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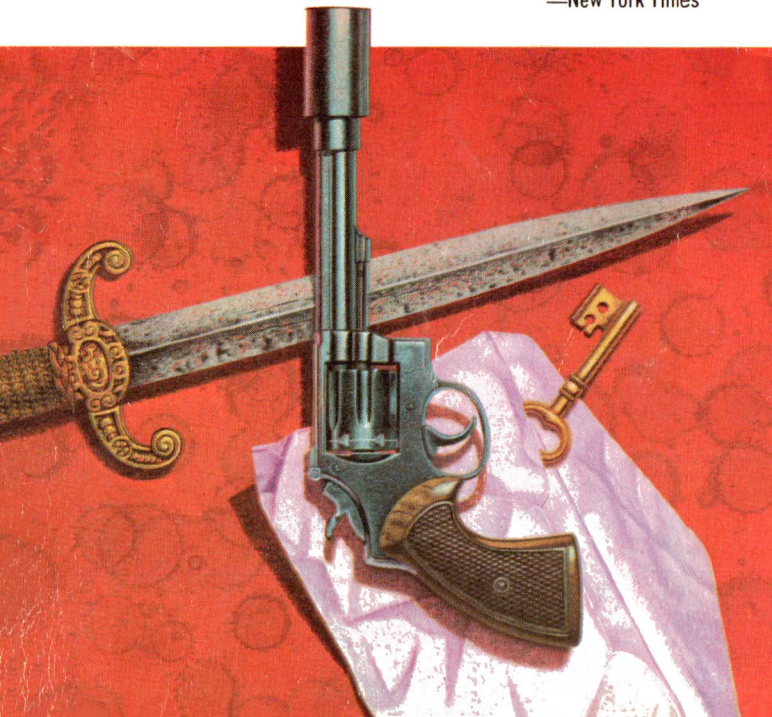

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THE MURDER OF A FIFTH COLUMNIST

LESLIE FORD

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1

It was Pete Hamilton who first called the great J. Corliss Marshall the Fifth Columnist. It was just a sardonic crack that Pete took once, talking to three other Washington columnists when Corliss walked into a cocktail party at the French Embassy before Vichy. But it stuck like grim death to a dead nigger—largely, I suppose, because everybody liked Pete Hamilton, and I don't know anybody who ever really liked Corliss Marshall.

The two of them, naturally, didn't like each other, but everybody knew that. It was one of those secrets that any one who read their syndicated columns (some millions of people did) could see without having to be told. "Marshalling the Facts" in column one, and "The Capitol Calling" in column six—Monday, Wednesday and Friday in hundreds of newspapers throughout the United States—couldn't have been farther apart if one was written at the North Pole and the other in Little America, instead of both of them a stone's throw from Lafayette Square in front of the White House.

But up to the time Pete said, "Here's the Fifth Columnist—I thought I smelled something," and walked out of the room, their status had been one of non-belligerency, punctuated by occasional aerial attacks in the Press Club bar. They were kept from the public—except that portion of it who knew what Larry Villiers meant when his "Shall We Join the Ladies?" asked "What w. k. columnist marshalled his beer mug and launched an aerial Blitzkrieg at whose head at the Press Club last night?" It was also "Shall We Join the Ladies?" that reported the Fifth Columnist incident, which it followed up a week later with the information that a certain w. k. columnist had had two hundred and fourteen cancellations, and had had to hire an extra secretary to answer the bombardment of I-always-suspected-you-were-a-member-of-the-Fifth-Column letters that poured in from all over the country. "There isn't," said "Shall We Join the Ladies?", "any actual evidence that *we* know that the columnist in question is a member of a Fifth Column. On the other hand, *we're* constantly surprised at how many things we don't know." That wasn't any help—as indeed it wasn't intended to be—and Corliss Marshall made it worse trying to make it better by ex-

plaining in his column that it was just one of those *jeux d'esprit*. That alarmed a lot of people who hadn't heard about it in the first place, and convinced a good many who didn't quite know what a *jeu d'esprit* was that Corliss Marshall was anti-Semitic.

After all, it would have been hard to keep the two of them separated, though Corliss Marshall did his best by taking a trip to South America and marshalling his facts from there for a while.

The reason that I, Grace Latham, widow by act of God and resident of Georgetown by act of my parents in buying a house there when I was born, shortly after the turn of the century, knew anything more about it than I read in the papers was that my friend Colonel John Primrose, 92nd Engineers, U. S. A. (Retired), is a member of the Press Club and knew both of them very well. In fact it was Colonel Primrose who persuaded Corliss to go to South America. It was ostensibly because he needed the rest—but since the Colonel's ostensible motives usually conceal others not so ostensible, I suspected it strongly.

If Corliss hadn't gone to South America, however, I imagine more people around Washington would have suspected —though some did—that Pete Hamilton was responsible for his violent death. In general there was the impression that Time Heals All, and that two months is a considerable time-span on the quicksand shores of the Potomac, where any autobiography can fairly be entitled "Out, Out, Brief Candle." So most people assumed—if they thought about it —that it would take at least more than forty-eight hours after Corliss's return for the old feud to get back to blood-letting proportions.—That, and the fact that a bludgeon was more Pete's style than a stiletto.

People don't, of course, normally have either bludgeons or ornamental stilettos lying loose on their tables around Washington . . . or if they do, they don't usually have a columnist to call attention to them, as Mrs. Addison Sherwood had on this occasion. "I wonder," Larry Villiers wrote in "Shall We Join the Ladies?", "when I see lovely creatures examining the jewelled dagger a certain charming woman uses to open her ever-growing stack of invitations, whether they're thinking how beautifully decorative it is, or how neatly lethal it could—perchance—be." However, I suppose it's fair enough to assume that even among civilized people a thin blade of steel—however decorative—doesn't really need a columnist to suggest its original purpose.

That piece of Larry's was some time before the Tuesday night the whole thing happened. I call it the whole thing because I don't know what else to call it. It was fantastic from the beginning, or would have been anywhere except in Washington, or at any time here before now, when things we've always thought fantastic seem to have become normal and have a kind of horrible validity. And I'm not thinking about the end of it so much as the beginning that made Sylvia Peele point out in her script that the party could only have happened in Washington. It didn't get into her column, because her editor blue-pencilled it. "It's all right to be disillusioned, but you can't be disillusioning," he said.

It was about eight o'clock on Tuesday that I went around to Mrs. Addison Sherwood's apartment in the Randolph-Lee. Any one who's been to Washington knows that astonishing place, sticking up over Rock Creek between the Shoreham and the Wardman-Park—a trinity that the Aztecs would have been proud to build, though not many of Washington's so-called cavedwellers live in them. I was living in it myself, because I'd rented my Georgetown house for the winter to Bliss Thatcher for much more than the dollar a year that he got for being on the Defense Council, so I could go to New York for Christmas and to Guatemala for a couple of months afterwards. I'd found Mrs. Sherwood's big engraved invitation in my mail box three days after I'd turned the house, including Lilac my cook and Sheila my Irish setter, over for defense and taken up my temporary quarters.

I was puzzled about why she'd asked me. Extra women are a drug on the market in Washington. I'd sometimes found that such invitations were just a bait to get Colonel Primrose to the party too, but Colonel Primrose and his self-styled "functotum" Sergeant Phineas T. Buck, also 92nd Engineers, U. S. A. (Retired), were out of town on one of their again ostensible vacations that had become pretty frequent since the Department of Justice activities had expanded, and they weren't expected back, so I thought that probably wasn't the reason. And the only thing that made me feel there must be a reason, I suppose, was that the second night I was at the Randolph-Lee, Mrs. Addison Sherwood and I had gone up on the elevator together—my apartment's on the same floor as part of hers—and she hadn't recognized me. I wasn't really surprised at that, since I'd only met her once, at lunch somewhere, and seen her across crowded rooms, until I got her dinner invitation next morning. That rather interested me, and I'd probably have gone anyway, because when the

society columns, which always had her name in them somewhere, gave lists of her guests they were usually interesting people.

When I pressed the bell at her door a bald-headed butler who looked as if he'd been carved out of a firm pinkish leaf of lard let me in, and indicated a wrought-iron staircase that looked like a prop in a stage set of a de luxe duplex penthouse on Park Avenue. It opened up beside a passage leading from the corridor to a room obviously used for informal entertaining. Through the door to my left I could hear voices, and I started to go in. Then I glanced up the stairs.

Sylvia Peele was coming down—and that was a little like a stage set too. She was lovely, with a short-sleeved frock of pale pinkish-brown chiffon that billowed like a cloud of smoke from a tight-fitting bodice, and she looked her usual vague and open-eyed and expressionless self at first, so that, again like a stage play, I got the impression that when she spoke I'd begin to know what everything was all about.

"Oh," she said. She came down a few steps and said "Oh," again. She needn't have added, "I didn't know you were coming," but she did. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," I said. "How are you?"

She was looking at me blankly still, but at the same time with an odd kind of almost professional interest. The suet butler stood a moment, and then, leaving us to get in by ourselves, went around the stairs and disappeared about his business.

Sylvia came on down. "What are you here for, do you suppose?" she inquired coolly.

"I've wondered myself," I said.

"I'll bet I can guess. Where's Colonel Primrose, and his iron cross?"

"I don't think Sergeant Buck's as much of a cross as Colonel Primrose pretends," I said—though why, after all I've put up with at the hands of that man, with his odd obsession that I'm trying to marry his Colonel, I should have leapt so instantly to his defense is beyond me. "Anyway, they're taking their ease at Virginia Beach, or somewhere."

"I'll bet," Sylvia said. "Like the big G-man playing around night clubs—just for fun. But don't tell me if you don't want to. When are you and the Colonel middle-aisling it, by the way?"

I don't know why that's an expression that makes me see a mild shade of red, but it is.

"The point has never come up, dear," I said. "So far as I know, you and Sergeant Buck are the only people it's ever

occurred to. And I'm quite sure Mrs. Sherwood hasn't ever heard about it."

Sylvia smiled faintly.

"That's not quite what I meant," she said. "Well, I'm just trying to decide whether I've got a frightful headache right now, or wait till just before dessert. They say she has a wonderful cook."

"Why?" I asked.

"Take a look. I haven't seen so many people I don't like in one place for a long, long time."

I went up beside her. A mirror on the wall reflected another mirror over the fireplace inside. I saw a number of people in there, some of whom I knew.

"There's Pete Hamilton," I said. "I should think that would decide you."

She made an odd little sound as if something had caught her off her guard and hurt her.

"What's the matter?" I demanded. "I thought you and Pete were practically middle-aisling it, as you call it?"

Pete Hamilton was in the process of dropping a whole canapé into his mouth to keep it from disintegrating down his shirt front.

"I don't mean Pete," Sylvia said. "He's just a virus that's got into my blood stream. Not even sulphanilamide will get him out."

I'd always seen her crisp and soignée, and rather hard, as a matter of fact, but just now her voice was as soft as the smoky folds of her chiffon skirt. And a little hopeless as she added, "I wish I'd fallen in love with somebody else. Every time I go to a party I think 'Well, maybe tonight——' "

She shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "It's the rest of them, dear. Every time I see Larry Villiers I think of jellied eels. If I didn't have to eat once a day I'd give up my job. I'm getting fed up with people who say, 'My dear, your column is marvellous—it's even better than 'Shall We Join the Ladies?' And look at old Corliss Marshall. He's like Dorothy Thompson the day she said she had to remind herself she wasn't God. Now he knows all about South America too. If there was just *one* place he didn't know all about. And don't look now, darling, but there, in addition, you have what Larry and I will call A Brilliant Galaxy of the Distinguished Visitors Who Are Making Washington the Cosmopolitan Capital of the World."

"Which ones?" I asked.

"Don't tell me you don't know. Haven't you met Señor Estevan Delvalle with his ear to the ground listening for the

stampede of Western beef? He's the dark little man there by Sam Wharton."

"Poor Sam," I said. I could see Congressman Wharton's fine white mane and broad shoulders, but not Señor Delvalle. I knew he was an unofficial observer for one of the so-called democracies South of the Border.

"Poor Sam my eye," Sylvia said. "You mean poor Effie. Sam told me he was glad he was defeated—he's sick of Washington. And I think he is. But Effie'll stay if she can, by hook or crook. She's talking about a Strong Opposition as if the term was invented to keep Sam in Washington. That's all she talks about."

"Who's the handsome blond she's talking to," I asked.

"That, my dear, is Kurt Hofmann. You've read *Terror Unleashed?*"

I nodded. I'd read the famous anti-Totalitarian book. It was the monocle that threw me off, and I said so.

"Oh, that's what he uses to peek through keyholes into totalitarian bedchambers," Sylvia replied. "You know, I don't see why, if he was so inside as he says he was, and they're as ruthless as he says they are, they don't quietly drop him in the river below the morgue some night when the cops aren't looking."

She took my arm with a sudden impulsive gesture and laughed.

"I'm in a filthy mood," she said. "I shouldn't have come. It must be that new persimmon astringent I'm using to disguise my age. But you know, sometimes I think if I ever again have to hear the country's gone to hell and there's nothing to do but arm the Boy Scouts, I'll shriek. I wouldn't have come if Bliss Thatcher wasn't coming."

"Oh, good," I said. "He's taken my house. He's awfully nice."

She nodded. "I had the idea," she said slowly, "that seeing a man who'd weathered the stigma of industrialism, and had gone quietly to work without saying industry is stymied and if you won't play my way I won't play at all, would be good for my psyche."

She smiled.

"—That and any chance to be in the same room Pete's in for a couple of hours, with the chance he might take me some place later for a post mortem. Oh well, let's skip it. Shall we join the ladies?"

