slowly her own personality, Maggie was putting a crushing load upon her ego. I'd seen too many mental cases start with a trifle not to be alarmed about Maggie. To Maggie, Rose Fairlee wasn't a trifle.

After Maggie exhibited the bedroom floor and showed me to my own room, after I made the proper comments on the charming furnishings, I tried again to reach her.

"Your room is attractive, too. Not much like you, of

course, all that pink. But then I suppose Rose Fairlee had it first."

"I don't know," Maggie said. "I don't know which bedroom belonged to Rose."

"You don't know! Do you mean to say you haven't asked your husband?"

"Oh, I've asked often enough."

"Then . . ."

"Tradd refuses to tell me," Maggie burst out. "Tradd refuses to talk about Rose. All I know about her I've learned from Stephen, and from asking other people. In this house Rose Fairlee's name is never mentioned. Never."

"But that's fantastic."

"Fantastic or not, it's true."

"Some people," I said awkwardly, "feel that way, Maggie. People react differently to loss."

"Yes, I know. I know how some people react to loss. Tradd's business was in bankruptcy three months after Rose's death. The war helped to kill it, but Tradd's grief helped, too. Rose has been dead a long time now. Tradd still hasn't found the heart to be interested in his work. I often think it would be better for both us," Maggie finished quietly, "if Tradd talked a little more about Rose."

I thought the same myself. Curiosity, unsatisfied, can develop into something pathological. Was it curiosity, nothing else, which had driven Maggie into her distasteful masquerade? Did she hope, by keeping the physical semblance of Rose Fairlee ever before him, to break down her husband's unnatural reserve? Four years of silence! His behavior was as unnatural as hers. And, whatever its origins, his attitude was making a nervous wreck out of Maggie.

Some time that evening, the moment I could manage to catch him alone, I decided to have a serious talk with Maggie's husband. When we met half an hour later, when I first looked at Tradd Fairlee, I changed my mind. Tradd Fair-

lee was the type of man who belongs to himself and brooks interference from no one. Tall, dark, steady-eyed, casual yet unmistakably tense, he lived in himself and by himself. Even I, the original and impervious Pauline Pry, knew better than to invade his reserve. Even from his best friend, advice would be an impertinence.

Not that Tradd Fairlee wasn't cordial to me. He was perfectly charming to his wife's old friend.

"Dr. Grant, I'm delighted you're to be with us. Maggie has been singing your praises so many years, I'd begun to think you were a legend. If I'd known this morning who was coming," he continued with a rueful glance at his shabby leather jacket, "you wouldn't have caught me in this relic of college days, which I still think of fondly as a proper hunting jacket. But I can promise you pheasant for your dinner. At least, I think I can." He glanced at Maggie. "How many are we to be at dinner, dear?"

"Elizabeth and Con are coming," Maggie said quickly.

"Well, with Stephen and us," said the hunter, pleased by his count, "that makes six. I hope you aren't too fond of pheasant, Dr. Grant. My bag was exactly six."

Maggie was silent. Nothing was said about the seventh guest expected at dinner. Her husband turned to the credenza, now equipped as a bar with a silver tray, glasses, bottles, ice. He asked if he could pour me a glass of sherry. I would have preferred a cocktail. But I nodded meekly. Maggie rescued me.

"Vic wants a martini. Me, too. Why don't you have a cocktail yourself? You look rather fagged."

"I am a little tired," he admitted.

"Then a martini should fix you up."

Tradd Fairlee mixed two martinis for us and poured a glass of sherry for himself. He brought the cocktails over, and sherry in hand started toward the foyer and the stairs.

"Must you hurry?" Maggie asked nervously. "Why don't you drink your drink with us?"

"My dear, I want to bathe."

"Please, darling, don't go making solitary drinkers out of Vic and me. It makes me feel depraved."

Her husband smiled, but he looked at her curiously, too. I knew that Maggie was bracing herself for the arrival of Valeria Trevelyn, already long overdue. The seventh guest should be showing up at any minute now. I didn't wonder that my friend was feeling strain. Tradd Fairlee struck me as a man opposed to surprises, even delightful ones.

He stood before the pink-striped sofa a moment, looking down at his wife. There was a suggestion of a frown.

"Tell me, Maggie. Is something troubling you?"

"Well, Tradd, the truth is . . ."

Just then Stephen, shouting my name, burst upon us. In the confusion of his arrival, while he was giving me a great bear hug and scolding because he hadn't known I was to be in Charleston, Maggie's moment was lost. To my pleased relief, Stephen seemed unchanged, exactly as he had been a year ago when he was raiding my refrigerator with Jack and I couldn't buy sufficient food to carry through a week-end. It was hard to credit that this was the same young man I had seen swiftly mounting the servants' stairs and hurrying furtively along the hall out at Harmony. I wondered if I had imagined the look in his eyes.

Tradd Fairlee was still looking down at Maggie. "My dear, you were saying something when Steve came in."

"Was I?" Maggie said vaguely, and took a nip at her cocktail.

Her eyes slipped past me to rest on Stephen, then returned to her husband. Her chin went up. She drew a long breath. "Oh, of course! I remember now. I meant to tell you and Steve that we'll be seven at dinner. The thing is, I've invited another house guest."

The frown went from Tradd Fairlee's face. The little flicker of question. His response was the automatic re-

sponse of the courteous Charlestonian, who in the spring entertains many guests.

"Splendid! I expect we should plan a party later in the week. Maybe dinner at the club. Whatever suits you suits me . . ."

"Tradd," Maggie said, "aren't you going to ask me who it is?"

The sharpness of her voice surprised him. Stephen, who had walked over to the bar, noticed too. He turned around.

I meant to watch the boy's reaction to Maggie's announcement. After all, it was Stephen's fraternity ring Valeria Trevelyn had worn before the war and time and distance separated them.

"Well, darling?" Tradd Fairlee said, and his tone sharpened a trifle, too. "Don't keep us in suspense. Who is to be our guest?"

"Valeria Trevelyn," Maggie said.

In the unexpected reaction of the father, I forgot the son. Tradd Fairlee's tanned face went gray. The glass of sherry slipped out of his hand and fell on the floor. The heavy crystal didn't break, but the glass rolled. In an ugly lengthening stain, the liquor ran in a path along the rosy carpet.

"I won't have that girl in my house," Tradd Fairlee said.

Maggie went white, too.

"Tradd? What are you saying? Dick Trevelyn was your partner, your friend, his daughter is just back from Egypt . . ."

"I won't have that girl in my house," Tradd Fairlee repeated.

"But Tradd, you can't do this. You can't. You can't. I don't understand at all," said Maggie, and sprang up from the sofa. "I thought . . . well, I did think Stephen might be a little surprised, but you and Rose always hoped . . ."

"The subject is closed," her husband said.

"Tradd, listen! You don't understand. I can't back out now. It's impossible. I've invited Val to stay through the Festival, and . . ."

"Not in my house," he said.

"But she's arriving any minute," wailed Maggie in despair. "How could I possibly explain?"

"You've created the situation, my dear, and you must solve it. I'm sorry, Maggie, but I tell you here and now, I refuse to receive that girl."

Tradd Fairlee turned on his heel. And then, of course, inevitably it happened. Just as he reached the threshold, Valeria Trevelyn arrived. From the foyer we heard the clatter of feet, a high, excited young voice.

Valeria Trevelyn appeared. For a moment, in silence, Tradd and the girl faced each other in the doorway. She was nearly as tall as he, awkwardly tall for a girl.

Valeria Trevelyn wasn't a beauty in any conventional sense. She was too angular; her face was arresting rather than pretty. She hadn't learned how to handle her body or dress up to it. Her navy blue gabardine suit was well cut and smart enough for traveling, but it lacked dash. The crownless navy blue hat revealed hair the ash-blonde color that Maggie's had used to be. The eyes, fringed in darker lashes, were blue. She stood there uncertain, abashed, touchingly unsure of herself.

"Hello, Mr. Fairlee," she said at last in a voice that shook a little.

I had heard a great deal about southern gentlemen and southern chivalry and I had cynically discounted most of what I'd heard. Tradd proved me wrong. More than good breeding, far more than tact, courtesy, good manners, were displayed in his behavior. Seeing, as only a sensitive person could have seen, that his unwelcome guest was scared to death, Tradd Fairlee was generous.

"Val, my dear!" he said, and without hesitation stretched out his hand and drew the girl into the room. "After five

years, such a formal greeting! You always used to call me Tradd. Surely Egypt hasn't made you forget your oldest friends! Stephen," he then said, with a smile at his son, "where are your manners? Maggie, are you dreaming? Step over here, you two, and greet our guest."

And then he slipped from the room. As Maggie rose, she expelled a sigh of incredible relief. But I was looking at Stephen. And I felt no relief. The Tradd Fairlees of this world can arouse my admiration and yet annoy and baffle me. I had no idea what was going on in Tradd's handsome head, what he proposed to do. I could only surmise that high words would be exchanged with Maggie behind closed doors, that a polite, face-saving solution would be reached, that Val Trevelyn wouldn't be with us long. My host's antagonism toward his one-time partner's daughter was a complete mystery.

I flattered myself, however, that Stephen was no enigma to me. Stephen was a Fairlee, too, but he was young and I knew him very well. Stephen's feelings as he looked at Valeria were crystal clear.

For Stephen, the dim and faded past had become the glowing glorious present. If Valeria had lost his heart and given up his ring, she could have them back again. Stephen loved the girl.

What would Tradd Fairlee make of that?

6

NOW YOU'VE FINALLY arrived," Maggie said cheerfully to Valeria Trevelyn, "sit down, my dear, right here beside me and relax while Stephen fixes you a drink. We've been expecting you since four o'clock."

"My car acted up," the girl explained apologetically. "I had to leave it out in Summerville and take a taxi, so I

only brought one small bag. It's in the foyer," she finished hopefully.

Maggie blithely ignored the appeal.

"I'll take you up in a moment, dear. You and I must get acquainted now we have the chance. I was so sorry to hear about your father."

"My father," Valeria repeated slowly.

A guarded look came into the blue eyes. Stephen looked guarded too, suddenly tense. Ah, I thought: so Dick Trevelyn, Tradd's one-time business partner, is mixed up somehow in the trouble. I wondered whether Tradd had passed on to the daughter an enmity he had felt for her dead father. Very often partners don't part . . . as friends.

Did Maggie know what the Fairlee-Trevelyn trouble was, or was Maggie merely trying to find out? There was something expectant, watchful, in the brown eyes fixed upon the girl.

Stephen said quickly, "Maybe Val would rather not talk about her father."

"I can't help thinking," Maggie persisted, watching Val, "how sad it is that your father can't be with us at the Festival."

"My . . . my father never cared much about parades," Val said.

I was surprised that she herself cared to be an Azalea Queen, with her father so recently dead. Yet she had cared enough to travel thousands of miles. That rather pathetic little exhibitionist, Rena Mae Thripp, had cause to feel aggrieved. Rena Mae's movie-magazine looks were, at least in my opinion, better suited to the job of doing justice to the Bodes Crossing float. The banished Queen's costume had been ready for a matter of weeks. When Maggie went on and asked Valeria about the dress she meant to wear in the parade, the girl looked actually frightened.

"I really hadn't thought. I threw in several long dresses, but I left them with the car."

"Then we'll choose the first thing tomorrow," Maggie announced decisively. "Wednesday isn't far off, my dear. In the meantime you and I must get to know each other. I'm longing to hear about the happy times the Fairlees and Trevelyns used to have together."

Whatever might be Maggie's hidden object, the conversation was distressing the girl. I decided to put an end to it.

"Valeria is a pretty name," I remarked. "It's new to me."

"Old with the Trevelyn's," Maggie said obligingly. "Tell Vic the story, dear."

"Really, Mrs. Fairlee, I . . . I hate talking so much about myself."

"Val gets tired of being asked and I don't blame her," Stephen broke in with an unfriendly look at his stepmother. "But you might like the story at that, Doc. Well, it goes like this. At the time of St. Bartholomew's massacre in France two Huguenot girls, sisters—Valeria and Marie—swam the Seine with an infant brother, hid themselves and finally escaped to this country with the first Huguenots reaching here. It's probably legendary," he finished with a laugh, "but there's been a Valeria or a Marie in every Trevelyn generation since. True, Val? Or false?"

"True," she replied with a smile.

But her smile was forced. She looked tense, very tired, as though the strain of meeting with Tradd Fairlee and Tradd Fairlee's second wife had worn her out. For this guest, I would have prescribed rest. Maggie went on talking.

"I adore that story. If it were in my family, I'd love telling it. Your grandmother was a Marie, wasn't she?"

"Yes," Stephen said curtly. "And her great-grandmother was a Valeria. There's a current aunt named Marie. No one who has lived in Charleston any length of time, Maggie, should need to ask."

The remark was rude, unlike him. But I secretly ap-

plauded. The rudeness missed its mark. Maggie's attention had suddenly been diverted. She got up from the sofa and walked across the room to a window. Darkness was slowly gathering. It was after seven o'clock. Maggie stared out into the growing dusk, at the house across the street, the double house belonging to the Collisons. A little smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Behind her oblivious back, I saw the two young people exchange a glance that was almost conspiratorial. A small by-play took place. Valeria pointed to the foyer where her bag reposed. Stephen nodded, in his turn pointed interrogatively upstairs. The girl nodded with relief, rose.

But Maggie turned around and caught them.

"Val! Steve! Do wait a minute, you two. There are lights in Elizabeth's bedroom. She should be running over right away to see you," Maggie said to Val.

It was the last straw. To the tired girl, apparently the thought of facing anybody else just now was too much. Her color faded. She wavered on her feet. Alarmed, I sprang to her side, grabbed her arm. To my astonishment, she cried out in pain.

"What have you done to your arm?" I exclaimed, pushed her to a chair, and rolled up the gabardine sleeve.

"Nothing, it's nothing."

I stared. From wrist to elbow, the girl's left arm was swollen to twice its natural size and was an ugly purplish color.

"I probably hurt myself this afternoon on the steering wheel," Valeria admitted wanly. "I told you I'd had trouble with the car. I almost had a . . . a nasty collision."

"That's a nasty-looking arm," I said coldly, for I have scant patience with folks who think courage is substitute for common sense. "Have you had medical attention? An X-ray? I don't like that swelling. One of the small bones in your wrist may be broken."

"Oh, I'm sure you're mistaken," Valeria protested in

dismay. "Luckily there was a doctor near by. He just said not to over-use the arm. See, I can move it."

Far be it from me to question the opinion of another doctor, particularly of the masculine persuasion and in a state where I wasn't licensed to practice. Personally, I wouldn't have allowed her to move that arm until I had taken and examined an X-ray. But she wasn't my patient.

"At least," I said, "put the arm to soak for the next hour to reduce the swelling, and then go to bed with wet dressings. I hope you don't propose to come down to dinner."

"Indeed she doesn't," said Maggie, touched as always by the drama of physical distress. Perhaps, too, Maggie's conscience was pricking. "Come along at once, Val dear. Why didn't you tell us, you brave child? You're going straight to bed and I'll send up your dinner on a tray."

Stephen wasn't admiring Val's bravery, not a bit of it. He was worried by the injury and angry at her foolishness. By my book that combination more or less sums up . . . love. In silence, he took Val's other arm.

The three of them went upstairs. Not being invited, I stayed where I was and pondered that near-collision out in Summerville. Somehow I had a feeling that we'd received a very hazy recital of the entire incident.

I forgot Val's accident with the arrival of the Collisons. Maggie was just coming down the stairs when Elizabeth Collison, followed by her husband, steamed in. Mrs. Collison's stout figure was encased in a steel-gray evening gown the shade of her hair, but she had dressed in such haste that she had overlooked a whole row of snaps along one side. The frivolous peach of her lacy slip showed. She was in a state of outrage and indignation, momentarily speechless from what appeared to be sheer rage.

Conway Collison was perfectly calm, even amused. Wearing a rather rumpled business suit with a gay red tie,

he provided a surprising sartorial and physical contrast to his wife. They had been married a long time, but unexpectedly the husband showed less wear and tear. Poor Elizabeth Collison was one of those unfortunate women who settle into the mold of middle age at thirty and remain that way forever. At fifty-two there was something irrepressibly young about Conway Collison. The snow-white hair worked to his advantage, as did the disillusioned and yet roguish eye of the old-time newspaperman. Humor, I thought, sustains him and makes the marriage possible. I also suspected that Conway Collison laughed more often at his wife than with her.

"Elizabeth!" he said. "Do hold on a moment! I thought there was something wrong. You're actually emerging from that gown."

As he reached out and deftly fastened the snaps, his wife found her voice and her eyes found Maggie.

"I've just this minute talked to Mr. Tartleboro," Elizabeth Collison cried. "I had to learn from a city official that my godchild is to take part in the Festival, that Valeria Trevelyn is a guest in my own brother's house."

"I was just on the point of calling you," Maggie said blandly. "The point is, Elizabeth . . ."

"Where is Valeria? Take me to Val this instant."

She was clearly determined to see the girl and at once. It was impossible to say whether she was motivated by affection, curiosity, or . . . dislike. Breathing with effort, she charged toward the stairs as Stephen appeared and came quickly down.

"Aunt Elizabeth, I'm sorry but you'll have to wait until tomorrow," he said. "Val is in her room and . . ."

"Then I'm going to her room. Stephen, I insist. I mean to see Val now. Why, I gave that child her first bath."

"By this time, Elizabeth," suggested Conway Collison, "she's probably learned how to take a bath by herself."

Elizabeth Collison didn't smile. Still determined, she attempted to pass Stephen. He reached out. Suddenly Tradd Fairlee was with us.

"Let your aunt alone, Stephen. Drop her arm at once. We aren't holding a football scrimmage. Elizabeth," he said to his sister, "please stop making a spectacle of yourself. Our guest is not to be disturbed."

"Tradd, I want to know why . . ."

"Our guest is not to be disturbed," Tradd repeated. "She had a bad experience driving in from Summerville. She's resting now."

I would not have cared to defy that quiet voice. The instant her arm was free, Elizabeth Collison acted. With amazing speed for her bulk, she shot between Tradd and Stephen and charged on up the stairs. For a moment I think Tradd meant to follow her. Then he shrugged and turned to the drawing-room. We followed.

A few minutes later, Elizabeth Collison reappeared. Ignoring the rest of us, she sailed across the room and stopped beside her brother.

"Val refused to admit me. I knocked and knocked. She wouldn't answer. Tradd, I insist upon knowing . . ."

Her voice was breathless, demanding. Maggie leaned forward in her chair. So did I. Tradd sat easy and relaxed.

"What do you want to know, Elizabeth? All of us are interested."

Abruptly she became aware of the company. She started, looked around the room. Perhaps I imagined that her gaze rested over-long on Maggie. Elizabeth Collison sat down.

"It's nothing of any consequence, Tradd," she said to her brother. "I'll ask you later."

With that, the tension was at an end. My cocktail napkin had fallen to the floor. Stephen reached down and then passed the linen square to me.

I glanced idly at his hand. My glance paused. Earlier in the evening, just before he went upstairs with Val,

Stephen had worn his fraternity ring . . . a silver ring, very plain, with the emblem nearly rubbed away. I'd noticed the flash of silver while he was busy at the bar.

Stephen wasn't wearing the ring now.

Someone else observed the ringless hand. Tradd Fairlee drew a long breath as he looked quickly at his son. Then his dark eyes became blank and empty and very still.

7

IN CHARACTERISTIC CHARLESTON fashion, dinner wasn't on the table until nine o'clock. The dining room, a pleasant oval shape, was done in dull gold, picked up from the gold of old luster plates that lined the fireplace mantel and filled the walnut cupboards. The plates, long pre-dating the Civil War, had been a part of the first Mrs. Fairlee's dowry. Inevitably, pink roses in a silver basket formed our centerpiece.

For a while the conversation lagged. The absent guest was in everybody's thoughts. Even Elizabeth Collison's loquacious tongue was stilled. But presently Tradd Fairlee, good host that he was, was, lured his sister into talking about the Azalea Festival.

Mrs. Collison was proud of the forthcoming show, and I didn't blame her. Charleston, the queen of southern cities, had expended enormous thought and effort to charm and please its visitors. Balls, luncheons, teas, garden tours, were scheduled for every day in the week. A regatta was planned, as was a medieval tilting tournament in which the Charlestonian descendants of the Knights of France and England would display their modern-day courage and horsemanship. In a street criers' contest, open to the colored hawkers of the city, descendants of Angola and Bantu chiefs and kings, would be heard echoes of a language preceding the Crusades and dating back to the dawn

of man. Boat races had been arranged, a children's parade, sporting and athletic exhibitions, military events. The United States Army had engaged itself for elaborate maneuvers in Battery Park. The Navy was represented by two destroyers and a battleship which already lay in Charleston Harbor, open for the inspection of the public. The Air Forces had sent a fleet of bombers and pursuit planes to stage a mimic battle in the skies.

But the grand climax of the week was set for Wednesday, the day on which the Azalea Queens would parade in glory. Once again Mrs. Collison forgot the company. She spoke across the table and with a kind of peculiar emphasis to her brother.

"Why did Valeria make up her mind to come back home and appear in the parade? What is behind it?"

"Why does a young girl need a 'reason' to take part in a parade?" Maggie broke in a little breathlessly.

"Val's father has only been dead a few months," her sister-in-law stammered.

It was clear that Elizabeth Collison had stopped short of saying something quite different. That commonplace question she'd asked her brother contained some hidden significance. In the candlelight, Tradd Fairlee's handsome face showed strain. Maggie lifted the dyed red head, set her small jaw. I abruptly decided to do my social bit by taking the conversation away from her. Turning to Conway Collison, I made some comment on the extent and variety of the Festival.

"Frankly, I'm surprised a city this size can afford such an annual celebration."

"We can't afford *not* to put on a real show," Conway Collison told me, with his engaging grin. "We must send our visitors away happy. Festival Week is big business for us, my dear lady. Tourists are the life blood of Charleston, our newest industry. Lord, take me, take my own paper which is jammed with all the advertising my newsprint

allotment will stand for. Take our hotels, guest homes, tourist courts, which are already crowded to overflowing and with cash registers jingling. Our shops and stores expect record-breaking sales. We southerners," he said dryly, "have discovered it's easier picking tourists than picking cotton. At last we've waked up to a fact you New Englanders grasped some while back . . . money makes the mare go!"

I found his candor delightful. Tradd Fairlee wasn't pleased by the frankness of the speech, nor was Mrs. Collison. Proud and sensitive, the two Charlestonians didn't care to have aired before a visiting northerner, an outsider like myself, any such realistic concept of Charleston hospitality. For me, they preferred to present their city wearing its gay company face, its gracious company manners.

But Con was irrepressible.

"Forgive me, Doctor. My old daddy was a Georgia cracker, and we Georgia crackers don't know how to keep our mouths shut."

Mrs. Collison was not amused. Her eye lighted on the pheasant, and she plunged into a discourse on hunting that was certainly remote enough from reality. Fox hunting, she admitted with regret, had almost vanished in South Carolina. Too many stubborn farmers objected to huntsmen riding across their planted fields. But her heavy face brightened as she went on to tell me that many of the old plantations on the Ashley and the Cooper had been turned into preserves, which teemed with grouse, pheasant, duck. If I'd brought along my equipment, she could easily arrange my introduction to the finest shooting in the world. Since my last shooting had been done with my elder brother's B.B. gun, I was somewhat at a loss. There was a small silence.

The silence was broken by an unexpected sound. Shrill and clear, and not very far away, a rooster crowed lustily. I was considerably startled. I turned to Maggie.

"Good heavens," I said. "Do people keep chickens in the heart of Charleston?"

"They're my husband's game cocks," Mrs. Collison informed me a little coldly. "His birds are excitable and high strung, easily disturbed. Raising game cocks, my dear, is a far cry from keeping chickens."

"I beg your pardon," I said meekly.

"Speaking of hunting, that reminds me," Maggie said suddenly, and fixed her eyes upon her stepson. "This afternoon a girl named Rena Mae Thripp . . ."

"I know," Stephen said.

"You know! How in the world . . ."

There was another silence. Stephen and Conway Collison exchanged glances. The older man turned to Maggie.

"Miss Thripp," he explained lightly, quickly, "showed up at the City Room just as Steve and I were leaving late this afternoon. The young lady was anxious to tell her side of the Bodes Crossing election to the press. Rena Mae seems to think someone done her wrong."

"Rena Mae is much mistaken," Maggie retorted crisply, but with heightened color. "Rena Mae is a very provoking girl. I hope you didn't listen to her, Con."

"On the contrary," Con said, and flashed another grin, "we listened very patiently. Rena Mae had fire in her eye. More important, she had Steve's gun in her hand."

"Do stop joking, Con. It's not *that* funny. What I want to know is whether Steve got back his gun?"

"No, I didn't," Stephen announced, with a rather mirthless laugh. "I was afraid the gun might go off. After the girl left the office, I phoned the police. Sanford Clayton was greatly exercised. He's got a special squad on the lookout for her. Frankly, he was worried that Rena Mae might start drinking and do some real harm with that gun. She's been threatening to do away with herself. She's been threatening to . . ."

"Rena Mae isn't going to shoot herself or anybody else."

Maggie said tartly. "Lieutenant Clayton has probably got hold of her now. Naturally he's anxious to keep her out of circulation on his family's account. You'll have your gun back in the morning, Steve. There's nothing to worry about. Rena Mae just wants to be dramatic."

Maggie was talking to reassure herself. There was a general tacit conspiracy among all of us, except Stephen, to take Rena Mae Thripp lightly, the missing weapon as a matter of no consequence. But nobody really felt that way.

Half an hour later, after the men had left their coffee and cigars and joined us in the drawing-room, the telephone rang. Stephen jumped to his feet. His father also rose swiftly. Perhaps I imagined that there was a subtle lightening of tension in the group, that everybody else, like myself, was hoping for a report that Rena Mae Thripp was safely in her cousin's hands. It wasn't the police, however. The call came from the Summerville garage, and was for Val.

Tradd Fairlee reached the telephone ahead of Stephen. The instrument was in a distant corner of the big pink room. As my tall dark host listened, I detected a slight change in his expression as though he were hearing unexpected, perhaps unwelcome news.

"Yes, I fully understand," Tradd Fairlee said at last. "Miss Trevelyn will call you in the morning."

With that he hung up. Maggie glanced at him expectantly.

"Well, Tradd? When does Val get her car?"

"She doesn't," Tradd said. "Not this car. The garage just phoned an offer to buy what's left of it as junk. The car is a total wreck."

"A total wreck? From a near-collision?"

"It wasn't a near-collision, my dear. Evidently our guest was trying to spare us concern. At noon today she hit a telegraph pole head on, but fortunately was thrown free. It was a miracle she wasn't killed."

Maggie gasped. Stephen's face showed no surprise. I

knew at once that he'd already heard from Val the true facts of the accident. Indeed I suspected that Stephen had hoped to head off the Summerville phone call, and to keep the story from the rest of us. And then a choking sound caught my ear.

Elizabeth Collison had been surprised and . . . unpleasantly. Her solid body was shaking as though from violent chill. Coffee was dribbling down the front of her dress. With a trembling hand, she set down her cup.

"Automobile accidents can be frightful," she whispered. "We've already gone through one tragedy in this house . . ."

"Elizabeth!" her husband said sharply.

At once Mrs. Collison was silenced. But her eyes moved. She looked across the room toward the fireplace. She looked above the mantel at the painted roses framing a space of wall where once a portrait had hung.

Until then, I hadn't wondered about the circumstances of Rose Fairlee's death, or hadn't been interested. I did little wondering at the moment. My immediate sharp concern was Valeria Trevelyn. My great fear was that the girl might have a head injury. Failure to suspect and diagnose a head injury is the nightmare of every physician. Too many skull-fracture cases feel perfectly well and then lapse, hours later, into coma and painless death. I intended to examine Val without delay.

Fast as I made it upstairs, Stephen beat me to Valeria's door. He was knocking on the door when I arrived. As he turned to face me, I thought he held something in his hand.

"She's fast asleep, Doc. You can't rouse her. I've been trying. Maggie gave her one of your sleeping pills."

"Stephen, I'm going in."

He stood between me and the door.

"I know you're anxious, Doc. But Val has locked herself in. She's sound asleep and dead to the world."

"I fully intend," I said, "to see she isn't dead tomorrow. You must be addled, Steve."

"Rest will do her more good than being fussed over. Anyway, we can't wake her. Look!"

He raised his doubled fist and pounded thunderously on the door. Possibly the performance would have been convincing except for happenstance. As the young man knocked, something dropped out of his hand and tinkled on the floor. It was a key.

Stephen quickly scooped up the key, but it was too late. I understood at once why I would not examine Val.

The girl wasn't in the room. She had left the house, and to cover the fact Stephen had rushed up and locked her door. Furthermore, Stephen knew where Val was. There was a private arrangement between them. They meant to meet, and soon. I was sure of it.

Stephen was silent. Our eyes met. His eyes defied me to question him about that key, to comment on Val's absence or his own intentions. He shoved his fist into his pocket. The key jingled against loose silver. Stephen drew out his empty hand.

"It was my car key," he said.

The silent battle of wills lasted several seconds. Stephen was the victor. I decided to hold my tongue about Val for the time being. Stephen relaxed. Sensing the boy's relief, and aware that relief breeds weakness, I suddenly attacked from another direction.

"Listen, Stephen," I said, "may I ask you something that doesn't concern Val?"

"Ask away," Stephen said easily.

"Who is Deborah Parr?"

The effect of the question was shocking. The blood drained from his face. In his gray eyes, back of the light lashes, welled such terror, rage and dislike that I was almost afraid he might strike me.

"Dr. Grant, I have no idea," Stephen replied, enunciating every word coldly and distinctly.

"Stephen . . ."

"Look, Doc," he said, "you used to be a good friend of mine. Do me one small favor. Leave me alone. Just leave me and Val alone."

Turning on his heel, he walked down the hall and quickly descended the back stairs on his way out. Unfortunately for Stephen and his pride, I am not the kind of woman who would be stopped from rescuing a drowning suicide because the man was naked and earnestly desired to die. I had no intention whatever of permitting Stephen and Valeria to follow their own sweet will until coma overtook the girl. I went after Stephen and I went fast.

But Stephen had anticipated my reaction. A door closed off the back stairs. Stephen had locked that door, too. With angry chagrin, I conceded that by the time I got down the front stairs, he would be on the street and out of sight.

The pursuit must become a search. I darted into my bedroom and put on my hat, realizing that my departure if observed by the company below might arouse undue curiosity. Hatted and carrying purse and gloves, I hurriedly emerged from my bedroom. Conway Collison was in the hall.

"Maggie sent me up. We were all wondering . . ."

I said calmly, "I suddenly remembered I had a telegram to get off. To one of my patients, you know. Will you make my apologies to the others?"

To say the least, the explanation was thin. He didn't believe a word of it. There was a little twinkle in his eye.

"I'll be glad to oblige you, Doctor. By the way, you can do a favor for me. Or rather you can do a favor for somebody else. Are you agreeable?"

"That depends," I said.

"It's like this, Doctor. Talking about Rena Mae Thripp tonight at dinner, I'm afraid I got carried away by my own wit and gave a wrong impression. To tell the truth," he said slowly, "Rena Mae, with that gun in hand, wasn't

side-splittingly funny. In fact, to come right down to it, Rena Mae wasn't funny at all."

"Well, what am I to do about it?" I asked sharply. "What *can* I do?"

"I thought you might pass on the word to Val," he said. "Val is the one the little devil really has it in for. It might be a good idea for you to tell my wife's godchild to be careful."

"Oh, I will," I said. "I will."

And then he couldn't help it, this instinctive show-off. His eyes gleamed again.

"In view of the circumstances," he said, "I realize your words of advice may be delayed."

"I don't follow you."

"Fifteen minutes ago when I came upstairs to wash my hands," said Conway Collison, "the youngsters happened to be conferring. Doctor, the door was closed then too, but my hearing is acute. I suggest that you look for your patient in Battery Park!"

He twinkled at me again, and went.

8

BATTERY PARK WAS only a dozen blocks from the Alexander Street house. In the quiet harbor, the two destroyers and the battleship dispatched by the Navy to enliven the Festival lay at anchor. The black lines of their superstructures were sketched against the moonlit sky. Moonlight washed the curling paths in the Park, silvered the scattered benches where many pairs of lovers met.

On the farthest point of land rose the pallid monument erected to the defenders of Charleston, the courageous men who fought and died in another bloody war. Val and Stephen occupied a bench very near the somber young man

in marble who stretched out his marble shield as though in a last vain, but undespairing, effort to hold off the foe from his city. The ragged fringes of a palmetto tree drooped above the bench.

In the spatter of light and shadow Val's face gleamed whitely, and the red of Stephen's hair was dark like the night. They sat close together. Stephen held one of Val's hands, and her other hand was pressed against her pale cheek. On Val's third finger shone the silver of Stephen's fraternity ring. As I approached them, the girl was talking.

"Steve, we can't go on like this. We can't, I tell you."

"Darling, it's only for a little while. Please, please, just keep your nerve and everything will work out all right."

"Don't keep saying that. Everything isn't all right. Everything's a mess. . . ."

"Darling, listen. We've simply got to get your car off the street or the police will spot it. There's a parking lot out in East Charleston I know about. . . ."

Stephen rose from the bench. Simultaneously, I halted in the shadow of the next palmetto-guarded bench. A car? What car were they talking about? Val's wrecked car was miles away in Summerville.

Parked on the street that curved past the monument, tightly packed together, bumper touching bumper, was a whole row of cars. I glanced in that direction. In the row was a car I recognized. The cream-colored convertible had the top raised now, but the New York plates and the dented left fender were visible. The rear left wheel had no hub-cap.

Stephen pulled Valeria to her feet. They crossed the street to the convertible. Stephen opened the door, but Valeria hesitated doubtfully. I also hesitated, for once in my life at a complete loss.

Plainly Val required no immediate medical overhauling. My worries about a fractured skull were groundless. At noon that day Val hadn't been thrown out of a car which hit a telegraph pole. Whatever had happened in Summer-

ville must have happened while Val was at the wheel of the convertible, and the convertible wasn't badly damaged. It seemed possible to me that the wrecked car had been driven by Deborah Parr, and that some secret reason had caused Val to accept responsibility for its ownership. Val had certainly delivered Deborah Parr to Harmony Hall at two o'clock that afternoon. The moment I saw her with the convertible, I recognized Val as the girl in slate blue. Wearing a scarf and sun glasses, Val had passed my car as she sped away alone from the plantation house.