2

I've known Sylvia Peele a long time, though not as intimately as all that would seem to indicate, and I'd never seen her anything but blank and social, being terribly nice to people who mattered and looking as through a stone wall at people who didn't. Her family had a lot of money until 1929. In 1928 they'd announced her engagement to a young count in one of the central European embassies. He married a girl whose family didn't lose their money, and Sylvia got a job as a society reporter. Some people thought it was that that made "Peelings" such a perfect name for her column; the peelings were so frequently off the hides of people who'd dropped her after 1929 and tried to pick her up later. She was about thirty. She'd never married, though there was always the gossip that connected her and Pete Hamilton. I thought she was very attractive—not pretty but smart, with an extraordinary face concealing a sharp intelligence behind a perfectly made-up lacquered mask and blank hazel eyes that didn't quite track and were a great part of her charm. I liked her—in spite of herself, I suppose, because I had the idea that a lot of her surface was a shell she'd grown and kept highly polished to protect her from any more blows.

"—And by the way," she asked, as we moved toward the door, "who the devil is Mrs. Addison Sherwood? Tell me about her."

I shook my head. "I was going to ask you."

She laughed, a little mirthlessly. "That's Washington for you. We'll ask Corliss. He wouldn't risk a dinner unless he knew the shade of pink they'd lined his hostess's bassinet with."

She stopped, looking into the long room.

"All I know about her is what I've read in 'Shall We Join the Ladies?' She's rich, if that means anything. She's just come to town. She goes everywhere, usually with your tenant Bliss Thatcher. It seems to me I heard she'd had some sort of tragedy. If I didn't hear so much I could keep it sorted out better.—Oh, I remember. It's about a child. It's sort of——"

She shrugged.

"—Peculiar, I guess. Nurse dropped it, or something. Anyway, it's not here, and she never mentions it. Mrs. Wharton asked one day at a luncheon at the Sulgrave Club if she had

any children. She looked so . . . oh, sort of stricken. Then she said, 'Yes, I have one, who isn't very well.' I'll bet she thought Effie'd gone back to the farm when she asked Sam here. So don't start talking about your sons—not if you intend to be tactful."

As we started in I noticed that on either side of the door was a modernist glass console table with a pair of lovely lamps with the three royal feathers in glass sprouting above some kind of jade plastic shades. Sylvia stopped abruptly, reached out and picked up a handsome jewel-handled knife in an old tooled leather sheath.

"This is what Larry fills up his space with," she remarked, pulling it out. It was about ten inches long and sharp as a razor. She put the point against my ribs. It was like a needle. She laughed, put it back in its case again and put it down. "Nothing like being prepared for an emergency, I always say.—Oh, bless me, look at this."

She picked up a folded letter lying on the other side of the lamp. There was a familiar look about the heavy salmonberry yellow paper.

"She must belong to the better classes or she wouldn't be getting this."

As she unfolded it I saw the heading "Truth Not Fiction."

"Oh," I said. I recognized it then because I was on its mailing list too. It was a news letter that arrived three days a week and had done so since the fifteenth of September, regular as the morning milk. I'd thought it was an election stunt until November 5th, but it kept on coming. It was sponsored privately, it said, by Thinking Americans. Who they were exactly it didn't reveal, but they thought along pretty consistent lines. The general tenor of it was that the country had gone to the dogs completely—doom was just around the corner. The disquieting things about it, however, seemed to be the so-called straight-from-the-horse's-mouth items about international friction in the Defense Program that gave you the feeling that democracy—as we know it—has about as much chance as frost in August. It harped constantly on the necessity for the mailed fist in the Orient and insisted that the United States walk in and take over Mexico. I couldn't help starting to read it, but I'd never read it through, and I never read it at all the day my boys' reports came. They were usually severe enough reminders that the youth of the nation was frittering itself away on non-essentials.

I noticed the heading "Has Defense Bogged Down?" and glanced at Sylvia. There was an extraordinary expression on

her face. She folded the letter quickly and put it back on the table.

"Who writes that, do you know?" I asked.

"I don't," she said quickly. Too quickly, I thought, and too abruptly. "Let's go in."

She went on, instantly gay and charming and liquid as honey.

"My dear—it was lovely of you to ask me!"

She held out both her hands to her hostess as if they'd been friends for years and hadn't seen each other for a month.

"This is such a beautiful apartment—I didn't think the Randolph-Lee had anything like it. It gives you a ray of hope for American interiors. Hello, Pete—how nice! I didn't know you were going to be here. Corliss, you're looking unbearably fit! How was South America? Don't tell me—let me read it. Hullo, Larry darling. You were wonderful this morning. How *do* you find out so much. Is it really true that Madame Blank dropped her wig in the punch bowl?"

She turned back to me. "You know Grace Latham, don't you, Mrs. Sherwood.—Oh, sorry . . . how stupid of me. She wouldn't be here if you weren't friends.—Hello, Sam!"

Then she was telling Congressman—or ex-Congressman—Sam Wharton how blind the country was in not returning leaders like him. I could hear her while I was shaking hands with Mrs. Addison Sherwood.

Mrs. Sherwood wasn't a beautiful woman, but she was a handsome one—about forty-five, I'd say, though she looked younger. Or would have if there hadn't been something around her gray eyes that was deeper and more mature than her slim figure in a beautifully cut white gown would indicate. Her skin was warm and sun-tanned, and her hair had been light and was smartly cut and curled with no attempt to disguise the graying strands in it. She'd got up with a simple cordiality that would have made Sylvia's Ruth Draper act look a little shoddy if Sylvia hadn't herself been just as much to the manner born. She smiled at me.

"I don't know Grace Latham—but I've met her and liked her, and I wanted to know her."

I don't think anyone else heard that, except possibly Larry Villiers, who could be in Omaha and hear what people were saying in Los Angeles if it was column.

She took my arm. "You know everybody, don't you? Mrs. Wharton and the Congressman?"

Effie Wharton said, "Yes, I know Mrs. Latham," rather

as if it was my fault that I could go on living in Washington while she had to leave it shortly. The Congressman said, "Yes, indeed," with a twinkle in his eye. He looked ten years younger than he had in October when he rushed back home to do a hurried and ineffectual job of political fence repairing.

"And Mr. Hofmann?" Mrs. Sherwood said.

"No," I said. "But of course I've read *Terror Unleashed.*"

The noted anti-Totalitarian, big and blond with a saber scar down his cheek, dropped his eyeglass and bowed from the waist. "I'm very glad, madame," he said. Just a touch of foreign accent did something to his middle "r's." "I hope all Americans will read it and be warned in time—if indeed it is not already too late."

"I guess we'll manage," Sam Wharton drawled.

Mrs. Sherwood interrupted, laughing. "Now, now—I've told you, Mr. Hofmann, that Mr. Wharton doesn't believe there's anything the United States can't do when it puts its mind to it."

Kurt Hofmann bowed again.

"I respect his opinion, madame, but I deplore the lack of insight that has enabled him to form it."

I could see the color seeping up around Sam Wharton's ears.

"We haven't all had your opportunities, sir," he said, with the suggestion of a bow himself.

I went over to Corliss Marshall. If I couldn't figure out why I had been asked to this party, I certainly couldn't see why he had. Neither could he, apparently. He was looking at his watch as if his train was long overdue, and sort of shaking his withers. He kept his back to Pete Hamilton as well as he could, but it was hard to keep it to Pete and to Congressman Wharton at the same time—and while columnists are supposed to be able to attack the President and go cheerfully to the White House, I doubt if that holds all down the line. Furthermore, Corliss just couldn't look at Sam Wharton without a glint of malicious triumph brightening his eyes. He'd been unbelievably bitter about Sam. He'd accused him of selling the country down the river, of making political capital out of the heart's blood of small investors, and of practically every public crime in the index. All of which might be true —I wouldn't know. But the day he devoted his entire column to what he called the Abe Lincoln ruse to slide towards the White House, I happened to meet Sam Wharton. A picture of him had come out in the papers with a group of

men who'd met some dignitary. All had top hats but Mr. Wharton. He had an old gray felt in his hand.

"I wasn't trying to be Abe Lincoln," he said to me. "I just feel like a fool in a top hat. I never owned one. Effie said I ought to buy one, but I'm damned if I will after this."

I'd always rather liked Sam Wharton after that. He was a bitter isolationist, but he'd been in Congress a long time and still believed in the democratic processes, and that's more than Corliss Marshall did. And of the two of them now, Corliss Marshall, the suave and travelled and successful diner-out and molder of public opinion, was definitely showing himself less the man of the world. I had the feeling, standing there by him, that a fuse of some sort was already sputtering, and that any moment there'd be an explosion that would blast the Randolph-Lee and everything in it into Rock Creek Park.

"I understood Bliss Thatcher was going to be here," he said testily. "I wouldn't have come otherwise."

I said, "Ssssh." Mrs. Sherwood was coming over to us. And Corliss, rather politer than I would have expected him to be, said, "Where's Colonel Primrose, Grace?"

"He's out of town, I believe," I said. How the idea that I'm Colonel Primrose's keeper has got so firmly planted in so many people's minds is beyond me.

"And I'm so sorry," Mrs. Sherwood said. "I thought he'd enjoy meeting Mr. Hofmann. But perhaps we can arrange it when he comes back. And my dear, I don't think you've met Señor Delvalle, have you?"

I hadn't but I'd been very much aware of a brilliant pair of black eyes in a dark-skinned pockmarked face following me about the room. I was a little surprised at the perfect Oxford English that accompanied a definitely warm and Latin kiss on the back of the hand I held out.

"I have seen you before, Mrs. Latham," Señor Delvalle said. "But I have not had the pleasure of meeting you."

I'd probably spilled something somewhere, I thought. I definitely wasn't the type to attract a Latin's attention in the usual crowded rooms around town.

"I hope I shall also meet Colonel Primrose," he said. "I have heard so much about him."

Larry Villiers uncrossed his legs and pulled his spine up a little out of the corner of the sofa to reach the ashtray. "You ought to make him go on the air, Grace," he said languidly. "Think of the money he'd make, running some kind of round table of military opinion on defense."

I interrupted him a little sharply, I'm afraid. "I imagine Colonel Primrose thinks the officers on active duty are better-informed about defense than the retired personnel, Larry," I said.

"—Atta girl, Grace!"

I turned abruptly. Pete Hamilton was at my elbow, grinning like a fiend, his sardonic hard-bitten mouth betrayed by a spattering of perennial freckles across his big nose, his too light and too shaggy eyebrows making him look a little like a Nordic chimpanzee, his black tie a little askew. Sylvia Peele certainly hadn't fallen in love with him for his looks. He was tall and gangly, and as many seasons as I've seen him I've never seen him with a dinner coat on that had sleeves quite long enough.

"Don't let 'em use your influence, Grace," he said, and even though he was still grinning there was a bedrock undertone that was apparent to everybody.

It annoyed Corliss Marshall.

"If Grace has that influence"—you could see that he for one doubted it—"she ought to use it," he put in sharply. "It's people like Primrose who know how obsolete our army is, and how it's riddled with incompetents because of the retirement rules."

"On the contrary," I retorted—and why I felt it my duty to uphold the Army, about which I know next to nothing, I'm not quite sure—"I think Colonel Primrose regards the Army as flexible and highly efficient."

"Then he'd be a fool!" Corliss Marshall snapped. "And he's not. Look what the Army did to Billy Mitchell. Look at the situation now. We ought to have had the draft five years ago."

"Yes?" Pete said, a little dangerously. "And what have you done? Did you raise a storm when Billy Mitchell bit the dust? Wasn't it you, Marshall, that said we didn't need the draft? And didn't you go to town on the disarmament conference and plump for scrapping the Navy? I won a prep school debate by learning a column of yours by heart once. And what are you scared of now? You're too old to fight. What makes you figure the rest of us have lost our guts just because you've lost yours?"

Corliss Marshall trembled with rage. "Because the safety of the country's in the hands of white-livered puppies like you—and you!" he shouted. He pointed from Pete to Larry Villiers, who didn't, I must admit, look as if he'd ever been much good defending anything but a very upper-class drawing room hearth.

Pete's mouth went a shade harder.

"Be careful how inclusive you are, Marshall," he said quietly.

Larry Villiers, still slumping elegantly back in the corner of the sofa, had merely looked surprised when Corliss's finger shot out at him. At this almost gratuitous insult from Pete, everything about him changed . . . but without his ever moving a muscle or varying the slow almost catlike movement of his hand as he raised his cigarette to his lips and let the smoke trickle slowly out of the corner of his mouth. I wouldn't have wanted Larry Villiers to hate me like that, I thought.

He flicked his cigarette into the fireplace and lighted another, saying nothing.

It seemed to me that it was getting unpleasantly warm in the room, and there was a detached glint in the eyes of Señor Delvalle as he followed this argument that didn't look very hopeful for hemispheric solidarity.

"—Why don't you let the War and Navy Departments take care of it?" I asked. "And tell me something that's in your field. Who is it that writes 'Truth Not Fiction'?"

If cooling off the room had been my idea, it was certainly successful. It was just as if I'd dropped a Molotov breadbasket of dry ice squarely in the middle of it. The silence was deafening. The faces of the four newspaper men went completely frozen.

Señor Delvalle looked at me with admiration.

"I have often wondered that myself, Mrs. Latham," he said.

Nobody answered him either. It was the first time in my life that I'd seen Corliss Marshall, Pete Hamilton, Larry Villiers and Sylvia Peele—en masse or any one of them separately—silent on any subject.

"I saw a copy of it today," Kurt Hofmann said, apparently unaware that an unusual situation had developed. He let his monocle fall and slide down his starched shirtfront. "I applaud every effort of the press to keep America aroused. You are too soft. You stir yourselves every four years, and drop back to sleep again."

"What we need is a Strong Opposition," Effie Wharton said sharply. She sounded exactly like the chorus in a Greek play.

I could see what Sylvia meant all right. It wasn't because she didn't like the way the country was being run—it was because she and Sam weren't helping run it any more.

Kurt Hofmann glanced at her.

"America is becoming a decadent nation," he went on, as if he hadn't been interrupted really. "Look what happened when an obscure infant-prodigy playwright broadcast a supposed attack from Mars. It is the duty of you gentlemen of the Press . . . and ladies"—he bowed to Sylvia sitting beside Larry, and put his glass back in his eye—"to hold constantly before your country the danger it is in by its failure to have adequate arms, and its lack of moral preparedness, and its class struggle, and the wastefulness of its government."

Sylvia was looking at him with her blank, almost childish stare. She glanced at me.

"You ought even now to have blackouts in your great cities!" Kurt Hofmann exclaimed. "Prepare! Be ready!"

"Oh, we couldn't do that!" Sylvia said flatly. "We couldn't have blackouts!"

"Why not?"

"Because!"

Her voice couldn't have been more innocent.

"It would disrupt everything. It would stop all the electric clocks, and the refrigerators. I was an hour late to dinner the other night, because the current had gone off and nobody had set the clock."

An abrupt and I think I may say appalled silence for an instant galvanized, and then deflated, the whole group. All of them, that is, except Sam Wharton, Pete Hamilton and myself who knew her. I saw a sharp flicker of amusement that passed between the two men.

In the silence that had all the varying qualities of the people who were part of it, Sylvia said, "Well, it would, I mean. Wouldn't it?"

Kurt Hofmann's affirmative was all sibilants. "Yes!" he said. His voice was stinging with scorn. "It would, Miss Peele. I'm afraid it would. I'm afraid the refrigerators would be off a few hours. And America would be without its ice cubes."

The atmosphere was so charged with electricity that if a blackout could have isolated it I'm sure our hostess would have ordered one. She was sitting there, obviously distressed, her head bent forward a little, waiting to interrupt them. As she started to speak the butler came into the room with a telegram on a tray.

"I hope that's not from Bliss Thatcher," Corliss said. He took his watch out of his pocket.

Mrs. Sherwood smiled. "Perhaps I'd better read it at once, if you'll forgive me," she said. The rebuke, if that's what it

was intended to be, was lost on Corliss Marshall—accustomed to being rude if he liked and to never being rebuked.

She tore open the envelope and glanced at the telegram.

"It's not from Mr. Thatcher," she said, smiling. She folded it and put it in her pocket. I wouldn't have guessed from the tone of her voice that there was anything important in that wire. I wasn't watching her read it, but I was looking at Sylvia Peele who was watching her . . . and I saw something flicker behind her eyes before she looked away and started talking to Mrs. Wharton.

"Mr. Thatcher said he would be a little late," Mrs. Sherwood said. "He had to attend a meeting, so I put dinner back a little. He's bringing Lady Alicia Wrenn. I knew you'd all want to wait for them. Perhaps I'd better call her and explain."

She got up.

"Have you seen this apartment?" she said to me. "Do come and see my upstairs. Do you mind if I call you Grace?"

It was a little surprising—not the Grace part so much as wandering off to look at her apartment with my cocktail scarcely touched. I got up nevertheless, of course.

"I'd love to," I said.

Sylvia moved her feet for me to pass and looked up at me with blank expressionless eyes. Mr. Hofmann stood aside and bowed. I could feel Larry Villiers' eyes following us out the door.

"They've done a frightfully nice job," Mrs. Sherwood said. "My name's Ruth, by the way—I forgot you didn't know it. They took out the ceiling and put in these stairs."

We'd got to the top of the landing. She stopped abruptly, glancing back down the stairs, her hand tightening on my arm.

3

I suppose I looked as completely staggered as I felt at the extraordinary change that had come over her. Her face was the most perfect mask of tragedy I've ever seen—tragedy, and fear so total that it was amost appalling.

"—Forgive me, please!" she whispered urgently. "You have a child, haven't you?"

"Two," I said.

Her hand gripped my arm tightly.

"Then will you for God's sake do something for me?"

For a moment I thought either she'd lost her mind or I'd lost mine.

"Of course," I said. "I'll be glad to. What is it you want me to do?"

She let my arm go and pushed her hair back from her forehead, like some one coming back to her senses. She looked quickly back of her again.

"Go to your room and telephone my daughter in New York."

Her voice was scarcely a whisper.

"—I'll write down her number for you."

There was another glass console table against the white wall in front of us, between two doors. It had a telephone on it, and beside it a pad and pencil.

"Tell her you're calling for me, and that I say it's most inconvenient for me to have her here, and I'd prefer she didn't come. Tell her I'll be in New York on Tuesday and I'll see her then."

She turned her head away a moment.

"You see . . ."

She hesitated painfully, and looked back at me. "You see, she wouldn't fit in. She's just a child, and . . ."

"You don't have to explain, Mrs. Sherwood," I said. I couldn't possibly have called her Ruth just then. It seemed like such a . . . well, I suppose, *shocking* thing—just to tell your child not to come home. Still, she was so distraught that I was really sorry for her.

I must have looked at the phone there in front of us, because she said, "I can't phone from this apartment—the servants would hear me."

That seemed to me an extraordinary explanation indeed, and she couldn't help realize it.

"Believe me—it's dreadfully important," she said, with a kind of suppressed desperation. "I wouldn't ask you if it weren't." She picked up the pencil and scrawled a number on the back of the telegram and handed it to me. "You can go through this door. Your apartment is the third on the left."

I took the blank and opened the door.

"Thank you, Grace Latham," she said. "Thank you—more than you know!"

I couldn't look at her. The relief in her voice was too terrible. I just hurried along the corridor to my door. I didn't even look back to see if she was waiting for me.

I unlocked my door and went in to the bedroom, went to

the phone and gave the operator the number. As I waited I realized abruptly that Mrs. Sherwood hadn't told me her daughter's name. I turned over the wire and looked at the signature. As I looked, my eye caught the date line, and I looked again. The time was 12:05 P.M. And the message said—I read it shamelessly—"Coming down unless you wire you don't want me—love, Betty."

I looked at my watch. It was seventeen minutes past eight. Something had obviously happened that had delayed that telegram's delivery . . . and that meant that that child was in all probability well on her way. I started to signal the operator to change it to a person to person call, but just as I did a woman's voice said, "Hello—this is Devereaux."

"It must be a school," I thought. I said, "May I speak to Miss Elizabeth Sherwood?"

There was the kind of pause you expect to have followed by "Sorry, there's no one here of that name." Instead the woman said, "Who is calling, please?"

"I'm calling for her mother in Washington," I said. "I have a message for her."

"I'm very sorry," the woman said. "Elizabeth Sherwood is not here just now."

"Do you know if she's left for Washington?" I asked.

"I'm sorry," the woman said. "I couldn't tell you." If she'd said, "I won't tell you," it would have matched her tone better.

"Her mother is anxious to have her put off her coming," I said. "Will you try to get that message to her?"

"Thank you," the woman said. "Good-bye."

I heard the phone click down. It all seemed stranger than ever. I sat there with the phone in my hand. Suddenly I heard her voice again.

"—Operator," shesaid crisply.

I realized that we hadn't been disconnected, so I said, "Yes?"

"Operator—this is the Devereaux School."

She hadn't recognized my voice, apparently.

"Can you tell me where the call I've just had came from?"

"Washington," I said.

"Thank you."

It may have been my imagination, but I thought there was a definite relief in her voice. She hung up then, and so did I. She'd evidently thought it was a local call. And that was odd too. Of course I knew that some schools live in mortal terror of kidnapping, and are reluctant to give information about their pupils, but this was watchful suspicion of a

very special order. My curiosity was growing by the minute.

I glanced at the telegram again, put it down quickly and glanced around. Sylvia Peele was there in the doorway, looking at me with a kind of calmly detached appraisal. I didn't know whether she'd seen the telegram in my hand or not. I let it slip onto the floor and got up.

"What's the matter, darling?" I asked casually. "Have you decided to have your headache after all?"

"I don't think this party's going to be *my* headache," she said coolly.

"Whose, then?"

"I'm not sure. Somebody's certainly. I came upstairs to tell you something I thought would amuse you, and saw the door open here. Not calling the Colonel, by any chance, are you?"

I shook my head.

"It mightn't be such a bad idea at that," she remarked.

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Fee fie foh fum, I smell the blood of . . . well, not an Englishman necessarily."

"Sylvia!" I said.

She looked at me with bland indifference.

"Perhaps it won't go as far as murder. But there's something awfully phoney about this setup. The place reeks, Grace. —Listen. Do you know that not *one* of Mrs. Addison Sherwood's guests—as far as I can make out—has the foggiest idea who she is, or where she comes from, or what she's settled here so handsomely for? There's just *nobody* here who knows her at all."

I stared at her.

"Maybe she just likes the climate," I said.

"Then she's crazy, and maybe that explains it," Sylvia said coolly. "But do you understand that not even Corliss knows who she is? Pete doesn't know and doesn't care. He doesn't know the difference between the social register and the telephone book."

Something clicked sharply in my mind when she said that. It was at a crowded party somebody gave for a newcomer to Washington—one of those post-election names that make news arrivals—and the Press turned out en masse. I met Pete on the stairs as I was coming in.

"Is Sylvia here?" I asked. "A friend of mine has got engaged."

"Sylvia?" Pete said. "Good Lord, no. The nearest the guest

of honor ever got to the social register is the telephone book. The only time he's exclusive enough for Sylvia is Saturday night, and then he's in the bathtub."

"That's funny," I retorted. "—I thought I'd seen her with you, sometimes."

"She's got to know one member of the working class to keep her professional standing," he said. He grinned, but I had the uncomfortable feeling that it was more important than he pretended. "She preferred—on this occasion—to have tea with the new Chargé of some third-rate embassy. So long. They used bilgewater for the cocktails, so don't stand in line."

A little later I saw Sylvia come in.

"Has Pete been here?" she asked.

"He left," I said. "He thought you were being exclusive."

"I wish he had my job for about two weeks," she said, a little bitterly. "He thinks I *like* these people. I wish I could make him understand."

All that flashed through my mind again as I listened to her going on.

"But Corliss does know the difference. He came to meet the great Kurt Hofmann and because Bliss Thatcher would be here. He's a great admirer of Hofmann's—you remember how he went to town for *Terror Unleashed* when it came out. He plumped so hard for it people were saying he must have helped write it. But a body's got to be fair, even to Corliss."

She crossed over to the foot of the bed, ostensibly towards my dressing table, but I knew that in passing she'd seen the telegram lying on the floor. There wasn't much that those blank vaguely nontracking eyes of her missed.

"And Kurt Hofmann came because Corliss was coming. He doesn't know our hostess either. Your Latin admirer Señor Delvalle got mixed up—he thought it was somebody else when he accepted. *He* doesn't know her."

"And Larry?" I asked.

"Oh, Larry. She's probably paying him space rates."

"There's still Mr. Thatcher."

"She met him on the ship coming up from South America two months ago. She told me that herself just now. I asked her."

"Maybe that's the reason," I said. "He's a widower, isn't he?"

"It might be at that," Sylvia said. "But that doesn't explain the atmosphere down there. I tell you I can *smell* it, Grace. And there's something wrong with Corliss—some-

thing's happened to him. When you and Mrs. Sherwood left he went off the deep end completely. It wasn't pretty. He and Pete have been quarrelling a long time, but . . ."

"But what?" I asked when she didn't go on. "What happened?"

"I don't quite know. I was doing a little prying into Effie Wharton's plans for poor Sam when it blew up at the other end of the room. Delvalle apparently brought up 'Truth Not Fiction' again. The first thing I knew they were practically tearing Pete and Corliss from each other's throats. I wish to Heaven you hadn't dragged that thing up."

"I wish to Heaven you'd tell me why!" I demanded.

She looked oddly at me.

"Grace," she said—more serious than I'd ever seen her. "Drop it, will you? It's just plain dynamite. Take my word for it, this once. I'm sorry to go enigmatical on you, but—I haven't got time to go into it. That's really why I came to find you."

She shrugged and turned to the mirror, looking at herself critically. The insistent seriousness faded from her face. She looked almost poignantly lovely for an instant as her eyes went blank and young. No one would have thought she had a brain in her head. She turned back to me.

"Let's go, if you're through. I want to see Bliss Thatcher and Lady Alicia make their entrance. I'll bet anything her ladyship doesn't know our hostess either."

She took my arm. "You know, darling, it's really wonderful. It couldn't happen anywhere in the world but in Washington. Just think: four columnists, and a lady—that's you, dear—and a great industrialist in a key position, a famous anti-Totalitarian author, a defeated House Leader with an ambitious disgruntled wife, a big shot in the Good Neighbor racket, and an English peeress trying to skim off a little top-milk while the skimming's good . . . all together in the same place. And what for?"

"Well," I said, "our hostess conceivably might have the quaint idea that we're all nice people."

She nodded slowly.

"Maybe," she said. "Maybe I've lost my innocence and have a bad case of spiritual jaundice. Maybe Corliss just needs a good night's sleep, and my nose is betraying me at last."

"Well, I hope so," I said. If it hadn't been for that telegram lying back there on the floor I'd have said it with greater confidence.

Having Corliss Marshall and Pete Hamilton together any-

where was bad enough, I thought, but with Larry Villiers ready to slit both their throats neatly with his typewriter, and Sylvia Peele quietly reconnoitering in the interest of "Peelings" and acting like Cassandra on the walls of Troy, all we really needed to finish it off in grand style was to have Ruth Sherwood's problem child barge in. I felt that even more strongly when we'd joined the rest of them again in the library. The atmosphere was not what you'd call relaxed. Corliss Marshall's fleshy face was apoplectic and mottled with gray. Pete was like a dog with the hair still standing up along his spine, though he was at least trying to be polite. Delvalle was watching them with bright shrewd eyes. Ruth Sherwood, talking to Sam Wharton and Larry, looked up suddenly.

"Oh, there they are. I hope you aren't all starved."

She went out into the hall.