Their two figures defined by a street lamp overhead, Val and Stephen still hesitated on the pavement beside the open door of the convertible. Stephen spoke impatiently.

"Darling, please get in. Tomorrow things may look different."

Val stepped into the car. I shook off my paralysis of indecision, started toward them. As I moved, someone else who had stood and watched the couple from even deeper shadow, also moved.

A dusty figure detached itself from the mass of marble of the monument. From the corner of my eye I caught the flurry of motion. I turned.

The crocheted butterflies at Rena Mae Thripp's ears swung gently, as she stepped noiselessly from the curb into the street. Intent and concentrated, like a small feral animal stalking nearby prey, the girl stole toward Val and Steve. As she moved, she was clawing at the opening of her crocheted purse.

In emergency I can act fast. Without a sound, I sprang. In that first jump, I got a good firm hold on Rena Mae. She gasped and tried to pull away. Simultaneously, with sickening relief, I heard a car door slam and knew that Val and Steve were getting off.

"Give me that purse," I said.

"Who are you? Let go my shoulder!"

"Give me that purse."

"Are you crazy? I won't! Let go of me. . . ."

"The purse," I said, and made a grab for it.

My hold on her shoulder slackened. Instantly, like an eel, Rena Mae wriggled free. She ran across the street. She ran directly in front of the convertible, just as Steve and Val got under way.

By the Lord's own mercy, she wasn't hit, and made it safely to the opposite curb. I went after her. The convertible disappeared. Rena Mae had lost all interest in Val and Steve. Her sole idea was to escape from me. She began to run. The girl had twenty years the advantage in age but she was wearing a pair of fancy high-heeled slippers that would have discomfited Mercury. Three blocks, four blocks, five blocks and I began to overtake her.

The hotel lights, the activity and busyness of the Park, shrank away. We now were in a neighborhood where every living soul seemed to be tucked in bed. I prayed in vain that we'd encounter a policeman, preferably one of the special squad assigned to apprehend Rena Mae. We saw no one.

Rena Mae shot around a corner. She was still going fast, but her hobbling gait gave me hope. When I rounded the corner the girl was not in sight. My eyes searched the quiet block, as I paused and took a few very welcome gulps of air.

Three doors from the corner was a house which threw out upon the sidewalk a handsome stairway, shaped like a miniature iron bridge. Underneath the arched span of the graceful steps was a commodious semi-circular space. Rena Mae, I felt confident, had ducked under that stairway to rest those tortured feet.

Momentarily refreshed, I walked to the third house in the block. Until then, I had been intent upon the chase itself. Just as I reached my objective, I remembered why I wanted the crocheted purse. There was a gun in it.

Simultaneously, peering at me from under the stairway,

I caught the dim shine of Rena Mae's eyes. Her hands were hidden but I knew they held the purse. My mouth felt suddenly dry. I cleared my throat.

"My dear, I want to talk to you," I said.

"Talk away," invited Rena Mae.

I did some rapid thinking. To argue with a person in Rena Mae's emotionally unbalanced state would be folly. For me to venture into the dark obscurity underneath those stairs would be sheer insanity. Somehow I must woo the girl into the open. With sweet persuasion, I must tempt her into coming out and handing over the gun. I forced a smile.

"Look, my dear. I know you counted on being in the parade, that you've been hurt and disappointed . . ."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" demanded Rena Mae. "I recognize you now. You're that woman doctor. You were at the Fairlees' house this afternoon. You're on Val Trevelyn's side!"

"Rena Mae, truly I'm thinking of you."

"So am I," she said bitterly. "I'm thinking about that Bodes Crossing float without me on the throne."

"There are more important things than parades, Rena Mae."

"Says you! Me, I feel different. No one is going to push me around like I was trash. Maybe," said Rena Mae, "maybe I found out this afternoon how to look after myself."

The bitterness left her. She gave a sudden elated little laugh. The erratic shift of mood, the loose idea-flow, the whole behavior pattern, indicated alcohol. Alcohol in quantity. My heart sank. The prognosis was bad. Sweet reasonableness makes scant appeal to the intoxicated. Nevertheless, I tried again.

"You mustn't let your anger run away with you, Rena Mae. Angry people do foolish things. Afterwards, when it's too late, they are sorry."

"Valeria Trevelyn is going to be the sorry one," Rena Mae spat out. "Just let her try and show her face on that

float, and she'll be good and sorry. I can promise that right now. I'm not as dumb as some people seem to think."

I wasn't reaching the girl at all. The Azalea Crown of Bodes Crossing was a matter of vital consequence to Rena Mae. I'd offered nothing in exchange to her excited, overstimulated mind except the dreary solace of sensible behavior. I'd better improve the offer.

"Listen, my dear," I said. "You're entitled to consideration, I know that. Together we should be able to figure something."

"What's the proposition?"

"Conway Collison and Stephen Fairlee are both friends of mine. Suppose I ask them to print a story about you in the paper, with pictures, of course. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yes," Rena Mae admitted. "You're pretty smart. But I'm smart, too. Maybe I know a way to get my picture in the paper my own self."

She took a tentative step forward. My eyes discovered the crocheted purse. It was in her right hand, a sacklike thing, loosely held. Almost shyly, still underneath the stairway but nearly within arm's reach now, Rena Mae hesitated.

"I wish I had a drink," she said unexpectedly. "I'm awful hot and thirsty."

I thought to myself that she'd had far too much to drink already. I could smell the whiskey on her breath now. Perspiration glistened on her forehead, was thick on her upper lip. In the shadowy gloom her eyes stared, her sweating face was pallid. Again she gave an elated irrational little giggle, as though she knew something I didn't know.

"But what I really want," the giggling Rena Mae reminded both herself and me, "is to be Miss Bodes Crossing."

"Perhaps a second float . . ."

"I want to be the real queen. I want to be in the parade and I want Valeria Trevelyn out of it."

"Let me talk to Val, my dear. I believe she'll listen to me. Perhaps I can persuade her to withdraw."

"If she was going to back out," Rena Mae inquired with dark suspicion, "why did she mix up things in the first place?"

"I don't know, Rena Mae. But when Val learns how you feel I'm sure she will behave generously. Val is a nice girl."

"Is she?" Rena Mae asked sweetly.

With that, she darted out from underneath the stairs. She used the crocheted purse like a blackjack and to much the same effect. The full weight of it caught me squarely on the temple. As I reeled backward, she delivered a second whack upon my nose. Blood poured from my nostrils.

"Mind your own business, you old hen! I'm doing okay with mine," screamed Rena Mae, laughed loudly, and ran.

It was nearly 2:00 a.m. when I returned to the Alexander Street house, climbed the stairs and tottered into my bedroom. Maggie had made a mess of my bag getting out the sleeping pill which Val hadn't taken. But I found my gauze and sterile cotton, dressed my painful and swollen nose, and crawled into bed.

The bed was welcome. But just as my eyes were closing I had a sudden thought of Rena Mae. For the first time I thought of her in her own right, a Rena Mae unconnected with Val or Stephen, with Maggie or myself. I thought of Rena Mae as a young girl, not yet twenty, intoxicated and reckless, agonized and irresponsible, running around the streets of Charleston alone and with no one to look after her. I half rose from the pillows, sank back. I fell asleep and began to dream. The dream soon turned to nightmare.

Again I saw Rena Mae crouched underneath the stairway, saw the perspiration glistening on her lip and forehead, heard her querulous complaint that she was hot and

thirsty. Again I heard the elated, irrational little laugh. And then the laughter faded, and in my dream the girl's voice changed and with it, horridly, the rhythm of her breathing.

As though a hidden orchestra were playing out some enigmatic, dissonant message to the audience of my subconscious mind, my nightmare became sound alone. Appalled, I listened in my dream to the sound of breathing—stertorous, irregular exhalations, shallow, gasping inhalations, with long pauses in between. I listened and, sleeping, recognized the typical Cheyne-Stokes breathing of the dying. The other sound was a voice. Sleeping and appalled, I listened to a young, familiar, uneducated voice calling thinly in the emptiness: "Doctor, doctor, doctor . . ."

Rena Mae was crying out to me for help, and I couldn't move. Tense, rigid, motionless, I lay there and fought the battle of nightmare. "Doctor, doctor, doctor . . ."

My eyes opened with a jerk. I sat up in bed, grabbed for a telephone that was back in Connecticut, awoke to where I was. Across the street, the Collisons' game cocks were proclaiming the news of dawn. Once oriented, I understood the dream. The crowing of the cocks had been the shrill thin voice of my dream; the Cheyne-Stokes breathing, which still lingered horribly in my mind, must have been merely my own heavy, irregular exhalations. I'd been sleeping on my back.

But I couldn't shake off the vividness of the nightmare in its explanation. I crawled out of bed, still listening. Except for the crowing of the cocks, the room was quiet. I padded across the carpet and opened the door into the hall. I was still listening. The household was locked in the silence of profound slumber.

Something, some unrelieved anxiety, drew me out into the hall and to Valeria's door. It was unlocked now. I opened her door, and looked in. The figure lying on the bed was peaceful and composed. Valeria had pulled the

sheet up over her head, and I couldn't see her face. Her breast rose and fell with the evenness of the sleeper. But one of her shoulders wasn't covered. She was fully dressed.

I was closing the door, when down the hall another door creaked. I whirled around. Already the other door had softly closed. I faced a row of doors, tightly shut. All was silence again.

I longed to return to my own bed. My feet seemed rooted to the hallway floor. I couldn't rid myself of the dream-like feeling that I'd been summoned from my sleep, that I was needed somewhere.

Suddenly the telephone rang sharply in the quiet house. Someone else was up and as wakeful as myself. I waited. The telephone kept on ringing.

There was no extension in my bedroom. The nearest instrument available to me was a floor below in the drawing-room. I started down the stairs, still half-expecting the call would be taken elsewhere. The phone rang steadily on, filled the foyer with its insistent clamor.

As I opened the door into the drawing-room, the ringing abruptly stopped. My heartbeat also stopped.

The drawing-room was rosy in the tender light of early morning. The sun streamed in from the piazza through the open door, washed gently across the old rose carpet. On the pink-striped sofa, her head thrown back at an unnatural angle, her arms and legs asprawl, sat Rena Mae Thripp.

Her eyes, wide open, seemed to be regarding the empty painted frame of roses above the mantel. She did not reply when I called her name. She didn't move.

I ran to her. The girl was in collapse. Collapse? She was in coma. The respiratory system had failed. There was no slightest indication of breath, her face was cyanosed.

Cold, clammy sweat stood forth on her forehead, gleamed on her upper lip. The pupils of the wide open eyes were contracted. Her dress was wrinkled and dirty, and all around her rose, stupefyingly, the fumes of alcohol.

I thought she wasn't breathing when I seized her wrist and felt for her pulse. I waited seconds and it seemed that hours went by. And then very faintly I felt a threadlike quiver. Very faintly she drew a thread of breath. She was alive.

I screamed upstairs to whoever might hear. I wanted adrenalin, strychnine, a stomach pump. I seized Rena Mae's shoulders to lay her on the floor so I could begin artificial respiration. Simultaneously, the girl's head fell forward, and the pupils of her eyes expanded. A crumpled piece of paper slipped out of her hand and drifted to the rosy carpet.

Again I seized her wrist, but the weak thread of pulse had flickered out. Breath was gone. Rena Mae died in my arms. I will always think I felt her die.

Written on the slip of paper was my name and Maggie's address. Rena Mae had found her way on foot and in the darkness to the Alexander Street house. But the doctor had arrived too late.

9

I REFUSED TO ACKNOWLEDGE that Rena Mae was gone. I laid her on the floor, knelt over her, and tried to pump air into lungs whose need of air was gone. One of the butterfly earrings had been lost somewhere. The other fell off, as I forced the bluish lips apart and arranged her cheek against the carpet.

I was working grimly at the futile job, when Maggie rushed downstairs and into the drawing-room. She was calling to me as she came.

"Vic, where are you? Sanford Clayton phoned a few minutes ago. Someone reported to the station that Rena Mae was on her way here."

And then Maggie saw me crouched on the floor, apply-

ing artificial respiration to the dead girl. She stopped with a scream. Through the scream, the doorbell tinkled. Maggie's eyes dilated.

"That must be Lieutenant Clayton, now," she whispered. "He was coming to the house. Vic . . ."

Again she started to scream. I jumped to my feet.

"Throw something over her," I said. "Spare him looking at her face. Hurry. That shawl on the piano will do."

I walked into the foyer, and closed the drawing-room door behind me. I opened the door to Lieutenant Clayton. He had been up all night. His eyes were red-rimmed from sleeplessness, but he looked peaceful and relieved. He took off his hat.

"Good morning, Dr. Grant," he said. "Is my young cousin here? Some man telephoned the station that he'd met Rena Mae wandering in Battery Park an hour ago, that she seemed ill and was asking for you. They couldn't find a taxi, and he had to go to work. But Rena Mae seemed so confused that he wrote down the name and address for her, and directions for getting here. Has she arrived?"

I looked at the big, broad-shouldered, freckle-faced chief of the Charleston Homicide Squad. Lieutenant Clayton was a strong man. He would need to be.

"Your cousin is here," I said. "Lieutenant Clayton, I'm sorry. The girl is dead."

He fell back a step. The color left his ruddy face and the freckles stood forth with startling clarity. His voice filled with pain and sorrow. He spoke as though to himself.

"That poor kid. The poor crazy little kid. So she went ahead and did it. I was afraid she would."

"Lieutenant Clayton . . ."

But he brushed past me, jerked open the drawing-room door and strode in. I followed. Maggie hadn't found the strength to walk as far as the piano. She had ripped the nearest of the rose-colored draperies from its rod, and

thrown the velvet covering over Rena Mae. Maggie was sitting on the pink-striped sofa, staring into space.

Lieutenant Clayton walked straight to the body. He pulled off the rosy covering. He dropped on his knees beside Rena Mae. He gently touched her disordered, dirty dress, straightened the dangling crocheted belt. He looked long and hard at the pitiful, cyanotic face, the staring eyes.

"She was such a pretty thing," he said. "Everybody spoiled her." Then he smoothed back the gilt hair from her forehead. Another long moment passed. Suddenly he spoke sharply to me, "Doctor, where's the gun? I don't see the injury."

"She didn't shoot herself," I said. "She died in alcoholic coma."

"What had she been drinking? What did she put in the drink?"

"I don't know," I said. "The post-mortem should show. Perhaps the liquor was bad, and death was accidental."

For the sake of Rena Mae's family, which was his family too, I had thrown out a suggestion I didn't believe myself. The policeman ignored it.

"What became of the gun?" he repeated mechanically. "I thought of course she'd shot herself. Where is her purse?"

"I don't know," I said. Rena Mae had hung on to the worthless slip of paper but somewhere she had dropped her purse, just as somewhere she had lost one of the earrings. "Your cousin was in coma when I found her," I said. "The vital pattern must have been fading fast some minutes before she came in the house from the piazza, and collapsed. She had no purse."

Lieutenant Clayton saw the crocheted butterfly on the carpet. He picked the earring up, looked at it, looked with sad wonder at Rena Mae,.put the earring in his pocket. Slowly he stood up. A block away, an ambulance siren sounded. The policeman gave a heavy sigh.

"I called the ambulance," he said, "when I thought my cousin was ill. I'll let you know the post-mortem findings, Doctor. I'll want to talk to you again later in the day."

He had ignored Maggie, as though she weren't there. Indeed Maggie hardly seemed to be in the room, so far removed had she been in spirit. Outside, the wailing of the siren stopped. Maggie spoke.

"If that child killed herself," Maggie announced in a high-pitched, unnatural voice, "if she took poison, I'm to blame. I thought her carrying on was all pretense, that inside she was having a wonderful time dramatizing herself. I drove her to suicide. If I hadn't called the Bodes Crossing Mayor, if I hadn't meddled . . ."

"No, no, no," another voice spoke from the threshold. Eyes glittering in an ashen face, Val stood there. "I killed her," Val said. "It's my fault. I knew Rena Mae wasn't pretending. I'm young myself. I knew how she felt. I knew how much she wanted to be the Azalea Queen, but I wouldn't let myself think about her. I'm the one to blame."

Val's misery aroused Maggie from her own wretchedness. She ran to Val, put her arms around her. The two clung together and both were crying. Lieutenant Clayton gazed at the two women. He examined Maggie's pink satin dressing gown, the dyed red hair falling around her shoulders. His eyes rested briefly upon Val's rumpled street clothes. He looked back at Rena Mae, quiet on the rosy carpet. . .

"It's a little late for tears, ladies," the policeman said.

And then it seemed to me that the drawing-room was full of people. Tradd and Stephen were there, shocked, incredulous and asking questions. Both men wore bathrobes over night attire.

From across the street, similarly appareled, came the Collisons. Con was quiet, asked no questions. Elizabeth talked. She tried to be kind and helpful, I suppose, but she succeeded in being officious.

"Lieutenant Clayton," Elizabeth Collison said, "my husband and I want to express our deepest sympathy for you and your family. I'd like to promise here and now that we will undertake to keep the whole unhappy story out of the papers."

"Oh, put it in the paper," the policeman said. "Use your biggest, blackest type. Rena Mae was a little country girl who never had advantages, and she would like to know her name was big in print. She would like to think her name was on everybody's lips. After all, you might say Rena Mae died to get her name and picture in the paper."

His glance flicked past Mrs. Clayton. He looked hard at the frame of painted roses.

"But there," Lieutenant Clayton said in a strange voice, "I'd forgotten! You Fairlees are sometimes a little sensitive about how a family name figures in the public prints."

The last of this strange, bitter, contemptuous speech was drowned out by thunder overhead. A bomber formation, headed toward the airfield, was flying over us. The whole house vibrated to the mighty wings. Monday was dedicated to the U. S. Air Forces. Charleston's week of celebration had begun.

Lieutenant Clayton glanced up, then looked around at all of us and his eyes were hard and bitter. Two white-coated men came into the room with a stretcher. Lieutenant Clayton waved them aside. He lifted Rena Mae's small, weightless body in his arms, said to me, "I'll be calling you this afternoon, doctor," and strode into the foyer.

Through the foyer he went and outside and down the long flight of wooden steps, gently carrying in his arms the girl who would never ride a flowered float or wear an azalea crown. The ambulance drove away. The siren did not sound again.

For a good many minutes after that bleak departure, I was sincerely glad Elizabeth Collison was present. Maggie and Val both went to pieces from reaction. I had two

patients to look after, and Elizabeth Collison was another pair of hands. She might be officious but she was undoubtedly efficient.

Menlike, with the domestic situation in distress, Con and Stephen found it imperative that they get off to business. The Festival edition of the *Banner* required their immediate attention. Tradd Fairlee had no business to go to but he, too, thought of an important errand which quickly carried him from the house and to his club.

Val was shaking with uncontrollable sobs. I'd expected that Elizabeth would see to Maggie, her sister-in-law, but she took charge of Val. She practically carried Val upstairs, undressed and put her to bed. Remotely, I was aware of them. Mrs. Collison treated the godchild, recently returned from years of residence in Egypt, like a big, strong, impersonal nurse. Lost in grief for a girl young like herself, who was inexplicably dead, Val kept on crying. She suffered the ministrations of the gray-haired woman, obeyed the efficient orders, but she didn't speak to her. It was like a meeting of two strangers.

I got Maggie back into her bed. I convinced her that the selection and ordering of a floral spray should wait until the time and place of Rena Mae Thripp's funeral was set. I told her that regret is the most wasting and futile of all human emotions. I told her that no one person drives another to suicide, that no one reason is the true reason, that the suicidal impulse seems to be a manifestation of the death wish deeply ingrained in most of us but hovering ever near the surface in a specific type of personality. I pulled the shades and started to leave the pink bedroom. Maggie's tears were over.

"You're a good friend to me, Vic," she spoke from the bed. I did not deny it. "You're a better friend than I deserve," Maggie said. "You don't ask awkward questions, Vic."

"I'd like to," I said slowly. "Tell me, Maggie dear.

What's spoiling your life for you? What's the trouble, Maggie?"

"My husband," Maggie replied, very slowly indeed.

"It's more than that."

"Call it love then. I love Tradd. I love Tradd so much that I want to own every part of him, want to possess everything that's ever happened to him or ever will."

"Why did you invite Val Trevelyn to Charleston? The real reason, please. Not the nonsense about carrying out Rose Rairlee's ambitions for Stephen."

"It was jealousy, I suppose," Maggie confessed, and her face twisted and grew older, almost ugly. The dyed red hair, loose on the pillow, flamed like an aureole. "Val and Val's father knew Tradd in the first Mrs. Fairlee's era. Through Val I hoped to find out about Rose. But it's been useless. Val pretends to know less about Rose than I do. If I ask one question, Val asks two."

"What do you want to find out?"

"Things," Maggie said.

"What awakened you this morning, Maggie?" I asked abruptly.

"The telephone, of course," she said quickly.

I felt sure that wasn't true. The telephone had rung for a good many minutes. There was an extension beside Maggie's bed.

Outside in the hall, Elizabeth Collison was waiting for me. She made an odd figure with her gray hair falling down her back in sparse twin braids, her slippers and bathrobe. Oblivious of her unconventional costume, she suggested that I look in on Val. I promised I would.

"I hope Maggie is feeling better," Mrs. Collison added a trifle hesitantly. "If it would help I'd gladly pop in on her, but I suppose it's better not. My sister-in-law and I aren't especially close; Maggie seems so odd at times, so difficult to know. I often think that Maggie doesn't really like me."

She shifted on the slippered feet. I fancied she was debating some further remark. And then again the house vibrated, as a second bomber formation passed overhead. Mrs. Collison's expression changed. She pushed up the bathrobe sleeve and looked at her watch, frowned a little.

"Dr. Grant, I'd like to ask your advice," she said, "about a rather awkward little problem. Weeks ago I ordered a box for the Air Show this afternoon. Under the circumstances," she went on hurriedly, "I'm sure that most of us, Val, and Maggie, you, Tradd and Stephen perhaps, won't be attending. But I really feel that I should put in an appearance. What do you think, Doctor?"

"Go, by all means," I said, realizing that her mind was already made up.

She beamed her gratitude at me, and quickly left the house and went back across the street. She had done her duty in the aftermath of tragedy. Rena Mae Thripp had received her allotted portion of a busy woman's time and thoughts. Those thoughts had now passed on to the details of a busy day, a busy week. I looked after Elizabeth Collison, thinking she was an odd person herself, difficult to know.

A few minutes later I carried a glass of warm milk to Val's door, hardly knowing whether my call was therapeutically justified. For I had many questions to ask Val, who had been lying in her bed fully dressed at the very time I found Rena Mae. There was doubt and suspicion in my mind, as I recalled Val's attire and her overwhelming remorse.

What I greatly feared was that Val had come upon the dying girl before I arrived on the scene, and had been too terrified and conscience-stricken to arouse the household but had crept off upstairs to await the inevitable. If that were true, if Val had lost her head and done a cruel, stupid, childish thing I was determined that she confess to the fact immediately. In the end, on his own, Lieutenant Clayton

was going to find out everything about Rena Mae's tragedy. It was best to tell the truth, the whole truth, and at once.

As I stood irresolutely at the door, my worries mounted. I wondered whether Val and Stephen, too, might have seen and talked to Rena Mae during that last evening of her life. I knew they'd glimpsed her as she ran in front of the convertible, as they were leaving Battery Park. And then I wondered how and where Deborah Parr fitted into Val and Stephen's private distress, and whether Rena Mae had known about the young woman in residence at Harmony Hall. I wondered whether the Val-Stephen story would come out too, in the investigation of Rena Mae's death.

I knocked on Val's door. As I walked in, the girl half-sat up in bed. She stuffed a wadded handkerchief underneath her pillow, greeted me with a touching little air of apology.

"Hello, Dr. Grant. I wish you wouldn't bother with me. It seems I've become quite the problem guest."

"Drink this milk," I said briskly, approaching the bed.

She obediently took the glass. I jumped. The third finger of her left hand was bare. Stephen's ring was gone.

The two had quarreled. Abruptly I understood why Stephen had rushed off to work, instead of lingering at home. My heart sank. Our meeting was starting badly. It was imperative that I win Val's confidence and give her counsel. A girl who has quarreled with her sweetheart is singularly hard to win. Val drank the hot milk in silence.

I walked over to a chair and sat down. Beside the chair, open on the floor, was her unpacked suitcase. Lying on the top was a rumpled dress. It was slate blue. Over the rim of her glass, Val was tensely watching me. I decided to come out in the open.

"What a pretty dress," I said. "I noticed it yesterday when we passed each other on the live oak avenue out at Harmony. You had just dropped Deborah Parr."

"Oh!" said Val, with a quick, gasping breath. The glass

clattered on the table. "I . . . I didn't think you recognized me."

"I didn't recognize you at first," I said. "The scarf and sun glasses threw me off. But last night in Battery Park when I saw you and Stephen and the convertible . . ."

Again Val gasped. Her pale face grew still more pale. She held the sheet to control the trembling of her hands. I got up and walked over to the bed. I put my hand on her rigid shoulder and inwardly braced myself. She was going to hate me, but I couldn't help it. This child needed the advice of someone wiser than herself.

"Tell me, Val," I said. "Did you and Stephen see Rena Mae Thripp last night?"

"We . . . we saw her when she crossed in front of the car."

"I mean later on. Did you run into Rena Mae after that, or rather did she run into you? Did anything unpleasant happen? Did she threaten you? Or did she threaten to kill herself, unless you withdrew from the Festival?"

"Oh, no," Val said, and earnestly shook her head. A little color was returning to her face, as though I'd hit upon a line of questioning that troubled her less.

"Are you quite sure, Val?" I asked slowly and deliberately. "Didn't you find Rena Mae in the drawing-room this morning shortly before I got there? She was dying then, but perhaps you thought she was already dead and . . ."

"Oh, no," Val cried in horror. She shrank away from my hand. "How can you think such a thing of me? How can you think it for a single minute? Why, that's . . . that's horrible."

"Val, you were dressed when I looked in on you just before I went downstairs myself. You were awake."

"I didn't know Rena Mae was in the house," she whispered. "I'm not such a coward that I'd leave someone dying, while I sneaked off and hid in bed. I was dressed because of something quite different."

"What? Why were you dressed? What had you been doing?"

In a pitiful effort at defiance, she half-rose from the pillows. "Dr. Grant, please go away. You've got no right to ask me these things. Why don't you ask Mrs. Fairlee some questions? She's your friend. Why don't you ask Mrs. Fairlee why she invited a girl her husband hates to her home? Ask Mrs. Fairlee why she keeps talking to me about her husband's first wife?"

"My dear, we aren't discussing Maggie," I said, and steeled myself again. "We're discussing you, and Lieutenant Clayton. He is going to get to the bottom of his young cousin's death. You must be prepared, Val. Lieutenant Clayton is coming back to the house, and believe me he will ask all of us many questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"In the first place," I said, "he's bound to want to know why you were so determined to take from Rena Mae her place in the Festival."

"I can't tell him," Val whispered. "I can't tell you either. I can't talk about it at all."

"And why not?"

"Dr. Grant, you don't understand. There are things you don't know, and I can't tell you. The decision isn't up to me. Other people are involved."

"Other people?" I pounced. "Do you mean Deborah Parr? That's a bad girl, Val. I'm older, and I know. Let me help you with your problem, dear. Tell me about it."

Val didn't speak. She stared at me with appalled and fascinated eyes, as though she couldn't tear her gaze away. Feeling like an executioner, I grimly plunged ahead.

"What has Deborah Parr to do with you and Stephen? Does the wrecked car in Summerville belong to her? Why did Stephen call on Miss Parr yesterday at Harmony Hall?"

The girl freed her eyes at last. She sank back on the bed, pulled up the sheet, hid her face and thus escaped

from me. For a moment, in my frustration, I was angry. My anger went. I'd caught the expression she sought to conceal. Val was wretched aund unhappy. She was also badly frightened. Val was terrified of . . . something. She didn't intend to talk about it.

"Very well," I said dully, "you won't accept my advice and help. Perhaps you'll accept my medicine. You need to get some rest before Lieutenant Clayton comes. I'll bring in a sedative."

I returned to my bedroom, despising the role I'd played, sick about the interview. In his absence, I grew angry at Stephen. Was he advising Val to take an attitude that was certain to alienate the freckle-faced policeman who had small love for the Fairlees, anyway? Was Val's course of action, her refusal to speak out, the cause of the quarrel between her and Stephen?

Why, I suddenly asked myself, was I so desperately concerned about the situation? To be sure, Lieutenant Clayton was coming back to ask questions, but what of that? His inquiry would be a mere legal formality, quickly over. Presently I pulled myself into a more rational frame of mind.

I remembered I'd come to get a sedative for Val. I picked up my bag and laid it on a chair. The phenobarbital wasn't where I usually keep it. The night before I'd noticed with annoyance that my bag was a mess. Now I noticed that my hypodermic syringe, like the phenobarbital, was out of place. It was lying at the bottom of the bag, jammed against my stethoscope.

I frowned. Hypodermic syringes are delicate and easily broken. Frowning, I put the syringe behind the little supporting loop where it belonged. The loop was firm and strong. It was impossible that I could have carelessly knocked the syringe out of position, without automatically replacing it. And then I gave a violent start. My heart began to beat in the slow thick way that only a doctor or nurse—

someone who handles dangerous drugs—would understand.

My morphia supply was missing. The loop beside the hypo, which should be supporting a long slender bottle of tiny white tablets, was empty.

The long slender bottle contained twenty-four quarter-grains of morphine, packed one atop the other . . . six full grains. The bottle wasn't in the bag. My heart pounding, I went carefully through everything. Then I carried the bag across the room, recklessly dumped the contents on the bed. In feverish haste, I did a double check. It wasn't any use. Six grains of morphia had vanished from my bag. Three grains can be a toxic dose.

I sank down on a chair. At last I understood the worry and anxiety which had haunted me through the morning. Back into my memory came flooding the nightmare which had aroused me from my bed and sent me downstairs to Rena Mae. My subconscious mind had been wiser than my conscious thinking.

Subconsciously I'd known what was wrong with Rena Mae, even as she hid from me under the stairway and I stood on the night-dark Charleston sidewalk. The outward evidences of morphia poisoning are strikingly like those produced by alcoholism. And yet, I told myself as I sat there in agony, I should have known. I should have known. The symptoms had been classic—elation and irrationality, thirst and complaints of heat, cold sweat on the lip and forehead.

Except in my dream I hadn't heard the stertorous rasping breaths which must have begun with the dying girl's struggles for air, but I'd heard the final shallow thread of breath as the respiratory system collapsed, and I'd seen the contracted pupils of her eyes expand at the end.

Rena Mae Thripp hadn't been in alcoholic coma when I found her. She'd been in opium-narcosis. Death had re-

sulted from a toxic dose of morphia, taken by mouth and very probably administered in whiskey.

I was sure what the post-mortem would show. The post-mortem would show a wet brain, congested lungs, and enlargement of the venous trunks of the right heart. The stomach contents would reveal the presence of morphine.

Rena Mae Thripp hadn't killed herself. She'd had no opportunity to get at my bag. That girl wouldn't have known how to identify morphine, in any case. But someone knew.

Someone had opened my bag and removed the slender glass bottle, marked only by a pasted label which said: POISON. Someone who hadn't needed the hypodermic syringe had brushed the syringe to the bottom of the bag as the bottle was removed. Someone had offered Rena Mae a poisoned drink, and she had taken it and swallowed death, unknowing. Morphine is tasteless. Alcohol is a perfect solvent. Taken orally, the paralyzing and inhibiting effects of the drug are slow. When a toxic dose of morphia is taken by mouth, many minutes pass before the victim first senses trouble. There is no pain with morphia, no initial physical distress. A common primary reaction to morphia is a wonderful sensation of physical and mental well-being. The drowsiness comes later. There must have been several hours of elation, excitation and confusion last night, I thought, before Rena Mae began slowly to feel the onslaught of a fatal illness.

Sanford Clayton wasn't going to investigate a suicide. It was murder.

10

I DON'T KNOW HOW long I sat there, staring at my rifled bag, realizing that I'd carelessly, unwittingly and unforgiv-

ably, allowed a lethal amount of morphia to reach the hands of a killer. From my own point of view, I had been almost criminally negligent on still another score. I had failed to diagnose a case of morphia poisoning until too late. If I'd recognized Rena Mae's condition and correctly read her symptoms during our encounter on the street, I might have saved her. Morphia cases, treated early enough, will usually respond without undue complications. But the doctor must be competent.

Perhaps only another physician can understand and sympathize with what I was feeling, thinking. Rena Mae was gone. But I was alive, and my professional reputation, which was my life, was at stake. Everybody would know, and very soon, that Dr. Grant had permitted herself to be robbed of dangerous drugs; everybody would know that Dr. Grant had failed to diagnose morphia poisoning until after the victim died. My terrible double blunder could not be hidden.

For I must take the advice I had sternly given to Val. I must report the facts to Lieutenant Clayton. At last, I got to my feet. Moving like a somnambulist, I went out in the hall and slowly down the stairs. I turned into the quiet of the drawing-room, walked its rosy length. I sat down beside the telephone. My hand opened the directory. My eyes found the number of the Charleston police station. I picked up the receiver.

The wire wasn't clear. Confused, I heard a voice speaking over an upstairs extension. The voice was low and slurred, very rapid, but I identified it.

"Fairview Cemetery won't be overrun with tourists. I'll be waiting near the gates at five this afternoon," Maggie said to someone, and hung up.

There was a sharp click in my ear. And then the operator began asking for my number. I, too, hung up the receiver. I stared stupidly at the telephone. In those few seconds, my whole plan of action had vanished.

My friend's slurred, quick, surreptitious voice, promising to wait for someone that afternoon in a deserted cemetery, kept on sounding in my ears. It was as though Maggie's voice had awakened my mind to a possibility so dreadful that I'd stubbornly neglected to consider it. Until then my thoughts had been upon myself and my own share of responsibility for Rena Mae's death. For the first time, I wondered who bore the real responsibility. Who had taken my morphia? Obviously someone who had the run of Maggie's house must be guilty. For the first time, it came to me that I wouldn't be the only one who would suffer from the consequences of my brave report to Lieutenant Clayton.

In the general picture, I perceived belatedly, the price Dr. Grant would pay would be comparatively small. Lieutenant Clayton would probably brush me aside as a careless physician. It was even likely that he'd agree to treat my information as confidential, in consideration of the fact that it was voluntary. I'd be in no real danger. But my report to the police would place someone in very definite danger.