"Bliss—how nice!" I could hear her through the doorway. "How do you do, Lady Alicia. I'm Ruth Sherwood. It's so nice of you to come."

Sylvia glanced at me with nothing in her face at all. I was listening to Señor Delvalle, but watching Kurt Hofmann. He was wandering about the room, rather as if he wanted to be *au fait* with each object when the auction began. He stopped at a desk in front of the side windows, and picked up a photograph in a tooled-leather frame that was lying—face down, I had an idea—on top of it. He made an odd sort of face, squinting his glass out of his eye.

"What an unattractive person!" he said, holding it up for everybody to see. He was right. It was a photograph of a girl about fifteen, and not very . . . oh, well, after all, all people can't be magazine covers. I felt a little sick. I had no doubt now why Ruth Sherwood didn't want Betty to come just then. It was rather distressing—and infinitely more when we were all suddenly aware that Ruth Sherwood was standing there in the doorway, Bliss Thatcher by her side, and that her face was as white as the exquisitely cut dinner gown she wore.

4

She steadied herself against the door-frame for an instant, then came forward with all the ease and dignity in the world and took the picture out of Kurt Hofmann's hands.

"This is my daughter, Mr. Hofmann," she said. "I'm sorry you won't have the pleasure of meeting her. She's away at school."

She put the picture in the desk drawer and closed it.

Hofmann bowed. "I am sorry, Mrs. Sherwood. I'm . . . sure the child has a beautiful soul."

"—The swine," Señor Delvalle said under his breath.

"She has indeed," Ruth Sherwood said coolly. She turned back to Mr. Thatcher, standing there massive and good-looking, his crisp curly black hair just touched with gray. He'd stopped short, and I thought for an instant he looked as if he was shocked by something. I wondered if he hadn't known she had a child, or what difference any of it made in any case. It was all very puzzling to me—the more so as it was also obvious that Ruth Sherwood felt whatever it was that he was thinking. The effort with which she forced herself to smile, introducing him, was a painful contrast with the casual air she'd managed when she got the telegram.

Only one thing was plain to me, and that was that I couldn't possibly sit there and let the child burst in on her without some kind of warning. It wasn't for any one of us to judge her, in any case—and certainly, I thought just then, it wasn't something for any one to make gossip fodder out of for the consumption of the public. I glanced at Larry Villiers. I didn't think of Sylvia, because Sylvia has a heart in her body. I don't think Larry Villiers has. He was watching Mrs. Sherwood, his eyes as bright as a copperhead's spying a day-old thrust.

I wasn't the only one who'd noticed him. Pete Hamilton bent down by him to pick up a cigarette.

"—Not for publication, pal—see?" he said under his breath.

Larry picked up his glass and set it down again, a shadow of a smile on his lips. If only Lady Alicia Wrenn would come down and we could get into the dining room, I thought. If it hadn't been for the rhythmic beat of the current in the clock on the desk I'd have been sure it had stopped. I tried desperately to remember what time the New York trains got into Washington, and then how long it would take her to get a taxi and get out to the Randolph-Lee. Maybe they'd call from the desk, I thought.

I tried again to catch Ruth Sherwood's eye, and couldn't. Then there was a momentary respite. Lady Alicia Wrenn came in, and Larry, who adores a title, was on his feet and at her side in an instant.

"How charming you look this evening, Alicia," he said.

Señor Delvalle glanced at me, flicked his cigarette case open and smiled faintly, as if he had a rather special secret joke. Of course charm is a curious word. It can mean an awful lot of things. And Lady Alicia Wrenn was a rather curious woman. In general she looked rather more like a horse than a woman, though I don't know whether horses are ever near-sighted. Lady Alicia certainly was, or her rouge would have been on differently, and the dress she had on would have been in a Bundle for Britain to make gun-wadding out of. Yet there was something curiously fey about the quick, searching glance she gave each person she met.

She shook hands vigorously with Sam Wharton. "Oh yes. You're what you call a mugwump in this extraordin'ry country, aren't you?"

Sam looked a little dazed.

"You mean a lame duck, darling," Larry murmured.

"Oh, is that so?" Lady Alicia said. "I want a spot of grog. And I don't want one of your cocktails. I'll have gin and tonic. And I'm starving. I hope we'll eat shortly."

"So do all the rest of us," Pete said politely. "It's you we've been waiting for."

Lady Alicia was making the rounds, giving everybody's hand a swift pump and saying "Howjado," looking at everybody sharply. Ruth Sherwood had come over to the fireplace by me to press the bell.

"She'd already left, Ruth, I think," I whispered quickly. "The telegram was marked 12.05."

If I'd thought she'd turned pale as she faced Bliss Thatcher, I'd been wrong—not compared with the ashen draining of every ounce of blood from her face now. I thought she was going to faint. For a moment she just swayed there, trying desperately to get control of herself. Her back was to the rest of her guests. The others were listening to Lady Alicia and Kurt Hofmann.

"You've forgot me, haven't you?" she was saying, rather stridently, yet with some kind of odd undertone.

"Never, madame."

He was bowing from the waist, her hand raised to his lips.

"Your memory's better than mine, then," Lady Alicia said. "You've got fat and I've got thin. It was just after you'd had your duel, wasn't it? You were putting salt in your wound to make it a handsome scar. Good thing for both of us my father snatched me back home. You wouldn't have become famous and I wouldn't have won the Derby."

"I should have been very happy, madame."

"Oh, well, it's pleasant to look back on."

Ruth Sherwood had turned back to face them.

"Gin and tonic for Lady Alicia," she said to the butler. "Take it to the table—we'll go in now."

I knew she wanted to get us to the dining room as quickly as she could. Once over there and seated, if the child came she could manage.

"Shall we go in?" she said. She took Sam Wharton's arm. She seemed to sway a little and steady herself against him. "I must be faint with hunger," she said lightly.

Señor Delvalle bowed and offered me his arm. "I should be happy for you to faint, Mrs. Latham," he said with a smile.

"I'm afraid I'm not the type," I answered.

Bliss Thatcher and Effie Wharton followed Ruth Sherwood and Sam. Lady Alicia and Kurt Hofmann went next. I fancied Mr. Hofmann for some reason looked a little uncomfortable. Lady Alicia for one thing was being frank to say the least about his former colleagues. Corliss Marshall and Sylvia behind them were listening, each with his own professional ears well tuned. Pete Hamilton and Larry stood aside to let me and Señor Delvalle precede them. It hadn't occurred to me until just then that there were more men than women present. It seemed rather odd, with all the extra women around everywhere. Surely two female guests, I thought, had declined at the last moment.

I looked up at Pete as I passed him. There was something more than a little strange about his expression. He was looking at Corliss Marshall's back; his jaw was like a hard rim of steel, and the spray of tiny lines around the corners of his eyes that I'd always associated with laughter didn't have any laughter in them now. The look on his face was a kind of wary contempt—like the look of a prizefighter waiting for his opponent to lead with a tricky left below the belt. Corliss's neck was fat in back and a little moist, and a lock of hair that was supposed to cover up his bald spot had slipped down and uncovered it. I don't know what it is about people's backs that's so revealing.

Sylvia glanced back at Pete and started to smile. The smile changed to a sharp flicker of anxiety. Her face went blank and social again as she turned back to make some remark to Corliss.

Señor Delvalle and I followed them through the doorway and past the iron staircase. Ruth Sherwood was almost to the dining room door—but not quite. Then she stopped abruptly. There was the sound of a key in the lock of the corridor door at the end of the little passage beside the stairs. The door opened. A girl's voice said,

"Thank you—just put it in here, please."

I couldn't see her, I could only hear her. But I could see Ruth Sherwood. She was wonderful.

"Oh, how nice!" she cried, as if she'd got the pleasantest surprise in all the world. She left Sam Wharton and rushed forward into the passage. "My dear! I didn't expect you till tomorrow. Do come—I want you to meet my guests. We're just going in to dinner."

We were all just standing there, waiting. Then Ruth Sherwood came back. Beside her was a girl, about eighteen, I imagine. But it wasn't that that made my hand on Señor Delvalle's arm contract as sharply as if I'd been struck an unexpected blow. It was the girl herself. She was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in all my life.

Every one straightened up as if a star had suddenly fallen into the middle of the hall. Through the sudden silence Ruth Sherwood's voice came as cool as April. Only her knuckles showed white where she gripped her daughter's arm.

"I want you to meet a young friend of mine from New York," she said. "Barbara Shipley. This is Mrs. Wharton, Barbara, and Mr. Wharton, and Lady Alicia Wrenn——"

I didn't listen to the rest of it. All I was acutely aware of was Señor Delvalle's saying, "I thought you weren't the fainting type, Mrs. Latham." And Lady Alicia saying, "I hope she's had her dinner. I won't sit down with thirteen at table. The last time I did, one of the guests was dead before morning."

5

The girl standing there—Barbara Shipley, I had to remember to call her—broke off her shy and bewildered acknowledgment of her mother's introductions to answer Lady Alicia's brusque remark. "—I've had dinner already, coming down on the train."

She was almost as tall as her mother, with that sort of heart-breaking clarity and youngness that no amount of bright red lipstick seems to affect. She had on the uniform of her age—a brown skirt and tan sweater and checked jacket, with a short fur coat over her arm and a brown felt hat in her hand. Her hair was reddish gold, cut in a long loosely curled bob, and her eyes were the color of tawny sherry with the sunlight shining through it.

"She's *really* lovely," I thought, my mind searching like mad—and in vain—for some explanation of this fantastic situation. And no one could possibly have guessed what the situation was. The bewildered uncertain look in her face could so easily have been embarrassment at bursting in on a dinner party the day before she was expected that nobody could think it was odd at all.

"Please go on in," she said to her mother. "Can't I just go up, and——"

"Of course, and come down after dinner," Ruth Sherwood said. She turned to the suet butler. "Have Martha take Miss Shipley's things to the green room. You'll find everything you want, my dear. Make yourself completely at home. I'm sorry we're so late."

She moved back toward Sam Wharton. "—Let's go in, shall we?"

The girl stood there for an instant, that lost and uncomprehending look widening her eyes. I saw her glance back at her bag and at the door and then upstairs, as if she didn't know at all what to do. I felt horribly sorry for her. My kids would have said, "Hey, Mother, what's the big idea anyway?" But then it would never have occurred to either of them to send a telegram asking if it was all right to come home—they'd just have come. The tone in Barbara's voice as she'd told the bellboy to put her bag down had had that confidence in it too. She didn't have it now, and she was almost poignantly moving, like a child who'd raised its face for a kiss and been roughly pushed away, not knowing why.

At the dining room door I glanced back. She was slowly following the maid up the stairs. Larry Villiers was looking back at her too, and a flicker of apprehension stirred inside me for an instant. I heard Hofmann say, "Here you are, Mrs. Latham, beside me," and Señor Delvalle at my elbow say, "I should have slipped out here and changed the cards."

His own place was between Effie Wharton and Lady Alicia. As he settled Effie's chair into place she looked up at him and said coyly, "Habla usted Español?"

I stared at her, I'm afraid, and for an instant Señor Delvalle looked as if he couldn't speak Spanish or English—either one. And then all he could manage was "Si, Señora. Y usted?"

"Don't mind my wife," Sam Wharton put in genially. "She's just started Spanish lessons. She's probably used her entire vocabulary already."

"I thought you were going back to Berryville, Effie,"

Sylvia remarked. "Don't tell me it's South America instead."

Effie Wharton flushed. Her carrot-red hair was more carroty than ever in the candlelight. She glanced quickly at her husband as if all this was something he wasn't supposed to know about. And I'm sure it was to get off the subject on his account that she said, without the slightest relevance to anything, "There are too many people trying to get us into war." She looked belligerently around the table.

"Did you say we had to go to war, Sylvia?" Pete asked, grinning.

"I didn't mention the war."

"That's what you meant," Effie retorted.

"And quite correctly." Lady Alicia set down her gin and tonic with some vehemence. "The sooner America gets into it, the sooner it will be over."

"Is that what you've come over for, Alicia darling—to help push us in?" Larry Villiers asked.

I looked at him, almost seeing Lady Alicia torn into neat bits and spread out to dry in "Shall We Join the Ladies?" He raised his spoon and sipped his green turtle soup with a bland little smile. Small-boned and delicate, blond with almost cruelly handsome features, sharp and intelligent, with a feline gift for other people's weaknesses, he was as sensitive and neurotic as a woman. I think he tried to overcorrect his natural fastidiousness, because he deliberately dressed badly except in the evening, and I think in a way he hated his job. He envied people like Pete Hamilton—and Pete Hamilton especially. He'd wanted, at first at any rate, to be liked and taken seriously, and because he wasn't he made up for it by making people hate him—especially men—and fear him—especially women.

Lady Alicia was apparently near-sighted spiritually as well as physically. "I shall certainly do my best," she said vigorously.

"I'm happy to hear you say so, madame," Kurt Hofmann said. I thought of the Delphic Oracle. I don't know why he impressed me that way, unless it was his size and his monocle and the sabre slash down his cheek. "I hope you will go all over America, and speak to women in their clubs, and make them see——"

"That's precisely what I've planned to do," Lady Alicia interrupted. "But I must admit I've got astonishingly little help from our Embassy. It's extraordin'ry."

"Maybe they think we like to make up our own minds without any outside pressure," Sylvia remarked sweetly.

"Nonsense," said Lady Alicia. "You Americans haven't

yet realized what's going on in the world. You've not got the faintest idea of what bombing means."

"But of course you're safely over here, out of it all, aren't you?" Sylvia inquired innocently. "Tell me, how did you ever bring yourself to leave at a time like this? Didn't you feel you ought to stay and help out, and let a couple of children come instead?"

There was a silence as clean and sharp as a razor edge. Out of it I expected Lady Alicia to issue a blast that would demolish the lot of us. I looked down. Nothing came—but in the black plate-glass table top I could see her face. It had collapsed into something tragic and really terrible.

"Don't! Don't say that!" she whispered.

It was awful, really. None of us could say a word. It was as if we were completely paralyzed. Then Bliss Thatcher at the end of the table managed to speak.

"By the way, Hofmann," he said calmly. "How did you ever get out? You were in a concentration camp, weren't you?"

"Yes," Kurt Hofmann said. "It was through the help of a group of American writers. I was in a camp in France. I can't tell you the method because it might prevent others like me from being rescued. It took me twenty-nine days to get to Lisbon."

"—Did you get the letter I wrote you, Kurt?" It was Lady Alicia who said that, though for a moment I don't think any of us recognized her voice. It had lost its strident determined quality. "I wanted to ask you when I came in."

"No," Hofmann said quietly. "I did not get it."

"It was after I got your letter from Lêves. You'd just got to the pensionnaires' home. I remembered it all so well—the day we walked out there, and ate lunch in the field of red poppies and ripe corn. I have both those letters—the one you wrote the next day and the one you wrote this summer. I was so happy you thought of me again, and then I thought my friends at St. Cyr could help you."

"I am afraid it was your friends at St. Cyr that enabled them to find me and put me in the concentration camp, Alicia," Mr. Hofmann said. "It was there the Americans got to me, through a former caretaker of the Cathedral at Chartres. Poor little chap. He is in a prison himself now. Or I hope he is."

"Why do you say that?" Sylvia asked.

"I mean, I hope he is not dead, mademoiselle," Hofmann returned coolly.

A little shudder seemed to go around the table. I suppose

it could only have been fancy, but I thought even the candle-points flickered, as if a door somewhere had opened and shut again.

Ruth Sherwood pushed her chair back. Her face was quite pale.

"I wonder if you'll excuse me a moment. I must see if my young guest is all right. I shan't be but a moment."

I wondered if she'd really heard a word that had been said. It was hardly the kind of dinner-table conversation a hostess would choose. But at that it was much better than what was to come. It was Bliss Thatcher again who did it, and at the time I thought he was only trying to change the subject.

"There's something you fellows can tell me," he said, looking from Corliss Marshall to Pete Hamilton. "All of you in the newspaper game ought to know. Who writes this newsletter called 'Truth Not Fiction'?"

I thought, "Oh, Lord."

The silence was deafening—but it wasn't solid and stunning as it had been at Sylvia's remarkable gaffe. It was divided into separate little compartments that apparently Lady Alicia and Kurt Hofmann and Effie and Sam Wharton had no share in, and that the rest of us did—the others because apparently they knew what it was about, and me only because Sylvia had been so upset.

She was now. I could see her reflection in the glass table top as I'd seen Lady Alicia's. Her face had gone perfectly blank, as if she for one had never heard of "Truth Not Fiction." The angles at the corners of Corliss Marshall's mouth went down sharply. Larry seemed to fold up inside himself, Pete to expand and become suddenly hot and sultry. Señor Delvalle leaned back in his chair and looked calmly from one of them to the other.

"I understand the F. B. I. is working on it," Bliss Thatcher said. "I must say I think people should be willing to sign their names to what they write. Also to distribute it without trying to hide its place of origin."

"Maybe they're afraid to," Effie Wharton said with determination.

"But there are no concentration camps in America, madame," Mr. Hofmann put in.

"There ought to be," Corliss said irascibly. "The sooner we put a stop to this sort of thing the better."

"You want to muzzle the press, Marshall?" Sam Wharton asked.

"—Before the press muzzles him, I guess." That was Pete

Hamilton; and Corliss's face was red and mottled with gray again. If he'd had an apoplectic stroke I shouldn't have been surprised in the least.

"Do you think 'Truth Not Fiction' is a good thing to have going around, Hamilton?" Bliss Thatcher asked.

"I don't read it," Pete returned coolly. "I'm not on its mailing list."

"That's because you aren't in *Who's Who* or the *Social Register*," Larry Villiers said.

"It happens I am in *Who's Who*, as you know.—I just think it's dangerous to have censorship of any kind."

"And what really is this newsletter?" Hofmann asked.

Ruth Sherwood's return stopped the conversation a moment. She looked much less tense, I thought. She smiled around the table.

"We're talking about 'Truth Not Fiction,' Ruth," Mr. Thatcher said.

"Again?" She laughed. "What about it? It comes to me regularly."

Thatcher turned to Kurt Hofmann.

"It's a newsletter circulated, as far as any one can make out, only among people of some means," he said. "It's mailed from New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but it seems to be written here in Washington. Or a good deal of the stuff is dug up here. The whole thing's designed to rouse fear about the value of money, the stability of investments and real estate, and the ability of the country to put over the defense program—including the intentions of its leaders in government and industry. It's a clever piece of work. Whether its effects are very good we don't know. There are two or three known instances like this: an elderly woman with a small invested income who turned on the gas in her kitchen had a copy of it in her hand when she was found. It was about the prospect of inflation."

"It sounds like Europe," Lady Alicia said quietly.

"It does. That's why we're interested. Europe with the aid and comfort of some one very close to home."

I could feel the individual pools of silence around the table again.

"You haven't any of you said if you know who writes it?"

Pete Hamilton shook his head.

"Maybe it's one of the foreign press people," Sylvia said vaguely.

Larry Villiers looked at her out of the corner of his cat's eyes, a slight smile on his lips.

"Perhaps Mr. Villiers knows," Señor Delvalle suggested blandly.

"Not me. Nobody ever tells me anything," Larry murmured.

"I do know," Corliss Marshall said abruptly. "I can't tell you here, but I'll be glad to tell the F. B. I. tomorrow."

The smoke coming from Pete Hamilton's mouth stopped for an instant, and continued to come out in an even unhurried column. I saw his eyes meet Sylvia's. There was no more expression in her face than there was in the yellow orchids in the center of the table. Bliss Thatcher was looking intently at Corliss, and I found myself looking intently at Bliss Thatcher. He was a massive man, but there was also a tensile steel quality about him that I'd been aware of in my brief discussions with him about how to start the oilburner again if it bogged down when my Lilac happened to be on one of her periodic religious jamborees and couldn't be found. He wasn't handsome, except in the sense that his face was strong and intelligent and confident; he was the kind of man you'd always choose if you wanted to get something done without shilly-shallying. Which of course was why he was in the position he was in at the moment—and also, I suppose, why he objected to the implication in "Truth Not Fiction" that he and others like him weren't doing the job of defense the best it could be done.

He settled back in his chair. I saw his eyes move to our hostess, and something a little strange happen in them, as if he wasn't quite so sure of something as he'd been before.

Corliss leaned forward. His movement had a studied carelessness in it that was betrayed, I thought, by the swift sharp movement in his brilliant eyes and the sudden down-pull of his long upper lip. I had an instant feeling that he'd been waiting for just this opportunity . . . though it was a long time before I understood the significance of what he was about to say.

"Do any of you remember a newspaperman named Gordon Lacey?"

He asked it casually, but he emphasized the name by speaking it slowly and distinctly.

"Yes," Sylvia said. "He used to be on *The Chronicle.* What did they call him?"

"Frog Face," Pete said. "He was at school with me. We had a teacher that got us interested in Pepys, only instead of reading him Frog Face and I worked like dogs inventing ourselves a system of shorthand. Where is he now?"

"He's in Panama now," Corliss Marshall said. "Or he was three weeks ago. I ran into him at Kelly's Ritz."

"Not sober—don't tell me?" Sylvia said.

"No. I take it he isn't often."

"He was a good man," Pete said.

Corliss shrugged. "Gordon Lacey," he said deliberately, "is working—or was going to work—for a South American press association. Have you met him, Delvalle?"

"Casually," Señor Delvalle said. "He applied to me for a job. I wrote to one of my editors."

"He didn't say who he was with," Corliss went on. "He wasn't in a hurry to start. He had money. I take it he's one of those chaps who doesn't work so long as he can eat—and drink—without it."

His eyes met Pete's for an instant.

"I've got three hundred dollars in the bank, Marshall," Pete said amiably. "Don't look at me."

"And when does the racing season open, Pete?" Sylvia inquired.

He grinned at her across the table. Her smile that was usually so many other things was unaffected and natural, with that vague almost wistfully tender quality her voice had when she spoke his name first that evening on the stairs. I saw Larry Villiers watching her.

"What you need, Pete, is a rich wife," he said evenly.

"I've asked you to find me one."

Corliss Marshall looked over at Kurt Hofmann. "This Gordon Lacey, Hofmann," he said.

"Yes?"

"He told me he was largely responsible for your writing *Terror Unleashed*."

Kurt Hofmann's face showed his surprise.

"He interviewed you in Prague, and convinced you that a book like it would sell enormously here. He said he helped you outline the thing."

"I remember him," Hofmann said coolly. "He had a face like a frog."

"Which is why he is called Frog Face," Pete remarked.

"He did give me some help. I paid him at the time for it. He was stranded in Prague."

"He has the idea," Corliss said, "that you were to go fifty-fifty on the royalties. You'd better check up on it. Not that he'll bother you unless he happens to need money some time. I gather he's indifferent where his money comes from."

There was a curious little silence around the table again. It may have been, this time, because of the plain implication

that Mr. Gordon Lacey's money came by dubious means from dubious sources. Pete Hamilton's jaw hardened a little.

"You're not saying anything about a friend of ours, are you, Marshall?" he inquired.

"A friend of yours, did you say, Hamilton?"

Corliss laughed, not very pleasantly.

"If you regard him as a friend I'll be glad to take back what I said. I'm sure his funds come from the most righteous of sources."

"Oh, Pete, for Heaven's sake!" Sylvia said sharply. "You know Gordon Lacey's gone all to pieces. There's no use trying to defend him. You didn't see him the last time he was in town. He was mooching from everybody at the Press Club bar. Maybe he'll start off again down there.—I hope you'll see that your people give him a chance, Señor Delvalle. He's a good man, when he's sober, and better than a lot when he's not."

Señor Delvalle bowed. "Your wish is my command, always, Miss Peele," he said smiling.

I looked at Pete. He'd quieted down. People said it was Sylvia who made him keep his head, and that he ought to marry her for that alone, but this was the first instance I'd seen of it.

Ruth Sherwood pushed back her chair and glanced at Lady Alicia Wrenn.

"Will you join us when you're ready, gentlemen?"

She smiled at Bliss Thatcher, shaking her head just a little, as if it was up to him to keep the peace in the absence of the refining influence of the ladies.

If, I thought, that was what it possibly could be called. It was a desperate relief to get out of that room and hear the door close behind us. I don't remember a dinner in Washington, ever, where the crosscurrents were quite so crossed, the drawn swords quite so naked. I remember all of it, now, with shocked incredulity. Two of the men we left in there at the table, smoking their cigars, are dead now, and another man; and the woman who was just ahead of me as we crossed in front of the ornamental staircase to the library is dead too. And at the time I understood nothing. When Colonel Primrose said, "Why couldn't you have told me, in Heaven's name?" there was nothing I could say, except that I'd missed everything, and above all that I hadn't realized at any point that it was Murder, not the girl upstairs, who was the thirteenth guest at Ruth Sherwood's table.

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As we came to the library Ruth hesitated. "Would any of you like to go up?"

Lady Alicia said no and Effie Wharton shook her head. Sylvia took hold of my arm.

"I should," she said. "Come with me, Grace."

We started up. From the dining room came an abrupt burst of hearty laughter—the first of the entire evening, I realized grimly.

"You certainly put your foot in it," I said as we turned at the top of the stairs.

"You mean her ladyship?" she asked indifferently. "It's not my fault if her conscience bothers her. And it's nothing to what Larry's going to do to her in the public prints—just wait and see. If she'd come here and kept quiet I wouldn't care. Or Kurt Hofmann either. It's these people seeking sanctuary and telling us how we ought to run things that make my D. A. R. blood boil. And what makes a gin and tonic civilized and a good dry Martini vulgar is beyond me."

"Why Corliss didn't pitch into her is what's beyond me," I said.

Every ounce of aid to Britain had been a pound of Corliss's own flesh, from the sound of his column. I didn't know whether he'd changed after his sojourn in South America.

Sylvia didn't say anything. We went into Ruth Sherwood's bedroom. I took out my lipstick and bent down in front of the dressing table. Then I stood there like that for an instant. In the mirror I could see Sylvia. She'd closed the door and was standing there, her hands behind her, holding on to the knob, her head thrown back resting against the white wood, her eyes closed. She looked desperately ill. I turned sharply.

"Sylvia! What is it?" I cried.

She moved her head from side to side, her lower lip caught in her teeth. "Oh, nothing, nothing!"

I stood staring at her. She opened her eyes suddenly and gave her head a violent shake. "Oh, I can't stand it, Grace! I don't believe it! I *can't* believe it! Nothing will make me believe it!"

I sat down slowly on the bench in front of the dressing table, literally open-mouthed.

"Believe *what?*" I demanded.

"That Pete's writing that thing."

I still stared at her.

"Oh, don't you see?" she said passionately. "That newsletter. That's what it's all about. Bliss Thatcher's trying to trap him. But it's Corliss doing it. He hates Pete, he's always hated him."

I managed to speak. "You mean Corliss Marshall is writing 'Truth Not Fiction,' himself?"

"Oh no, I don't mean that. He couldn't. He doesn't write —he pontificates. I mean he's blaming it on Pete. Can't you see? His coming back right now after he's seen Lacey—even if I don't know what that means—and his cracks at Pete about needing money. . . . Of course he needs money. He always will. He gives it away the minute he gets it. But he wouldn't do this, not for a million dollars! Even if Corliss's never been known to make a mistake about a fact, he's made one this time!"

She went over to the window and stood there with her back to me, looking out, more moved than I could have imagined her, her body quivering as if she had a violent chill. I sat there, watching her, remembering what she'd said about the group of people gathered in Ruth Sherwood's library, trying to understand what all this was about.