At the point where my interest in the matter ended, Lieutenant Clayton's interest would begin. I wasn't sure I wanted to know who had stolen my morphia while I was a guest in Maggie's house. I was 't sure I wanted to know who had poisoned Rena Mae. Lieutenant Clayton would feel very differently.

Lieutenant Clayton was certain to ask who had access to my bag. With a thrill of horror, I remembered that Maggie had made free with my bag the night before. Maggie hadn't asked permission but had stepped into my bedroom, opened the bag and got out a sleeping pill for Val. Why not? We were old friends, long ago we'd roomed together, and in those days Maggie was so closely associated with my burgeoning career that she'd sometimes felt and acted like a physician herself. Maggie would know how to locate and identify a sleeping pill in any doctor's

bag. Maggie would also know that the long slender unidentified bottle, placed beside a hypodermic syringe, contained morphia—tasteless, painless, producer of the sweetest dreams.

Suddenly, my whole body began to shake. I knew that Maggie, my Maggie, was not a poisoner. But would Lieutenant Clayton know it? If I telephoned the station, he'd come back to the house in a hurry and he'd soon discover who had easy access to my bag. He knew already that Maggie and Rena Mae had quarreled. To Sanford Clayton, Maggie was a northern woman, an outsider who'd deliberately gone out of her way to harm his dead cousin. To Lieutenant Clayton, Maggie would be the prime suspect. Nor would the policeman's inquiry stop with Maggie. He'd pry into everybody's secrets. None of us would be safe. I remembered Valeria's terror, her refusal to talk to me. What was Val afraid of? I wondered whether Val suspected that Rena Mae wasn't a suicide, but had been murdered. I wondered whether Val knew that morphine was missing from my bag, and had her own idea as to who had taken it. I remembered how Val had insisted that I leave her alone, and ask Maggie questions. What would Lieutenant Clayton make of Val's attitude? How long could that child withstand an official examination?

Sitting in the quiet drawing-room, I thought about the Fairlees and the Collisons. It seemed to me that every one of them was hiding something. If I spoke out and summoned Lieutenant Clayton back to the house, what would happen to Stephen and to Tradd, to Elizabeth and Con? How would the Fairlees and the Collisons feel about the dragging forth of their family secrets? Most of all I thought of Maggie, who was concealing her inner self from her oldest friend. Maggie had only pretended to be frank with me. After I left her bedroom, she had promptly arranged a surreptitious appointment.

For half an hour I sat beside the telephone, struggling

with dreadful irresolution. Many times I reached toward the instrument, many times I stayed my hand. At last, with a heavy sigh, I acknowledged that my problem was solved. I wasn't going to call the police. I wasn't going to tell the truth to Lieutenant Clayton until I had exhausted every other possibility.

Right and wrong were no longer clearly distinguishable. I only knew that I couldn't salve my own conscience by bringing misery and untold distress to others. I couldn't voluntarily set a murder investigation under way. I lacked the courage. I was too fearful of the ultimate result. I wasn't thinking of myself now, or of Val and Stephen, of Tradd or the Collisons. Once again I was thinking of Maggie, my oldest friend. I was afraid that the truth might hang Maggie.

I rose stiffly from the chair where I had sat so long. I walked back across the pink drawing-room, opened the door into the foyer. My imagination had been picturing my friend in such horrible terms that I heard the sudden sound of her voice with shock. Opposite the drawing-room another door was ajar. Maggie had come downstairs to the gun room, a square, leather-and-monks-cloth, masculine sort of place, adjoining the dining room. Her voice floated forth, commonplace and normal. She was placidly greeting Tradd, who had just returned home. Unlike Maggie's voice, his was taut with anger.

"I've just been to the bank," Tradd was saying to his wife. "It's bad enough for me to be on your bounty, but why must you lend a thousand dollars to my son?"

"Tradd, I've offered and offered to set you up in the cotton business again. You know I'd dearly love . . ."

"One bankruptcy in a lifetime is enough, thanks," Tradd Fairlee said bitterly. "One bankruptcy can destroy a man's confidence forever. Stick to the subject, please. I'm asking you why you gave Stephen a thousand dollars."

"Stephen needed a new car."

"His old car is good enough. My son is working. Let him earn his own new car."

I stepped out into the foyer, prepared to flee upstairs and out of earshot. But then the sound of my own name rooted me to the spot. Tradd Fairlee changed the subject himself, bewilderingly. He was angrily asking Maggie why she had made arrangements for Victoria Grant to stay at Harmony Hall.

"Vic had never been to Charleston," Maggie stammered. "I . . . I thought Vic would enjoy the plantation atmosphere."

"You thought nothing of the kind. You thought you would enjoy having an excuse to hang around Harmony."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know very well. I'm talking about Philo Higgs. You wanted a chance to drive out and see Philo Higgs on the pretext that you were visiting your friend."

"That drunken idiot! Why, I've never exchanged two words with him in my life. Tradd, that's the most preposterous . . ."

"Philo Higgs wasn't always a drunken idiot."

"Perhaps not. But I assure you," Maggie said shrilly, "that Philo Higgs and I have nothing in common."

"You can't fool me," her husband returned in a low savage voice. "I know how your mind works, Maggie. You hoped to catch poor old Philo drunk and babbling, you wanted to pump him about my first wife, Rose Fairlee."

I had heard enough. Suddenly the Alexander Street house became a prison to me, choking and suffocating. I had to escape to the open air. I went through the foyer and out the door and down the long flight of the piazza steps. I went quickly through the pocket-handkerchief garden and to the sidewalk.

For several hours I walked the streets of Charleston. The whole of the town was *en fête*. Flags blew gaily at the store

fronts and bunting fluttered. Overhead the sky was alive with planes. Two bomber squadrons, flying above the city in formation, patterned and exact, stately and mathematical and thrilling like a Bach fugue, threw black shadows on the ground, so low they flew. Dancing around them, swift and free and airy as any bird, tumbling and darting through space, were the fighter planes.

The bomber squadrons broke apart. One formed in the sky the giant letter "C" for Charleston. The second squadron formed the letter "A" for Azalea.

Thirty thousand people had flocked out to the airport to view the spectacle from the improvised grandstand and bleachers built near the control tower. Thousands of people remained in town, craning their necks upward for the show. Visitors jostled me on every sidewalk, bumped into me at every turn. Other tourists mistook me for a native, and asked me for directions. Once I asked directions myself of a broad-shouldered, sunburned man in a wilted seersucker suit. I asked where I could send a telegram.

A forlorn hope took me to the telegraph office. Because I wanted it so, I told myself that my agony might be based upon a misconception. It was barely possible. Suppose on packing to come south, I hadn't tucked into my bag six grains of morphia, as I so clearly remembered doing. Suppose there had been no theft. Suppose for once my memory was at fault.

A young boy, sullen at being kept indoors on a day of celebration, took my message. I wired my office nurse in Connecticut to check my dispensary records and telegraph me the result. The message seemed safe enough. It didn't interest the boy.

An hour later, I walked past a newsstand. I stopped and bought the late edition of the *Banner*. The front page was almost wholly given over to accounts of the opening day of the Azalea Festival. I had to turn through pages of adver-

tising to find the only news in the *Banner* that interested me. A two-line item was buried below a syndicated column. It said:

> "Rena Mae Thripp, 18, visitor from Bodes Crossing, S. C., died suddenly this morning."

Poor little Rena Mae would have been disappointed. Well, Rena Mae might have her headlines soon. I threw the newspaper away.

In the west, over the airport, the counterfeit battle was beginning. In mass formation, twenty-four A-26 Invaders, guarded by Mustang fighters, sailied forth on a theoretical bombing mission. Suddenly fighting planes, painted to represent Zeros, sneaked in behind them. Mimic gunfire rattled. At once the opposed fighting forces engaged, came to grips in individual combat, in an ever changing pattern. The pattern of the bombers didn't change. The gap left by one of the Invaders, which sank earthward with two of the little Zeros darting triumphantly about its tail, was quickly closed.

As undeterred as in wartime, majestic and unswervable, the bomber formation held, flew on toward the determined target. The painted Zeros sought in counterfeited frenzy to reach and down the big planes, the Mustangs to destroy the Zeros and protect their massive, slower moving charges. Abruptly, four of the Mustangs, four out of eight, had disappeared. And then, jet-propelled, flashing from behind a bank of clouds like the shooting stars for which they are named, the P-80's raced to the rescue.

There are acres of sky. No pair of eyes can encompass even a simulated battle in the air. But I saw one of the Zeros zigzagging crazily down, black smoke pouring from its tail. I saw a Mustang waver, slope sidewise, seem to fall. From the descending planes, two men in parachutes

bailed out. The parachutes looked like tiny silver seeds at first, seeds that blossomed into flowers as the chutes opened and drifted with their human cargo toward the ground. Out at the airfield, a fire department wagon with its bell clanging rushed off to locate the "survivors."

It all seemed very real. Two of my nephews served in the Air Forces. Jack is still alive.

When the battle ended, the four faces of St. Michael's tower clock showed me it was after four o'clock. At five o'clock Maggie would be keeping her appointment. On my last errand of the day, I went to the public garage and got my car.

I was determined to refuse my help to Lieutenant Clayton, and I was willing to accept full responsibility for my decision. Under a physician's code, it was my duty promptly to turn over my evidence to the authorities. But what about the duty of any decent citizen to protect the innocent from needless suffering? What difference would a few hours make in ultimate justice? For the moment I might put myself in the light of protecting a poisoner. But I could justify my course to myself. I intended, if humanly possible, to find out who the poisoner was.

Fairview Cemetery lay on the outskirts of the city. The burial grounds were large, fenced in iron, and there were six sets of gates. As I started along the bewildering maze of graveled paths, I encountered an elderly caretaker who offered to guide me to the grave I sought. I asked him for the Fairlee plot.

Rose Fairlee's stone rose plain and pure and simple among the ornate monuments of long dead and buried Fairlees. On a marble shaft, beneath a conventional pair of clasped hands, was inscribed her name, the date of her birth and the date of her death, May 5, 1943. There was no other epitaph.

I looked again at the simple inscription, and then again.

I stared hard at the graven name. Rose Higgs Fairlee, April 4, 1905—May 5, 1943. Higgs? I asked the elderly caretaker a question.

"Oh, they's a passel of Higgs in and around Charleston. We keep a right smart lot of Higgs out here. Yes, I reckon the Higgs are all kin. Cousins, like we say."

Aware that in South Carolina consanguinity is acknowledged to the ninth and tenth degree, I wasn't particularly surprised to discover that Rose Fairlee had been born a Higgs, that Philo Higgs must be "a sort of cousin" of hers. My surprise came some fifteen minutes later, after the caretaker left me and I was able to resume my interrupted survey of the cemetery gates.

As I approached the third set of gates, I spied Maggie. She was seated on a marble bench with her back to me, talking earnestly to a man who sat beside her. I saw his dark saturnine face in profile. Maggie's companion was Philo Higgs.

I crept as close to them as I dared, slipping from the shadows of one stone to another. Finally, in the stillness of that quiet place, I caught a few phrases of what Maggie was saying to Philo Higgs.

"Please, please tell me the truth . . . Surely you can tell me why Rena Mae Thripp went out to Harmony after she left my house yesterday afternoon. I found out that much from Mrs. Higgs. Please tell me why Rena Mae went to see Deborah Parr."

Maggie asked her pleading questions in vain. From the immobility of his position. I suspected that Mr. Higgs had been drinking. But he wasn't garrulous and talkative. The master of Harmony Hall sat straight as a ramrod and listened, and didn't say a word.

I waited for several minutes, and then I stole away and left them. I was mystified but my heart was lighter. My greatest fear was gone. For it seemed to me that Maggie like myself was in search of the truth behind Rena Mae's

death. Maggie wouldn't need to seek the truth if she were guilty of murder. She would know it.

In an almost peaceful frame of mind, I returned to Alexander Street. I mounted the piazza steps, and stepped into the foyer. A radio was playing in the drawing-room. Mercifully the door was closed.

I moved toward the stairs. Suddenly the door of the gun room opened. Lieutenant Sanford Clayton looked out at me.

"Dr. Grant, I've been waiting for you since four o'clock this afternoon."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"My understanding was that you expected to hear from me," he said. "I want to talk to you about the post-mortem report, ask a few questions. Please come in."

He held the door for me. I stepped into the gun room. He closed the door very carefully. Then he turned around, and faced me in the gloom.

"Dr. Grant," Lieutenant Clayton said, "did you give my young cousin morphine?"

11

I SANK INTO A SHABBY leather easy chair that Stephen had used in his room at Yale. Lieutenant Clayton flipped on a reading lamp, and swung the arm so that the light shone on my face. Then he stepped back into the shadows and waited for my reply.

The echoes of his appalling question echoed in my brain. Did you give my young cousin morphine? Did you, did you . . . ? Are you a poisoner, Dr. Grant? Are you, are you . . . ?

I didn't speak. I couldn't. Finally, Lieutenant Clayton pulled from his pocket an official-looking document. He laid on my lap a post-mortem report.

"Read it carefully, Dr. Grant," the policeman said. "Read the pathologist's finding, third paragraph from the top. Rena Mae was poisoned. The stomach content showed the presence of at least three grains of morphine."

I didn't touch the document lying on my lap. I didn't look at it. The voice speaking from the shadows dragged me from the asylum I had found in shock. Again Lieutenant Clayton asked whether I had given morphine to Rena Mae. When? he asked me. At what hour? Why?

"I didn't give her morphine," I managed to say, and tried to rally my wits. "Just this morning, Lieutenant, only a few hours ago, your idea was that she had committed suicide."

"I've learned some things since then," he informed me. "Rena Mae didn't kill herself. Nothing was further from her mind. At ten o'clock last night the poor kid expected to be in the Festival, to be queening it in the parade on Wednesday."

"How can you know that?"

"Rena Mae telephoned another cousin during the evening. She was elated, excited. Life was wonderful; she'd had a stunning piece of luck. Or so Rena Mae thought," he said with great bitterness. "At ten o'clock last night Rena Mae told our cousin she was going to appear in the parade, riding a wonderful, expensive float, wearing a brand-new costume that would knock the spots off the other girls. Does that sound like suicide?"

"No," I said. "No. But she did threaten suicide. And she did take Stephen's gun."

Lieutenant Clayton's eyes swept around the dark square room, beloved of the Fairlee men, with no softening feminine touch to mar its somber charm. Fishing rods were stacked in the corner, and tennis racquets in their presses. Jackets hung on pegs driven into the paneled walls, and boots were heaped beneath. A garishly painted sailfish

swam above the mantel. Ducks, pheasant, grouse, stuffed, shellacked and disconcertingly unlifelike, flew across painted wooden backgrounds to which their rigid bodies were firmly glued.

The weapons that decorated the paneled walls and filled a big glass cabinet told the story of a long line of hunting, fighting, shooting men. The Fairlee men had brought to Charleston from everywhere their own weapons and the weapons of their fallen foes. A tall lance, green with antiquity and age, had spun from the hand of an armored Frenchman on a field in Normandy long ago, traveled triumphantly to England, and then overseas with the first Tradd Fairlee. A crude old blunderbuss of a much later period had notches on the stock for five unknown Frenchmen who had breathed their last in the wilderness of Louisiana Territory, and beside the blunderbuss a printed card admitted regretfully that Gilton Fairlee had kept no count of slaughtered Indians.

The sword and gun that a Colonel Stephen Fairlee had carried through the Revolutionary War was there, along with a British sword, a stained and tattered British flag. Colonel Stephen Fairlee's weapon wasn't notched, but the printed card accredited him with seventeen of Lord Cornwallis' invading Redcoats. The breech-loading rifle that had belonged to Tradd Fairlee's grandfather lay on a shelf near the big glass cabinet, and the printed card read merely: "Civil War—1861-65."

In the big glass cabinet Tradd Fairlee's World War rifle rested beside a flag of Imperial Germany, a pointed iron-gray helmet with a hole in it, three rusty German weapons. Next was Stephen's .45 service pistol, his Garand rifle. Next to that on the shelf was an empty space with a handwritten card still lying there. "Mauser pistol—Captured in Huertgen Forest, October, 1944. Two missing bullets were fired at me!" ran Stephen's youthful, exuberant script.

Lieutenant Clayton opened the glass door of the cabinet, looked in at the card and at the empty space. He turned around to me.

"I don't believe Rena Mae took that Mauser yesterday afternoon."

"You don't?" I stared at him. "But the cook saw her taking it. Surely you've talked to the cook."

"Yes, I've talked to the Fairlees' cook," he said. "She sticks to her story, but I haven't forgotten who employs her. It's no use telling a northern woman, I suppose, that darkies will say anything to please their employers, but it's the truth."

"I'm as white as you are," I said. "When Rena Mae Thripp left this house yesterday afternoon, she was carrying Stephen's Mauser in her purse. I felt it."

"A month ago when Rena Mae was named Queen of Bodes Crossing, they presented her with a heavy metal vanity case. She was very proud of that case."

"A gun doesn't feel like a vanity case," I said. "The gun disappeared hours before your cousin . . . died. Its loss was reported. Why would Mrs. Fairlee . . ."

"I don't know why Mrs. Fairlee would do this, that or the other," cried the policeman. "I don't care, except as it affects what happened to my cousin. There, I care plenty. Mrs. Fairlee hated Rena Mae, or maybe hate is too strong a word. Maybe she just considered Rena Mae the dirt beneath her feet. Mrs. Fairlee helped Val Trevelyn steal from Rena Mae the biggest thing in that kid's life. Rena Mae wasn't prepared to take the blow without a fight. Rena Mae was prepared to make a nuisance of herself, to interfere with Mrs. Fairlee's plans in a very noisy way. How do I know that Mrs. Fairlee, in reporting the 'theft' of that gun, wasn't setting up a possible line of self-defense for somebody who intended to dispose of the nuisance by means of poison?"

"Poison," I said, "can never be considered a weapon of

self-defense. Poison is cowardly, wicked, inhuman . . ."

"I'm glad to hear you disapprove of poison," he said, and without irony. He came over to the chair, leaned over it. His burning eyes sought out mine. "Dr. Grant, tell me. Who met my cousin last night, and gave her a drink that was spiked with morphine?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I've been in this house quite a while, Dr. Grant. I spent a good half-hour in your bedroom. Your medical bag is lying open on the bed, with stuff scattered every which way. Why?"

"I . . . I was looking for a sedative."

"There isn't any morphine among your medicines."

"No," I said.

"Don't you carry morphine in your bag? Most doctors do. Didn't you bring a supply with you from Connecticut?"

"I came off on my trip in a hurry. My packing was done quickly."

"You keep records of dangerous drugs, of course?"

"Yes," I said, and then told a lie. "But I'm afraid my records at home are hardly up to date. I'd been planning for this vacation. Then at the last I was rushed and hurried, and I don't recall exactly what drugs I brought along."

"So you came south in haste. Why? Did your friend, Mrs. Fairlee, wire you that she was in a mess over Rena Mae?"

"It was nothing like that," I replied, truthfully now. "I had never heard of Rena Mae until I reached Charleston. I didn't even expect to be staying with Maggie. I moved in here from Harmony Hall."

"Why?"

"Why? Because . . . because Maggie wanted me."

"First Mrs. Fairlee wants you to stay out at Harmony Hall, next she wants you as a house guest. That seems odd."

"Maggie is . . . is impulsive. She felt slightly awkward about the arrival of another house guest, and . . ."

"Another house guest? Do you mean Valeria Trevelyn? Why not say so? I've been talking to that young lady," Lieutenant Clayton said, "or trying to talk to her. Miss Trevelyn has a remarkably bad memory. She could tell me nothing about Rena Mae or the trouble over the Festival. Miss Trevelyn couldn't even remember why she was so anxious to take over Rena Mae's place. The girl seems to remember practically nothing. She looks blank at the mention of her own name."

"Val had an automobile accident. She hasn't been well."

"Don't apologize for her, Doctor. I prefer to put my own interpretation on her reticence. Just tell me about the awkwardness Mrs. Fairlee felt over her arrival."

"Maggie had never met Val Trevelyn."

"Come, come, Doctor. Mrs. Fairlee is a sophisticated woman, used to meeting strangers. Didn't Mrs. Fairlee feel awkward because of some unpleasantness connected with the break-up of the Fairlee-Trevelyn cotton brokerage firm five years ago?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "I wasn't acquainted with Tradd Fairlee in those days. As for Dick Trevelyn, I never laid eyes on him. The same goes for Maggie."

"There are a good many things you don't know, Dr. Grant," Lieutenant Clayton said. Anger and pride, too, rang in his voice. "I'd like for you to know that the Claytons and the Thripps have been in South Carolina as long as the Fairlees or the Trevelyns, though the Trevelyns and the Fairlees may have forgotten it. The Claytons also look out for their own. I'm in a position to find out exactly what happened to my little cousin. I mean to do it."

"I wish you well," I said.

"Do you, Dr. Grant?" he asked, with a sudden change of manner. His harsh voice broke. He sat down near me and the light shone on his freckled face. Now the hard

eyes had the defenseless look, the strange brightness of sorrow. He said, "There are things I'd like for you to know about Rena Mae, Dr. Grant. So often in a murder case the victim is forgotten. Let me tell you about my cousin. Rena Mae was a dumb little country girl who'd never been out of South Carolina, but she dreamed of Hollywood, New York, Paris, London. She had a pretty face, but no education, not an ounce of brains. Eighteen years old, and as amoral as a kitten; Rena Mae wanted applause, the shouting of the crowd and money. Why would she be otherwise? Rena Mae left high school her sophomore year, went to work behind a soda fountain. She got her standards and her ideals from the radio and the movies."

"I know," I said.

"I wonder if you *do* know," the policeman said to me. "For I think Rena Mae, in her ignorance and unsophistication and in her greediness, too, did a wrong thing, and that she died for it."

"What do you mean?"

"When Rena Mae left Bodes Crossing, she had twenty-eight dollars in her purse. Last night she had a great deal more than that."

"But if you haven't found her purse . . ."

"The man who met her wandering in Battery Park shortly before daylight is my source. After he wrote down the Alexander Street directions, Rena Mae opened her purse and tried to put in the slip of paper and failed in that simple act. She was already dying, I suppose. But this man saw inside the purse. She was carrying a big roll of bills, and it surprised him. Where did Rena Mae get that money?"

"I have no idea," I said, and with sinking horror tried not to remember that Maggie had lent Stephen a thousand dollars to buy "a new car." "Lieutenant Clayton, I have no idea."

"Well," he said, "I have a fair idea as to how Rena Mae

got the money. She wasn't poisoned just to keep her out of a parade; I know that's bosh. I also know, of course, that you didn't poison her. I'm convinced in my own mind that Rena Mae found out something connected with the Festival and that . . ."

"Something? What?"

"Something that the Fairlees, the Collisons and Miss Trevelyn want to keep hidden," he said grimly. "Believe me, that crowd is anxious to write Rena Mae off, forget her existence quickly. That crowd intends to rise above a murder investigation, ignore it out of existence.

"I haven't even seen Mrs. Fairlee; she's been away all the afternoon. Miss Trevelyn won't talk. Stephen Fairlee is busy covering the Air Show for his uncle's newspaper. Tradd Fairlee greets me with the cool courtesy of an iceberg, and tells me nothing. But I haven't forgotten my cousin. Rena Mae isn't going to be recorded under suicide or accidental poisoning, when I know damn well, regardless of how they may feel at the station, that she was murdered. That kid had no access to morphine. Where would she get it? Did you notice how her death was handled in the *Banner?"*

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I noticed. But you were talking about the money in her possession last night."

"I'm not excusing her," he resumed, very quietly. "The way things are, I can't. I'm explaining the situation as I see it, Dr. Grant, because I need and want you on my side. Rena Mae was ignorant but she was shrewd. During the course of her activities to get herself reinstated in the Festival, I firmly believe that she found out something, stumbled on somebody's secret. Knowing Rena Mae," he said sadly, "I feel confident that she'd be willing to make a deal. Rena Mae would take money for keeping her mouth shut. Well, she kept her part of the bargain. She got her money and her brief hour of triumph, and then she got a

dose of morphine. How," he asked, "does my theory strike you, Doctor?"

"It seems possible," I said in a voice as quiet as his. Stealing over me was a queer dreamlike feeling that a chasm was opening at my feet. This extraordinary policeman was leading me to a decision for which I might never forgive myself. "It seems possible," I repeated.

"Rena Mae wasn't a model young girl," her cousin said. "In a way, I suppose Rena Mae was a bad girl. But I don't think she deserved to be poisoned. Do you?"

"No," I said.

He leaned over from his chair, and put his hand on my arm. He looked deep in my eyes. In his own eyes was a look not of anger, not of menace, but of naked and desperate appeal.

"Help me, Dr. Grant. Tell me what you know about my cousin's death.

"Look at it from my point of view," he said. "I'll come clean with you. This investigation is my own idea; my superiors on the force aren't behind me. No one downtown at the station is willing to believe that Rena Mae didn't kill herself while temporarily deranged. Everyone thinks she took the gun to shoot herself, and then decided on poison. She dropped her purse somewhere, so I haven't even got the money to show. Tell me," he said, "what you know about that morphine."

12

THERE WAS SILENCE in the square room hung with the trophies and weapons of the Fairlee men. Lieutenant Clayton was a remarkable man. I almost succumbed. And still I hesitated. Perhaps he had spoken too angrily, too bitterly about "that crowd," which after all was my crowd, or at

least more my crowd than the Claytons or Thripps. Instead of appealing to my sense of right and justice, my ethics, Lieutenant Clayton had chosen to appeal to my emotions.

In consequence I remembered that I wasn't on his side in the investigation of Rena Mae's death, that I didn't really wish him well, that he menaced those I loved. I remembered how Maggie had gone into my bedroom and looked through my medical bag. I remembered Val, lying upstairs, stubbornly keeping her own secrets, but terrified of . . . something. I thought of red-haired Stephen, Jack's friend and my friend, too. I remembered the large sum of money Stephen had got from Maggie so very recently.

Lieutenant Clayton lacked the backing of the Charleston police force. He admitted it. In a way he didn't represent the law, but merely himself. It was a personal investigation. With such reasoning I quieted my conscience.

"I have nothing to tell you," I said, and my voice was steady. "Lieutenant Clayton, I am sorry."

He rose to his feet. The appeal had vanished from his eyes. They were hard and cold.

"Dr. Grant, I am sorry, too. Sorry and very disappointed. I expected something different from a woman and a physician. You have made a serious mistake. I warn you that you haven't heard the last about the morphine."

"I . . . I don't understand."

"You have underestimated my power to find out facts I am determined to know," Lieutenant Clayton said. "Dr. Grant, early this afternoon you telegraphed your nurse for your dispensary records. I am awaiting the reply from Connecticut with an interest equaling yours."

And then he turned his back on me, and moved toward the door. Before he reached it, the door opened abruptly. In the dark paneled room, with only the single lamp shining, Conway Collison didn't notice the policeman at first, but he saw me.

"Dr. Grant, I was looking for you. On my way across the street to have a quick one with Tradd, I ran into . . ."

Perceiving Lieutenant Clayton, Con hesitated. Lieutenant Clayton had no interest in Conway Collison, and, for the moment, was done with me. He brushed past the other man without speaking, and left the house. But he would be coming back.

Con walked over to the chair. A few minutes earlier Con had encountered a telegraph boy at the Fairlees' gate. He put in my hand the message from my nurse. No doubt Lieutenant Clayton's copy was awaiting him at the police station.

I opened the yellow envelope, took out the yellow sheet. The telegraphed reply of my very thorough nurse was absolutely damning. Miss Phipps had gone further than I requested. She had sent a complete report of the drugs I'd bought the past six months, the drugs on hand, the drugs administered to patients. My nurse had also tabulated in neat detail the contents of the bag I had carried to Charleston.

Six grains of morphia—the words seemed to leap at me from the yellow page. Six grains of morphia, for which the doctor could not account, were now a matter of record.

The blow was hardly unexpected. But I'd suffered from a prolonged strain. The telegram slipped out of my hand. My head fell back against the chair. I went into mild collapse, and badly frightened Conway Collison. A moment later brandy was dribbling down my chin, and Con's alarmed face was bending over me.

"Dr. Grant, I thought you'd had a heart attack."

"Nerves. Just nerves."

Con glanced at the yellow sheet of paper lying face down on the floor. He picked up the telegram and in silence handed it to me. Then he straightened a jaunty camellia boutonniere that made a splash of red on his rumpled linen jacket. His concerned and sympathetic eye now avoided

mine. When at last he spoke it was clear he didn't want to speak, but felt he must.

"Is the trouble connected with . . . with Rena Mae Thripp?" Con asked slowly, hesitantly. "Your telegram is your own business. But if you feel like talking to somebody, maybe I'm your man."

Somebody in the family had to be prepared. Somebody had to understand the situation. I knew I would rather talk to Conway Collison than to Maggie, to Val or to Stephen. I decided he was the man. Soon I wasn't sure. Even before I finished my story, the merry member of the close-knit clan, the twinkling-eyed extrovert, was more shaken than I was myself.

"But, Dr. Grant, that's appalling. You're a guest in my brother-in-law's house. If morphine was stolen from your bag, who had a better opportunity to take it than one of us? If Clayton succeeds in proving that girl was murdered, it looks like . . ."

"Exactly," I said.

"It's God's own mercy," Con said, and ran an agitated hand through his snowy hair, "you had the guts to hold out again Clayton. You chose the right line in refusing to talk. Stick to it."

"The truth can't be hidden indefinitely. By now Lieutenant Clayton probably has a copy of the telegram. When he asks to see my morphia supply, I'll have no supply to produce."

"Can't you buy morphine down here? Morphine that would look just the same. Several of my big advertisers are druggists, pharmacists. Surely you've got some kind of permit . . ."

"Thanks, no," I said dryly, more surprised by his naïveté than by the bluntness of his suggestion that I risk the immediate loss of my license to practice medicine. All along, I'd sensed that the Georgia cracker would stick by his own kin, however he might laugh at them, however he might

joke in public about southern concepts of family loyalty, family honor, family sentiment and the rest of it.

"Yes, I have a narcotics permit," I said to Con. "But even if I proposed to commit a felony and manufacture evidence in a criminal case, which I don't propose to do, it wouldn't work. I'd be arrested the minute I stepped in a drugstore, and asked for any opium derivative. Clayton is already watching me."

"Yes, yes, I see," Con conceded, distractedly. With violence he added, "Suicide is the angle we've got to play. Rena Mae spent quite some time in this house yesterday afternoon. She took Stephen's gun. Both Steve and I saw her with the gun. Why couldn't Rena Mae have gone upstairs to your bedroom, rifled your bag, and taken the morphine, too?"

"It just won't wash," I said. "My bag wasn't in the house while the girl was here. All my luggage was at the garage until the butler fetched it."

"So Rena Mae couldn't possibly have got the morphine herself?"

"Not possibly," I said.

"Oh, my God," said Con, and sat down.

His white head dropped between his hands. I seriously doubt that his conscience was troubling him. The outrageous suggestion that we compound a felony by producing false evidence rested lightly on Con. His head sunken on his chest. Con was worrying; he foresaw himself and his family moving swiftly toward certain and serious trouble.

Suddenly he raised his head. A new idea had struck him. His face looked odd.

"Doctor, you told me the girl's stomach contents showed three grains of morphine."

"Yes, I did."

"What became of the other three grains? You lost six. You don't suppose those missing grains might pop up, too?"

"Pop up? What do you mean?"

"Hell, you know what I mean," Conway Collison said, and left me.

Of course I knew. Presumably someone was still in possession of a lethal amount of the drug, someone who had used it once. A loaded Mauser pistol, with four bullets remaining out of the original six, was also unaccounted for.

Dinner that night was a wretched meal. Maggie and Tradd, Stephen and Val and I didn't eat in silence. We talked steadily through bisque of crab, through the wild turkey course, through the tipsy cake dessert. We talked to cover our own thoughts and preoccupations.

We talked at length about the Air Show, we discussed the prospects for the morrow, officially designated as Navy Day. We hoped the sun would shine. We chattered about the Children's Parade, a special project of Elizabeth Collison's. Along the shore front, past the crowds waiting to inspect the battleship, the destroyers, a fleet of newly arrived submarines, the small fry of the city were prepared to march with thier beribboned, garlanded pets, their own miniature flower-decorated floats. We granted that the children's show was bound to be successful.

Rena Mae Thripp wasn't mentioned. Not once. Only a few scraps of that Alice-in-Wonderland conversation, which carried straight through a five-course dinner, linger in my memory.

Once Tradd said to his wife, "My dear, where did you spend the afternoon?"

"Walking," Maggie replied. "Walking, and gaping at those planes. My neck is still stiff."

Suddenly I wondered whether Maggie had seen me in the cemetery. Did Maggie know I was aware that she had kept a rendezvous with Philo Higgs not far from the tomb of Rose Higgs Fairlee? The question went unspoken, along with other unspoken questions in the minds of other diners at the candle-lighted table.

Later on, after we'd finished praising the tipsy cake as though none of us had ever tasted a dessert before, Tradd addressed a remark to Val. He spoke to her about the wrecked car in Summerville.

"You young ladies usually need your luggage," Tradd Fairlee said. He smiled at his tall blonde guest, as though he'd entirely forgotten that he once had refused to receive the girl herself in his home. "Maybe it would help," Tradd suggested, "if I drove you out to Summerville tomorrow morning."

"I'll drive her out," Stephen said quickly, almost curtly.

"Well, do see that Val gets her luggage. With the Azalea Parade less than two days off, Val must have her things," Maggie said evenly. But from the betraying quiver of her lips, I knew that Maggie wasn't thinking of Val but of another girl who would play no part in the Festival. "Val should have her costume now," Maggie said. "The parade is Wednesday afternoon. Tomorrow is Tuesday."

Tradd was looking at Val. Tradd came closer to the forbidden topic of Rena Mae than any of the rest of us.

"I've had so little chance to talk to you," Tradd said. "But I'd like to understand. With the situation as it is, I've been wondering whether you do expect to appear in the parade?"

Val's eyes examined with scrupulous care her untouched portion of the cake.

"I don't know yet," she said slowly. "I can hardly say. But I'd like to tell you this, Mr. Fairlee. I never really wanted to be in the Parade."

"But my dear child," Maggie began in protest and surprise, "why then did you call me long distance the very morning you docked in New Orleans?"

"Oh, leave her be!" Stephen interrupted angrily, and pushed his chair back from the table and glared at his stepmother. "Can't you see that she doesn't feel like talking about that damned Azalea Parade?"