"—She knows he *does* write it——"

Something inside me, and yet in some odd way completely apart, said that, with the utmost clarity. "—Or if she doesn't *know* it, she believes it, and she's trying desperately to deny it."

"I'll have to look into 'Truth Not Fiction,'" I said, as calmly as I could. "I throw it in the waste basket mostly, along with 'Peace Through Tolerance' and all the rest of the obvious propaganda. I must say I don't see what all the furore's about all of a sudden."

She turned slowly, her brown eyes that didn't quite track fixed on me.

"You don't? Ask your Colonel next time you see him. He'll tell you."

Her gaze wandered off beyond me into space. With most people you can tell pretty much what they're thinking about, but not with Sylvia Peele. Or I couldn't, because what she said the next minute came as a shock to me.

"Corliss Marshall's not going to the F. B. I. tomorrow, Grace," she said softly. Her face was shuttered behind that blank waxen mask of hers. "He's not going to ruin Pete. I won't let him. Pete's too good—in every way . . . for me, or . . . for Bliss Thatcher, or anybody else."

I watched her silently for a moment. There wasn't any doubt she meant it—every word of it.

"How are you going to stop him from going?" I asked then.

She shook her head.

"I don't know. But I'm going to—if it costs me my job, and everything else."

She turned her head away. "Not because I'm in love with Pete. That doesn't matter. He isn't in love with me and I know it. There's no reason why he should be. I'm just a society gossip writer—like Larry. The only reason he comes around is he hasn't got a comfortable chair in his room."

Maybe she believed it, I thought, and maybe it was true. It was hard to tell about a person like Pete Hamilton. He was amusing and volatile, with a devil-may-care if slightly sardonic surface that nobody who knew him ever thought was more than surface. His jaw and the steady gaze behind the twinkle in his rather comic slate-blue eyes with their odd whitish lashes—and also the place he'd made for himself at the not advanced age of thirty-three—were proof enough of a pretty solid interior. The temper that went with his sandy-red hair was the only thing I'd ever heard against him. I knew he'd been a fairly stout drinker when he first came to town, but he'd quit—as he said, he talked too much and gave away stuff he'd planned to use himself, and some wise guy took the credit for it. Altogether, however, that the idea of marrying anybody and settling down to an even domestic keel had ever seriously occurred to him seemed highly unlikely.

I glanced back at Sylvia. She was still standing by the window, but her eyes had moved to the door as if she'd heard some one coming. Her face emptied the way it does and smoothed out to her meaningless blank. I turned. The door opened softly. It was Barbara Shipley.

"Oh, I'm—I'm sorry. I thought you were——"

She hesitated.

"I—left my book in here."

Her face flushed. She went across to the low glass table by the chaise longue and reached down for a book that was lying there. On the table was a photograph in a silver frame. Her hand, almost to the book, stopped and moved to the photograph instead. She picked it up and looked at it a moment. Then she turned to Sylvia.

"Isn't this one of the men downstairs?"

Sylvia nodded. "That's Bliss Thatcher. He's on the Defense Council."

"Oh," Barbara said. She looked at it again and put it slowly back on the table. "How long do parties last, down here?" she asked seriously.

"Maybe if we go down, this one won't last so long," Sylvia said. "Are you ready, Grace?"

I got up and we went out, leaving the girl standing there looking down at Bliss Thatcher's photograph. At the corner of the iron stair rail, Sylvia turned and looked back. Then she looked rather oddly at me.

"If her name's Barbara, why does she have 'E. A. S.' on her belt buckle instead of 'B. A. S.,' do you suppose, darling?" she asked calmly.

I didn't say anything for an instant. Ruth Sherwood had made a mistake. On the spur of the moment, with her guests lined up behind her in the hall, she'd taken the "B" of Betty instead of the "E" of Elizabeth. I suddenly remembered Colonel Primrose telling me once an axiom of the famous German, Grolz, one of the first scientific criminologists—in taking an alias the criminal almost invariably keeps his own initials.

"Maybe she borrowed the buckle," I said.

"And why doesn't she like Bliss Thatcher's portrait on the table by the chaise longue?" Sylvia inquired sweetly. "And why did she pretend she'd left a book in there? That same book was in the same spot before she came."

"You'd better exert your powers on Corliss Marshall, Mrs. Holmes," I remarked. "There he is now."

We went on down the stairs.

"Just forget what I told you, will you?" Sylvia said coolly. "I must have been upset."

I wanted to say, "Yes—if you'll forget about the 'E. A. S.' and Bliss Thatcher's picture," but I didn't dare make it seem that important. I said, "Surely. I'll be glad to."

The men were straggling across from the dining room, Delvalle and Larry Villiers in front. Pete and Kurt Hofmann came after them, turning to exchange some remark with Sam Wharton. Bliss Thatcher and Corliss Marshall were still back by the dining-room door, standing there talking quietly. I could feel Sylvia's quick glance, in odd contrast with her cool request that I forget what she'd said.

Corliss's front gave one a totally different impression from his back. His face was suave and moonlike, and below his sharp hawk's nose and extraordinarily long, almost pendulous upper lip the folds of flesh from years of excellent dining-out fitted in his wing collar as if it were a cradle. If any one had to put a single word to the quality of that face I should think

arrogance would be it. It wasn't for nothing that his column so frequently started with "I, Corliss Marshall . . . ," and that his favorite method of conducting it was in imaginary dialogues in which Corliss Marshall practically took the dialectical pants off his opponents. Nevertheless, I thought suddenly—arrogance or no arrogance—Corliss Marshall had never been known to make a mistake about a fact. I wondered if it was just possible that his hatred of Pete . . . But of course I had no way of knowing.

We met the others in a cluster in front of the library door. I heard Sylvia say something gay and trivial about the glass feathers on top of the lamp shades, and dropped back to join Corliss and Mr. Thatcher. The rest of them moved into the library.

"I haven't told you how much I'm enjoying your house, Mrs. Latham," Bliss Thatcher said.

I remember that very clearly, just as the three of us came to the door between the two glass tables.

"Hello," he said. "Here's a copy of that thing."

He reached under the lamp and picked up the folded salmon-yellow oblong of paper, looked at it an instant and handed it to Corliss.

"It's a good sample," he said. "I wish I could analyze the technique. There's nothing here I can say definitely is not true—and yet the impression of futility and hopelessness of our ever getting the job we've set out to do done is extraordinary. I *know* that the Army and Navy are not riddled with incompetency and inefficiency . . . and yet, when I get through reading a couple of these things, I find myself beginning to doubt it and find myself wondering what the hell's the use of struggling. Let 'em take the whole world, us included, if they want it."

Corliss put on his pince-nez that hung around his neck on a slightly flamboyant black ribbon, looked it over and nodded silently, and handed it back to Bliss Thatcher. Mr. Thatcher turned to put it down. I had a vague sense that something was different about the glass table there, the way you have in your own home when an object that's brightened a particular spot has been moved in dusting and not put back. Then, as I looked down at the table again, it came into my mind instantly. The leather sheath with the jewelled stiletto hilt protruding from it that had sparkled brilliantly under the glass lamp was gone.

7

I realized that with a little start of dismay, even. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something, but Bliss Thatcher was speaking.

"If you'll stop in tomorrow, Marshall, I'll give you the figures. I'd be glad to see a piece about it."

He'd taken my elbow and was propelling me politely through the library door, and the moment for calling their attention to it casually, without seeming to make a scene, was gone. Corliss was saying, "I'll get away early tonight. I'll be in first thing in the morning.—My God, it's hot in here," he added.

As we came in I heard Larry Villiers' elegant voice. "What about Barbara, Ruth? Isn't she coming down?" Larry would have called the Dowager Queen of China by her first name.

"She's gone to bed, the little wretch," Ruth answered, laughing. "I'd have loved for you all to meet her. Her mother's my oldest and most intimate friend." Which is more than most of us can say about ourselves, I remember thinking with a corner of my mind that wasn't, like the rest of it, going around in half a dozen indecisive circles.

I didn't know what to do. The impulse just to blurt out, "Look—somebody's taken the jewelled stiletto off the table, and maybe one of us is going to get hurt with it, and whichever one of you has it give it up instantly," was almost overwhelming. My reason kept saying, "Don't be a hysterical fool. Maybe Ruth brought it in here to show some one while you were upstairs, and it's on the mantel or on the desk in plain sight. If you call attention to it, everybody will know what's in your mind, and Larry Villiers will see you never live it down. You don't *call* your hostess's friends potential murderers—or thieves at the best. Lady Alicia might be a kleptomaniac, and her maid will bring the thing back in the morning—*you* don't know. You don't know *anything* about it."

My friend Colonel Primrose says a woman ought never to try to reason—she has much more validity acting from intuition. I wouldn't know. All I know is that I sat over by the window, thinking "I've *got* to say something to somebody," with a sense of anxiety and even dread that was almost phys-

ically painful, trying desperately to determine how much of my alarm was conditioned by Ruth Sherwood's dismay and Sylvia's despair—or how much, perhaps, of what I thought was rational was nothing but moral cowardice built up by training in social taboos.

"It is hot in here," I heard Ruth Sherwood say, as if somebody had complained. "The other rooms are cooler. If you'd like a whiskey and soda in the dining room . . . or the terrace is pleasant if it isn't too cold. The moon is lovely."

It's always a question in my mind whether one's senses are sharpened by any kind of nervous agitation, or only more alive to certain stimuli. I was aware, for example, that people began to move about after she said that, but I couldn't say who moved where. I recall hearing Effie Wharton saying, "—strong opposition," for the third time, and Corliss Marshall's contemptuous answer. "Loyal opposition, you mean, Effie. That's different from personal ambition. You and Sam ought to go home. Ex-congressmen are a dime a dozen in Washington. I know your scheme. It won't work, I'll tell you that."

Sam Wharton, sitting next to me on the window seat, gave me an amused twinkle.

"Effie thinks he's responsible for my defeat," he whispered sardonically.

I remember thinking too, though that must have been while everybody was still there in the library, that none of them looked as if he wanted actually to take the life of a fellow human being. Except possibly Kurt Hofmann once. Lady Alicia, with the usual assumption of foreigners that Americans don't speak any other language, said to him in German, "Have I changed very much, Kurt?"

When he'd replied, "No, my dear lady—not at all, really," she said, "But you have, my friend. You haven't met success with humility, as I'd have imagined you would. I'd hoped we might pick up our past again."

If the quick look he gave her wasn't murder it was pretty close to it—and so, when I think of it, was Larry's when Pete Hamilton, answering some question of Ruth Sherwood's, said, "Oh, that's in the Soiled Clothes Department—ask Villiers."

Delvalle had taken Sam Wharton's place by me.

"Miss Peele doesn't reciprocate Villiers' affections, I take it?" he said, with what I thought surprising irrelevance.

"Affections?" I asked. "If that's what you call them, I should say she does, and very heartily."

He laughed quietly.

"Do you wish to go into the other rooms? I'm very comfortable here."

"So am I," I said.

"You Americans are very blind." He was apparently going back to something in his own mind.

"How do you mean?"

"About love, for example," he went on. "You understand boy meets girl, but beyond that—man meets woman, I might say—you don't understand at all."

"Really?"

"The relations of hate to love, for instance." We were alone in the library by then. He lighted my cigarette and smiled. "Also the effect of indifference on love. How long would, say Miss Peele, who's a very passionately emotional woman—how long will she continue her devotion to Pete Hamilton, do you think? In face of his—shall I say awareness?"

"I don't know," I said.

"But you have thought of it, I see."

"No, I haven't at all," I protested quickly.

"Excuse me, then. I thought from the way you looked that perhaps you had. I thought something seemed to be bothering you. Perhaps I am not as—shall I say psychic—as I thought."

And that sticks in my mind too.

He got up. "May I bring you something to drink?"

"I'd like a glass of water," I said. I sat there alone in the library, hearing the voices from the other rooms, a blessed shaft of cool air coming through the door from the terrace, what he'd said about Sylvia intensifying the dull nauseating anxiety in the pit of my stomach. He didn't come back for a long time, it seemed to me, and when he came the others were coming back too.

It was only a few minutes later that Ruth Sherwood said to somebody, "I must ask Mr. Marshall. We won't let him get out of it this time."

She looked around. "Where has he got to?"

"He slipped out, I imagine," Bliss Thatcher said. "He had some work to do before morning. He didn't want to break up the party."

"Oh, dear," Lady Alicia said. She looked at the watch on Larry Villiers' wrist. "It *is* late. I must be off too. I shall walk home, I think. It's a beautiful night."

It was Larry, not Mr. Hofmann, who offered himself as an escort. Señor Delvalle looked at me.

Ruth took my arm. "Stay a few minutes," she whispered.

She held out her hand, smiling, to her other guests. I shook my head at Delvalle. "I live on the next floor," I said.

"I had hoped it was many miles away, Mrs. Latham."

Ruth and I followed them out into the long reception room. Sylvia, just in front of us, stopped in the doorway.

"I love these tables, Mrs. Sherwood," she said lightly. "Only I don't see how you ever keep them clean. Look at this one."

She took her handkerchief and polished it briskly.

"Just a busy little housewife at heart, you see."

She went on, laughing.

"I wish you'd drop over to my place some time, then, Sylvia," Pete said. "Is that former den of silver foxes over there yours?"

The butler had brought the wraps downstairs.

Sylvia nodded. "Wholesale, from a grateful husband for squelching a story about his wife," she remarked easily.

I glanced at the table top. It was bright and clean.

Ruth slipped her arm through mine again. It was cold, and I thought it shook a little against mine as Mr. Thatcher said good night. He held her other hand a little longer than was necessary. It seemed to me that whatever doubt there'd been in his mind was gone now, and that he'd have liked to stay on a while, and that she knew it and was preventing it by keeping me.