We all saw that. Val's tears weren't far off. Maggie herself was hurt by Stephen's unexpected attack, and I knew she was as bewildered and amazed by Val's remark as I was myself.

"Very well, we'll drop the subject," Maggie said quietly.

After that, Maggie rose from the table and we moved into the drawing-room for coffee. At an indecently early hour I excused myself and went upstairs, taking with me the wretched conviction that I wouldn't sleep. I prescribe sedatives for my patients, but leave them severely alone myself.

Emptying my mind of thought, I busied my hands. I carefully repacked the scattered contents of my medical bag and closed it. Lieutenant Clayton had left no evidence whatever to show he'd spent a profitable half-hour that afternoon rummaging through the bedroom and examining my possessions. He was a good policeman. Too good.

Leaving the bag on the bed, I washed a pair of stockings. I sewed a tiny rip in a glove. I brushed layers of dust from the shoes which had traveled miles that day. At length the fiddling tasks began to bring the magic of drowsiness.

The time arrived when sleep might be barely possible. I hurried off my clothes, scuttled into my nightgown. I plucked the bag from the bed, and rushed it toward the corner shadowed by a dressing table where my other bags were placed.

A splotch of white, lying on the dark wood floor, caught my eye. I paused and stared. The white splotch hadn't been there at dinner time when I sat down at the dressing table to comb my hair. I'd have noticed it. I'd dropped a hairpin on the floor, and discovered the pin after considerable scrambling.

As I slowly put down the bag, I turned on the dressing-table lamps. The white splotch on the floor became a crocheted butterfly, with a metal fastening at the top. Rena Mae Thripp's missing earring had turned up in the doc-

tor's room, very near the spot where the doctor kept her bags.

I gazed at that piece of planted evidence, and knew I was dealing with not only a murderer but a fool. Someone had intended to suggest to me and no doubt to Lieutenant Clayton that Rena Mae had entered my bedroom, and stolen the morphine herself. That someone had acted without sufficient knowledge of the facts.

Clayton had searched the bedroom and searched it carefully that afternoon. The butterfly earring hadn't been there then, or he'd have seen it. The earring hadn't been in the room at dinner time while I was scrambling on the floor, or I'd have noticed it. I could well imagine Lieutenant Clayton's reaction if I telephoned him that I had miraculously discovered one of Rena Mae's earrings in the vicinity of my medical bag.

Someone didn't know that my luggage had been delivered at the house long after Rena Mae's departure. Suddenly I asked myself who *did* know that now-important fact. Maggie knew.

Maggie had sent the butler to fetch my luggage. Indeed, we were discussing Rena Mae's violent exit at the time Boswell returned from the garage laden with my things. So Maggie hadn't put the earring in my room.

Con knew all about my bag not being in the house until after Rena Mae had left the premises. I had told him. I eliminated Con from my dreadful calculations.

Now my brain worked slowly, reluctantly. I considered the others, the luckless ones who weren't equipped with the information which would have guarded them from an act of criminal folly. It was improbable that either Tradd or Stephen knew anything about the movements of my luggage, or knew the hour of Rena Mae's departure. It was impossible that Val knew.

My thoughts traveled across the street. Elizabeth Collison must be included with Tradd and Stephen and Val.

The Fairlees' door was never locked to their kin, or to anybody else for that matter. The Collisons were always running in and out. Mrs. Collison could have slipped upstairs unseen and dropped the earrings in my bedroom, supposing she had wanted to. Mrs. Collison could also have stolen my morphia and poisoned Rena Mae, again assuming she had wanted to. But why would she?

Abruptly, I stopped thinking. I stopped staring at the butterfly earring. The time had come to act. I didn't intend to report that piece of manufactured evidence to Lieutenant Clayton. But I meant to get rid of it.

In the least valuable ashtray in the room, I built a fire of paper scraps. The cotton thread crocheted into a butterfly was stiffened with wax. The wax hissed and blazed as I dropped the earrings into the heat of the tiny flame.

Soon the little fire was ashes. The metal fastening of the earring hadn't burned, of course. I twisted the metal out of shape, broke it into pieces. I opened the window, and emptied the ashtray into Maggie's garden.

Across the street, the Collison's house was dark. It was a fine house, finer than Tradd's and Maggie's. The house built by the first Fairlee to settle in the colonies, and brought back into the family by his great-great-great-granddaughter, suited Elizabeth Collison very well. I pictured her lying in bed over there, sleeping the dreamless sleep of the clubwoman whose busy day has gone nicely, whose busy tomorrow is also nicely arranged. But Con wouldn't be sleeping. Somewhere in the darkened house, I thought, the merry man must be as wakeful as myself.

I leaned my burning cheek against the cool glass of the window. The smell of night-blooming jasmine drifted upward. Below me, the piazza steps suddenly creaked. I looked down on the top of Stephen's red head.

I watched him pass through the gate, and move swiftly along the quiet sidewalk. Beneath a street lamp on the

corner, a girl was waiting. Val? No. The girl was Deborah Parr.

I jerked down the window, pulled the shade. I was trembling. The moment I glimpsed Deborah Parr on Alexander Street, I realized that I had entirely missed a highly important possibility.

The bag from which the morphia had vanished had been in my bedroom at the Fairlee house only since yesterday afternoon. Earlier that same bag had been out at Harmony. The theft hadn't necessarily occurred at Maggie's house. The bag had lain unguarded in an unlocked room at Harmony when I went to bathe.

I saw myself opening the bag to get whiskey for the suffering Philo Higgs. I hadn't even properly closed the catches until I packed to leave the plantation house and to come in town with Maggie. While I was absent from the room, Deborah Parr had visited it. She'd tossed the hubcap in my wastebasket, and then had quickly gone. It seemed altogether possible that the girl had not left the room empty-handed.

Deborah Parr was on Alexander Street at this very moment. She could easily have introduced the earring into my room. To my way of thinking, Deborah Parr was ruthless, wicked. Deborah Parr, I decided, wouldn't stop at poison or at any weapon to gain her objective. I'd known it from the first.

I went almost peacefully to bed and fell asleep. Lieutenant Clayton was conducting a personal inquiry into Rena Mae's death. I would do the same. I had two lines of investigation to pursue. In the morning I would call on Deborah Parr at Harmony. In the afternoon I would visit the offices of the Charleston *Banner,* consult the files, and search for information about the circumstances of Rose Fairlee's death.

13

I INTENDED TO GET off to Harmony early in the morning. Unfortunately, I overslept. I was so eager to be about my business and so very anxious to keep my business to myself that I decided to go without a badly needed cup of coffee. I hurried into my clothes, went quickly and quietly downstairs. There were voices in the drawing-room, but I got safely through the foyer and outside on the piazza.

As I closed the door in haste, one of my favorite gloves fell over the piazza railing and dropped into a camellia bush below. To my annoyance, I discovered a moment later that the thick glistening foliage of the tall shrub which stood guard at the steps had completely swallowed up the glove. I shook the bush, without result. Nervous and impatient, I jerked the branches apart, thrust in my arm and groped for the fugitive.

I found my glove. I also touched something else, which lay on the damp cool ground at the base of the bush. Before I saw my find, I identified it by touch. My hurry and impatience died. Very slowly, I pulled out Rena Mae's missing purse.

I understood at once how the crocheted purse happened to be in the bush. The pangs of death upon her, Rena Mae had staggered through the garden, reached the foot of the piazza steps and seized the railing to drag herself upward. The purse had slipped from her fingers, fallen in the bush and out of sight. She probably hadn't even missed it. The purse might have lain undiscovered in its leafy hideaway for days or even weeks.

This wasn't planted evidence.

The sacklike purse was heavy. I undid the drawstring, looked inside. The Mauser pistol wasn't there.

There was a half-empty package of cigarettes, a tin of aspirin, a comb that needed cleaning. At the bottom of the sack was a loose collection of change, a twenty-dollar bill,

a five-dollar bill, three crumpled one-dollar bills. A handsome metal vanity case, inscribed with Rena Mae's name and the date she'd received it, accounted for the weight of the purse.

I took out the case, opened it. She had never filled the powder compartment. The flat puff was pristine in its newness. The metal mirror sparkled in the sun, reflecting the piazza steps behind. On the opposite side of the case, tucked into the powder compartment, was a packet of hundred-dollar bills. There were ten of the bills. The bills had come fresh and new from the bank, and still wore a paper halter. On Saturday, Stephen had borrowed from Maggie the sum of one thousand dollars. Maggie had got the money from the bank. The whole transaction must be a matter of record. Well, I couldn't help it.

Whatever else my conscience might allow me to do, I couldn't keep this evidence from Sanford Clayton. It was impossible. He had to know about this. I couldn't steal his dead cousin's purse.

I started to close the case. And then I looked into the tilting mirror. The glittering metal surface reflected the piazza steps, a pair of trousered legs coming down. I turned around.

"Let me have the purse," Tradd Fairlee said.

"I mean to carry it to the police," I said. "It belongs to Rena Mae."

"Give me the purse, please."

Tradd's voice was courteous and quiet. But his face was set with determination. His expression almost frightened me. He stretched out his hand. Simultaneously I backed off, shoved the vanity case into the purse, drew the string.

"Tradd, I can't let you have the purse. I must take it to Lieutenant Clayton. Stephen's gun isn't in the purse."

"I know what's in the purse. Money. That money didn't belong to Rena Mae Thripp. She didn't come by it honestly."

"The money doesn't belong to you either, Tradd. The police must decide what to do about it."

"Dr. Grant, you're my guest. You're Maggie's friend and a woman. But I must take the purse from you."

"Oh, no," I said, and kept my eyes on him and backed another step into the garden.

Immediately he leaped from the piazza steps and was beside me. His hand closed on the hand I'd put behind my back in an instinctive gesture to protect the purse. As he tried to pull my arm around and as I resisted, the purse dropped from my fingers. I cried out in protest and dismay. He thought it was pain.

"Sorry, Vic," Tradd said, using my given name for the first time in our acquaintance. "I mean that. I hope I didn't hurt your arm."

Then he leaned over, picked the purse from the ground, straightened up. He was facing the garden gate and the sidewalk, and I was facing the house. I didn't hear the sound of someone entering the garden. But I saw the sudden despair in Tradd Fairlee's eyes. And then a familiar voice came to my ears.

"Good morning, Dr. Grant," Lieutenant Clayton addressed my immobile back. "I see that you've acquired an accomplice in suppressing evidence." To Tradd, he said, "Mr. Fairlee, I will thank you for my cousin's purse."

By now, the policeman had joined us. Tradd sent me a long and bitter look, but he surrendered the purse in silence. No one spoke. Sanford Clayton didn't examine the purse. He put the crocheted sack in his pocket, as though the occasion were quite ordinary. He asked no questions, not where we'd found the purse or what was in it, nothing. He glanced at his watch. The silence lengthened.

"Maybe we'd better go inside," I said at last, uncertainly, to the policeman. "I suppose you want to talk to us."

"Later, perhaps," Lieutenant Clayton replied, turned

around and strolled out of the garden, and left Tradd and me standing there.

His plan of strategy was clear. There would be no blustering, no threats. Watchful waiting was to be his policy. Sanford Clayton comprehended precisely the kind of people with whom he dealt. The Fairlees and the Collisons, the Trevelyns and the Dr. Grants of this world are handicapped in certain ways by being themselves. When they try to circumvent and outwit the law, they are victimized by their own nervous systems. Imagination torments them. Suspense becomes agony. They can't let a static situation rest. In the end almost inevitably they do foolish things, give themselves away. Lieutenant Clayton was counting on that.

The policeman had seen and studied carefully a copy of my Connecticut dispensary record, and knew I was aware of the fact. Later, perhaps, he would question me about the supply of morphia for which I could not account. In the meanwhile, I could consider what my answers were going to be. Time wasn't pressing. Time was on his side. My conscience and my imagination, the conscience, nerve and imagination of the others, were his allies.

"Vic, come back in the house with me," Tradd said, as the garden gate softly closed. "You're in no shape to go off now. Come in and eat your breakfast."

"No," I said. "I have some important errands."

"Then let me fetch you a cup of coffee."

He vaulted up the piazza steps, with a youthful swing for a man nearing fifty. I didn't propose to wait for his return. Time that was working so nicely for Lieutenant Clayton, was working against me. If I intended to conduct a personal inquiry, it would be well to get the inquiry under way before all of us were behind bars. I went to the gate. As I opened it, Maggie walked out into the garden from the first floor. She came quickly toward me. Her face was very pale.

"Vic, what happened? I saw Tradd and you and Lieutenant Clayton."

"Lieutenant Clayton has found Rena Mae's purse," I told her. "There was a thousand dollars in it."

"A thousand dollars," Maggie repeated stupidly. "Vic, that can't be true. There's some mistake."

"It's true," I said.

The blow was obviously unexpected. Maggie leaned against the gate like someone about to faint. but I put aside my feelings as a physician.

"Maggie," I said, "you lent a thousand dollars to Stephen on Saturday. Did he give that money to Rena Mae?"

"I certainly didn't think so," she said in a dull, bewildered way. "I don't understand at all. I thought Stephen wanted the money for Deborah Parr."

Detective work is not a pleasant business. Now, if ever, now that Maggie was caught off guard with her defenses down, was my chance to get at least a part of the truth from her. I seized it.

"Why did you think that?" I demanded. "Why would Stephen give money to Deborah Parr?"

"I don't know," said Maggie in a rising voice. "All I know is that Deborah Parr is down here, driving Stephen crazy. All I know is that there'd be no trouble if she'd stayed where she belonged . . . in New Haven."

"New Haven?" I said blankly. "Maggie, who *is* that girl?"

"Don't you know, Vic?" asked Maggie, and her voice was quiet now. There was an odd look in the eyes regarding me. "Deborah Parr," said Maggie, "is the New Haven girl Stephen courted while he was at Yale. You saw so much of Stephen last year. Didn't you ever meet his girl?"

"No," I said.

It was true that I'd seen a great deal of Stephen last year, entertained him many times. From my nephew I'd heard about Stephen's local girl, but Jack hadn't mentioned her

name. No doubt Jack hadn't known it. Stephen didn't talk about his girls.

So Deborah Parr was the one! Well, it was logical enough. It fitted in. I recalled Maggie's violent attack on the New Haven stenographer, her gratified announcement that Stephen had soon forgotten his college fancy; I recalled my own spirited defense of a girl I'd never seen or met, a girl whose name I didn't even know.

Maggie had been right about Deborah Parr. I had been wrong. Plainly the girl had some secret hold on Stephen. What was the secret? Did Maggie know or suspect? Or was Maggie, like myself, merely trying to find out?

Suddenly I had a shock. Maggie was covertly watching me. Suddenly I understood the odd look in her eyes. It was a look of doubt and suspicion. My own integrity was in question. Maggie didn't credit that I'd never met Stephen's girl. Maggie was remembering that Deborah Parr had arrived in South Carolina on the same day I arrived.

I opened my mouth. But I had lost the opportunity to continue the conversation. Maggie glanced past me and across the narrow street. Her expression changed. I, too, looked through the gate. Elizabeth Collison had emerged from the double house, and was just stepping into a station wagon parked at the curb. Maggie turned and fled. But I was squarely caught.

Mrs. Collison beckoned me over. I had no choice but to go.

"Good morning, Dr. Grant," Elizabeth began chattily. "What an attractive suit you're wearing. I'm so fond of navy blue. Didn't I see Sanford Clayton leaving a few minutes ago?"

"Yes," I said, without elaboration.

She hesitated.

"I'm afraid it's my nature to be curious. You should hear Con teasing me," Mrs. Collison offered, and waited expectantly.

I examined the woman seated at the wheel of the station wagon. She didn't look like the kind of woman a husband would tease. She wore a thick, long-sleeved cotton shirt, thick cotton pants, and a stout pair of high-laced boots that would have done service on the trails of darkest Africa. The ensemble was topped incongruously by a sailor hat, tied firmly with a veil. Mrs. Collison perceived I wasn't going to talk, but she didn't surrender without a struggle.

"Where are you going, Doctor? Perhaps I can offer you a lift. I'm running all over town," she went on with a confiding smile, "picking up the Boy Scouts who've volunteered to help me collect decorations for the Children's Parade. Can't I drop you anywhere?"

"Thank you, I'm afraid not," I said. I had no intention whatever of telling Elizabeth Collison that I was about to travel eighteen miles to make a call on Deborah Parr. Merely to be polite, I added, "Which way are you headed?"

"Out to Harmony," she said.

"Harmony!"

"We need quantities of flowers to decorate the floats," Mrs. Collison explained, with a quick, sharp, curious glance at me. "Penelope Higgs has kindly offered to let me raid the plantation gardens."

"You have a fine day for the parade," I said mechanically.

"The parade isn't scheduled until five this afternoon, I wish it was earlier." She turned a dubious gaze on the blazing, cloudless brilliance of the sky. "Our storms come up so fast. I noticed our barometer was falling. I don't suppose you're familiar with southern coastal storms, Doctor?"

"No," I said, frantic to escape from her, not wishing to be held there to discuss South Carolina weather, the children's parade, or, in particular, Harmony Hall. "It's nice to have seen you. Luck with the parade!" I turned away.

"Wait a minute, Dr. Grant."

The executive voice was breathless. She leaned out of

the station-wagon window in her anxiety to delay my flight. "How is Maggie feeling this morning?"

"Maggie? Maggie is feeling well."

"I'm glad. I do wish," said Mrs. Collison, "that my sister-in-law liked me better. I must be difficult to like. So many people prefer Con. I'm sure that Maggie ran in the house just now to avoid me. You've known her for years, of course."

"Yes, for years. Ever since we started kindergarten together."

"I've often wished that I could talk to Maggie freely. But she holds me off. I expect she talks freely to you."

"Well, yes," I replied, knowing that wasn't true, and wondering what point Maggie's sister-in-law was trying to arrive at. With her next remark, the point was at last revealed.

"In fact, Dr. Grant, I've never been able to talk to Maggie about my brother's first wife. I've often wanted to. Will you be kind enough to tell Maggie something for me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then tell her," said Mrs. Collison, "that Rose Fairlee wasn't perfect."

Mrs. Collison stepped on the accelerator. The station wagon drove away.

As I watched the car turn the corner, I changed my own plans for the day. I decided to save Harmony for the afternoon, and save myself the risk of encountering Elizabeth Collison again. It was my intention to call upon Deborah Parr as privately as Stephen had done. If the girl happened to be away from the plantation house, I would be just as well pleased. In that case, I was determined to search her room.

Besides, I had the extra reason for preferring to visit the *Banner* offices first. I was sharply curious about the circumstances of Rose Fairlee's death.

The Charleston *Banner* was housed in a handsome mod-

ern building on Meeting Street. I walked into a virtually deserted city room. It was between editions. All the busy young men were outside on the streets covering the Festival. An elderly Negro, who was slowly drawing a broom back and forth across the floor and redistributing a remarkable amount of dirt, happily interrupted his work to tell me that I would find back issues of the newspaper filed in bound volumes in the library. The library was on the second floor. I climbed a flight of stairs, walked along an empty hallway.

I passed by Conway Collison's private office. Next to it, I saw a frosted door marked SPECIAL FEATURES that bore Stephen's name. I found myself stopping at Stephen's door.

If Stephen was in, I would give him one last chance to explain his and Val's trouble with Deborah Parr. I would tell Stephen frankly that I believed the girl had taken my morphia and was a poisoner, that I was half-convinced she had his missing gun. I would tell him I was determined to find out. I would tell Stephen that I believed his dead mother was somehow concerned in the situation. And then I would await results.

My hand closed on the doorknob. It was a business office. I didn't knock. The door opened soundlessly.

Stephen was in. I caught him unawares. Across the room, his back to me, Stephen was engaged in performing a peculiar, a furtive task. He was leaning over a metal filing cabinet. Stephen was shoving something—a makeshift parcel hurriedly wrapped in carbon paper swept up from his desk—into the lower drawer of the filing cabinet.

That he was hiding the parcel was all too obvious. The carbon-paper parcel wasn't very large. It was, however, large enough to hold a gun. It was small enough to hold a slender bottle, half-filled with morphia tablets.

The filing-cabinet drawer rasped into place. Without a

sound, I closed the door. For several minutes I stood in the quiet hall, while the thudding of my heart subsided, while I pondered what to do now.

At last I raised my hand and knocked. There was no answer. I knocked again. I opened the door.

Stephen was gone.

Across the office, a second door showed the way of his departure. I hestitated, stepped in. Slowly I approached the filing cabinet. A white card on the lower drawer read: "Inactive." A long minute dragged by, while I gazed at the little sign. And then the drawer rasped as I pulled it out. Thick rust corroded the metal edges. Yellowed clippings, yellowed papers thrust into cardboard folders filled the space.

In one way, the search wasn't difficult. I knew exactly the size and shape of the object I sought. In another way, the search wasn't easy, for I felt that I was spying on, betraying, a red-haired boy who was a friend of mine.

Deep in one of the cardboard folders, I located the carbon-wrapped parcel. There was nothing else in the folder except a yellowed newspaper. Purple stuff came off on my fingers as I drew the package forth. The makeshift wrappings parted.

My find was wholly unexpected. I stared. A red-haired woman holding a pink rose in her hand stared inscrutably back at me. Stephen had hidden away his miniature of his mother.

I re-wrapped the miniature, replaced it in the filing cabinet, and stole out of the office. Now very much I wanted to learn more about Rose Fairlee. In the library, a thin dyspeptic man listened wearily while I introduced myself as a northern visitor collecting data on the southern press. He jerked his thumb toward the shelves of big bound volumes that contained back issues of the newspaper.

"You're welcome to look through our stuff, ma'am. The

Banner makes a right smart showing these last few years. Conway Collison has big-town ideas. You can use that table over there."

His weary eye followed me to the shelves. It seemed wise to back up my tale of a burning interest in the southern press by beginning with at least a cursory examination of the most recent volumes. The *Banner* shrank in physical size and lost in style as I went backward in time. Twelve- and sixteen-page issues dwindled to six and eight pages.

May 5, 1943 was the date inscribed on Rose Fairlee's tomb. The librarian began tapping on his typewriter. At last I thought it safe to select the volume I wanted. March 1—May 31, 1943 appeared on the back of the heavy book that I carried over to the table. I forced myself to patience, leafed through the month of March. My fingers sped through April.

I came to the month of May, 1943. May 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th rustled by. And then, bewildered, I was looking at pages dated May 6th. I flipped back through the pages.

The issue of the *Banner* published on May 5, 1943, wasn't there. It had been neatly scissored from the volume. I could feel the severed edges.

"How you doing?" the librarian suddenly inquired.

"Oh, I've done well," I replied, and rose and replaced the mutilated volume on the shelf. "Thank you, I'm finished here."

But I wasn't finished with the *Banner* building. For I knew where the missing issue was. I'd had it in my hands half an hour ago. The May 5, 1943 copy of the newspaper was in the cardboard folder along with the miniature of Stephen's mother.

I returned to Stephen's office, knocked again, entered the empty room. A second time I stepped to the inactive file, removed a folder from the bottom drawer. I smoothed out the newspaper on Stephen's desk.

The story of Rose Higgs Fairlee was printed on the

front page of the *Banner,* but it was very short. The headline occupied almost as much space as the solid type. The headline read:

MRS. TRADD FAIRLEE DIES
IN FREAK CAR ACCIDENT

Ten lines composed the narrative. Five years ago, at six o'clock one foggy May morning, Rose Fairlee had crashed into a tree. Driver and car had been caught by the toppling tree.

On the second page appeared a photograph of the fantastic accident. It showed the crumpled hood and front wheels of an automobile protruding from a confused mass of limbs and leaves and twisted branches. The imagination was left to picture, lying somewhere beneath the fallen tree trunk, the rest of the car and a woman's crushed and broken body.

The fallen tree was the cripple of the live oak avenue out at Harmony Hall. The Hangman's Tree.

In the foreground of the photograph stood a vaguely familiar figure. I picked up a magnifying glass on the desk, and with its aid identified the figure. In May of 1943, Philo Higgs had been twenty pounds heavier and looked fifteen years younger.

The photographer had posed the master of Harmony so that he was pointing at the wreckage. I was surprised that Mr. Higgs had been persuaded into adopting the stupid, banal and somewhat vulgar pose. His own cousin was buried under that wreckage.

Perhaps shock was responsible for his acquiescence. Shock would have been understandable. According to the story, Philo Higgs was the only witness of Rose Fairlee's fatal accident.

14

IT WAS LATE afternoon when I turned my car into the live oak avenue at Harmony. By then the fierce brilliance of the sun had grown less bright. A wind was blowing. I drove slowly, looking for a turn-off, a place to park. I mean to approach the plantation house inconspicuously on foot. I hoped to reach Deborah Parr's third-floor bedroom, unseen.

I found my turn-off, a dusty rutted road hardly more than a trail. It led me downhill past an old abandoned rice field to the banks of a clay-colored river which once had flooded and enriched the rice fields and now ran through ruin and desolation. I parked behind a clump of brush and bushes that pressed in on a dilapidated boathouse on the river bank. Satisfied that the car was well concealed, I stepped out.

Up a rising slope before me stretched a tangled jungle that had been under cultivation once. Above the bankrupt rice fields, the tumbled, all-pervading wilderness of gray and green was punctuated here and there with the bright flame of azaleas, the white and purple spatter of wisteria, the deep green of box—the shattered remnants of a formal garden that long ago had been the glory of Harmony.

A narrow irregular path of sorts, like a sunless tunnel, had been hacked through the heavy growth and climbed upward toward the plantation house. It jogged this way and that through the ruined acres. But I judged this footpath must come out somewhere near the fallen live oak tree.

I picked my way through a crawling mass of growth starred with tiny yellow blossoms and thick with thorns. I stumbled over an old bronze sundial swallowed in vines and creepers. The pointing finger on the dial was broken off. The inscription had withstood long neglect.

"Serene I stand among the Flowers
And only count Life's Sunny Hours.
Dark Days for me do Not Exist
I'm just a brazen-faced Old Optimist."

And then abruptly my own meager store of optimism was further diminished. In an opening near the entrance to the ascending path, I caught sight of Elizabeth Collison's station wagon. I'd supposed the decoration committee would be long gone. Certainly I had hoped so. The station wagon was stuffed with bushels of camellias, azaleas, streaming banners of wisteria. I was sharply, uncomfortably reminded of another woman who had come five years ago to Harmony to gather flowers. I shook off the thought.

Hastening past the station wagon, I started up the path. Tree branches meshed by vines and briars and ropy creepers, dripping Spanish moss and wisteria, met overhead and formed a gray-green roof. The light was watery, obscure. In the jungle advancing from both sides, I heard the muffled voices of several of the Boy Scouts, as they wielded clippers, knives, machetes. My heart beat uncomfortably. Why? My errand was unconventional but quite proper. My cause was right. I intended to help bring to justice a cruel poisoner.

On the path ahead, there was a sudden rustling, a crackling and snapping of branches. I gasped, jumped to conceal myself. A small boy with bleeding hands, decked out like Birnam Wood, burst into view. The poor lad was blinded by his own flowery, leafy burden, and couldn't possibly have seen me. Nevertheless, I shrank still farther back, and I didn't speak to him. He staggered on past and toward the station wagon.

Ashamed of hiding from a Boy Scout, I stepped defiantly into the center of the path. I mopped my sweating forehead, knocked bits of twigs and leaves out of my hair. Not

a ray of light penetrated much of that unpleasant tunnel chopped through the solid wilderness. You could only guess that somewhere the sun was shining. The too-sweet smell of unseen jasmine drifted in. Wisteria, battling to reach light and air, struggled to the death with Spanish moss which requires no light but also loves the trees. White and purple blossoms carpeted the ground, slippery underfoot, odorous like rotting bananas. Insects buzzed their little secrets, flitted on the busy errands that must be performed in a life cycle that is very brief.

The mounting, twisting path seemed endless. Soon, surely soon, I would reach the exit. Surely around that next bend I would see a welcome gush of sunlight, and beyond the hump-backed tree a plantation house set in beauty among cultivated flowers, surrounded by shaven lawns.

I moved three steps forward. Someone came around the bend—a man. The man was Philo Higgs. He was drunk as a coot.

We met face to face. I had no chance to pass. He grabbed my arm. In his drunkenness and in the shadowy obscurity, he didn't recognize me at first. He appeared to take me for Elizabeth Collison, changed magically from pants to skirts, a change which he frankly confided was a decided improvement. And then he laughed uproariously. The sound went echoing up and down the gray-green tunnel.

"Stop that!" I said. "Stop that, at once."

Recognition dawned. His tight grip on my arm loosened. He clasped my shoulder tenderly. He peered at me with great affection.

"It's the Doc. Good old Doc! She knows how to treat a drinking man. What's your pleasure, Doc?"

My silence first hurt and then displeased him. He frowned.

"What are you doing here on my grounds? What did you come for, Doc?"

It was a fair question at that.

"Not that I mind," Philo Higgs conceded largely, with a sweeping gesture of the hand that wasn't clutching me. "All I have, Doc, is yours. The trouble is that all I have Penelope has. Doc, that makes it different. Sad but true. Too, too true. Frankly, Doc, Mrs. Higgs dislikes trespassers. Mrs. Higgs would want to know your business. What did you come for, Doc?"

"I think I left something behind in my room," I said. "I'd like your permission to look for it. You remember my being here. You carried in my luggage."

"More, Doc. Tell me more. Tell me more, and tell me better."

"Something was . . . was missing from my medical bag, when I unpacked in town. I thought perhaps it got lost out here. You may recall the bag . . . a small black bag, rather worn."

"Got lost, Doc?" repeated Philo Higgs, with an abrupt change of manner. In the greenish-gray obscurity his face turned a mottled red. Anger flared in his bloodshot eyes. "Got lost, Doc? Is that your Yankee way of saying 'stolen'? Of course I remember the bag. You gave me a drink out of it. I've been insulted a lot of different ways in my time. Some insults maybe I deserve. But some insults I won't take. Do you think I *stole* your whiskey?"

I wasn't exactly frightened but I was apprehensive. I interned at Bellevue, and my jaw was broken once by a drunk I treated with insufficient tact. I was alone with Philo Higgs, trapped with him on the path, several hundred yards from the open and the safety of the house.

"Well, Doc?" he said.

"Don't be absurd," I said, realizing in despair that I must part with at least a portion of the truth. I needn't

tell it all. "I did mean stealing," I said, "but I didn't mean you. My whiskey wasn't stolen. But drugs—dangerous drugs—disappeared from my bag. And I have a fair idea of who took them."

"Who?"

"Deborah Parr," I said.

As quickly as it descended, his anger lifted. Apparently I could have said nothing to delight him more. We were friends again. Friends and, alas, allies.

"Now, you're talking sense," Philo Higgs announced with enthusiasm. "That little lady, like too many of your sex, if you'll forgive my remarking it, is a worthless piece of goods. Tell you what, she's been gone all day. Why don't we sneak in her room and look around for your stuff?"

"We?" I echoed in consternation. "Oh, but Mr. Higgs . . ."

"You need my help, Doc. Mrs. Higgs keeps the back door of Harmony locked, and then I come along and keep it unlocked. With me to lead the way, you may be sure that Mrs. Higgs won't catch us."

The company of Philo Higgs was the last thing that I desired. I'd have sooner been preceded by an army with banners. I had to make a real and very thorough search of Deborah Parr's bedroom. To be sure, I wanted to look for a half-empty bottle of morphia tablets. But I also wanted to look for Stephen's vanished Mauser.

Somehow I had to distract his mind, get rid of him. In my eagerness to do so, and in my curiosity about Rose Fairlee's fatal accident, I miscalculated both the extent of Philo Higgs' friendliness and the extent of his intoxication. I proceeded to say a very foolish thing.

"Mr. Higgs," I said, "why was Rose Fairlee leaving Harmony Hall at six o'clock in the morning?"

The silly alcoholic grin vanished from his face. It became the face of a sober man, still and quiet. There was no

anger in the bloodshot eyes. There wasn't menace. There wasn't pain. There was nothing.

"Never mind," I stammered. "Forget the question. Only I happened to run across the story in the paper and . . ."

"Never mind the explanations, Doctor," said Philo Higgs. He withdrew his arm from my shoulder. He stepped back and looked me up and down. His lip curled. "Why bother with explanations? Idle curiosity is one of the minor vices of your sex. There are worse. If you happened to run across the story in the paper," he went on, "I'm surprised you didn't read that Rose Fairlee had come out to Harmony to pick flowers."

"It was so early in the morning. People . . . people don't drive miles to cut roses at six a. m. I . . . I didn't believe it."

"So you don't believe it," he said. "What a coincidence. I don't believe it either. Sure, I'll tell you about Rose Fairlee. Why not?

"Rose was a cousin of mine, a Higgs of South Carolina, and no doubt I should pretend she was above reproach like Caesar's wife. But Rose wasn't like Caesar's wife. Come to think of it, maybe Caesar got tired of supporting the Calpurnia legend. I know I get damned sick of the Rose Higgs Fairlee legend.

"Why should I play the little gentleman forever?" inquired Philo Higgs. "The role becomes tiresome, not to say anachronistic, in the female company I seem to keep. You asked about Rose Fairlee. Why was Rose leaving Harmony at six o'clock in the morning? Well, in the old days, Rose used to stay over-night out here, quite often. With the hearty co-operation of my own sweet wife, Rose used to entertain her friends at Harmony, and then get home with the milkman."

"Her friends?"

"Oh come now, Doctor," he said. "Wide-eyed innocence

is not your style. Surely you've heard of wives who do not entertain *all* their friends in their husbands' parlor."

With that, he left me. It was at once a pitiful and a fascinating performance. In his determination to maintain coordination and dignity, Mr. Higgs pivoted very gradually on his heel like a slow-motion picture. He accomplished the turn with perfect balance, presented me with his back. And then his muscular coordination failed him and he went lurching and reeling away down the hill toward the boathouse.

A few minutes later I left the footpath, scuttled past the Hangman's Tree, circled the house, and slipped into Harmony Hall by the back entrance. I heard the rattle of crockery in the kitchen. Otherwise the big house was quiet. The paying guests had gone into town to see the Navy Show. I wondered whether Deborah Parr was among the visitors at Battery Park. I rather thought not.

Without incident, I reached the third floor. I moved along the wide hall toward Deborah's bedroom. Around the corner, hidden by the angle of the wall, was the telephone booth.

I recalled how Deborah Parr had danced out of the booth into the hall. She had paused long enough to enjoy a moment of secret and gleeful triumph, the peculiar triumph that thrills the nerves of a certain kind of person who contemplates some anticipated and illicit monetary gain. I recalled the old dollar signs the girl had absently penciled in the margin of the phone book, beside the listing of the Fairlee name.

Very shortly after Deborah Parr had concluded that satisfying conversation, I remembered, with a pang, Stephen had surreptitiously entered the plantation house. A Stephen as furtive as myself had climbed the servants' stairs and come along this hall.

I stopped before Deborah's bedroom door. Stephen hadn't knocked. Why? Had he been expected?

I knocked. There was no answer. I opened the door, went in.

15

DEBORAH PARR WASN'T a tidy girl, nor was Harmony Hall notable for service. I've seldom seen a room which needed a maid's attention more.

The bed was unmade. The floor wasn't swept. Discarded clothing, lipstick-stained tissues and cigarette ashes were scattered everywhere. A whiskey bottle had been tossed into a wastebasket stuffed to the brim with newspapers and magazines. Crumpled balls of letter paper lay on the carpet around the wastebasket, as though someone seated at the cherrywood desk had begun a letter several different ways and thrown away the unsatisfactory results.

The desk was a sight to behold. Ink was spilled on the blotter, the pen was separated from its stand, and a partially filled glass of water had left a whitish ring on the cherrywood. The bureau top was littered with flagons of perfume and jars of cosmetics, mostly unstoppered and uncapped.

So great was the disorder that it was difficult to know where to begin a search. Surveying the uproar of the bedroom, I tried to decide where I would hide something I didn't want found. A long slender bottle half-filled with morphia tablets, say. Or a Mauser pistol. Or any other kind of evidence that might point to wrongdoing.

I began with Deborah Parr's luggage. Her bags were empty. I felt in the pockets, examined the lining for any signs of loosening. Next I looked for bumps in the carpet. I flashed the pencil flashlight I carry in my purse behind the two old-fashioned radiators. I sent my little light up the blank hole of the fireplace chimney.

I then attacked the bureau. Starting with the bottom

drawer, I worked up. I found tumbled piles of lingerie, gloves, handkerchiefs, blouses; nothing else. I discovered only that Deborah Parr owned rather expensive accessories for a girl who earned her living by stenography.

I lifted the lid of her jewel case. There was a tangle of costume jewelry, smart and tasteful, but it was all the type of thing I could have afforded myself. In the inexpensive jumble, however, I spied an unusually fine piece of white jade which clasped an Egyptian scarab. The scarab brooch wasn't especially attractive but it was undoubtedly costly. The three unset star sapphires, wrapped in a twist of cotton to protect them until they glittered from a bracelet or dinner ring, were costly, too. Very costly.

No stenographer could possibly have paid for the jade or the star sapphires. The girl must have got the sapphires and the jade as . . . gifts. Suddenly I found myself feeling ashamed, a little sick. I had discovered nothing connecting Deborah Parr with murder. Yet I was going through her possessions, making up my mind about her on the basis of information I was collecting as stealthily and perhaps as dishonestly as any thief.

It wasn't my business to judge the girl's morals. Her character, except as it touched on Val's life, Stephen's life and Rena Mae's death, was hardly my affair. My conscience did not restrain me long. Once begun on the search, I must finish it. A massive mahogany wardrobe, large enough to house the clothing of a family of five, served as a closet. I went over to the wardrobe, intending to go through the pockets of Deborah Parr's suits and dresses.

I pulled open the two mahogany doors. Deborah Parr had brought a lot of clothes to Charleston: prints and cottons, silks and flannels, long swishy evening dresses. But what I noticed first was a row of shoes on the wardrobe floor.

"Um," I said aloud, "the very place."

I picked up a pair of bright blue wedgies and shook them. I thrust eager fingers into the rounded toes of a pair of loafers, and then into tan and white spectator sports shoes. I ignored the flimsy sandals and explored a pair of alligator pumps. A moment later my heart beat hard. Hidden deep in the toe of a silver dancing slipper, I struck pay dirt. My fingers touched a wad of crumpled paper. Very carefully I pulled out a wad of bills—hundred-dollar bills.

Carefully I walked over to the desk and sat down. The hundred-dollar bills seemed to be wrapped around the hard core of a coin. With careful fingers, I began to pull the wad apart. Even before I peeled off the ninth of the ten bills, I knew that Deborah Parr's hidden cache totaled exactly one thousand dollars.

For a moment I almost thought I was going crazy. Rena Mae Thripp had died with a thousand dollars in her purse, but Lieutenant Clayton had carried off Rena Mae's purse and the money with it. On Saturday Stephen had borrowed a thousand dollars from Maggie. Stephen hadn't borrowed *two* thousand dollars. Yet Deborah Parr had also got possession of exactly one thousand dollars. Where? From whom?

Mechanically I unwrapped the tenth bill to take a look at the coin. Only it wasn't a coin. Stephen's fraternity ring gleamed from the desk, circled by the scattered bills.

Stephen couldn't have raised ten dollars by pawning the shiny old ring. Val, who had briefly worn it and soon parted with it, had valued the ring as women always value the rings of the men they love. Deborah Parr had also set a high value on Stephen's fraternity ring. She had wrapped the ring inside a thousand dollars' worth of bills, and then had hidden both in the toe of a silver dancing slipper.

Outside the bedroom the boughs of great trees creaked and rattled, banged against the house. The wind was stead-

ily rising. A stiff breeze blew in through an open window. My search had taken a long time. It was dark now.

On the floor the loose crushed sheets of letter paper rustled and scurried around like blown leaves. I turned on the desk lamp in the room. The soft yellow light shone on Stephen's ring and across the ink-splashed, marked-up blotter. Deborah Parr had spent quite a while seated at the desk earlier in the day. Several of the accidental ink splashes had been turned into the nasty little dollar sign that was her favorite symbol. I glanced at the sheets of scribbled letter paper blowing on the floor.

I swept up the nearest sheets. In a kind of frenzy, I flattened three of the wrinkled paper balls against the blotter. The hand-writing was Deborah Parr's, the same impatient scrawl that appeared on the hotel register downstairs. The context, the style and phraseology of each of the three drafts of what was obviously to be just one letter sent to one person, was strikingly different. You could tell how young the writer was from her unsureness as to just what pose would be the most effective with her reader. Deborah Parr had devoted considerable thought to choosing the best way to torment the person who was to receive her offering.

The first draft of the projected letter was pretentious, in a literary vein. It was the longest of the three.

> "Darling: How happy I am to be in Charleston, and how happy you must be to have me here. Not that I'm happy over everything. How can I be, when there are so very many things on which you and I don't see eye to eye.
>
> "Let us consider southern traditions, for instance, southern notions of honor and reputation, family and all the rest of it, things which mean a great deal to you and less than nothing to me.

"I'm a woman of the world, dear. What care I for the ideas of a provincial town like Charleston, where the family honor of the Fairlees, the Collisons, the Higgs, the Trevelyns et al, seem to mean so much? To me, family honor as a consideration seems a wee bit dated.

"However, I'm so pleased that you feel differently. Particularly since your so very different feelings have rekindled your interest in little me. At any rate, you're interested in persuading me to abandon my lovely idea to make Charleston really sit up and take notice. Once you had a different kind of interest in me, but why should I speak to you of auld lang syne. Except I will say this: I've been badly hurt in my time and now it's your turn, darling.

"As I told you, I'll give up my lovely idea to make Charleston open its eyes and ears for a consideration. There will be no compromise. You know my terms. It's imperative that we meet again and that you"

There the literary pen had halted, and she'd crumpled and thrown the sheet away. The next draft was much shorter. Deborah Parr had evidently got the style from a careful study of hard-boiled movies. It read:

"Pal! Here's that girl again, determined to meet with you. I'm a determined femme. Rena Mae Thripp couldn't stop me. Neither can you, my friend, except by playing ball. Don't try.

"Baby knows exactly what she wants, and she means to get it. Baby doesn't want half a loaf; Baby wants it all. And Baby is in an elegant position to"

There, abruptly, the hard-boiled epistle broke off . . . "Rena Mae Thripp couldn't stop me . . ." Would Deborah Parr have written such a damning statement and

neglected to destroy it if she had poisoned Rena Mae Thripp? I really didn't know. It seemed uncommonly careless, even for a careless girl.

There was only one line on the third sheet of paper. That line was succinct and to the point. There was no salutation.

> "One a. m. tonight," it said, "I'll be waiting at the tree. You get there!"

The tree? I thought I knew the tree to which Deborah Parr referred. And I thought I knew the person whom the girl commanded to a meeting in the shadows of the Hangman's Tree. That person was Stephen Fairlee.

What was Deborah Parr's secret hold over Stephen? I thought I knew that, too.

The threat Deborah Parr held over Stephen, the threat implicit in every word she'd written, must be knowledge she possessed concerning Stephen's dead mother. The place selected for the rendezvous—the tree where Rose Fairlee had crashed and died—must have been coolly and deliberately chosen. Unless Stephen did her bidding, the girl would broadcast her scandalous knowledge in a city where, traditionally, family scandals are carefully concealed and buried.

What did Deborah Parr want from Stephen in return for her silence? In the light of the fraternity ring hidden in her slipper, in view of her obvious determination to achieve security and wealth, only one answer suggested itself to me. The answer was marriage.

She wanted to marry Stephen. Stephen Fairlee had no money. But Maggie was a very rich woman. Deborah Parr desired to marry Stephen's stepmother's money.

As I arose from the desk, my eyes fell upon the over-

flowing wastebasket. There, in plain sight, lay a piece of evidence I'd searched everywhere to find. Perched atop the wastebasket, supported by the debris underneath and resting against the empty whiskey bottle, was a much smaller bottle.

The small bottle was long and slender, of plain clear glass. The cork was gone. The label marked "Poison" was partially torn off. Only the letters "s-o-n" remained.

It was the bottle which had contained my supply of morphia.

I snatched the small glass bottle from the wastebasket, as though it were a treasure. Taken in conjunction with the scribbled mention of Rena Mae in Deborah Parr's own handwriting, surely the bottle should be sufficiently incriminating to bring about the girl's arrest.

The bottle was empty. Rena Mae had swallowed only half the contents. In that first moment of my triumph, I argued that Deborah Parr must be carrying the remainder of the supply with her, secreted in her purse or clothing, that she must be keeping the deadly little tablets close at hand in the event a second murder struck her as advisable. If Lieutenant Clayton caught the girl with three grains of morphia in her possession, then indeed he would have a case.

Slowly my triumph died. I dropped the empty morphia bottle on the desk, stared at the mutilated label. So easily could the torn label be identified and the bottle, too. And I had made the find so very easily.

Deborah Parr was a careless girl. Yes. But she was hardly a fool. She had concealed the hundred-dollar bills and Stephen's fraternity ring in the toe of her slipper. Would she carelessly toss into the nearest wastebasket an empty bottle clearly implicating her in a murder by poison?

I recalled the butterfly earring that had been planted in my room. I'd found the earring easily, too. I'd been meant

to find it. Slowly it came to me that the empty morphia bottle might have been left in the wastebasket because someone *intended* that the bottle be found.

That someone would hardly be Deborah Parr.

A gust of wind rattled the windowpanes. A few tentative drops of rain blew into the bedroom. And then I heard a rush of footsteps coming along the hall . . . light, girlish steps.

At once I seized the empty morphia bottle, together with the wad of hundred-dollar bills and Stephen's ring. As I grabbed for the three scribbled sheets of letter paper on which I'd spent such anxious thought, the papers blew off the desk on the floor. I was obliged to let them go. When I snapped off the desk lamp, the footsteps in the hall were already slowing.

The girl opened her bedroom door and came in quickly from the hall. By then I was safely inside the wardrobe and closing its double doors. Fearful of a tell-tale screech, I dared not shut them tightly. An electric switch clicked. Huddled in the darkness of the wardrobe, half-smothered by the delicately scented clothes all around me, I could only guess that the room was alight. Something whisked through the air, plopped on the bed. Her hat and purse?

The footsteps moved away from the door. Her feet tapped across the floor with the little dancing spring I so well remembered. I judged she was approaching the bureau. I felt perfectly secure. I'd left the bureau in the same disorder I had found it.

Deborah Parr also felt secure, secure in her privacy. She reached the bureau. I heard her giggle softly to herself. I fancied that she was standing before the mirror, examining her pretty face, pleased with what she saw. She began to sing:

"There'll be pie in the sky
by and by . . ."

Abruptly, in the middle of a jubilant note, the song broke off. My nerves jumped. Had the girl noticed something wrong? Did she sense danger?

Clutching the morphia bottle, the bills and the ring, I began groping past the suits and frocks, the silky evening dresses, toward the rear of the wardrobe. The swinging clothing brushed against me in ghostly embrace. In the bedroom a window banged. I gasped in relief. The girl had merely noticed the open window.

But Deborah had noticed more than that. She had spied the sheets of crumpled letter paper blowing on the floor. Her footsteps moved here and there, paper rustled, as she collected the scattered sheets. What did she mean to do with them?

I soon found out. Competent and purposeful, directed by a mind filled with belated prudence, the footsteps moved firmly past the wardrobe and to the fireplace. High heels struck the hearthstone.

I didn't hear the flare of the match, but I smelled the smoke. Paper crackled. Deborah Parr was burning my evidence.

I couldn't save the burning letter paper, but if I kept my head I could salvage my knowledge of what Deborah Parr had written and was now destroying. I thought I could make use of my knowledge to put an end to all the mystery. For it seemed to me that the truth would emerge that very night at the meeting beside the fallen live oak tree. The time had come to tell Sanford Clayton all I knew.

I felt sorry for Stephen, yet not too sorry. I believed Stephen to be the victim of a merciless young girl and a hollow ideal. Chivalry, outmoded concepts of honor and family pride, had got Stephen into a terrible mess. Being a practical New Englander, born far to the north of the Mason-Dixon line, I didn't propose to allow Stephen to sacrifice himself further to preserve unsullied the reputation of his dead, uncaring mother.

These thoughts and conclusions moved swiftly through my head. Suddenly I became aware that the bedroom was disquietingly silent. The small paper fire had burned out quickly. The smell of smoke was gone now.

The footsteps hadn't retreated from the fireplace. Why? What was Deborah Parr doing as she stood there, silent, motionless? What was she looking at? What was she thinking about?

With taut nerves, I wondered. Was something wrong? She had a quick brain. Had I left something undone that made her suspect an outsider had been touching, tampering with her possessions? A minute went by, and I aged appreciably. Then Deborah Parr moved. Her footsteps, no longer filled with a dancing spring, moved very slowly but straight toward the wardrobe. Why? At once, I knew.

Instinct, some sixth sense, had alarmed the girl. She was advancing slowly because she was afraid. She wasn't afraid of finding a stranger hidden in the big mahogany wardrobe. She was afraid of what she might *not* find in the toe of her silver dancing slipper.

Then indeed I went through a brief but terrible mental struggle. Obviously I had to give up the bills and Stephen's fraternity ring, replace them in the slipper. The decision was more easily reached than carried out.

In the darkness, in absolute silence, I had to get down on my knees, fumble along the row of shoes and identify by touch a pair of silver dancing slippers. Well, I did it. My success was achieved by a very slender margin.

She reached the double doors, as my groping fingers touched metallic fabric, a tall rhinestone heel. I almost fancied I could hear breathing through the thin wood separating us. She paused to contemplate the knobs on the doors, perhaps to brace herself. I had a second's time to thrust the wadded bills and ring into the toe of the slipper. But my hands almost brushed her hand, as sud-

denly she jerked the doors apart and picked up the silver slippers.

Light gushed into the forepart of the wardrobe, only barely brightened the farther wall against which I pressed my body. A frail barrier of dresses, suspended from a shoulder-high rod, hid her from me, and me from her. I heard her sigh in relief, as her fingers located the money and the ring in the toe of the slipper. I caught no sight of her.

After an endless moment, she put down the silver slipper. But she'd taken out the money and the ring.

Still she hesitated. The cramped position of my body was intolerable. My cheek was pressed against a rough spot on the wardrobe wall, one of my knees was ground into a shoe which had escaped the row of shoes. My hands ached with the weight and pressure of my body. I couldn't stand the burning pain in my knee for very long. Soon the muscle ache in my palms would become unendurable and I must shift position, however strong my will.

Deborah Parr was choosing the frock she meant to wear for the evening. Standing before the open wardrobe, she pleasurably and unhurriedly debated the array. The instinct that had warned her of danger earlier had been satisfactorily banished. Her worries were at an end, and again she sang blithely:

"There'll be pie in the sky
by and by . . ."

It took her an interminable time to make up her mind. She selected the frock she wanted. Its long eyelet cotton skirts brushed my face. And then, with horror, I felt a second long-skirted dress slip from the adjoining hanger and collapse around me like a shroud.

I gave myself up for lost, as yards of diaphanous chiffon

sewn with little blobs of velvet, settled on my face and shoulders. When the owner stooped to pick up the garment, she would discover it wasn't lying flat on the wardrobe floor.

Abruptly the doors of the wardrobe closed. Deborah Parr had spent five minutes choosing a dress to wear, but she couldn't spare a second to hang up another. The remainder of my ordeal sticks in my memory strictly in terms of physical discomfort.

I longed to roll over on my back. I longed to stand up, to sit up. Unfortunately one of the mahogany doors was now slightly ajar. The smallest noise would be fatal.

Lying flat on my stomach on the wardrobe floor, I settled down to wait. Cautiously I gathered in the silky cloud of chiffon sewn with the little velvet knobs, stealthily pulled the voluminous stuff into a sort of pillow to cushion my head and shoulders. The silken garment must be new, I thought. It wasn't drenched with the perfume which permeated the dark interior where I lay and waited.

Deborah Parr left the bedroom in a rush. She didn't even pause to snap off the lights. The door banged, and I was released. I stood up at once.

But I didn't press my luck. I stayed inside the wardrobe for several minutes, until I was satisfied she hadn't forgotten something which would bring her back.

Then I pushed open the wardrobe doors, and tottered forth into the brightly lighted disorder of the bedroom. I'd caught my heel in my makeshift chiffon and velvet pillow. The diaphanous stuff emerged with me, settled silkily on the carpet.

The material was a soft pink color. The garment must be a dressing gown, I thought, for it seemed to have flowing sleeves. No, it was too impractical for a dressing gown. With the little knobs of velvet in a darker pink bestrewing the delicate shell pink chiffon from one end to the other,

it certainly resembled no evening gown that I had ever seen.

I picked up this nonesuch in the garment world to replace it on the hanger. And then I saw that the little knobs of velvet were tiny pink roses, exquisitely fashioned by hand so that the pink color deepened at the heart of each small rose. The beautiful little roses were sewn to the chiffon as thickly as stars, so that the wearer would seem to be clad in a fluttering flower garden.

It was a fancy dress costume. Suspended around the neck of the hanger from which the costume had fallen was a flexible velvet chaplet, a crown that was also made of roses. Above the clothing rod in the wardrobe was a shelf considerably higher than eye level. I looked up at the shelf. A couple of hats had been tossed up there. Reposing beside the hats, was a bright red wig of smoothly braided hair.

I knew then that Deborah Parr was prepared to take part in the Charleston Azalea Festival. I knew the threat that she held over both Stephen and Val. Deborah Parr proposed to appear in tomorrow's parade of beauty queens, wearing a costume that would instantly bring to the minds of everyone who had ever known her a woman who had died in dishonor among the roses she loved so well. In callous and merciless masquerade, she proposed to impersonate luckless Rose Higgs Fairlee.

Well, Deborah Parr was going to be sadly disappointed. I looked at my watch. The parade wasn't scheduled until three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. The young woman in residence at Harmony Hall wasn't going to appear in that parade, or blackmail Stephen Fairlee into marriage either.

I looked at my watch. There was ample time for me to arrange that Sanford Clayton put in an appearance at the meeting beside the fallen live oak tree. I intended to see to it that Deborah Parr awaited her pie in the sky behind prison bars.

16

WHEN I LEFT THE bedroom I went straight to the telephone booth. I called the Charleston police station. Lieutenant Clayton wasn't in. A pleasant-voiced desk sergeant expected him soon. I identified myself and informed the sergeant that I was extremely anxious to see Lieutenant Clayton on urgent business, that I would arrive at the station within three-quarters of an hour.

Serenely confident of keeping the appointment, I boldly descended the front stairs of the plantation house, and stepped out on the piazza. I received my first intimation that I'd reckoned without the weather. The rain had begun. I wished I'd had the sense, or rather the courage to bring my car up the hill. It might be a wet walk down to the boathouse. I ran across the driveway to the Hangman's Tree, around the tree. I had my pencil flashlight.

Before I located the entrance to the footpath, I was soaked to the skin, and suffering painfully on another score. The mosquitoes were amphibious. They accompanied me in singing, stinging clouds, biting even through my blouse and skirt. To my relief, the path seemed to be fairly dry. At first I thought the rain had slackened. Then I realized the jungle growth that roofed the twisting, descending trail held off the elements. Here and there, large drops of water plunging down in single chains burst through. Where there were real breaks in the overhead growth, it was like walking through a shower bath.

I completed the descent, arrived at the exit from the path. Near by, on the banks of the narrow river, was the boathouse, a clump of wild elder bushes and my car. Near by? Where? Appalled, I took the measure of a South Carolina cloudburst.

In the open, undeterred by sheltering trees and brush, the rain itself became solid matter like walls of water. Walking through that downpour was like a walk through

Niagara Falls. Nevertheless, I attempted it. My flashlight was an absurdity, a mere speck of fuzzy, streaming yellow. I could scarcely see the hand that held it.

Somewhere close by was the river and the boathouse, the dry security of my car. I listened for the rushing of the narrow, clay red stream. The rushing of the wind and rain filled my ears. I tripped on vines and briars, I crashed into a tree that smacked me in the nose. Beneath the branches it was a trifle drier. In God's name, where was the boathouse? Huddled against the tree trunk, I peered into the pouring, blowing darkness, sallied forth again. This time when I stumbled I fell flat on my face. Groaning, I felt for the obstacle that had unkindly knocked me over in the mud. It was the old bronze sundial. I had a little flicker of hope. I knew now that the boathouse, the clump of bushes must be somewhere on the left.

As though further to hearten me, the drumming thunder of the rain lessened slightly. I pulled myself upright, challenged the elements again. Holding the flashlight at arm's length, I advanced. To the left, obscurely, a dim shape appeared. That must be the boathouse. It seemed almost too good to be true. Careful now, I told myself. Don't be over-confident. I took twelve careful steps. And then I stepped off a six-foot embankment and plunged into the river.

The roaring, swirling water was only waist-high, but the current was swift. Instantly I was swept into water over my head. I was sure that I was drowning in the storm and darkness. I screamed and no one heard.

After minutes of frantic struggle, I floundered to the clayey, slippery bank. I clamped my fingers around some sort of bush so I couldn't slide in again. I had lost my flashlight, my purse, my hat, I'd nearly lost my life, but there was one indisputable advantage in the situation. I had definitely placed the river.

Provided my strength held out, I could crawl along the

slippery bank and eventually must reach the boathouse, and beside it the wild elder bushes and my car. Other bushes grew along the turbulent, unseen stream which hissed and boiled beside me in the falling rain. On that nightmare journey, I got to know them well. I didn't fall in again but many times I almost wished I would.

Minutes later I crawled around the last thorny bush, felt beneath my hand one of the slimy wooden piles that supported the boathouse porch. The main part of the structure rested on the land but in front, supported by heavy piles, a porch was flung out across the stream with, underneath, a watery place to store the boats. As I inched my way up the bank, I could hear through the storm the restless splashing and banging of the anchored craft.

The boathouse itself guided me upward to solid footing. The piles resting in the muck fell away and at length I touched ordinary stone foundations. I had come up on the wrong side. But the wild elderberry clump wasn't far off now. I felt my way around to the other side of the boathouse. I angled slightly to the left. The wild elderberry bushes, blowing to and fro in frenzy, slapped my outstretched hands like whips. I moved to the spot where I'd left my car.

The car was gone.

At that point, I broke down and cried. Indeed, during the next ten minutes I acquired personal insight into the problems of certain patients of mine who suffer from hysterical attacks. I proceeded to succumb to an hysterical attack of my own.

I screamed my own frustration. I ran around in crazy circles and fell down and got up again. I didn't even wonder —not then—where my car had gone. Any more than I recalled that I'd conveniently left the keys in the ignition so that anyone could drive it off.

In short, I acted like a fool, with no one there to see or care. The hysteria was followed by despair and hopeless-

ness. I had done my best. Rain and wind and darkness had beaten me. I'd never get to town that night. My chance of talking to Lieutenant Clayton and enlisting his cooperation was gone. I admitted it. Rest and shelter alone concerned me now.

I staggered up on the porch of the boathouse. The rain drove in through the open sides. I blundered around in search of the door. Inside I might find wood to build a fire, perhaps a cot to lie on. I discovered the door. It was boarded over. Beside the door was a heap of soaked and mildewed canvas. I rolled up in the canvas, Indian fashion, and lay down on the water-soaked floor to wait out the weather. I fell asleep.

It must have been the silence which awakened me. After the previous uproar, the stillness was incredible. Moonlight was shining in my eyes, glistening whitely upon a drenched and sodden world. A breeze blew strong and fresh and clean, balmy, almost warm. I groaned and sat up. Painfully I shook off the canvas, got up and tottered across the porch to the railing. I looked at the spot where I had left my car. Twin gullies of water, gleaming in the moonlight, marked in the mud the passage of wheels backing out.

It was too late, anyway, to drive to town. I must have slept for hours. Or had I? When I sent a sturdy wrist-watch to my nephew overseas, I bought a duplicate for myself. Jack's watch had survived the war. My watch had come triumphantly through the night's events. I looked at it.

My heart sank.

The luminous hands pointed to half-past twelve. Half an hour wasn't time enough to drive into town for the police even if I'd had a car. Half an hour, however, was ample time for me to walk up the hill to the fallen live oak tree. Several minutes dragged by, before I aroused sufficient will to step off the porch.

I hesitated beside the rutted tracks that marked the

flight of my vanished car. I paused again beside the sundial which had directed me off a six-foot embankment. Squishing past the sundial, I approached the footpath. It was only a few minutes' climb. But I thought I would never force myself to start.

Why should I be frightened? Wasn't I the woman who had stepped confidently through a blinding rainstorm into a river? What had become of my courage? In perfect safety, without my presence being suspected, I could listen in on the clandestine interview from any one of a dozen hiding places.

I knew that Deborah Parr's actions to date were criminal. I knew that she would stop at nothing to achieve her purpose. I believed that she hadn't stopped at murder . . . or that she had *conspired* to bring about a murder. Circumstances had prevented me from reaching the police. It was duty to discover everything I could about the girl. It was now or never.

The reassuring moonlight vanished as I entered the dripping, leaky tunnel and began the climb. I started slowly. But despite myself, my footsteps quickened. My heartbeat quickened, too.

My nerves and imagination peopled the darkness ahead, the darkness behind. In the stillness, I imagined whispers, other steps as cautious as my own. Someone awaited me in the shadows ahead. Someone crept stealthily at my back. *What was that?* A streamer of Spanish moss, sopping wet, touched my face like moist, clammy fingers, broke off, fell noiselessly.

At the bend where I had met Philo Higgs, I halted. Suddenly in the distance I heard real voices. Murmured voices that drifted indistinctly from the Hangman's Tree. I stole around the bend. It was still very dark. I couldn't see the pair who stood only a few yards away in the monstrous shadows of the tree, but I could guess their whereabouts by their voices. In the quiet, the two voices, a girl's voice and a

man's voice were clear, almost shockingly distinct.

The girl's voice was Deborah Parr's. The man's voice was Stephen's. The two were quarreling.

"I'm not fooling," Stephen said. "Give it back. I won't be pushed around. If you think I'm afraid of you . . ."

"Watch yourself," the girl said arrogantly. "I'm in the saddle now, my friend. These days I'm pleasing myself, and you're doing as I say. So is everybody else. Remember?"

"You little ghoul, do you suppose I'll make a trade with you? Well, think again. There will be no trade. Nor will I allow you to insult the dead, parade a scandal, and break my father's heart . . ."

"Other people have fathers, too. What do I care about the fine old name of the Fairlees? The hell with that!"

The exchange was interrupted by the sound of scuffling. Branches snapped. I heard Stephen call her name. Then there was silence.

I groped forward. Suddenly, against the blackness, I sensed rather than saw or heard the movement of a blacker shadow. It was hardly more than a change in the texture of the night. Yet I knew that someone had stepped into the path ahead.

"Stephen?" I said uncertainly. "Stephen, is that you?"

The answer was instantaneous. I had no chance to scream or cry out. The assault was launched the very second I spoke. A figure hurtled upon me from the darkness, a hand shot out and clasped my mouth. Simultaneously, before I could begin to fight, something hard and heavy crashed down upon my skull.

All fight left me. A great white light illumined the night and then I fell and fell into deep darkness.

17

DR. GRANT, Dr. Grant," a voice was calling over and over in my ear. "Dr. Grant, are you conscious? Can you hear me?"

Yes, I can hear you, I thought, but I don't want to hear you. Please go away. The relentless voice was drawing me back to awareness of a body that ached and throbbed, a head that pounded, lungs that hurt with every breath I took.

"Dr. Grant, Dr. Grant, can you hear me? Please try and open your eyes."

My head pounded in rhythm to the chanting voice. My aches and pains assumed fresh vigor. The knifelike pain in my lungs came and went. Pneumonia? I wondered vaguely. I wondered if I had a fractured skull. My nose began functioning. I could smell mildew and canvas.

Rolled up in the length of canvas, I seemed to be back on the boathouse porch. That puzzled me. Ignoring the insistent; continued yammer of the voice, I struggled to pick up my recollections at the point where consciousness had left off. I'd been many hundreds of yards from here, up the hill near the Hangman's Tree, when I'd been attacked from darkness. Since then someone must have carried me downhill, wrapped me up like a sausage roll, and laid me on the boathouse porch.

"Dr. Grant, Dr. Grant, your eyelids fluttered," the public-announcement voice chanted in my ear accusingly. "Do try and look at me. Do try and speak. Dr. Grant, I'm going to try to move you."

Oh, no, I thought in horror. Oh no, please don't. A firm, efficient hand grasped my shoulder. I opened my eyes, as Elizabeth Collison attempted to pull me to a sitting position. Or rather I opened one eye. The right eye was swollen shut as a combined result of the blow on the head and the attentions of scores of mosquitoes. The sharp knifelike pain in my lungs was the forewarning of a heavy chest cold.

The pounding head pain was most disturbing. I flexed my hands and wriggled my toes to test my terminal responses, decided with hazy relief that the skull wasn't fractured.

Elizabeth Collison was squatted beside me on her knees. She wore the long-sleeved cotton shirt and the heavy pants in which I'd seen her last. They were torn and dirty. She'd changed the sailor hat for some sort of knitted cap that was thick with leaves and twigs and burrs. In the strong sun of early morning, Mrs. Collison gazed at me with a mixture of pride, relief and satisfaction.

"Dr. Grant, I hoped you were conscious. Otherwise I was afraid to give you brandy, for fear you might strangle and swallow your tongue. Here, drink this."

She whipped a flask from somewhere. When she was satisfied I'd drunk the proper amount and hadn't swallowed my tongue, she got up and moved quickly to the railing of the porch. Suspended on a chain around her neck was a whistle. She raised the whistle to her lips and blew two shrill blasts on it. Several times she blew. I took a certain mild interest in this odd performance.

"I'm signaling the others," Mrs. Collison explained. "We've been hunting for you for a long while, Dr. Grant. Two blasts mean that you've been found alive and conscious. One blast would mean that you'd been found dead."

I digested that. By now, I felt a vague curiosity about the "others" who had been searching for me a long while, beating through acres of brush and jungle, wearing efficient little whistles around their necks. I had many questions, but these questions were all too difficult to frame.

"Dr. Grant," Mrs. Collison said reproachfully, "you gave us all a dreadful fright. No one knew where you were. Maggie was frantic when she hadn't heard from you by ten o'clock last night, and then when Philo Higgs telephoned that he'd found your car . . ."

"Found my car!" I echoed in astonishment, abruptly

jolted to full consciousness. "How do you mean . . . Philo Higgs *found* my car?"

"Well, well, that was how Philo explained it," said Mrs. Collison, somewhat taken aback by the violence of my reaction. "Wandering around before the storm, it seems Philo ran across your car, quite empty and with the keys still in the ignition. He drove the car up to the garage to protect it from the weather. Then he tried to call my brother's house, but by now of course Maggie was using the phone herself, ringing every place she could think of, trying to locate you. Right at the height of the storm, Philo eventually did get through, and you can well imagine Maggie's sensations at his news. Unfortunately, Harmony covers a great deal of ground and Philo wasn't very helpful about just where he had found your car. To tell the truth," Mrs. Collison finished delicately, and with the air of one imparting a secret, "poor Philo sometimes drinks too much."

Well, that was true enough.

"Lieutenant Clayton was most annoyed," Elizabeth Collison conceded, as her fingers played with the shiny whistle.

I sat up at that. My whole head rocked with pain.

"Good heavens, did Maggie call out the police?" I said faintly. "Just how many people were kept out of bed on my account?"

"Lieutenant Clayton and three other members of the police force," Mrs. Collison stated promptly. "All of *us,* of course. Con and Maggie, Tradd, Stephen, and . . . and Stephen's girl." I fancied she mentioned the last in the group with a slight hesitation. The hesitation passed. "Penelope Higgs isn't strong enough to do much walking." Elizabeth went on, "but Penelope has served gallons of coffee which I must remember to reimburse her for. Penelope also served a light breakfast to my Boy Scouts. Troop B volunteered for the search to the last man, and they've hunted like twenty little Trojans. The boys will be so pleased and happy you've been found alive and well. I

imagine they will enjoy a little speech of thanks as soon as you feel up to it."

"Oh my," I said. "Oh my, has this been going on all night? When did the search get started?"

"The police got here first," she answered, and now with decided hesitation. She glanced at the whistle in her hand. "Stephen also was early on the scene. Quite early. Dr. Grant," Elizabeth Collison inquired abruptly, "did you happen to telephone Stephen from Harmony around twelve o'clock last night? Before you got lost, I mean."

"No," I said slowly. "No, I didn't telephone Stephen."

"Dr. Grant, I . . . I was rather hoping that you had."

"Why?"

"The police," Elizabeth informed me, and indignation lifted her head and straightened her spine, "have some tale of chasing Stephen out to Harmony shortly before midnight. It seems Lieutenant Clayton has taken it upon himself to follow various members of our family these past two days. Clayton says he lost Stephen on the live oak avenue during the storm when his own car went off in the ditch."