Lady Alicia and Larry had gone first, the Whartons and Sylvia and Pete following them after a while. Delvalle and Kurt Hofmann waited for Bliss Thatcher. As they went out and the door closed, Ruth's hand tightened on my arm.

"Thank God!" she whispered. "I thought they'd never go."

The relief in her voice was unbelievable. She swayed a little.

"Come and sit down. I've got to try to explain to you."

As she turned toward the library door she stopped abruptly, her hand gripping my arm again, her fingernails sharp as needle points in my flesh.

On the back of the sofa at right angles to the fireplace was a man's evening overcoat, a black-and-white silk muffler, and a wide-brimmed black velour hat. The hat, as flamboyant as the black ribbon his pince-nez hung on, was as clearly Corliss Marshall's as if his name had been written on it.

Ruth dropped my arm, took three quick steps to the library and looked in. She turned back toward me, her face blank, her lips parted breathlessly. Then, as she whirled around and looked up the stairs, the most extraordinary change went over her, and with the speed of lightning. It wasn't anxiety

any longer, or fear either—it was a burning furious anger. In an instant she was running up the steps and around the iron rail at the top, like a tigress, not a lovely gracious woman at all. I heard her go swiftly along upstairs and stop, a door open and then close gently, and her steps again.

I stood there motionless. What on earth she could be thinking of I hadn't the remotest idea. I had no more when she appeared again at the top of the stairs and came quickly down. Her anger was gone. She was still pale, but bewildered again, as she'd been when she hadn't found him in the library.

"He . . . couldn't have gone without his coat, and not realized it," she said blankly. "Could he?"

"You wouldn't think so," I said.

We looked at the dining-room door, and both of us started toward it, with a kind of mutual agreement that he must be there if he wasn't anywhere else. The silver tray with the half-empty decanters on it stood at the end of the table, the empty glasses doubling themselves in the black mirror surface. Corliss Marshall wasn't there. The room was quite empty, and without the saving touch of the women's colored gowns its black-and-white decor made it look cold and rather theatrical. I wouldn't be surprised if I hadn't intended to say that when I turned to Ruth. But I didn't.

She'd stopped dead, the color drained from her face, staring across the table at the white rug in front of the terrace window. I suppose my eyes followed hers automatically, because I was only conscious that I'd gone suddenly taut and staring—aware only of the scarlet mark of a pointed shoe on the white velvet surface of the rug.

We stood there silently. Then Ruth Sherwood moved forward. She stepped around that livid spot on the white ground, reached her hand out in a kind of awful slow motion, and opened the terrace door. I stood where I was.

"Grace!" she said. "—Come here!"

She didn't really say it, and I didn't hear it. It was a hoarse vibration that I felt and understood without needing to hear. I went around the end of the table and followed her out.

The moonlight lay over the rooftops and the trees in the park below like a silver coat, and sifted through the ring of pollarded evergreens around the balcony terrace. Ruth's white figure was like a column frozen there half a dozen feet from the open door. I went quickly along and stopped by her.

A dark mass was lying by the tubs of evergreens. A strayed moonbeam played white and red and green on the diamond and ruby and emerald hilt of the stiletto that lay beside the

black inert form, and played another and more dreadful color on the slow viscid pool around it.

I don't know how long we stood there, or what Ruth Sherwood was thinking, or what I was thinking, or if either of us was thinking at all. I remember feeling her hand on mine a long time after she must have put it there.

"—You've got to help me, Grace!" she whispered. "You've got to help me again!"

8

"You've got to help me, Grace! You've got to help me again!"

Ruth Sherwood's tense whisper and her hand tugging at my arm penetrated through the extraordinary sense of unreality that held me as if in a spell. The dance music from the Willow Room downstairs stopped abruptly. The applause pattered like rain on a hollow wooden box. Corliss Marshall lying there, Ruth Sherwood and I, might have been on another planet . . . we seemed so far away and so utterly alone in the darkened parabola cast over the terrace by the green-and-white awning. The lighted windows scattered up the concave semi-circle of the Randolph-Lee's park elevation looked out blankly into the frosted night. The sound of traffic along Connecticut Avenue might have come from miles away. It was so remote from anything that concerned us, caught in the terrible unearthly stillness that grew like some monstrous plant from the silent mass that had been Corliss Marshall.

"Come, quickly, Grace!" Ruth Sherwood whispered. She pulled at my hand.

I nodded and we went back on tiptoe to the open door and into the dining room. The same unearthly stillness had seeped in before us, and lay over the room like a pall. The empty glasses on the black glass table seemed as if they had been there for years, untouched so long that their reflections had taken on substance and form, and would always be buried indelibly in its crystalline surface.

Ruth Sherwood looked back toward the door, her breath catching sharply. I looked too. There were new shadows on the white velvet rug where her feet and mine had been. We hurried through the door. She closed it after us.

"We've got to call the police, at once," I said. My voice was hardly above a whisper.

She didn't speak. When I turned to look at her she put her hand out and took hold of my arm again.

"I'll call them," she said. Her hand tightened. "Grace—I don't know how to ask you. But you will—please, I know you will—take her to your apartment. Now—before the police and the newspaper people come."

Her voice had that desperate quality in it again, but it was no longer imagined fear of what might happen. It was realistic now, and stark. "—I can't explain it to you—I will later. She mustn't be touched by this. You can understand that, can't you? You do see, don't you?"

I saw, very clearly—more clearly, probably, than she did, knowing so well how far blood spatters when once a good sensational reporter catches the scent. And Barbara Shipley had had nothing to do with it. There was no reason I could see not to save her from the consequences of it if I could.

"But everybody knows she was here," I said.

"I can tell them she left. She can slip away the first thing in the morning."

"Or I could say she'd gone to my apartment earlier—if worst comes to worst."

"No, no!" she said quickly. "She mustn't come into it at all!"

"All right," I said. I wasn't so sure, because I've learned to have a lot of respect for the police. But there was no use getting her desperate again. "We've got to hurry. We can't put off calling the police any longer. You get her up and explain to her, and I'll see if the coast is clear."

Normally the prospect of circumventing the authorities is rather like a heady wine to me. This time it wasn't. I was a little scared, actually. All I could see—besides the dark huddled figure of Corliss Marshall under the tub of evergreens—was Sylvia Peele wiping off the glass top of the table over there by the library door. All I could hear—besides the awful silence that brooded over the terrace—was the casual lilt of her voice saying, "Just a little housewife at heart." It couldn't mean she was deliberately wiping off the fingerprints of whoever had taken the jewelled stiletto, it couldn't possibly, I kept telling myself—and all the time I knew it could. I knew it couldn't mean anything else, actually, because whatever Sylvia Peele was at heart it wasn't a housewife.

I was trying desperately not to put another name to it . . . and I didn't want to get mixed up in my loyalties, however dubious they might prove to be. I stood there anxiously, thinking about that, trying not to look at Corliss Marshall's hat and overcoat and black-and-white muffler with his ini-

tials embroidered on it . . . or at the table top under the lamp by the door. I started for the stairs. I was suddenly so tired I could hardly drag one foot after the other up the soft gray-carpeted steps.

Then I stopped and leaned against the iron rail and looked behind me. The idea that I was still tracking the dark stain of Corliss's blood wherever I trod made me a little sick. I looked at the step just below. Then I looked at my feet. On the thin sole of my right slipper there was a brown spot. The stain had gone in, however, so I wouldn't leave traces of it along the hall to my apartment and back again, after I'd left Barbara there to go to bed, and to sleep if she could. I went on up the steps, opened the door and looked out. The corridor was empty. I shut the door and waited.

I could hear Ruth talking quietly to Barbara, and then the sound of a suitcase clicking shut. It seemed hours that I stood there, trying now not to look at the telephone on the table against the wall. It seemed to take on some insistent kind of animate quality that made the time drag interminably. I ought to pick it up and call the police myself, I thought—not wait for Ruth. I knew I should do that, and because I didn't I was becoming with each second more and more acutely jittery.

Suddenly I jumped nearly out of my skin. There was a sharp insistent buzz from the box under the table that was almost like somebody bursting through the door. Ruth Sherwood ran out into the hall and stood there. The phone buzzed again. She nodded at it sharply. I reached out and picked it up, my hand shaking.

I said, "Hello," I know my voice was high-pitched and unnatural.

A voice said, "Hello. Is this Mrs. Sherwood's apartment?"

For a moment I thought I wasn't going to be able to stand up long enough to answer. It was a voice that I knew as well as I know my own. And I knew all the more just how unnatural my own voice must have been if he didn't recognize it wherever he heard it.

"Oh, Colonel Primrose!" I gasped. "—I'm *so* glad! Where are you?"

He still didn't recognize me.

"It's Grace Latham," I said.

"Oh, hello, hello, my dear! I've been calling you for the last two hours. I got in at ten o'clock. I'm at Corliss Marshall's now."

My lips went so dry, my throat so tight, that I couldn't speak. Ruth Sherwood was at my side. I could see her face in

the mirror over the table. It was almost as white as the wall behind it. I shook my head at her.

"Has he left yet?" Colonel Primrose said. "He asked me to meet him here at a quarter to eleven, and it's almost twelve now."

I tried to speak, but I couldn't. My mouth was just as if it was stuffed with cotton.

There was a short silence at the other end of the phone.

"Mrs. Latham!" His voice was sharpened. "What is it? Is something wrong?"

"—It's Corliss, Colonel," I managed to say. "We were just calling the police. He's dead. He's been murdered."

I don't know whether it was because he'd already sensed it, or because his reaction time is fast as lightning, but I hadn't got my breath before he said, "Call the police at once, Mrs. Latham. I'll be over immediately."

The calm unhurried competence in his voice was miraculous in its effect.

"Yes, Colonel," I said.

"And look, my dear," he added firmly. "—Don't you do anything on the impulse of the moment, will you? Just for this once? I'll be there in ten minutes."

I put down the phone and turned to Ruth Sherwood.

"It was Colonel Primrose. He's at Corliss Marshall's house. Corliss was supposed to meet him there at quarter to eleven. You've got to call the police, quick. Have you told Barbara?"

She shook her head. I glanced down the hall. Ruth must have closed the door to keep the girl from hearing, because it opened now and she came out, carrying her bag and dressing case. She had her skirt and jacket on, her fur coat over her arm and her hat jammed down on the back of her head. Her face was flushed and her eyes sleepy and bewildered. She came along obediently, as if she was too unhappy—or maybe just too sleepy—to question anything else that night.

"Go with Mrs. Latham, darling," Ruth said. "Go to bed and go to sleep. I'll see you early in the morning."

She put her arms around the girl and held her tightly a moment, and kissed her. "Quickly, darling."

I opened the door. The hall was still empty. She gave Barbara a litle push and turned her head away, holding blindly to the door. A few steps along I could hear her voice saying, "This is Mrs. Addison Sherwood at the Randolph-Lee."

"Hurry, my dear," I said. I took her dressing case. "It's the next door."

She came along with me, not saying anything, and waited while I fished in my bag for the key—frantically, because at

the end of the hall I could see the green elevator light come on. I heard the door whirring open just as I turned the key in the lock and pushed Barbara in in front of me. I picked up her dressing case, followed her inside and closed the door. If I'd been a snowshoe rabbit just escaped from a mountain lion my heart couldn't have been pounding harder.

"In there," I said, and pushed my bedroom door open.

I came to an abrupt halt. It was too late to do anything about Barbara. Sylvia Peele was lying on my bed, leaning forward on her elbow, starting to speak before she saw I wasn't alone. Her blank stare—sincerely blank, I think, for the first time that evening—rested on Barbara for a moment.

9

She got up quickly. "I'm so sorry!" she said. "I didn't know you were . . ."

Her voice trailed off, leaving whatever the rest of it was going to be unsaid. She took her silver fox jacket from the bench at the foot of the bed, laid it around her shoulders and picked up her bag.

"I thought I'd drop in to say good night on my way upstairs."

Her social mask was perfectly intact again.

"Barbara's going to stay here tonight," I said casually. The child stood there without moving, completely awake and aware by now, and conscious that something had gone very wrong with her mother's plans. She looked at me, her sherry-colored eyes questioning and anxious.

"Go on in, Barbara," I said. "The bath's in there, and you can sleep in the other bed. I'll try not to wake you when I come in. Good night, my dear."

She said, "Good night," and I closed the door after her. Sylvia moved across the sitting room, took a cigarette off the table at the end of the sofa and lighted it, her back to me. I came out of the narrow foyer and closed the door there. Sylvia turned.

"Well?" she said calmly.

"Ruth Sherwood and I found Corliss, Sylvia," I said.

"What do you mean, 'found him'?"

Her face was as closed as the white jade box on the table.

"He's dead, Sylvia."

I waited, looking at her. Her face didn't change. It was perfectly blank and motionless. Yet I somehow had the idea that she hadn't intended to take the news this way. She'd intended to act as if it came as a shock, but something—an inborn honesty, probably—had made her reject that kind of fraud in spite of herself. Still she didn't speak. She just stood there motionless.

"I've got to go back right away," I said. "Ruth has called the police. Colonel Primrose is coming."

"Colonel Primrose!"

That was shocked out of her. The scarlet lipstick on her mouth stood out sharply all of a sudden, as if her own color had retreated behind it, changing the whole background of her face.

"He was at Corliss's apartment," I said. "He was supposed to meet him there. He called up Ruth to see what had happened to him."

She moistened her lips with a sharp flick of her tongue.

"What was he doing at Corliss's?" she demanded softly.

"I don't know . . . but I've got to be there when he comes."

I glanced toward the other room and back at Sylvia.

"Ruth doesn't want Barbara involved in this."

Then I stopped. After all, Sylvia was a newspaperwoman, and a story was a story. She wasn't a friend of Ruth Sherwood's, and the girl in there was a feature scoop of star proportions.

"—She's Ruth Sherwood's daughter, isn't she," Sylvia said abruptly. "Her name's Elizabeth Anne. I read that telegram you left on the floor—but it only told me what I'd guessed already."