"I see," I said, and suddenly was swept by a feeling of extraordinary apprehension.

"Stephen had no reason for driving out to Harmony. No reason whatever," Mrs. Collison said flatly. "Lieutenant Clayton is simply mistaken. In point of fact," Stephen's aunt announced clearly, unwaveringly, "Stephen spent the entire evening with Con and me, was in our company every single minute until after one a.m., when the three of us drove out here to look for you. So that settles that."

"I should think it would," I said mechanically. At half-past twelve, Stephen hadn't been with the Collisons on Alexander Street. At half-past twelve Stephen had been quarreling with Deborah Parr in the shadows of the Hangman's Tree. "I can hardly understand," I said, "why it matters to Lieutenant Clayton how Stephen spent his evening."

"It doesn't matter now," Elizabeth said, and a sudden happy smile lightened her heavy face. "But for a while last night, Dr. Grant, the situation was . . . well . . . unpleasant, strained. Lieutenant Clayton took the remarkable position that Stephen had something to do with your absence. Did you ever hear of anything so preposterous?"

"No," I said. "No, I never did."

Clear in my mind was the memory of Stephen's voice in the darkness, of myself calling out his name, and then falling beneath a sudden crushing blow. Mrs. Collison looked away from me and out across the rail at the roaring, swirling torrent of the clay-red river; it had risen several feet during the night, almost to the level of the boat-house porch. She hadn't asked a single question concerning my own reasons for coming to Harmony, and getting lost there. She'd asked nothing about my night's adventures. Perhaps she didn't want to know. Again she raised the whistle to her lips.

"By now, the others must be expecting us at the plantation house," Elizabeth said to me. "With three short blasts I can bring a stretcher party down here. You're hardly fit enough to walk."

"No stretchers, please! I much prefer to walk," I cried, and staggered to my feet. Then I was obliged to grab the rail to steady my wobbly knees. Elizabeth dropped the whistle, came swiftly over, put a firm supporting arm around my shoulder. As we stepped off the porch into muck and slime, we heard a crackling in the underbrush. Conway Collison came up on the river side. He wore hip-length rubber boots, but layers of clay reddened his body almost to the armpits. He greeted both his wife and me with enthusiasm, affection and relief.

"I heard your signal, Elizabeth. God, it sounded good," he said to her. To me, he said, "Doctor, that's quite a shiner you're sporting there. I told Maggie you were too tough to kill."

"Con, please," said his wife.

Her tone failed to dampen his enthusiasm. He threw one arm around her corseted, unyielding waist with the first real affection I'd ever seen him show her. He gave Elizabeth a friendly squeeze.

"I'm right proud of you, honey. With everybody else scattering out, you stuck like grim death to the river area and you turned up the missing. Nice going, old girl."

She accepted both the praise and the affection with a slight frown. Perhaps "old girl" was not the term of endearment Elizabeth Collison would have chosen. Con expected to accompany us to the Hall but his wife made other plans for him. It seemed that Philo Higgs and six of the Boy Scouts had been assigned to search the old slave quarters. "They'll never have heard the whistle that far away," Elizabeth said decisively. "You'd better carry word to them, Con."

Conway Collison sent a rueful glance at me. Then he plunged back into the jungle to do his wife's bidding. Her firm arm sustaining me, we moved away from the boathouse. Together, we started up the now familiar footpath. It was not yet seven o'clock, but the morning was already extremely hot.

In the leafy tunnel the air seemed almost too thick to breathe, as though it possessed actual weight and texture. The humidity was unbelievable. Pools of water which had gathered on the ground were in rapid process of evaporation. Mists and vapors rose like steam further to thicken the atmosphere. In spots fallen wisteria blossoms were piled inches deep, like slippery purple mud. The path was very still. Elizabeth Collison, half-carrying me, was sweating with effort. Once, when we paused, she said, "I'm surprised that only Con showed up at the boathouse. Do you suppose the others didn't hear the whistle?"

"I don't know," I said.

My head ached dully. In and out my brain, like mice, ran

my problems. Soon I must face the police, the Boy Scouts, Maggie, Tradd, Stephen, Val, everybody. I'd be obliged to produce for public consumption some sort of story. For the benefit of Lieutenant Sanford Clayton, I must produce a private story, the true story. Could I do it? Had I the right to talk to Lieutenant Clayton before I heard Stephen's account of his quarrel with Debcrah Parr? Again I remembered hearing the quarrel in the darkness, again I heard my own voice calling out to Stephen. *Who had hit me on the head last night?*

"I hope," Mrs. Collison said suddenly, "that Stephen and that pretty girl of his do get married and are happy. She seems so sweet and genuine."

Under the circumstances, it struck me as an odd remark. It seemed equally odd that Elizabeth Collison should refer to her own godchild as "that pretty girl." But she had always treated Maggie's fair-haired guest like a stranger.

Bang, bang, bang, went my head with every upward step. My heart was pounding, too. I was gripped by that strange sense of physical imbalance and disorientation which is the product of pain and worry and nervous exhaustion. A broken leaf lightly drifted into my hair, and felt heavy. My depth and distance perceptions were affected. That last bend in the path, which hid the opening and the sunlight, the fallen live oak tree and the plantation house, seemed to retreat and then advance. There was a marked depletion of the time evaluation sense. I seemed to be moving in a world where clocks and watches had no meaning. Seconds stretched like rubber bands into hours. All at once reality deserted me.

Time went backward. It was yesterday afternoon, and soon I would meet Philo Higgs, babbling his tale of Rose Fairlee. Time rushed forward, and I was projected into the future. In my mind I'd already rounded the bend and passed the Hangman's Tree, was running through the hot sunlight from something horrible.

"Shall we rest again, Dr. Grant? You look a little pale."

"I'm quite all right," I mumbled.

Linked together, walking abreast, we crowded the dim, narrow path. At last we reached the final turning. Together we stepped out into the sunshine. The light was clean and clear and strong. The morning was beautiful. The Hangman's Tree was on my side. But the horrors of my imagination had vanished. The feathery, leafy branches that stretched out and brushed my face were just the branches of an old ugly fallent giant.

"What's that?" Elizabeth inquired suddenly.

I stared at her changing face, watched calm and confidence leaving it. She was looking across my shoulder, gazing into a leafy aperture beneath one of the thick branches. Her eyes stared into the shadows and confusion at the heart of the old tree. Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Turn around, Dr. Grant. Look behind you, a little to the left. Something is lying against the tree trunk. It looks like a bundle of rags."

I never made a slower turn. I looked through the leafy gap, pulled the branch aside so I might see better. There was, indeed, a bundle huddled on the rich damp earth. But it wasn't a bundle of rags.

In silence, we stared. Ringed in leaves and twigs and branches, motionless as a picture in a frame, the body of Deborah Parr lay there in the quiet of death. She might have been, I thought at once, one of the babes in the woods covered by the friendly birds. The hands which had dragged her into that fantastic hiding place had dragged along bits of Spanish moss, twigs, shreds of grass and leaves. The blowing of the wind had done the rest.

Her dark head and one bare shoulder and arm protruded from the leafy shroud. The cotton eyelet evening dress she wore had once been white. She had been shot directly through the temple. Stephen's missing gun—the squat,

snub-nosed Mauser—lay within reach of her outstretched hand. She seemed to be pointing at it.

On the third finger of the pointing hand, gleaming dully, was Stephen's fraternity ring.

I let go the branch. Showering feathery bits of leaf and bark, it snapped back into place. At once the picture of death was snatched away, as an exterior will vanish when someone pulls a window shade. Mrs. Collison looked at me.

"Doctor, are you sure she's dead? Perhaps she's only badly hurt."

"She's been dead for hours."

"Do you suppose . . . do you suppose she killed herself?"

"No," I said. "She didn't kill herself. It's murder. Blow your whistle for the police."

"Murder," she repeated idiotically. "Oh, no, Dr. Grant. It can't be murder. You're a physician. Go in and examine her. Go now, go quickly, before anybody comes. Thank God, we were first to find her. You must prove it's suicide, accident. You must . . ."

"You don't know what you're suggesting," I said. "Blow your whistle for the police. Then come away. Come away with me to the house."

My words seemed to awake her numbed and drowsy thinking processes. Before I guessed her intention, she reached out, seized a double handful of the live oak branches, and wrenched an opening. Stooping her head, she pushed into the opening and disappeared as the branches closed.

I went after her. Over us, like an arched gray-green roof, bent the wild curves and contortions of the grotesque limbs growing from the fallen trunk. Streamers of Spanish moss hung everywhere within the incredible enclosure, and the murky shifting light was like that seen from a submarine. It was impossible to stand, but one could crawl.

Elizabeth Collison was beside the body when I reached her. I managed to get hold of her arm.

"Stop it! You don't know what you're doing. You must not disturb the body. It's criminal."

Our eyes met across the dead girl. Her eyes were filled with fright and despair.

"Do you went Stephen to be hanged?" Stephen's aunt asked me. "Do you want Stephen to be convicted of murder?"

For a moment, I couldn't speak. I was overwhelmed by the realization that both she and I were ready at once to concede Stephen's guilt. If that was our point of view, the point of view of those who loved Stephen, what were the police going to think? Lieutenant Clayton had followed Stephen out to Harmony the night before, and lost him during the storm. Stephen had been on the plantation grounds at the time murder occurred, and Lieutenant Clayton knew it.

"The police are bound to think Stephen is guilty," Mrs. Collison said dully. "Clayton has been claiming all along he heard a shot fired on the plantation grounds last night. That is why we were all afraid of what might have happened to you. Perhaps Sandy Clayton did hear the shot that killed her. Do you want to help him convict Stephen of murder?"

"No," I said. "No. But you and I can't turn a murder into a suicide. We would certainly be found out. This girl was shot from a distance of at least eight or ten feet. If she'd fired the bullet herself, there would be powder marks around the wound."

The kneeling woman cast a bitter glance at the body which lay between us. Tumbled silky black hair partially concealed the face. The single wound in the temple was not disfiguring. Death is not horrifying to me, but it is often pathetic, and most especially when the individual is young. There was even pathos here, I thought. This girl, so arrogant and self-possessed in life, was utterly defenseless now.

And, abruptly, I noticed that Stephen's silver ring was no longer on the third finger of her left hand. What had Elizabeth Collison been doing?

"You must put the ring back," I said sternly.

"I won't," Elizabeth said, and her hands flew up to guard the pocket of her shirt. "Dr. Grant, I cannot leave Stephen's ring on her finger. If Stephen killed her, she deserved to die. She was a wicked girl. I always hated her, even when she was a little thing. I hate her still."

I was confused. Elizabeth Collison, I was sure, had never been in New Haven, had never known Deborah Parr as a child. Elizabeth saw the confusion in my eyes, and became confused herself. She looked at me in bewilderment.

"Dr. Grant, surely you know who this girl is?"

"Her name is Deborah Parr," I stammered. "Anyway, that's how she's registered at the plantation house."

"This," said Mrs. Collison, "is Valeria Trevelyn."

"But," I said in stupefaction, "if this is Valeria Trevelyn, who is Maggie's guest?"

"I haven't asked," Elizabeth replied. "It wasn't my business to ask. I suppose the other girl must be Deborah Parr, and that she and Val switched around their names."

"Why?"

"Dr. Grant, I don't know. Perhaps they wanted to deceive Maggie. I do know this is Val Trevelyn."

Almost as I heard the truth spoken, I accepted it. The real Valeria Trevelyn, registered as Deborah Parr, had occupied a room at Harmony.

Maggie's guest had known nothing about the Trevelyn family, and Stephen had been obliged to answer for her the most commonplace questions about the Trevelyns. Tradd Fairlee's curious reversal of attitude was clarified immediately. So many inconsistencies and small mysteries were automatically explained, once the truth was revealed. He had refused to admit Valeria Trevelyn to his home, and a moment later had graciously welcomed another girl, a tall

frightened girl, a stranger, who had introduced herself by the hated name and begged him with her youth and nervousness to accept the situation in silence.

Tradd had seen through the masquerade, of course, and had not exposed it. Elizabeth and Conway Collison had done the same. With perfect courtesy, with that family pride and cohesiveness which is so much a part of Charleston, they had drawn themselves together and had accepted the impersonation. For Stephen, one of their own, was concerned in it.

Stephen was patently a participant in the plot which had brought a pretended Valeria Trevelyn into his home and left the real Valeria Trevelyn out at Harmony. Of all the people actively concerned, Maggie and I alone had been deceived. We had never met Valeria Trevelyn. If we thought about it at all, we must have assumed that the reticent, fair-haired girl had lost her southern ways and soft southern drawl in Egypt. Maggie's guest was not a southerner, nor was she a stranger to Stephen. She was Deborah Parr, the New Haven girl whom Stephen had met and fallen in love with during his year at Yale.

Two girls had exchanged names and identities for a little while. The masquerade was over now. It had ended in violence and tragedy. One of the masqueraders was dead, her identity at last revealed. The murdered girl was the real Valeria Trevelyn.

"Our family has good reason to know and remember Valeria and her dead father," Elizabeth Collison said with great bitterness. "The whole story will come out now. Dick Trevelyn," she said to me, "is the man who wrecked my brother's happiness, bankrupted him in his business and debauched his wife. Dick Trevelyn was Rose Fairlee's lover."

And then, muffled by the boughs and branches enlaced around and over us, we heard men's voices, the shuffle of approaching footsteps. The voices were not far off. I was

safely in the open and standing on my feet when Sanford Clayton stepped into view. But Elizabeth Collison, who'd followed me, was just straightening up.

The silver ring slipped out of her pocket, fell on the ground. From the corner of my eye, I saw it winking in the sun. But I didn't think Lieutenant Clayton had noticed. As I spoke to him in the steadiest voice at my command, I put my foot on the ring. Simultaneously, with dismay, I observed that the two men walking behind the lieutenant carried a stretcher. I drew the proper conclusion at once.

"Good morning, Dr. Grant," Lieutenant Clayton said to me. "Once again we meet at the scene of murder. I'm happy that you survived your night's adventures. I'm also happy to announce that this time I got to the scene first."

I'd known that when I glimpsed the stretcher. They'd returned to carry away the body. Elizabeth Collison, however, had missed the significance of the stretcher. She drew a gasping breath, as she spoke to the policeman.

"Dr. Grant and I just this moment discovered the body. We were on our way to call you. The doctor was most insistent that we hurry, and leave everything undisturbed."

"I'm glad to hear it," the freckle-faced police lieutenant said pleasantly. To me, he said, "Dr. Grant, if you will be good enough to remove your foot from the ring you took from the dead girl's finger, I'll bid you ladies good day for the moment. Neither of you is to leave the plantation grounds, of course. Kindly wait for me at the house."

18

HALF AN HOUR passed before the group which gathered in the octagonal library of Harmony Hall was complete. Maggie and Stephen's fair-haired sweetheart were in the room, when Mrs. Collison and I walked slowly in. Both of

them, quite obviously, had been informed of the discovery of Valeria Trevelyn's body.

Maggie was crying quietly into her handkerchief. She ran across the room, and threw herself into my arms. And then I learned that Maggie was shedding the tears for me.

"Vic, darling, I don't care who's dead so long as you're alive. If anything had happened to you, I couldn't have borne it. I'd have died myself."

Maggie clutched at me as though I were her only refuge in a strange, unfriendly world. Perhaps I clung a moment, too. After all, my friend and I were northerners, facing a police investigation which must inevitably end in tragedy, caught up together in disaster in the Deep South.

The pale, fair-haired girl, who sat alone in a distant corner of the library was a northerner, too. Deborah Parr of New Haven—it was still hard for me not to think of her as Val Trevelyn—had selected the most distant chair and the most uncomfortable chair. It was quaintly pretty to look at but the tall spindly legs were high off the floor, the hard seat was narrow, and the slanted back threw the occupant forward. Near by, a forgotten lamp still burned in the broad light of day.

Perched on the old French lacemaker's chair, as my mother's generation of children used to perch in patience on hard church pews and harder school benches, Deborah Parr looked as though she had no friend in the world. She watched Maggie and me greet each other. Unclasping the hands folded in her lap, she reached out and snapped off the lamp.

"Dr. Grant," she said, "I've already told Mrs. Fairlee that I'm sorry. I want to tell you, too. I feel that I'm to blame for everything that's happened. If only I'd told the truth, if only I hadn't . . ."

Her voice broke. Maggie went over to her.

"Deborah, my dear, you must not talk that way. You're not to blame for what's happened, any more than I am."

"I feel that I am."

"Deborah, you must forget your feelings and be sensible. In a very short while now, we're going to need to deal with facts, not feelings. As for your deceiving me and Vic, that doesn't matter. Put it from your mind."

"I can't."

"You must, Deborah. You're forgiven. I should have guessed that you weren't Val Trevelyn," Maggie said, and tried a smile to cheer the wretched youngster. "You're no actress, dear. You didn't act the part of a southern girl, just returned from Egypt. It was stupid of me not to see through your little trick at once."

"It wasn't a little trick, Mrs. Fairlee. You mustn't let me off so easily," Deborah said. "I came down to Charleston and I posed as Valeria Trevelyn of my own free will. No one made me do it. You see," she said, "that awful girl—that Valeria Trevelyn—telephoned me in New Haven the day she got back to Bodes Crossing from Egypt. Would you like to hear what happened?"

"If you feel like telling us," Maggie said. "Of course, Lieutenant Clayton will insist upon knowing, although he probably already knows a good deal of it. What did Val Trevelyn say to you?"

The girl's eyes remembered the conversation. They remembered well. Deborah lifted her chin. For a moment, she looked like a tall young queen as she sat in the old lacemaker's chair.

"Valeria Trevelyn told me that my engagement to Stephen was over, that I'd better forget him, that Stephen didn't love me any more. I didn't believe her," Deborah announced with a spirit that was a credit to her own Yankee forebears. "I knew better. So I called up Stephen down here that same afternoon."

Stephen had reassured his northern sweetheart with violence. Deborah was to ignore Valeria Trevelyn, and everything she'd said. Stephen had not forgotten Deborah,

even for a single minute. He lived for the day when they could marry. Far from loving Val Trevelyn, as Val had insinuated, Stephen despised her.

Then who was Val Trevelyn? Deborah had wanted to know. On this point, Stephen had been something less than explicit with his troubled sweetheart. From Stephen, Deborah had learned only that Val Trevelyn was a girl who was threatening to make trouble for him and his family by broadcasting "some sort of family secret." He'd been very vague in discussing the secret, but Stephen hadn't been in the least vague about his own intentions. He would take care of Valeria Trevelyn, Stephen had said. Deborah was not to worry.

But Deborah had worried. She was hundreds of miles from Charleston, and the man she loved was in serious trouble, despite his protests to the contrary. Another girl was making the trouble. That girl was about to descend on Charleston.

"So," Deborah said wryly, "I decided to descend on South Carolina myself. I borrowed a car from my boss's daughter—we were classmates at Smith—and drove straight from Connecticut to Bodes Crossing. I had some things myself to say to Val Trevelyn."

After driving day and night, Deborah had arrived at dawn in the village of Bodes Crossing. Someone had directed her to the old Trevelyn place. She had turned into the driveway, just as Valeria Trevelyn was pulling out of it on her way to Charleston. For once, Valeria Trevelyn had been disagreeably surprised at the result of a telephone call. She had intended to make Stephen's northern sweetheart miserable, but not to bring her to the scene.

"She refused to talk to me," Deborah said. "She drove off, and I went after her. I chased her car for miles. The faster Val Trevelyn went, the faster I went. I expect that's why we had the accident outside Summerville."

When a truck had suddenly appeared over the brow of a

hill, the two speeding cars were almost abreast. On attempting to swerve, Valeria Trevelyn had lost control of her car, left the road and crashed into a telephone pole. Deborah herself had gone off in the ditch, but the convertible had hardly been scratched, and except for a badly bruised arm she had not been hurt. Valeria Trevelyn had been thrown free, but she lay unconscious on the ground near the wreckage of her car and in the midst of scattered luggage.

"I hoped she was dead," Deborah said in a low steady voice. "After the garage men came, and we both saw the doctor, I offered to drive Val on in to Charleston. It wasn't kindness, I assure you. I still wanted to find out exactly what she was trying to do. It was a queer kind of ride."

I could imagine that the drive had been queer indeed. Other passers-by would have glimpsed two pretty young girls, two friends traveling together toward fun and gaiety. Other passers-by would never have guessed that the girl in blue was asking frantic questions, was begging, was pleading, while the girl in yellow sat in contemptuous silence, or tormented her companion by dropping an occasional teasing hint about her future intentions.

Deborah had gathered that Val was prepared to appear in the Festival wearing a "really remarkable costume," a costume so remarkable that Stephen would be wise "to play ball and keep me out of it." Deborah had gathered that the secret Val was hugging happily to her breast concerned Stephen's dead mother, and Val's dead father. Otherwise, the New Haven girl had been left helplessly in the dark.

Deborah's story came tumbling forth faster and faster, as though now at the last she was eager to be done with her share of the secrecy. So far there had been no mention of the masquerade, or how it happened that the two girls, the two enemies, had exchanged their names and their identities. Anticipating the end of the story, I was already guess-

ing that Val Trevelyn had suggested the idea, enforced the suggestion upon Deborah. I was wrong.

Together the two girls had driven into Charleston. Until then Deborah had expected to drop Val Trevelyn at the Fairlee house on Alexander Street.

"The traffic was awful," Deborah said. "The town was jammed with people. Val didn't like it. When we turned into Alexander Street, she complained that the house was too close to the Battery and all the crowds. She wasn't going to stay with the Fairlees after all, Val said. She asked me to drive her to a hotel."

Of the three women who were listening in silence to Deborah's recital, at least two of us were surprised to hear that Val Trevelyn had failed in courage at that point. Elizabeth Collison and I glanced at each other. There was a puzzled, a dimly questioning look on her broad face. I myself could hardly understand why Val Trevelyn had feared the proximity of crowds, when three days later she was prepared to make a show of herself before thousands of people.

To be sure, Val's essential idea was blackmail, and blackmailers usually have a strongly developed taste for privacy. Still, the girl's last-minute change of mind did seem odd. The fact remained that Val had changed her mind, and refused to be Maggie's house guest. She and Deborah had driven away from Alexander Street, and begun a tour of the hotels in a town bursting with visitors.

"Then," said Deborah, "I had *my* idea. Why didn't Val take my reservation out here at Harmony. Val was simply delighted, she . . ."

"But, my dear," Maggie said, interrupting for the first time, "how did you happen to have a reservation at Harmony?"

"Oh, I couldn't descend without letting Stephen know," Deborah said, and colored faintly. "He didn't want me to

come, but when I kept insisting, Stephen arranged a reservation."

So Deborah had delighted Val by giving up her accommodations at Harmony Hall. I wasn't puzzled by Val's delight. The associations of Harmony Hall, where Rose Fairlee had done her secret entertaining, the presence of the old live oak tree where Rose Fairlee had crashed to her death, must have seemed to Val beautifully suited to her own purposes. I wasn't surprised that Val had registered as Deborah Parr. Val had a taste for intrigue. The false registration, the exchange of names and identities, would have amused that instinctively dishonest girl. I recalled how my dark-haired neighbor had quite needlessly informed me that Deborah was her sister, was traveling on to Florida.

But I couldn't understand Deborah's share in the masquerade. Her nature was straightforward, honest. Why had Deborah entered the Fairlees' home as Valeria Trevelyn, when she would have been welcomed under her own name?

"That was Stephen's idea," Deborah admitted in a low voice, and now her eyes avoided Maggie.

Suddenly Maggie went a little white.

"I understand," Maggie said quietly. "I was the one Stephen intended to deceive, and the only one. I know why. Stephen thought I was mixed up with Val Trevelyn, was responsible for bringing the girl to Charleston."

Deborah was silent.

"Tell me, Deborah," said Maggie, "didn't Stephen want you to find out exactly what his stepmother was doing? Posing as Val Trevelyn, Stephen thought you'd have a better chance of learning. Isn't that the truth?"

"I'd rather you talked to Stephen," Deborah said miserably, but in her youthful misery was Maggie's answer. "I would like you to know this, Mrs. Fairlee. I didn't spy on you. Truly, I didn't. I did try to turn the questions you kept asking about Stephen's mother. Stephen wanted you and me and everybody else to leave his mother in peace."

The tall girl slid off the lacemaker's chair, walked over to the modern leather couch and sat down as though her story was finished. It wasn't finished, of course. Deborah Parr had explained how she happened to be a guest in the Fairlee house, posing as Valeria Trevelyn. She had told us nothing of what had occurred during the two days of her masquerade. I recalled the silver ring that Deborah had worn for a little while, and that Val had worn when she died.

I leaned forward to ask a question. The library door opened, and my chance was gone.

Penelope Higgs came in with a pot of coffee as weak as tea, and a Revere silver platter decorated with some of the smallest sandwiches I've ever seen. The mistress of Harmony Hall was in a temper. Mrs. Higgs had lost a whole night's sleep, and she didn't care who knew it. She had served gallons of coffee to dozens of people, and she had serious doubts that the county would foot the bill. She was even curt with her old friend, "dear Elizabeth."

"I have no wish to be unpleasant," Mrs. Higgs said unpleasantly to Mrs. Collison, "but there are limits, Elizabeth. I cannot allow Harmony Hall to be turned into a police station by you and your friends. It's not my fault if something happened to a guest that seems to warrant police investigation. I shall look to both you and Conway," Penelope Higgs went on coldly, "to see that there is no disagreeable publicity involving Harmony in this unfortunate affair. I hope that doesn't sound unkind, my dear. I have the reputation of Harmony to consider, my own reputation . . ."

"Then you should be more careful about your choice of guests," Elizabeth said with equal coldness. "Penelope, you knew perfectly well that the girl who registered here as Deborah Parr was actually Val Trevelyn."

Mrs. Higgs sat down abruptly. Mrs. Higgs was reminded that Rose Fairlee and Dick Trevelyn had kept their guilty

assignations at Harmony, that she had met Dick Trevelyn's daughter many times. Perhaps she was also reminded that she'd had previous experience with the police, that an official party had come out to Harmony five years ago to investigate an automobile accident which had occurred at six o'clock in the morning.

"It's not an innkeeper's business, Elizabeth," the shaken Mrs. Higgs said, "to question the business of any guest. If Val Trevelyn chose to call herself Deborah Parr, that wasn't my affair. Val's business wasn't mine. Val wasn't my responsibility in any way. If Val got herself into trouble, I'm sorry now that she's dead, but . . ."

"But it still looks peculiar," Elizabeth said.

"Peculiar or not," said Mrs. Higgs, regaining a little of her old assurance, "my own conscience is clear. Quite clear. I could have done nothing to prevent the . . . the tragedy. Personally, I believe that both those unfortunate girls committed suicide."

Both girls? I recalled that Rena Mae Thripp had visited Harmony on the day of her death.

"According to Philo, who talks too much and knows a lot that isn't so," Mrs. Higgs said vaguely, "Miss Thripp came out here late Monday afternoon hunting for Val. I certainly didn't see her myself. But I read in the paper where Miss Thripp was dead. And it's my opinion," Penelope Higgs repeated with emphasis, "both Val and that other girl killed themselves."

"I think exactly the same," said Elizabeth Collison.

The two friends, at sword's points a moment earlier, had found something on which they agreed. Elizabeth and Penelope exchanged a glance of understanding. As Penelope rose and pulled her chair over beside Elizabeth's chair, Philo Higgs and Con walked in.

Mercifully, the two men had collected and sent the Boy Scouts back to town. Philo Higgs was as dirty as Con and staggering from fatigue, but I'd never seen him looking

better. Actually it was the first time I'd ever seen the master of Harmony Hall completely sober.

A few moments later we heard the footsteps of two other men in the hall. Tradd Fairlee and his son arrived at the house together. Before the door opened, I glanced at Deborah and at Maggie. I saw something rather touching. Each woman recognized the step of the man she loved.

Stephen and his father entered arm in arm. One head was red, the other head was black threaded with gray. But they were nearly of a height, and in the moment of their entrance the Fairlee men looked very much alike. At that very moment an ambulance wailed on the driveway outside. The library grew very still.

My eyes welled with foolish and unwelcome tears. I couldn't find it in my heart to pity Val Trevelyn. But just two days ago, also early in the morning, another ambulance siren had wailed and another girl had been taken away.

Again the door opened. Lieutenant Clayton entered the library. He came in quietly. Over his arm, he carried a heap of pale pink chiffon with long flowing sleeves and fluttering skirts sewed with tiny pink velvet roses.

19

THE LIBRARY BECAME profoundly quiet. Lieutenant Clayton walked to a long oak table and swept it clear of magazines and books. He laid the fluttering pink costume down. Beside the costume he deposited a crumpled wad of hundred-dollar bills and Stephen's fraternity ring. On the other end of the table he placed a crocheted butterfly earring, the mate to the earring I had destroyed. Next to the earring he put a second package of hundred-dollar bills, uncrumpled and neatly folded.

Lieutenant Clayton set up his case without haste. Satisfied at last, he turned around and spoke to all of us.

"I don't want to be unnecessarily harrowing," Lieutenant Clayton began, "but I've got to get my point across to a remarkably unsympathetic, cohesive and reticent group of people. I can understand the motives for your reticence, and in some ways can even feel the motives are justified and proper, but I must ignore my feelings and your feelings, too. Ladies and gentlemen, I have a job to do and I must insist upon receiving your cooperation.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I brought in these exhibits as witness for two young girls who can't be with us this morning. These young girls were bad girls, if you like, but the fact remains that both of them are dead, murdered. I strongly suspect that all of you know who the guilty person is. The murderer of course is in this room. I invite any one of you—the murderer, preferably—to step forward, to accompany me into another room, and save the rest of us pain, embarrassment and unnecessary distress."

He paused and waited. No one moved or spoke. Fifteen seconds of silence dragged by.

Lieutenant Clayton laid his hand on the long pink gown. The delicate cloth quivered and the tiny velvet roses fluttered like flowers in a breeze-swept garden.

"I need hardly tell you people," Lieutenant Clayton said, "that one of my exhibits speaks, in a rather oblique way, for another lady, a lady who died early one morning out here at Harmony. Peculiar circumstances attended her death. Five years later, two young girls—my own cousin one of them—interested themselves in the circumstances of this long-buried tragedy, and decided that by threatening the living members of the dead lady's family with public disgrace, they could achieve certain ends of their own. Both girls wanted money. But both of them wanted something beyond money."

Clayton paused, looked once more at his audience.

"Shall I continue with my story? I will gladly stop, and retire with any one of you."

No one spoke. Tradd and Stephen were sitting side by side on the leather couch with Deborah. As Lieutenant Clayton paused, I saw Stephen half-rise from the sofa, and then look at his father. Stephen sank back. Deborah clenched her hands until the knuckles whitened. She didn't touch Stephen, but her eyes addressed him. Wordlessly she seemed to be begging Stephen to stay beside her, to keep silent for both their sakes.

Of all the company, only Philo Higgs appeared to be unmoved. His gaze was fixed upon vacancy, as though he were dreaming of some place far away. Lieutenant Clayton looked slowly around the room. Implacable and relentless, but gentle in tone, his voice resumed.

"To proceed . . . it is easy for me to account for Val Trevelyn's knowledge of what happened five years ago. I expect she knew all along. Her father was involved."

"But that's horrible," I heard Elizabeth Collison whisper. "Horrible. To hold her own dead father up to public scorn!"

Lieutenant Clayton ignored the interruption. Once again he gazed at the Fairlee men. He looked first at Tradd, and then long and hard at Stephen.

"It's somewhat more difficult to say how my cousin obtained the hidden knowledge she expected to use for gain. But I have established to my satisfaction that Rena Mae was here at Harmony late on Monday afternoon. My cousin probably came out to investigate why Val Trevelyn, whom she knew by sight, was posing as Deborah Parr. But most of all Rena Mae was anxious to discover why Val Trevelyn had seen fit to eliminate her from the Festival.

"Knowing Rena Mae," Lieutenant Clayton went on steadily, "I believe that she searched Val Trevelyn's room. I believe she quickly discovered that Val Trevelyn was

prepared to appear in today's parade wearing a beautiful but distinctly unusual costume. I believe also—and I am confident I shall soon be able to prove it—that Rena Mae came upon evidence—a document, papers, letters, something—which made her privy to the whole of Val Trevelyn's secret knowledge. Rena Mae herself now had information to sell. She had a weapon which she deemed to be of incalculable power. Ladies and gentlemen, do you follow me?"

Several people moved slightly, restlessly, as leaves will stir on a still day when a distant storm is approaching. I felt a cold, trembling hand touch mine and the hand was Maggie's hand. She soon withdrew it.

"Now the story quickens," Lieutenant Clayton said, but the measured voice didn't quicken. "In turn, acting independently and very possibly without the knowledge of the other, Rena Mae and Val went into action. That is to say, they interviewed a member of the dead lady's family who had an active interest in suppressing the information the two girls possessed. Each girl told this person the terms of her bargain. There were different terms for silence. To begin with, each of the girls was given the sum of one thousand dollars. You will see the money lying over there on the table," and he gestured in that direction. "I am in a position to establish where half of the money came from, and I believe I can satisfy a jury that the other half came from the same source."

"Lieutenant Clayton!" said Maggie, and got up from her chair. "I got a thousand dollars from the bank on Saturday for my own personal use. But if you are thinking . . ."

"Mrs. Fairlee, I dislike to question a lady's word. But you handed the money to your stepson. The transaction occurred in the bank; there were witnesses."

"Stephen needed a new car," Maggie gasped. "Anyway, I lent Stephen only a thousand dollars, not two thousand."

"Mrs. Fairlee, I must remind you that you habitually keep large amounts of cash in your Alexander Street house. The patrolman on the beat is my informant."

Maggie would have argued further. But Lieutenant Clayton had turned again to the Fairlee men, the father and the son. Now he spoke directly to them.

"It is my belief," he said clearly, "that both girls would be alive today if they had demanded cash alone. I believe both girls set conditions for their silence which their blackmail victim was unable or unwilling to satisfy. Suppose we take Rena Mae first. She telephoned another cousin of ours that she positively would be in the parade today. Obviously someone had promised Rena Mae the place Val Trevelyn was prepared to occupy. But it was impossible for this person to put Rena Mae back into the parade, to take Val out of the parade except by meeting a demand of Val's which struck the person as intolerable. So Rena Mae died of morphine poisoning."

What had been Val's intolerable demand? I thought I knew. Lieutenant Clayton also thought he knew. Now his steady glance singled out Stephen alone.

"Val Trevelyn was more ambitious and intelligent than Rena Mae. Val wanted a place in society again. She wanted security, she wanted to reestablish herself in a position of consequence in her native city. In short, she wanted marriage. In exchange for withdrawing from the parade, in exchange for her silence, Val made a final demand that her victim was unwilling to meet. So last night Val was shot to death. When Val Trevelyn died she was wearing on her finger a silver ring that . . ."

"Listen, listen, listen!" Deborah sprang up from the couch, with burning cheeks and brilliant suffering eyes. "Lieutenant, I gave Stephen's ring to Val. I sent the ring to Val and told her I'd break my engagement. I met her demands about that. Late Monday night, or I guess early Tuesday morning, I went to the telegraph office and hired

a boy to deliver the ring to Harmony. Stephen would not have given my ring to Val. Never. I did it myself. You can check with the telegraph office, you can . . ."

"Miss Parr, I will," Lieutenant Clayton said. And then he added gently, "But surely you see that your giving up your engagement ring in such circumstances would only serve to strengthen Stephen's hatred of Val Trevelyn."

Deborah didn't speak. Stephen got up and helped her back to the sofa. In an abrupt, jerky motion, he turned toward Lieutenant Clayton. Then Stephen caught his father's eye, and sat down again.

Lieutenant Clayton pulled up a chair himself. He sat down and faced the Fairlee men, the father and the son.

"Gentlemen, you've heard my case in general," he said. "Now, perhaps, I should move on to the particular. Stephen," he said crisply, "last night I chased your car out here to Harmony. I know you were on the grounds at the time Val Trevelyn was shot."

Then he glanced at Tradd. "Mr. Fairlee, I can't place you on the plantation grounds. But if you could produce twenty of your friends who played cards with you last night, I'd still be obliged to question your alibi."

He arose from the chair. His voice was clear and ringing.

"Stephen Fairlee, Tradd Fairlee," he said, "shall we continue to drag forth and throw the light upon every circumstance of a not-too-well hidden but most distressing secret? Both of you know that these two murders have their origin in the peculiar circumstances which surrounded Rose Fairlee's death."

Tradd whitened at the mention of his dead wife's name. Again I thought that Stephen would have risen, but that the will of his father held him back. Neither man moved.

"Tradd Fairlee, Stephen Fairlee," Lieutenant Clayton said, "for the last time I invite one or the other, or both of you, to accompany me from this room."

Sometimes thirty seconds can be very long. It seemed

inevitable that Stephen's nerve would crack, that he would rise and accept the invitation. A full minute passed.

Suddenly Tradd Fairlee pulled a package of cigarettes from his pocket, and offered it to his son. Stephen's shaking hand tapped out a cigarette. As the lighter flared, the spell was broken. A long sigh ran around the room. Lieutenant Clayton looked disappointed.

At this point Mrs. Higgs drew on her own store of brassy courage. Raising her small blunt nose in the air, she sent a frigid glance at the policeman.

"Sandy Clayton, this has gone on plenty long enough. If you were including me in all that rigmarole, you can mighty quick take it back. I don't know anything about any murders, or even that there's been a murder. I'm a respectable southern lady, working hard to keep my place nice and earn a decent living . . ."

"Haven't you been doing rather better these past five years?" Lieutenant Clayton asked unexpectedly.

"Now what are you insinuating by that, Sandy Clayton?" demanded Mrs. Higgs, but her face was pale.

Philo Higgs awoke from his prolonged reverie and said suddenly, "Penelope, don't ask questions you don't want answered."

Lieutenant Clayton had already produced an answer. His voice was courteous, but the eyes regarding Mrs. Higgs were cool.

"I notice that you've fixed up Harmony mighty fine these last few years. Other people have noticed the improvements, too. Some have wondered," the police lieutenant said, "if the Fairlees and the Collisons didn't give you a little financial help after Rose Fairlee's accident."

"Now, why would they do that?" gasped Mrs. Higgs, heedless of her husband's wise instruction. "I don't know what you've heard, Sandy Clayton, but people tell mean, nasty lies when someone else gets a little success in the world. What if I *have* fixed up Harmony and made the

grounds and all attractive? What if Philo's relatives have helped me out a little from time to time? We're all cousins in a way, aren't we?"

"It would seem to depend on *when* and *why* your husband's rather distant relatives gave the help," the police lieutenant said politely. "Tell me, Mrs. Higgs. Haven't you kept that ugly tree lying out there on your lawn as a sort of hint that a little 'help' from time to time would be appreciated?"

Philo Higgs got up abruptly and walked out of the library. Lieutenant Clayton made no attempt to stop him. I knew Mr. Higgs was going out to get a drink, and I longed to join him. Mrs. Higgs' outraged denials were quite futile. Tradd and Stephen and Conway Collison, the three of them, deliberately avoided looking at each other. One closely guarded secret was out. It was all too clear that Penelope Higgs had received financial help from either the Fairlees or Collisons, perhaps from both families, to insure against any idle chattering about Rose Fairlee's death.

There was something almost splendid about Elizabeth Collison's complete obliviousness to reality.

"Lieutenant Clayton," Mrs. Collison said, "I know you are a gentleman, that you dislike digging into a painful tragedy of the past, as much as we dislike to have you do it. I suggest there is a possibility you have persistently overlooked. My own unshakable opinion is that your unfortunate cousin and Val Trevelyn committed suicide."

"No," he said, and shook his head. "It's true I don't like hurting people, dragging out old secrets that are best forgotten. But neither of those girls committed suicide, although attempts might have been made to make their deaths seem like suicide."

"Forgive me, Lieutenant, but your cousin threatened to kill herself. And the gun was lying very close to Val Trevelyn's hand. I saw it."

"She was shot from a distance," he said patiently, as a

teacher to a child. "Young girls don't kill themselves when they've just come into possession of a thousand dollars. Both Val Trevelyn and my cousin were murdered at a moment they believed to be a moment of triumph. Mrs. Collison, three suicides in a single case are two suicides too many."

"Three suicides, Lieutenant?" Elizabeth Collison repeated interrogatively. "How do you mean . . . three?"

"Rose Fairlee committed suicide," Lieutenant Clayton said gently. "Rose Fairlee is the only genuine suicide in the lot. When things got tough five years ago, when her intrigue was discovered and a family explosion was inevitable, Rose Fairlee's lover, who was her husband's partner, ran out on her. In despair, Mrs. Fairlee deliberately crashed her car into that tree out there. Surely you knew that, Mrs. Collison?"

"No, Lieutenant, I didn't know. I don't know now. What you say sounds most unconvincing."

"Mrs. Collison, a police party came out here five years ago to investigate a fatal automobile accident. The Fairlees and the Collisons, the Higgses too, were powerful enough to block an autopsy, any real inquiry. But a report of the accident was made at the time. I've studied that report, Mrs. Collison, read it carefully."

"Yes?" she said placidly.

"Rose Fairlee ran into that tree deliberately. In order to bring down the tree, she had to hit at around seventy miles an hour. To achieve that speed, she was obliged to back off the drive and take aim at the tree from the grass a good many yards away. Her tire marks showed. The driver's visibility was perfect. The morning, described in the *Banner* as foggy, was unusually clear. Read the weather report for May 5, 1943, in the same paper, your husband's newspaper."

"My sister-in-law was a happy wife and mother," said

Mrs. Collison. "She had no reason to kill herself. Rose came out to Harmony to gather flowers for a social occasion."

"Mrs. Collison," said the policeman, "the roses your sister-in-law had presumably come to cut were practically torn out by the roots. They littered the scene. The flower-picking was someone's hurried after-thought."

"Happy wives and mothers don't kill themselves," Elizabeth said stubbornly.

"Rose Fairlee wasn't a happy wife and mother. She was a desperate woman in a desperate situation. You, Mrs. Collison, her sister-in-law, had discovered she was carrying on an affair with her husband's partner, and had threatened to inform on her."

There was a silence in the room.

"Lieutenant, I deny that."

"It's the truth, Mrs. Collison. No secret can be really hidden in a town like Charleston, though appearances may be maintained. Dozens of people knew. Well, perhaps not dozens, but a few. Several of us down at Headquarters knew."

Mrs. Collison folded and unfolded her handkerchief.

"Assuming for the sake of argument, Lieutenant, that Rose was what you say, that I acted as you say—and I flatly deny it—you've still proved nothing. Rose was a gay and pretty woman, not the suicidal type at all!"

"Ah," said Lieutenant Clayton, "but Dick Trevelyn was as lacking in conscience and scruples as he was in courage. When Dick Trevelyn took fright, gathered up his daughter and ran for Egypt, he also took along the company assets. He bankrupted Rose Fairlee's husband. He posed a real dilemma for his deserted lady, and she solved it by killing herself."

"You can't prove that, Lieutenant."

Elizabeth's folded handkerchief slid off her knee.

"The circumstances speak for themselves," Clayton said. "Three weeks after Rose Fairlee's death, the Fairlee-Trevelyn brokerage firm was in serious financial difficulties. Three months later, the firm was bankrupt. Thousands of dollars' worth of negotiable bonds had vanished, and one of the partners was far away in Egypt. Tradd Fairlee mortgaged his home, closed out his personal bank accounts to make good the stockholders' losses. He also . . ."

Tradd Fairlee arose from the leather sofa. Beneath the outdoor tan, his face was gray.

"Clayton, you win," Tradd said quietly. "I've had enough. My sister, my wife and son, my friends have had enough. We needn't leave the room. I'll confess now. I killed those girls to preserve an illusion that may seem empty to some, but an illusion that seemed important to me. Clayton, I'm the guilty man."

Maggie screamed. She would have run to him, but I held her back. Stephen was also rising. He was at his father's side.

"Sandy, don't listen to him," Stephen said. "My father is lying to protect me. He knows that I'm guilty. I committed murder to protect my mother's memory and to protect myself. I killed Val so I would not lose the girl I love with all my heart."

Deborah raised her hands and covered her face. And then a third voice spoke.

"Lieutenant, I know you want the truth," Conway Collison said. "God knows, you've earned it. I'm the guilty man. Tradd and Stephen haven't got the kind of money that attracts ambitious young blackmailers. I'm the one your young ladies tried to touch, and I'm the one that killed them. Give me five minutes to call my lawyer, and I'll be ready to accompany you to the station."

Elizabeth Collison's moan was soundless. She snatched the handkerchief from the floor and stuffed it in her mouth.

Simultaneously, we heard from the fourth man of our party.

Philo Higgs had opened the door, and stood on the threshold of the library.

"Sandy Clayton," said Mr. Higgs, "you've got too much sense to be taken in by a lot of highfalutin rubbish. I'm your killer. Isn't it obvious? I've committed so many crimes against myself that murder came easy. I killed those no-good girls, without a second thought, for a motive that seemed adequate the time. Sandy, I'll make no trouble. With nothing to live for, I can skip the lawyer. Just call the wagon," said Mr. Higgs.

It was Penelope Higgs' turn now. She looked at her husband long and hard. Her eyes were as cold as ice. There was a glass of whiskey in Philo's hand.

20

TO ME, AS PERHAPS to Maggie and Deborah, the situation was incredible—the four men confessing almost simultaneously to murder. Shoulder to shoulder, united, arrogant and brave, they stood, each offering himself to disgrace and to death. Lieutenant Clayton looked slowly from one to the other. Slowly, sympathetically, he shook his head.

"Gentlemen, I can see that you mean to hang together. But it won't do. I mean to hang just one of you."

"Which one?" asked Tradd.

Lieutenant Clayton hesitated, finally spoke.

"Suppose you let me manage my eliminating. I believe I can promise," he said grimly, "that I'll wind up with the person I want."

"Start with me, and then you'll have the guilty man."

"Very well, Mr. Fairlee."

"I killed both girls," Tradd said, choosing his words with care but speaking rapidly. "You concede the motive—the protection of my dead wife's good name, which of course was my good name too, and my son's name. I killed to save my son from an unspeakable marriage. Lieutenant, I hated Val Trevelyn. I hated her because she was her father's daughter.

"When the situation was discovered five years ago," Tradd said clearly, "I would have shot Dick Trevelyn like a dog. But I was away from home at the time, in New York on company business. When I got back to South Carolina, Rose was dead and Dick and his daughter had fled the state, as later they fled the country. I soon found out that Val's father had not only betrayed, deserted and driven my poor misguided wife to suicide, but had ruined me financially. Perhaps my hatred of the Trevelyns grew as I took the Fairlees into bankruptcy court for the first time in the history of the family. Perhaps I thought of Val, as I mortgaged my home and borrowed from everywhere to pay off my stockholders.

"But there," said Tradd to the policeman, "let's get to the present. I didn't know your cousin until she tried to blackmail me, until she threatened to reveal a past I'd spent years trying to forget. Murder wasn't in my mind at first. First, I attempted to buy both girls off. I borrowed two thousand dollars from Maggie and . . ."

"Tradd, you didn't," cried Maggie in despair. "Lieutenant Clayton, don't listen to him. That isn't true."

"Let him finish his story, Mrs. Fairlee. Tell me," Lieutenant Clayton said to Tradd, "when and how you got possession of the Mauser pistol?"

"Lieutenant, you've been under a misapprehension about the pistol," said Tradd. "Rena Mae didn't ever take Stephen's gun from the collection in my home. Monday morning I carried the Mauser on a hunting trip, and left

it in my car. Last night I got the gun from my car. I didn't intend, of course, to implicate my son in any way."

"I'm sure of that," said Clayton. "But three people say Rena Mae *did* take the gun—Dr. Grant, Mr. Collison, and your son. Stephen and Mr. Collison say they actually saw the gun when Rena Mae called at the newspaper office on Monday afternoon."

"Con and Stephen are mistaken."

"That's always possible," the police lieutenant conceded. "But Rena Mae was poisoned. Where did you get the poison?" he asked suddenly.

Tradd winced. Apparently it was easier for him to discuss a gun than to discuss poison. Abruptly I recalled that the theft of my morphia was not a matter of general knowledge. If Tradd couldn't explain his possession of the drug, he would be automatically eliminated. To my consternation and astonishment, Lieutenant Clayton spoke.

"The morphine that killed Rena Mae was stolen from Dr. Grant's bag," he said.

There was a hesitation.

"I stole it," Tradd said.

"Oh no, Mr. Fairlee," said the police lieutenant. "That I cannot believe."

"And why not?"

"A matter of character, Mr. Fairlee. It would be very difficult for me to believe you had poisoned a young girl, whatever the circumstances. I could *never* believe that you stole the poison from a guest in your own house. Please step aside, Mr. Fairlee."

Lieutenant Clayton knew his company better than I did. Tradd didn't step aside, but his shoulders slumped and his face acknowledged defeat. Maggie expelled a long breath of relief. I straightened in my chair. Philo Higgs was sauntering forward.

Mrs. Higgs darted a glance of purest hatred at her husband as he took his stand defiantly in the center of the

room. In his hand Mr. Higgs held the defiant glass of whiskey. He sketched a gesture with the glass.

"Consider me, Lieutenant. Consider the man of shaky ethics and your job is done, your indecision settled. Everybody knows, I even know myself in my more lucid intervals, that I'd steal anything from anybody if I was drinking and the humor took me.

"My ethics," Philo Higgs said confidentially, "haven't amounted to a damn since the day Penelope started taking gifts she's too genteel to call blackmail, and I wasn't man enough to stop her. To you my motive for the murders might seem a trifle obscure, but to me it's crystal clear. Shall I tell why I killed those two girls?"

"Do," said Clayton.

"I was brought up southern style, Lieutenant. Maybe I've forgotten a lot but I never forgot the lesson I was taught at my white-haired mother's knee. The honor and public reputation of the ladies in my family is sacred to me, in my cups or out. Rose Fairlee was a Higgs, however she behaved herself. Those two little tramps—forgive me, Lieutenant, but that's the only way to describe them both—were threatening to scandalize Rose's fair name.

"I found out about it when your cousin called at Harmony late Monday afternoon, searched Val's room and then tried to declare herself in on the scheme to shake down the Fairlee family. How did I find out? Naturally, being the last disreputable bearer of a once fine and decent name, I found out by listening at Val's door. It's a pity you weren't there yourself to listen, Lieutenant, when Val walked in and caught Rena Mae in the act of going through her private correspondence. Such a screeching and caterwauling you've seldom heard.

"The young ladies came to no agreement, and Rena Mae went back to town in a taxi and a huff. I can explain the poison easily. Dr. Grant was a guest in my great-grandfather's house on Monday and very kind to me.

"I repaid the doctor's kindness," said Philo Higgs, "by rifling her bag. At the time my idea was that morphine might be soothing to my frequently somewhat jangled nerves. After Rena Mae's sly call and tempestuous exit, I thought of a better use for the morphine. I followed Rena Mae to town, and invited her to have a drink. While Rena Mae was enjoying that last drink of hers, I stole the Mauser pistol from her purse. We alcoholics, or drunks if you prefer, have a certain cunning. And you'd be surprised how a fixed idea will stick with us. I hadn't forgotten Val. Nor had I forgotten that the Azalea Parade, at which function Val proposed to throw mud on the Higgses, the Fairlees and the Collisons, was scheduled for today. I set up a watch on Val. Around half-past twelve last night, my patience was rewarded. I saw Val sneak out of the house bound on one of her evil errands, and please don't ask me who Val was going to meet. All I can say is that Val was unable to keep her appointment. I slipped up behind the heartless hussy and shot her dead."

The words came out monotonously, evenly, not in a gushing cleansing torrent of angry bitterness but in a steady measured trickle. At the conclusion, Mr. Higgs lifted the glass in his hand, and tossed the contents down. He looked brightly, expectantly at Lieutenant Clayton.

"How's that for a confession?" inquired Philo Higgs.

The policeman was silent. There was now a note of quiet exuberance in Philo Higgs' voice.

"What are we waiting for? Where are your handcuffs, Sandy? Mind, now, you mustn't press me too much on details," said Mr. Higgs. "You've heard all the story I've got to tell. Sometimes I'm forgetful about small details. The thing is, I drink too much. What's wrong, Sandy? Have I overlooked some important detail?"

"Yes," said Lieutenant Clayton, applying the coup de grace with merciful swiftness. There were many holes in the confession, but Clayton pointed out only one. "Look

at your own hands, Philo," the policeman said. "See how they shake? Why, you can hardly hold that empty glass."

"What's that got to do with my killing those two girls?"

"Valeria Trevelyn," Clayton said, "was shot squarely through the temple by an expert marksman."

"Sit down, Philo." Mrs. Higgs raised her face from her hands and spoke shrilly. "Stop making a public show of yourself. Everybody knows that a man in your condition couldn't hit a barn door with a cannon."

The bright expectant look left his bloodshot eyes; the embers of the fire and passion that must once have dwelt there flickered and died. Carefully holding the empty glass, Mr. Higgs walked quietly over to a chair and sat down; he had offered up his life and liberty for someone else and the offer had been refused.

And then Conway Collison ambled forward.

"I'm a crack shot," Con began. "Ask who won all the cups at the Hunt and Saddle Club last year. Elizabeth's sideboard is groaning with my trophies. Isn't that so, Elizabeth?"

"Con, please," said Mrs. Collison, and on her face was a strange expression. It was a mixture of pride and fear and protest—pride because her husband was living up to the traditions to which she'd been bred, the fear and protest because, compelled by those traditions, he might talk himself into a death cell. Well, I thought almost in surprise, this frigid, unbending woman loves her man, too.

"Please stop him, Lieutenant. He isn't telling the truth. Con and Stephen," Elizabeth declared, "were both in my company every minute last evening from ten p.m. until one a. m. And I shall go on the stand and swear to it."

"Thank you, Elizabeth," Con said gravely to his wife. "Your lie is very sweet and gallant but quite futile. It's too late for perjury, my dear."

"Con, I hate to contradict you, but . . ."

"Let your husband finish his story," Clayton said.

Con swung around to face the lieutenant.

"You didn't see me or my car last night while you were pursuing Stephen," Con said clearly, "because I arrived on the plantation grounds considerably earlier. I had an appointment with Val, and I deliberately anticipated the hour. Around eleven o'clock, I hid my car in the brush near the boathouse, walked up the hill and concealed myself in the live oak tree. I had decided upon murder as the only solution. I'd already given Val a thousand dollars to no effect. I would have given Val all the money she wanted to hold her tongue and leave Charleston, and I told Val so. However, I refused to use my good offices to persuade my nephew to bring into our family a wife who was a blackmailer and a cheat. Consequently, from eleven until sometime after twelve, I lay in waiting for Val. The time passed quickly. I waited, and when the vixen appeared I shot her."

Con's white thatched head was flung proudly back, as he gazed at Lieutenant Clayton. And the blue eyes were the cold eyes of the hunter.

"I shot the vixen in the dark," Con repeated triumphantly, "and from a distance of thirty feet. I got her in the temple. Now, Lieutenant, shall I explain how I acquired the Mauser pistol?"

"By all means," said Clayton.

"You know that Rena Mae called at the *Banner* City Room late on Monday afternoon, but you don't know why she came," said Con, staring straight at the other man. "Rena Mae had been out to Harmony, and on her return to town she promptly telephoned my office. I invited her to drop around so we could talk her proposition over. Unfortunately, Stephen was in the office when Rena Mae arrived, but Rena Mae's wits were quick. Flourishing Stephen's gun, the gal put on a most convincing show that she merely wanted to see her side of the Bodes Crossing queen-making fracas written up in print.

"The gun," said Con, "was a piece of luck for me. When I followed Rena Mae out of the City Room into the hall, as of course Rena Mae expected me to do, I was able to get the gun from her. Ask Stephen," Con said sharply to Clayton, "if I didn't follow Rena Mae from the City Room. Stephen, tell Sandy the truth. Didn't I go out in the hall after Rena Mae?"

"Yes, Con, but . . ." began Stephen.

"Shut up, Steve. I've got the floor," said Con. "Sandy, I had only a few minutes in private with your cousin. They were important minutes to both of us. First of all, I was able to persuade Rena Mae to hand over the gun, to persuade her that running around with a loaded pistol was silly, that she could obtain her heart's desire without violence.

"In return for the gun, I gave Rena Mae a thousand dollars, took it from my billfold. I carry large amounts of money on my person, always have since I've had the money to carry. Ask anybody about Conway Collison and his vanity. Lieutenant, do you believe me?"

"Perhaps," Lieutenant Clayton said. "Perhaps. Go on."

"After I parted with the thousand dollars, I listened to Rena Mae's proposition," Con went on coolly. "The girl offered to keep quiet about Rose if I would get Mrs. Collison to intervene with the Festival Committee. That was impossible. My whole object was to keep my wife and the whole family clear of an unholy mess, to handle the matter myself. So," said Con, "as Rena Mae and I stood talking in the hall, with the presses making a noisy clamor not far off, I decided Rena Mae must die."

"When did you poison my cousin?" Lieutenant Clayton asked.

"Oh, then, right then," Con replied easily. "While she and I were standing in the hall. Thirty seconds after I gave Rena Mae the thousand dollars, I gave her the morphine. It was a quick decision, of course. But show me any

successful businessman, and I'll show you a man who can make quick decisions."

Lieutenant Clayton said nothing.

"I didn't administer the morphine in whiskey," said Con. "I had no flask on me; my own drinking is purely social. But there was a water cooler in the hall where Rena Mae and I held our conference. It was a hot afternoon. I asked Rena Mae if she was thirsty, and she was thirsty. She drank the morphine in a paper cup, or rather in two paper cups. I split the dose. And then I sent her off, happy and unworried, with a thousand dollars in her pocket."

"When," said Clayton inexorably, "did you get the morphine?"

"You know, Sandy, that I have a large stock interest in our local chain drugstore system and, as a matter of fact, I keep a well-equipped medical cabinet under lock and key in my own office. Either might be a source of supply. But the truth is that I got the morphine from Dr. Grant's car. After Rena Mae's call I went over to the garage; I wanted to take a drive to collect my thoughts. There beside Maggie's big bus was a dusty coupé with Connecticut plates. I saw, almost at the same time, the caduceus symbol on the radiator and the doctor's bag among the luggage. I opened the bag and took the morphine."

It was broad daylight now. The brilliant sun was strong upon Con's clever, alert, convincing face.

"Well, Sandy?" he inquired. "You've heard my story, and I'm sure it meets all your qualifications. Ask me any question you like, and I'll produce the answer. My memory for details is excellent. I'm the guilty man. Let me call my lawyer, and then we'll take that ride downtown."

"No," Lieutenant Clayton said. "You're clever, Mr. Collison, but you're not the man I want. I don't question your essential ruthlessness, your potentialities as a thief,

a liar, or killer, but you didn't commit these two murders."

"And why?" Con demanded. "Why not?"

"Again it's a matter of character, or suppose we say personality. In your case, Mr. Collison, the motive is missing. You had no motive for killing either Rena Mae or Val Trevelyn."

"No motive! In God's name, what have we been talking about? I killed them to prevent a scandal that would have rocked Charleston. They were threatening my wife and her family with public disgrace."

"Mr. Collison, you might have paid them money for such a reason. Murder, no. To you, family is relatively unimportant."

"Family unimportant! I'm a southerner myself, and don't you forget it!"

"No offense, Mr. Collison," said Lieutenant Clayton, "but you're one of the new southerners. Your values aren't the old values. Power, money, success are important to you. If your newspaper was threatened, and the power that goes with it, then indeed you might be impelled to murder. In these circumstances, no."

"Now look here, Sandy . . ."

"Mr. Collison, I've known you for years," Lieutenant Clayton said. "The idea of you as this particular murderer is ridiculous. If Rena Mae and Val had approached you and tried to strike the bargain you've so circumstantially described, you'd probably have threatened both girls with immediate police action. You are well aware that extortion is a crime. The thought of scandal wouldn't have frightened you for a moment, Mr. Collison. You don't fit the bill in any way," said the policeman. "You tell too many jokes. You laugh too much. You have too much humor."

"What has humor to do with it?" Con asked sullenly.

"Dozens of times, Mr. Collison, I've heard you joke about your Georgia cracker grandpappy, sitting barefoot

on the porch smoking his corncob pipe. Your grandfather, as we all know, was a distinguished United States senator. Come, Mr. Collison. You are one of us but you have always been in revolt against empty tradition. Does such a rebellious grandson risk his neck to sustain a family's honor?"

Now it was Conway Collison who said nothing. His keen face was vaguely troubled, as though he were wondering whether the modern southerner had overlooked something that might be important, because it was of such great importance to others. His face cleared, as Elizabeth got up and walked over toward him. Again her expression was strange. Her obvious relief seemed to be tinged with faint regret. And the hand she put on her husband's shoulder was definitely consoling, as though some flaw in his character had saved him for her and she was both glad and sorry.

"The Georgia cracker did his best," Con said. "Elizabeth, I want you to remember that."

"Yes, Con, you did your best," said another voice. Stephen was speaking from the sofa where he sat with Deborah. "Con, Father, Philo, you all did your best. And I'm grateful."

Deborah's fingers grabbed tightly at Stephen's wrist as he started to rise. Gently but firmly he detached the clinging fingers. Rising, Stephen walked away from the girl and to Lieutenant Clayton.

"Sandy, the charades are over," Stephen said. "Part of what you heard was true. A great deal wasn't true. It was of course futile . . . all the talking. Everybody knew from the first, you knew and I knew certainly, that I was the man you had in your mind."

Lieutenant Clayton made no comment.

"My story will be the shortest," Stephen said. "The truth can always be told briefly. Obviously, I'm guilty. My qualifications are letter perfect. I'm midway between my father's kind of southerner and Con's kind. My dead mother's good

name was important to me, very. Taking morphine from Dr. Grant's bag, even though she was my friend and a house guest, didn't trouble me especially.

"What did trouble me," Stephen said, and wiped the sweat from his forehead, "was giving morphine to a girl. When I met Rena Mae late Monday evening and handed her the thousand dollars I'd borrowed from Maggie, I took her to a bar and we had a drink together. My feelings as I put the tablets in her glass weren't at all the feelings that Con described. As I watched her lift the glass, I almost snatched it from her hand and swallowed the drink myself."

"I can believe that," Lieutenant Clayton said.

"Sandy, I did go through with it. You know," said Stephen to the policeman, "that I was here at Harmony last night. Con told you he'd got the gun from Rena Mae, but Con didn't tell you that he returned my own gun to me. It's possible Con won't back me up . . ."

"I will not," Con said strongly.

"When I met Val last night at the live oak tree," said Stephen, brushing aside the interruption, "I had the gun and there was murder in my heart. I offered Val one last chance to leave town. She laughed. When I tried to take my ring off her finger Val resisted, broke away and ran. I shot her."

Again Lieutenant Clayton made no comment. My own instincts and my brain were at war. My feelings said that Stephen could not be a murderer. Logic reminded me that I had heard the quarrel between Stephen and Val, had heard the couple scuffling, had heard them separate, had heard Val attempt to run away. Almost immediately after I was knocked unconscious, the murder must have occurred.

"I shot Val in the dark and with joy," Stephen was saying. "I can outshoot both Con and my father. Any questions, Sandy?"

"There was a second sum of one thousand dollars," Lieutenant Clayton said slowly.

"Savings, my own savings," Stephen replied unhesitatingly. "I've been saving my money for a . . . a private purpose."

The steady voice quivered only slightly. But Deborah's stricken face announced that Stephen's savings had been planned for their marriage.

"My motive for killing Val," Stephen said, and his voice steadied again, "was far and away the most compelling motive that has been mentioned here. I killed for my poor dead mother's sake, but for my own sake, too. In my desperation, in my crazy hunting for some way to protect my mother's honor," said Stephen, "there were times I actually considered giving in and marrying Val. To save myself from the possibility of such ignominy, to spare my own girl such pain and distress, I *had* to kill Val. When I shot Val I was thinking of my mother. But I was also thinking of myself, and of Deborah. Sandy, you have heard my confession."

"I accept it," said Lieutenant Clayton. He walked over and put his arm through Stephen's arm. No handcuffs or manacles were produced. "If you'd stuck to guns, Steve," said the policeman grimly, "you might have a fighting chance. Poison is something else again."

Arm in arm, the two men walked out of the library. I ran over to the couch. Deborah had fainted.

21

WHEN WE GOT back to Alexander Street in mid-morning, after I had made Deborah as comfortable as possible, I fell into bed myself. My exhausted mind attempted endlessly to sift the mixture of truth and falsehood that had

been told out at Harmony Hall. Sleep, I thought, was impossible. But I slept, and soon I dreamed.

I dreamed—God forgive a simple New England female—in gaudy pictures. I almost dreamed in Technicolor.

I dreamed of wonderful southerners doing wonderful things. I watched them shutting closet doors in haste. I watched them busily squirting perfume atomizers on mountainous heaps of dirty linen, and then rushing madly forth to splash buckets of whitewash on tidy rows of backyard sepulchres. I dreamed of the Azalea Parade.

Miss Myrtle Beach rode slowly past, holding an enormous bouquet, and she was smiling at the cheering crowds. But her fixed steady smile was strained and overbright. My dreaming eye pierced the covering flowers, saw that the hidden fox the young girl clutched was gnawing at her vitals. "She's got to do it, she's got to do it," the crowd was chanting. "It's a point of honor, Dr. Grant. She was brought up southern style."

And then I was in a paneled, candle-lighted room where a group of white-haired ladies were drinking tea. The silver service rested on a coffin, and in the coffin a dead man lay. None of the ladies drinking tea appeared to notice. And then I saw that the man was Philo Higgs and that he wasn't dead, but was only drunk. Now one of the white-haired ladies was whispering to another. "Poor Philo drinks a bit too much at times, but don't mention it, don't mention it. He's a cousin, after all . . ."

In another corner of the room, a group of whitehaired men, wearing tall silk hats, were whispering, too. "Cousin Richard was hopelessly insane, but please don't mention it. Sister Ellen drowned herself and her baby too, but let's put it otherwise. Aunt Mary is a kleptomaniac, but let's keep it to ourselves. It's a point of honor, Dr. Grant, a matter of family pride. You Northerners don't understand."

I awoke with a gasp. I won't pretend that I woke up with the truth, but I awoke with a sure knowledge that

Lieutenant Clayton hadn't heard the truth. The Harmony story—the foundation of Stephen's confession—was false.

It was possible that Rose Fairlee might commit suicide if she'd been jilted by her lover. But she wouldn't go out to Harmony, crash her car into a tree and leave to chance and to others the salvaging of her reputation. Not the Rose Fairlee that I'd learned to know. She would have stayed at home and swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills. Rose Fairlee hadn't gone to Harmony five years ago to commit suicide. She'd had another reason.

I got out of bed, trembling and shaky like someone who has experienced a stupendous revelation. I hurried into my clothes. I sped downstairs to telephone Lieutenant Clayton. Just as I reached the drawing-room telephone, it rang and was for me. Philo Higgs was on the wire.

"Doc, I'm sitting out here at Harmony feeling blue and lonesome. I wish you'd come out and talk to me."

I was astonished, but firm.

"Mr. Higgs, I can't possibly come to Harmony. In point of fact, I was just planning to call on Lieutenant Clayton."

"Doc, I'm sober."

"It isn't that. But . . ."

"You'd better come," he said with a kind of queer insistence. "It might be worth your while. I'd kind of like your slant on some of the lessons I learned in my youth. Maybe my ideas are outmoded, Doc. I'll wait for you in the boathouse," said Mr. Higgs, and abruptly hung up.

I was at once exasperated and baffled. But I knew perfectly well that I meant to accept that curious invitation. Mr. Higgs had been at Harmony the morning Rose Fairlee died there. Mr. Higgs had claimed to be a witness of an accident that had been no accident, whatever else it might have been. If Philo Higgs was in the mood to talk, I was anxious to oblige him.

I put my plans on record. I rang the bell for Boswell and spoke to him. Maggie and Tradd were downtown

hiring a lawyer for Stephen, but I asked that they be informed of my whereabouts the moment either of them returned to the house. Feeling a little foolish, I then rang up the police station. A courteous desk sergeant informed me that Lieutenant Clayton was too busy to be interrupted. I advised the sergeant that Dr. Victoria Grant was driving out to Harmony to call on Philo Higgs in the plantation boathouse, and requested that Lieutenant Clayton be notified. The sergeant promised to deliver the message, but with an air of considerable surprise. He plainly wondered why Dr. Grant appeared to think Lieutenant Clayton would be interested in her doings. I wondered a little myself.

An hour later, I parked my car beside the clay-red river where I'd lost my purse and an empty morphia bottle that had never figured in the case at all. The boathouse was freshly swept. The boards had been removed from the door. It stood open. Calling to Mr. Higgs, I moved swiftly across the porch, and went on in.

I stepped into the room where Rose Fairlee had entertained her friends.

I knew at once. Some attempt had evidently been made to tidy the place for my arrival. The floor was freshly swept. The boards had been pulled off a large plateglass window, looking out on the river, and a cloth hurriedly rubbed across the glass had produced a somewhat smeary effect. The evidence of five years of disuse and neglect are not to be erased in a few hours. Cobwebs dangled from the ceiling and wove their webs in corners. The once luxurious furnishings were rotten with damp and mold and mildew. Expensive draperies of rose brocade hung in ribbons from the depredations of mice and moths. There was a great hole in the back of the rose brocade that covered a sofa placed before a vast stone fireplace opposite the door.

Mr. Higgs wasn't in the room.

In brilliant waves, the sun poured through the smeary glass of the large window. It shone upon three mildewed

traveling bags, lined up against the wall. They sat side by side, like bags waiting in a railroad station, those three bags that weren't going anywhere. The brass fittings were tarnished and rusted. On the largest of the bags, I thought I could detect the shape of half-obliterated initials.

I approached the bag, leaned over it. The initials were R. F. I knew, of course, why Rose Fairlee had brought her luggage out to Harmony five years ago. I had dimly known even before I saw the bags. Rose Fairlee hadn't come to Harmony to kill herself. Rose had left her husband's Alexander Street home five years ago, expecting to take quite a different kind of journey.

I lifted the bag. The bag was light. There was nothing in it. The second bag was empty too. With a queer dream-like feeling, I put my hand on the third.

My fingers froze on the rotted handle. In the room behind me, a voice spoke.

"All the bags are empty, Dr. Grant," the voice said pleasantly.

Conway Collison stood up from the ruined sofa. He looked at me across the distance with a rather curious smile.

"Mrs. Higgs was afraid to remove the furniture," he said, "but Mrs. Higgs couldn't bear to let poor Rose's pretty dresses go to waste. Come on in, Dr. Grant," he said to me. "Come and sit beside me."

"Thank you, no," I said stammeringly. I had been so startled, so disagreeably startled. "I . . . I was looking for Mr. Higgs."

"So am I," Con said, the curious smile was deepening. "Do come in, Dr. Grant. We'll keep each other company while we wait."

He was moving past the window, was advancing through the waves of sunlight, was coming quickly, lightly toward me. Beyond him through the window, the river was sliding by. Great as was my haste to retreat, his haste was greater.

Con reached me. He had my arm. He held it firmly and compellingly but with an odd gentleness too, as a determined young man holds the arm of a reluctant girl and attempts to pull her to the dance floor.

"Please let me go," I said. "I prefer to wait outside. I want to see Mr. Higgs alone."

"So do I," Con replied, holding firmly to my arm. "Who knows, Doctor? Perhaps I have a certain interest in which of us sees him first."

"Then let me go," I said quickly. "I'll drive back to town, and come some other time."

"Doctor, I'm afraid it's a little late for that. Philo is outside now. Listen! Don't you hear a car?"

His hearing was very sharp. With incredible relief, I, too, heard a car drive up outside and stop some yards away. Con dropped my arm.

"When Philo comes," he said, still quite pleasantly, "you may go if you like. In fact, I think it might work out better all around for you to leave."

It was very clear that Con meant to prevent my seeing Philo Higgs. It was obvious to me that Con was trying to keep hidden the dark facts of murder. Now that I wasn't frightened any more, I was annoyed at my own fright and in my annoyance I became determined, too.

"You're very kind," I said, "but I'm sure you'll grant a woman the right to change her mind. All things considered, I believe I'll stay."

I looked at Con and he looked at me. Our eyes met in a long measuring glance, like the eyes of two duellists. Together, standing near the door, we waited. And the wait seemed very long. Many minutes seemed to pass before we heard footsteps—staggering, uncertain footsteps.

I looked out on the porch. Mr. Higgs seemed a prize hardly worth the struggle. The sobriety he had mentioned on the telephone appeared to be a thing of the past. He picked up his feet and set them down on the porch with

the carefulness of a man advancing through quicksand, and despite his efforts the big feet seemed to stick to the floorboards.

Apparently, Mr. Higgs had left the engine of the car running. In the sunlit distance, I could hear the steady throbbing. And then all at once as I watched him shuttling from side to side, I realized something was decidedly wrong about the picture. Mr. Higgs didn't walk that way when he was really drunk. He was shamming. Simultaneously Con spoke.

"Philo," he called distinctly, "the doctor thinks the scene is overdrawn."

One would have sworn that Mr. Higgs hadn't heard. When his final lurch brought him to the threshold, he peered at Con and me with the confused surprise of the heavily intoxicated.

"What are you folks doing here in my place?"

"Mr. Higgs, you telephoned me," I said.

"Did I?" Mr. Higgs asked me vaguely. "I wonder why."

"So do I," I said, with a sinking heart.

Once again Con was smiling. Suddenly Con looked confident and secure. Mr. Higgs was gazing at me, as though he'd never laid eyes on Dr. Victoria Grant before.

"Philo, the lady seems to think you'd like to talk to her," said Con. "She's been quite insistent. Suppose, to satisfy the lady's mind, we all sit down and talk together."

And a moment later the three of us were sitting on the stained, discolored sofa, and it was very much like a dream. Mr. Higgs remembered perfectly that he had telephoned me and he remembered why, but Con was there to remind Philo Higgs that I was an outsider, that both of them were born and bred to the same traditions. My only possible course, I thought, was a bold one. I turned to Mr. Higgs.

"Who killed Rose Fairlee?" I asked.

"Philo, the lady is asking about your cousin," Con said

softly from my other side. "The lady wants to know about poor Rose. Why don't you answer her?"

"It was an accident," Mr. Higgs told me, but his forehead was beaded with sweat. "Poor Rose had an automobile accident. Or was it suicide? Some people said suicide."

"It was murder, Mr. Higgs," I said. "Rose Fairlee was running away from her husband. She brought her luggage here. The bags are empty, of course. Long ago Mrs. Higgs removed her clothing."

"Now the lady is speaking of your wife, Philo," Con said from my other side. "Like so many outsiders, she takes a great interest in what does not concern her. She comes down from the Notrh, spends a few hours with us, accepts our hospitality, and tells us South Carolinians how to run our business. . . ."

"Listen to me, Mr. Higgs," I said. "Is it fair that Stephen Fairlee should suffer for crimes he did not commit? You know it isn't."

"It's Stephen's own choice, Philo. Stephen didn't send this lady here."

"Tell me what really happened five years ago," I said desperately to the big silent man who sat beside me. "I know that Rose Fairlee was murdered on the morning she was running away from her husband. I know that Dick Trevelyn didn't kill her; he was her sweetheart. Tell me about the bonds that disappeared that same day. Were the bonds given to Dick Trevelyn for holding his tongue? If that is true, why did his daughter return to Charleston wanting and needing money so badly?"

Mr. Higgs did not answer. But Con spoke again. His soft voice was hard, and Mr. Higgs' eyes seemed to harden, too.

"Now the lady is vulgar," Con said to Philo Higgs. "Now she inquires into financial matters. Our ladies leave such things to their men."

"Murder is vulgar," I said, and threw all my strength

and energy into a last appeal. With passion and pleading, I addressed Philo Higgs. "Good taste plays no part in murder. The notion is ridiculous. It's equally ridiculous for a young man—I'm speaking of Stephen Fairlee—to sacrifice himself to shield another person who is guilty of such a terrible offense.

"Murder is corrupt and evil, and not to be buried under the cloak of mistaken concepts of nobility. There is nothing noble in putting a dead woman's body in an automobile, and crashing that car into a tree. There is nothing noble in giving a young girl three grains of morphine. There is nothing noble in shooting another young girl through the head. There is no nobility in the conduct of those who seek to conceal the truth and protect the guilty! Is there, Mr. Higgs?" I asked, and now my voice was quiet and I was spent.

The room was quiet, too. Outside, coming faintly through the open door, we heard the lapping of the river. Further off, in the distance, was the steady throbbing of the automobile engine.

Mr. Higgs looked at neither Con nor me. He was staring straight ahead into the huge smoke-grimed mouth of the fireplace opening. Leaves and twigs, a shattered bird's nest fallen down the chimney, lay in heaps on the stones. Mr. Higgs' bloodshot eyes seemed to be absently examining the bird's nest. Several seconds passed. At last he spoke.

"Why don't we have a little drink?" inquired Philo Higgs.

"Not for me," I said dully. As he arose with some alacrity, I got up slowly from the sofa. "Goodbye, Mr. Higgs. I expect I might as well be going now."

"I'll show you to your car," said Con, and got up from the sofa with almost awkward haste.

But I was watching Mr. Higgs. He walked across the hearthstone of the enormous fireplace. Stooping his head a little, he walked right on into the fireplace and reached

up the chimney. Triumphantly, Mr. Higgs produced from a hidden shelf or aperture in the chimney a bottle of whiskey and a glass. Then he turned around, and walked out into the room again.

"Come along, Dr. Grant," said Con, and gave my arm a painful tug.

My fingers slipped off the damp, slimy fabric of the sofa. Mr. Higgs had now poured his drink. I watched him raise the glass to his lips. Simultaneously there flashed into my mind the empty morphia bottle which lay somewhere in the mud of the river, and with half its contents unaccounted for. I screamed.

"Don't drink that, Mr. Higgs!"

The big man paused in surprise and displeasure. Many times must Mrs. Higgs have screamed at him in such a fashion. Mr. Higgs looked at me unpleasantly.

"Why not?"

"I believe the whiskey is poisoned," I said. "Furthermore, I believe your friend and adviser, Conway Collison, knows it."

I was altogether unprepared for Con's reaction. He released my arm at once. His eyes and his voice were like ice.

"Dr. Grant," Con said, "you are insulting. If you were a man, I'd horsewhip you for that remark. Philo, this lady now suggests that I'd try to poison you."

And then Con walked away from me, and went to Philo Higgs, who stood bewildered, staring at the brimming glass. Con stretched out his hand.

"Philo, give the drink to me. By all means, let us satisfy Dr. Grant."

His outstretched hand was absolutely steady. Not a single drop of liquor spilled, as the transfer was made. Con sent an arrogant glance at me, lifted the glass as though he were about to drink a toast. The glass touched his lips.

And then a second woman screamed. From the doorway behind us, another high-pitched voice screamed a warning.

"Don't drink that!"

I whirled around. Elizabeth Collison stood on the porch, looking in at us. Her face was ashen. Glittering with terror and anguish, her eyes regarded her husband and the glass in his steady hand.

"Con, don't drink that!"

"My dear Elizabeth," Con called to her, "no woman, not even my own wife, tells me what to do. Go and get in your car, Elizabeth. I'll join you in a moment."

Again he lifted the glass to his lips. But Elizabeth held a gun. As Con raised the glass, his wife raised her gun and fired in through the open door from the porch.

Her marksmanship was superb. From a distance of nearly forty feet, she shot the glass from his hand. The fragments of the disintegrating tumbler flew in all directions. Liquor saturated Con's hand and clothing, shards of glass fell around him, and his hand was bleeding from several cuts. He looked stupidly at his hand.

But I looked at Elizabeth Collison. I looked at the woman who had lived her whole life with an eye to what her friends, acquaintances and social equals would think. I looked at a woman to whom appearances meant everything. I knew at last who had shot Valeria Trevelyn in the darkness. I knew who had stolen my morphia and poisoned Rena Mae Thripp. I knew at last that the answer to the riddle of what had happened at Harmony five years ago was held by Mrs. Conway Collison.

22

STILL HOLDING THE gun, Elizabeth ran in from the porch and to her husband. She was crying hysterically.

"Con, the whiskey is poisoned! It wasn't meant for you."

Philo Higgs and I had lost reality for Elizabeth Collison. In the moment of her collapse, she was aware only of her husband.

"I was afraid Philo might break down and talk," Elizabeth cried, indifferent to the fact that she herself had broken. She tried to take Con's injured hand. "Darling, did I hurt you?"

"You have ruined us both," said Con, and pushed his wife away, and nursed his bleeding hand in his coat. "Dr. Grant is no friend of ours. Philo will scarcely feel friendly any longer. Elizabeth, pull yourself together."

"I can't! I can't! I'm too tired of being harried and afraid and living a lie," Mrs. Collison said, the tears streaming from her eyes. "I've had years of lies, Con. Lies don't trouble you the way they trouble me."

"Elizabeth, I suggest you control yourself."

"My control is used up, Con. I can't seem to care any more. I hope they hang me, Con. I'm so tired of keeping up appearances, and protecting you while you protected me and made me pay for it. I'm tired of paying the Higgses for their protection, too. I hate the Higgses, both of them. Sometimes, Con, quite often, Con, I hate you, too. I'm glad it's over," said Mrs. Collison. "Dr. Grant knew all the time and so did Sanford Clayton that I was the one he really wanted."

And then Elizabeth turned to me, as though for confirmation. I stared at her, bewildered by my own obtuseness. Four southern men had simultaneously confessed to murder, and I had overlooked the significance of the fact. It should have been obvious that the men had united and drawn together to protect and cover one of their own women.

"The men protected me," Elizabeth said with curious bitterness, "and they asked no questions. Even now Tradd and Stephen don't know the true story. They think I killed the girls to save Stephen, and to protect Rose Fairlee's

nonexistent reputation. They still think Dick jilted Rose and ran off with the company money, that Rose committed suicide. Rose had no idea of killing herself. She meant to elope with Dick Trevelyn and disgrace the whole family. Well, I stopped her."

Once again, I was astonished at my own blindness. I knew it was Elizabeth who had discovered the intrigue between her brother's partner and her brother's wife. I knew that Tradd had been out of town. During the past two tragic days, I had spent considerable time with Elizabeth Collison. I had watched her briskly carrying on all her usual activities, lest people talk. To Elizabeth, the public reputation of her family meant everything. Five years ago she had probably attempted to break up the romance and had failed. She had reacted to failure with the logic of her background, her training, her beliefs. It would be easier for Elizabeth Collison to kill her sister-in-law, I thought numbly, than to permit an elopement which would cause an open scandal.

"I gave Rose and Dick every chance," Elizabeth was saying with querulous bitterness. "I promised Rose to keep her terrible behavior from my brother, if she'd give up Dick. She said she would. Then I went to Dick and ordered him to resign from my brother's business. He promised to leave the country at once. But they deceived me. They didn't tell me that Dick was taking Rose along to Egypt, that everybody in Charleston would know my brother's wife was an adulteress who'd run off with her lover. When I found that out, I killed her."

"Elizabeth!" said her husband savagely. "You're talking before witnesses."

"What does it matter now?" asked the querulous voice. "My brother and my nephew," Elizabeth said, "will soon know that I killed Val Trevelyn to protect myself from a murder charge. Before Val's father died, he told his daughter what really happened five years ago. Dick made a sworn

statement for Val. It's burned now. I took the paper after I shot Val."

"Personally, " Con said abruptly, and thrust his injured hand into his pocket, "I've heard enough. If you'll forgive me, Elizabeth, I think I'll be going."

"Oh, no," Elizabeth said, and whirled around on Con, and the gun was in her hand. "No, you won't be going. For you're a very important part of my story, and you're going to stay and hear it through. Look at my husband, Dr. Grant," Elizabeth said to me. "Look at the man whose clever, sensible advice I took five years ago. Look at the man who persuaded me to hide the truth from my own brother. Con convinced me that Tradd wouldn't forgive my killing his wife, however corrupt she was. Con had his own reasons, of course. I learned that later."

Suddenly I remembered the vanished bonds. And I wished that Elizabeth Collison would stop talking almost as much as did Con, who stood and listened with a white, sick face. I wished that she'd stop almost as much as did Mr. Higgs, who sat shuddering on the sofa, perhaps recalling the part he'd played in the tragedy five years ago.

"Early one morning, five years ago," Mrs. Collison continued relentlessly, "Penelope Higgs telephoned me that Dick and Rose were eloping. Rose had brought her luggage to Harmony. Dick was due any time. But I got here first," Elizabeth said, and looked dazedly around the river room. "Rose was sitting on the sofa there. I came in and talked to her. I begged her to come back to town with me. She refused. I reminded her of her promise, and Rose laughed. She said her reputation didn't matter, that Tradd's good name was nothing to her; she called my ideas old-fashioned, she called me a conventional fool. I was in a terrible position. Stephen was in the Army, Tradd was in New York. I was the only one to represent the family. Once Dick Trevelyn arrived, it would be hopeless. Rose

would go with him. When Rose got up from the sofa and ordered me to leave the plantation, I had to act. I shot her."

Mrs. Collison spared us none of the details. She told how Philo Higgs had carried Rose Fairlee's dead body up the hill to her car, guided the speeding car toward the live oak tree and jumped from the running board to safety just before the crash. That scene, of course, had been prepared for presentation to the public and the police. Elizabeth had fully intended that her brother should know the truth. To her way of thinking, her crime was justified. She had committed the murder "for Tradd's sake."

But Penelope Higgs had summoned Conway Collison to the distracted conference on ways and means. Arriving at the plantation in advance of Dick Trevelyn, Con had been considerably more realistic than the other three. One glimpse at the wreckage and the fallen tree, and Con realized at once that the police would undoubtedly be suspicious of the "accident" story. If an autopsy was ordered, if a post-mortem took place, inevitably it would be discovered that Rose Fairlee had died of a bullet wound. The police party must be left with the impression that Rose had committed suicide as the result of an unfortunate love affair, and then it was more than likely they'd drop further investigation to spare the family embarrassment.

Furthermore, Con had insisted, Tradd Fairlee must be informed that his wife had killed herself. With one telling argument, he had brought Elizabeth around to his point of view. Tradd's pride, Con had said, no man's pride, could survive the shock of learning that on his account, to protect his honor, his own sister had become a murderess.

It was Con who had interviewed and won the reluctant cooperation of Dick Trevelyn. In his grief and fury, Dick's first impulse had been to go straight to the police. But here, too, Con had produced telling arguments which had changed the wretched man's mind. Was Dick Trevelyn willing to send a woman to the death cell? Dick must

remember that his own conduct was directly responsible for the murder. Dick Trevelyn had betrayed Tradd Fairlee, his partner and his friend. As an act of personal atonement, the least Dick could do was save Tradd from knowing the whole of the terrible truth.

"Dick finally agreed that Tradd should be told he'd jilted Rose and that she'd killed herself," Elizabeth said. "Dick agreed to go on to Egypt and take Val along. Dick felt guilty and ashamed on his own account, I suppose. Poor Dick decided to sacrifice himself to spare Tradd from ever knowing that his own sister had killed his wife."

I wondered, but only fleetingly, whether Dick Trevelyn had been financed on the Egyptian trip with bonds which had vanished from the cotton brokerage firm's safe at the time of Rose Fairlee's death. A glance at Con, and I knew better. One look at the sullen face, beneath the snowy hair, was enough to identify for me the really practical man in the complex tragedy. It was hardly necessary for Elizabeth to go on and explain that Dick Trevelyn had never heard about the missing bonds or heard that Tradd was bankrupt, until long after he and his daughter reached Egypt. Dick Trevelyn had agreed to be labeled a cad and a bounder, but Dick Trevelyn had not expected to have it whispered through South Carolina that a Trevelyn was a thief.

"Rose herself took my brother's bonds from his office safe," Elizabeth Collison said bitterly. "Rose had no idea of eloping with Dick into poverty. None of the rest of us thought about Rose's luggage that first day. But Con did. Con is a businessman, and he keeps details in mind."

Con pulled his hand from his pocket and carefully scrutinized the tiny cuts. In silence, he sat down beside the silent Mr. Higgs. Neither of the two proposed to make any personal contributions to this recital.

"Rose was dead and I had killed her," Elizabeth said to me, "but you'd be surprised how quickly my husband's

thoughts turned to salvage. Five years ago my husband's newspaper was a joke, but five years ago Con wanted just as much as he does now to be the biggest newspaper publisher in the South. Rose brought four bags to Harmony five years ago. That same day, the day she died, Con went back to town with the smallest of the bags, the smallest and the most valuable."

Outside the river lapped softly around the piles supporting the porch. In the distant stillness of the hot afternoon, the automobile engine throbbed faintly. Elizabeth shifted the gun in her hand, as though the weight wearied her.

"It took me several months and it took Dick Trevelyn several years," her monotonous voice went on, "to learn that my husband had turned his tragedy and mine to advantage. Why didn't I tell my brother? Surely the answer must be obvious, Dr. Grant. I had waited too long to speak. Con of course knew that. Con protected me, but the price of protection has been high."

The price had been high indeed. For nearly five years Elizabeth Collison had been constantly in her brother's company, carrying the knowledge that she had murdered his wife, carrying also the knowledge that she was living on her brother's stolen money. Nor had that been the end of her torment. For Con had seemed to take a savage pleasure in torturing her with the secret they shared. Never had he allowed his wife to forget the power he held over her. Perhaps it was Con's way of reassuring himself that hers was the graver crime, that Elizabeth was as corrupt as he. Or perhaps Con needed constantly to validate his profound inner belief that all human beings, given the opportunity, are as unprincipled as the Conway Collisons.

Val's return to Charleston had touched off explosives that had been five years accumulating. With Val's return, it seemed to Elizabeth Collison that she had paid five years of her life for nothing. For Val knew the truth about Rose

Fairlee's death, had learned it from her embittered father just before his own death. She carried a sworn statement that would have reopened the investigation of Rose Fairlee's death, and brought about the arrest of Rose's sister-in-law. Val was prepared to tell the Trevelyn side of the old scandal aaginst the carnival background of the Azalea Festival. Unless . . .

"Val came back to Charleston hating us all," said Mrs. Collison, "and wild for revenge. She blamed us for discrediting her father, and for her own years in exile. Val hated Con and Tradd, Stephen and me. But Stephen and I were the ones Val chose to blackmail."

Once again the curious double pattern which ran through the long-drawn-out tragedy was repeated. There had been two blackmailers, and both had died. Val had elected to blackmail two people, and to each she had told a different story.

Val hadn't told the truth to Stephen. She had threatened Stephen with revealing the shameful facts of his mother's "suicide," unless he married her and reestablished young Valeria Trevelyn Fairlee in Charleston society. Stephen had flatly refused to bargain. Under no circumstances would he agree to marry Val. In his wretchedness and desperation, he had pointed out to the girl his financial inability to marry anybody. Val had gaily assured Stephen that he need have no monetary worries, that his unloved and unloving bride would be amply able to provide for them both. Stephen had heard nothing from Val about Elizabeth or Conway Collison. Instead Stephen had been left with the impression that Val was proposing to finance their marriage with the remainder of his own father's stolen bonds.

With her second and most important victim Val had dealt strictly in terms of truth. Unless Elizabeth paid for silence, Val had threatened to denounce Elizabeth as a murderess. Val's demand on Elizabeth was the unimagina-

tive demand of the usual blackmailer—money. But Val had wanted a great deal of money.

"Val wanted it all," said Mrs. Collison. "She wanted the entire proceeds of the stolen bonds, she wanted a controlling interest in the *Banner*. She even wanted my great-grandfather's house. I realized that Val expected to remain in Charleston, but I didn't know Val expected to marry Stephen, that she was bothering Stephen, too. Nor did Stephen know I was involved until that last night at the live oak tree when Stephen saw me . . ."

Elizabeth's voice faltered. I knew what Stephen had seen and heard. He'd heard me call his name, and then he'd heard me gasp as Elizabeth attacked from the darkness. As Stephen ran to my rescue, he'd seen his aunt rush past and fire at Val and shoot her down.

Abruptly I understood something else which had puzzled me. I understood why Val had decided at the last moment to stay out at Harmony in Deborah's place. The Collisons had moved to Alexander Street several years after Val's schoolgirl days in Charleston, while the girl was in Egypt. Val hadn't known how close together the Fairlees and Collisons lived, until she drove along Alexander Street with Deborah. It had been no part of Val's plan that her two victims should learn there were two victims, find strength and courage in unity. With Stephen and Elizabeth living across the street from each other, secret meetings would be virtually impossible of arrangement.

So Val had come to Harmony and enjoyed her few brief days of triumphant plotting and double-dealing, her few days of secrecy. But she'd brought along to Harmony her careless and irresponsible nature. I myself had easily discovered she was on the trail of money, because she'd scribbled in a phone book. When Rena Mae searched Val's room, she had discovered and read the document in which Dick Trevelyn told how Rose Fairlee died, and who killed her. At once the country girl had gone off to

an excited and thrilling interview with Mrs. Conway Collison.

Elizabeth Collison had met the second girl late on Monday night in her own home. Unfortunately for Rena Mae, she called upon a hostess who was already contemplating a murder. A few hours earlier, at dinner time that evening, Elizabeth had gone upstairs in Maggie's house and taken the morphine from my bag. Then she had Val Trevelyn in mind as the victim. Mrs. Collison had not wanted to kill Rena Mae. She had given Rena Mae a thousand dollars, and urged her to return to Bodes Crossing. But Rena Mae had refused to leave the city, and had insisted that Mrs. Conway Collison use influence to put her in the Festival.

"I couldn't do that," Elizabeth said. "Rena Mae Thripp wasn't at all my sort of person. Everybody would have wondered why I backed her for a place that everybody knew Val Trevelyn, my own godchild, had wanted. Everybody would have talked. So I gave Rena Mae a poisoned Scotch and soda, and asked her to come back again next day. When Rena Mae left the house, I knew of course that she wouldn't be coming back or troubling me any more."

On the single occasion that Rena Mae Thripp ever visited the Collison household, Elizabeth had persuaded the girl to turn over Stephen's gun to Stephen's aunt. In doing this, she'd had some hazy idea that the gun might be helpful in complicating the facts in the event a police investigation ensued. Throughout the entire affair, Elizabeth had strewn her small false clues and attempted with stubborn determination to confuse the issues. Inexperienced with official processes, handicapped by a completely unrealistic assurance that Elizabeth Fairlee Collison could out-think the law, she had persistently underestimated both the power and the intelligence of the law.

When one trick hadn't worked, she'd tried another.

First, she'd confidently believed that Rena Mae would be accepted as a suicide. Hadn't she planted the earring in my room? But I'd destroyed the earring, and the suicide theory hadn't been accepted. Next, she had put the empty morphia bottle in Val's wastebasket, hopeful of establishing that Val had shot herself after poisoning Rena Mae. If the police didn't like that theory, nevertheless the morphia bottle would serve a useful purpose in bewildering them.

To Elizabeth's way of thinking, every additional complication was to the good. The way she had handled her money transactions with the two girls was clear evidence of her obstinate efforts to confuse the situation. When Val arrived in Charleston almost penniless, and demanding immediate cash, Mrs. Collison had asked Stephen for a temporary loan. Stephen had borrowed the money for his aunt from Maggie without explanation. Maggie had invented the tale of Stephen's needing a new car. In Rena Mae's case, Elizabeth hadn't felt it necessary to cover her trail and seek the money from an outside source. Serenely sure that the police would never dream of connecting Mrs. Conway Collison with Rena Mae Thripp, she had taken the money from her own funds.

"Val supposed, of course, that Con knew all about her," said Elizabeth Collison. "Val supposed that Con and I were spending hours talking about her proposition to take over everything Con owned. But I never talked to Con at all. Val didn't know," Elizabeth said, "that I'd rather kill her than ask for Con's assistance again."

The voice was tired now. She'd found the strength to get through the terrible narrative. She'd finished with the horrors of the past, and was done. The present seemed to have no meaning for her. Elizabeth glanced dazedly at me, at Con, at Philo, as though wondering why the four of us were gathered there. She leaned wearily against a

chair. One fact of an empty future, one alone, concerned her to the end.

"I'm glad it's over. I don't care what happens to me. I don't even care what happens to Con. But I do wish," said Mrs. Collison, "that there was some way of keeping people from knowing about it."

An unexpected sound broke the quiet of the river room. Con was laughing. He threw back his white head and roared with laughter. Nervous reaction was partially responsible, I suppose. But in the wild peals of laughter was a note of genuine mirth, as though Con perceived a kind of ghastly humor in the collapse of the house of Collison.

"Elizabeth, you're priceless," said her husband. "Why, they'll be hearing the story of the Collisons, the Fairlees and the Trevelyns in New South Wales. They'll be singing bar room songs about the saga. You've seen to that, my dear. I hope that your catharsis is now complete."

"Con . . ."

"I don't like to hurry you, my dear," he said, "but our situation has its practical aspects. I strongly suggest that we hasten downtown and break our interesting news to the police, before Dr. Grant anticipates us."

"I'm ready, Con," said she.

But suddenly Con cocked his head on one side. Con was listening. He'd heard another car arrive. He heard approaching footsteps several seconds before the rest of us.

"Never mind, Elizabeth," Con said to his wife. "There's no hurry now. Apparently Dr. Grant made advance arrangements for us to have an escort."

Footsteps crossed the porch. Lieutenant Clayton stepped inside, hesitated at the threshold. He saw me first.

"Dr. Grant, you left a message downtown for me."

And then he saw the others, Philo Higgs sitting on the sofa, Conway Collison poised tensely beside it. He saw Elizabeth Collison leaning against a chair, with the gun

in her hand. Lieutenant Sanford Clayton's freckled face showed no surprise. Perhaps it showed faint relief, but nothing else.

"Lieutenant, your arrival is most opportune," said Conway Collison. "My wife has just confessed to three murders, and accused me of complicity. She has also accused me of theft. No doubt you'd like both of us to accompany you."

Lieutenant Clayton paid no attention to Conway Collison. He was gazing at Elizabeth Collison, and his eyes were a little uncertain. He waited for her to speak. She did not.

"Mrs. Collison, I'm sorry," Lieutenant Clayton said, "but I'll have to ask you and your husband to come with me. Mrs. Collison, I must ask you for that gun."

Elizabeth moved slowly toward him. If the policeman was armed, his weapon was not in evidence. He'd probably left his gun in the car which he'd parked beside Elizabeth Collison's station wagon. The car with the engine running was hers, of course. Con had known that all the time.

I wondered at Lieutenant Clayton's calm. The woman who advanced upon him with a gun in her hand had killed three people.

"I expect Mr. Higgs will drive the station wagon back to town for you," the policeman said casually to Mrs. Collison. "Now, if you please, I'll take the gun."

"Here it is!" cried Elizabeth, and spun around.

She tossed the gun back into the room away from both of them. The weapon struck the bare floor, skidded. Lieutenant Clayton went after it. I opened my mouth to scream, as Elizabeth darted past him and on through the door. She ran outside and across the porch.

Lieutenant Clayton must have heard her go. Very slowly he picked up the gun, and then he slowly turned around and walked back to the door. There he paused

and looked out. By the time I joined him, Elizabeth was in the open. She had already raced around the police car and flung herself into her own car. She was frantically backing the station wagon into the bumpy road that led through the ruined rice fields and upward to the live oak avenue. I did scream then. I tried to push Lieutenant Clayton through the door.

"Hurry, hurry! You can still stop her."

"Mrs. Collison won't go far," he said.

Lieutenant Clayton spoke as though Elizabeth Collison had made a promise to him. Perhaps she had. Perhaps she'd made one of those tacit, unspoken promises delivered from one pair of eyes to another. Or perhaps the promise was made when Elizabeth Collison was born in South Carolina, and so was Sanford Clayton.

I ran outside on the porch. As I reached the railing, far up the hill I heard the crash. A sound like distant blasting troubled the magical sunlit air of the April afternoon, and then silence settled again. When the four of us, Lieutenant Clayton, Conway Collison, Mr. Higgs and I, made our own way up the live oak avenue, Elizabeth Collison was dead. At sixty miles an hour, she had raced her station wagon straight into the fallen live oak tree.

A year has passed since I heard that distant crash up the hill at Harmony. Last week I flew down to Charleston for Stephen's and Deborah's wedding. The reception was held in Tradd's and Maggie's home on Alexander Street. The New York couple who now occupy the house across the street were among the guests. From the wife I heard a fairly full account of Mrs. Conway Collison's tragic automobile accident, and how they'd bought the place from the saddened widower. At that, the New Yorkers know as much of the true story as does most of Charleston.

Con left the city many months ago, as soon as he was able to negotiate a satisfactory sale of the *Banner*. He

returned to Tradd the full amount of the stolen bonds, and also offered Tradd an equal share of the five years' profits earned by his own skillful use and investment of Tradd's money. This offer Tradd refused. No doubt Con had counted on the refusal. Certainly he had counted upon escaping prosecution. According to Maggie, Con left town remarking gaily that he would seek greener pastures farther north.

Lieutenant Clayton came to the reception. When Deborah went upstairs to change her clothes, the two of us carried our glasses of champagne down the piazza steps into the garden. Lieutenant Clayton congratulated Charleston on its perfect April weather. He complimented my frock. He praised the beauty of the bride, he rejoiced in Stephen's good fortune in marrying such a charming girl. But finally I got my question in. I asked him whether he'd suspected from the first that Elizabeth Collison was guilty.

Lieutenant Clayton set his champagne glass on a garden bench. His eyes were a trifle cool.

"When there is a lady in the case," Lieutenant Clayton said to me on a note of courteous but firm reproof, "we feel down here that the matter is delicate. Forgive me, Dr. Grant, but we also feel that the less talk the better."

With that he bowed, excused himself, and went back inside.

A moment later Maggie ran down the piazza steps, calling excitedly that Stephen and Deborah were coming. At her heels came Tradd, a Tradd as beaming and delighted as though this were his own wedding day. And then Deborah and Stephen raced into the garden, followed by dozens of screaming youngsters. The air was a blizzard of rice.

The young people halted the barrage long enough for Maggie to kiss the groom, Tradd to kiss the bride. I managed to kiss both bride and groom, as they ran through the gate and jumped into a car waiting at the curb. As Stephen

whirled around the corner, Deborah looked back and waved. Her face was radiant as the morning.

Tradd put his arm around his own wife. He drew Maggie close.

"My girl is the prettiest of them all," Tradd said contentedly. "Vic, isn't Maggie beautiful today?"

"Very," I said.

Maggie was dressed in a wonderful shade of clear lemon yellow. It was exactly right with her soft blonde hair, a natural color once again, blurred here and there with glints of silvery gray. She reached up a hand to adjust a pin, smiled at me.

"Tradd likes it this way," Maggie said.

"I like you every way," Tradd said to her. "Darling, you're my wife."

He put his other arm through mine. The three of us went back inside together.

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