I suppose she was only telling me what I'd already guessed too without being aware of it in my conscious mind, because I wasn't surprised, really. Or maybe it was her honesty that completely disarmed me.

"I know what you're thinking," she went on quickly. "You think I'm like Larry Villiers. Well, I'm not. I don't enjoy hurting people just for the fun of it. Especially not when they're young and . . . vulnerable, and haven't learned how to take it. You don't have to worry about me. My job hasn't dulled all my sense of decency—not yet, anyway."

It was so clearly what I had been thinking that I couldn't meet the dispassionate irony in her level gaze. I looked down. The next instant I was staring, frozen and rigid, at the bottom of her skirt, a feeling of cold horror paralyzing my brain.

"Sylvia!" I said. "Your dress . . . your shoe!"

She moved quickly. I heard the dreadful terrified gasp that broke from her lips. The whole right side of the bottom of her smoke-brown net skirt and her rose satin slip was stained and stiff with blood.

Her stocking through her toeless satin slipper was sodden with it too, and the front and side of the slipper itself were a darker brown than they were supposed to be.

She stood there staring down, her lips parted, the color drained from her face.

"What *shall* I do?" she whispered. "Oh, how *awful!*"

She covered her face with both hands, shivering with horror.

I looked at the clock on the mantel. It was almost twelve.

"I've got to go," I said quickly. "Go up to your room. Don't use the elevator, and hurry. The police might start looking for everybody right away. But I've *got* to go."

"All right. I'll go in a minute—as soon as I can."

I looked at her anxiously. She was as white as snow. She went unsteadily towards the sofa.

"—Blood always makes me sick as a dog."

"There's some brandy in the closet. I'll get it. —But *hurry*, Sylvia—please! You've got to get that dress off."

I ran out into the foyer, got the brandy off the closet shelf and put in on the table by the water jug. I couldn't stay there any longer, and I knew she'd pull herself together more quickly when she was alone. I opened the hall door and looked out. The hall was empty, the green light above the elevator door flicking on and off and on. That meant the car had stopped at the floor below. I pulled the door shut and ran down the corridor and into Ruth Sherwood's apartment. I wasn't trying to think—I was trying with all my might not to think. Some form of mental process was going on, of course, but as long as I didn't admit it openly, I could escape the accusation I'd sooner or later have to face: that for the moment, and as far as I knew, I was frankly accessory after the fact. Just then I wasn't bothering about that. All I was concerned with was getting back and being there when Colonel Primrose and the police arrived.

I stepped inside the door and listened. The same brooding silence lay heavily about the hall. I slipped over to the head of the stairs. No one was in sight. As I came down the stairs I saw that Corliss Marshall's hat and coat and muffler were still lying across the back of the sofa, but that the hat had been moved, and so had the muffler. That occurred to me without any particular meaning as I hurried on down.

"Ruth," I called.

I heard her coming from the library just as the door bell sounded sharply at the end of the passage beside the staircase. She came out quickly, so much more composed than I was just then that you'd have thought she was the guest, and it was my terrace that was the grim field of slaughter, not hers. She went to the door and opened it.

"Come in, gentlemen," she said quietly.

I saw Colonel Primrose second. It was Sergeant Phineas T. Buck, three paces behind him but six inches above him, that one always saw first. That brass-bound granite visage, fish-eyed and lantern jawed, will be regarding me with the same lack of enthusiasm—if not actual dislike—on my arrival at the Gates of Heaven . . . that I'm convinced of and look forward to without pleasure. He was certainly so regarding me now. That in Sergeant Buck's mind the whole thing was a not very clever ruse on my part to keep the Colonel from going home and going to bed like an officer and a gentleman was very plain. He couldn't, fortunately, turn his head and spit, as he frequently did and as he looked as if he'd like to do now, because the nearest cylinder of white sand was back by the elevator shaft. And while I dare say he could have hit it with deadly accuracy even at that distance if he'd half tried, that would have given the occasion an importance it clearly didn't warrant. I had the feeling I've had a couple of times before in situations like this. Some day they'd come, somewhere, and I wouldn't be in the front hall to meet them. I'd be out under the evergreen tubs instead . . . and that would be O.K. with Sergeant Buck.

But not, I hoped, with Colonel Primrose—though I wasn't so sure at the moment. He looked much grimmer than he ordinarily did. He looked tired, too, as if he hadn't had much sleep in the three weeks he'd been gone from Washington. His gray suit was wrinkled and his thick grayish hair didn't look as if he'd spent much time combing it recently. His snapping black eyes had taken in Mrs. Sherwood and me and dismissed us, and were resting on Corliss Marshall's things lying on the back of the sofa before he'd crossed the threshold into the apartment. He crossed it now, with Sergeant Buck the regulation number of paces behind him, bringing with him, as he always did, a quiet and civilized air of competence and trustworthiness. As Ruth started to close the door the elevator door whirred, and four men stepped out. One of them jerked his hand our way. They came down the corridor.

Sergeant Buck looked back.

"The dicks, sir," he said, out of the corner of his mouth,

so that you felt he must have begun with "Cheese it," which you just missed hearing.

A bullet in the neck at the Argonne makes Colonel Primrose cock his head down a little and twist it around when he wants to look to one side. He did it now, looking rather like a particularly brilliant black-eyed parrot, as the four men came down the corridor. Ruth Sherwood glanced quickly at me. I knew from the sudden pallor around her lips that she had the same doomed sort of feeling I had—that from this moment everything was changed, and she'd live from now on under a merciless glare of publicity that few people ever completely recover from.

"How did you get here, Colonel?"

The heavy-set man in the gray overcoat and steel-blue hat put out his hand. I'd met him before—Captain Lamb of the District Homicide Squad. "Mighty glad to have you," he added, as they shook hands. "Howdy, Sergeant."

"This is Mrs. Sherwood, Captain. And you remember Mrs. Latham?"

He nodded to Ruth and shook hands with me. I couldn't help remembering him very well from a (literally) poisonous Christmas in Georgetown, and other less official occasions.

He turned to the Colonel. "This is Doctor Fisher—Acting Medical Examiner. Where is he, and who found him?"

The last was to Ruth.

"Out on the terrace—through the dining room," she said. "I found him, after Mrs. Latham and I had noticed his things over there."

She nodded towards the sofa.

"We saw a track on the rug in front of the window. I went out, and—found him there."

Colonel Primrose followed her to the dining-room door. Captain Lamb joined them after giving brisk orders to his men. Ruth pointed down to the white rug.

"That one stain in the middle is what we saw. The others we made ourselves coming back in. You can go out that window if you like."

She pointed to the other end of the room. Captain Lamb, the doctor and the police photographer went along there. Colonel Primrose stood in the doorway for several moments before he and his Sergeant followed them. I hadn't realized that the terrace balcony ran that far around. I wondered if it extended on across the other rooms too, and thought for a second of looking out to see. I thought better

of that instantly—feeling that at the moment the less amateur detective work I did the better.

Ruth Sherwood came back into the hall and stood there silently. I could see bright flashes lighting the darkness under the awning. She shivered a little.

"Let's go in the library," she said. "I'm cold. I've never been so cold in my life."

Her voice had the same kind of doom in it that I'd felt when Captain Lamb came down the hall with his men.

The detective left at the front door glanced around.

"It *is* cold," I said, speaking loud enough so he wouldn't think we were being subversive. "—Will you tell Captain Lamb we've gone into the library—this room here?"

"O.K., miss," he said. I mustn't have looked as old as I felt just then. He followed us to the door. "I'll just shut this, so you don't have to see——"

I nodded. Ruth went over and sat in front of the fire, staring fixedly into it. I put on another log, swept up the hearth and sat down beside her.

"Sylvia Peele was in my room," I said.

She closed her eyes wearily and leaned her head back against the sofa.

"It didn't really matter," I said. "She'd already begun to guess. She saw the initials on her belt buckle." I didn't quite dare to add, "And seen her look at Bliss Thatcher's photograph."

Then it seemed to me I might have, because she'd had so many emotional shocks already that one more couldn't make a great deal of difference. Or that's what I thought until I looked at her and saw the tears forcing themselves between her closed eyelids.

"You mustn't," I said, taking her hand.

She gripped mine tightly, then released it, sat up quickly and dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"No, of course I mustn't," she said quietly, "—but it's so unbelievable. I just can't believe it. I keep thinking it can't be just to punish me—because why should Corliss Marshall suffer because of my . . . my sins. And just as I'd begun to think I was free again! And able to . . ."

She stopped abruptly and stared at me with a stricken look on her face that was even more appalling than what she'd said. I looked away quickly.

"I mean— Oh, I don't know what I mean!" she said hysterically. "I'm talking nonsense."

"You're upset," I said, as casually as I could. "If I were

you I'd just sit quietly until they come. It's going to be hard at best."

And it was, in a way—and the way, oddly enough was Colonel Primrose. If it had been just Captain Lamb it would have been as easy as pie. I don't mean that Captain Lamb wasn't thoroughly honest—but Bliss Thatcher's name was one to conjure with in Washington at the moment and Captain Lamb liked Pete Hamilton, and you don't make trouble for people like Señor Delvalle, because of Pan-American relations, or Lady Alicia Wrenn, because in the first place London is heroic and in the second she'd probably turn up a diplomatic passport of some kind. It was the same with Kurt Hofmann. The things he was well known to be against gave him a special sanction he otherwise wouldn't have had. Larry Villiers didn't count. As Captain Lamb said, his wife and daughters read "Shall We Join the Ladies?"—he didn't have time for that sort of thing himself.

Colonel John Primrose, as I'd known well for a long time, had none of Captain Lamb's prejudices of that kind. If Captain Lamb's grandmother had got herself into serious trouble, he'd have got her off by hook or crook. Colonel Primrose would have hanged her, if necessary, without giving it a second thought. So while the Captain assumed that Mrs. Sherwood's distinguished guests—and her not so distinguished ones by their example—had acted like ladies and gentlemen, and Corliss's murder had to be made to fit into that pattern somehow, Colonel Primrose assumed differently. He'd seen more distinguished people, for one thing, and for another he didn't have to—or didn't choose to—think of diplomatic or political repercussions. He also, as I learned later, knew why Corliss Marshall had wanted to see him. He knew already, when he walked into Ruth Sherwood's apartment in the Randolph-Lee, why Corliss Marshall had been murdered.

10

When he came back he stood looking from one of us to the other for a moment.

"Who was here tonight, Mrs. Sherwood?" he asked.

I thought his black eyes moved a little oddly when she told him.

"Has anything been moved or touched here?"

Ruth shook her head.

"What kind of terms would you say your guests were on, this evening, Mrs. Sherwood?"

She hesitated. "If you mean, was there some incident that led up to this, the answer is No. There was some . . . tension, from time to time, but that was my fault."

"How so?"

"I didn't realize that Miss Peele could function with such centripetal force, for one thing."

She smiled faintly.

"I'd thought of her as a social catalyst, as a matter of fact. And I didn't know that Lady Alicia and Mr. Hofmann were former sweethearts, which is never particularly cheerful."

"Do you mean," Colonel Primrose asked slowly, "that you didn't know Marshall and Pete Hamilton were bitter enemies? Or that Marshall and the Whartons weren't on what you'd call cordial terms?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't know any of that. I'd . . . never met several of my guests before this evening. Mr. Hofmann wrote me from New York, enclosing a letter of introduction. I asked him if he'd dine with me when he came to Washington, and was there any one he'd particularly like to meet. He said Mr. Marshall, who he understood was coming back about the time he'd be here. I cabled Mr. Marshall, and fixed the date after I got his reply."

Colonel Primrose nodded. "Did he mention any one else?"

"Señor Delvalle. He's going to South America later—I imagine he wanted a publicity contact for lectures and articles. I included Mr. Hamilton and the two gossip writers, because it's been my experience that authors like all the publicity they can get."

"But why the Whartons?"

Mrs. Sherwood shrugged lightly.

"Well, I had to have . . ." She hesitated, and went on. "To be perfectly frank with you, Mrs. Wharton has been trying to get Señor Delvalle and her husband together ever since he was defeated last fall. I was just helping her out. It wasn't very successful. Señor Delvalle spent all his time talking to Mrs. Latham."

Sergeant Buck, standing at a modified attention by the door, gave me a congealed look indicating that his worst suspicions had been confirmed if confirmation was needed. I could see him warning Delvalle at the first opportunity.

"Bliss Thatcher I asked because he's a friend, and I thought he'd be interested in meeting Kurt Hofmann. He's spent sev-

eral seasons shooting in Scotland with the Wrenns, which is why I asked Lady Alicia."

She looked at me and smiled. "I asked Mrs. Latham because she lives next door to me, and I wanted to know her better."

It seemed very simple, really. If it hadn't been for Sylvia's Cassandra prologue on the stairs, or Barbara's coming, or Ruth Sherwood's own astonishing confessional—to say nothing of Corliss's murder—I'd have accepted it as calmly as did Captain Lamb, who'd just come in. In fact, I must have done it anyway, even if I wasn't completely aware of it, because I was definitely taken aback by Colonel Primrose's sardonic comment on it a moment later.

"Did that dagger belong in this house, ma'am?" Captain Lamb asked.

Ruth nodded. "It was on the glass table to the right of the library door."

"Some one must have picked it up when they passed," Captain Lamb said.

I imagine Euclid looked a little embarrassed too when he said things equal to the same thing are equal to each other.

"I've been trying to think when," Ruth said. "I recall definitely that it was there when Mrs. Wharton and Lady Alicia and I came in here to have coffee. You and Miss Peele went upstairs," she added to me. "Lady Alicia stopped and picked it up. She said, 'I can think of several places I'd like to see that.' Of course she meant Hitler, or the Vichy government. You know how people talk that wouldn't hurt a rabbit themselves. Would you like to see where it was?"

Captain Lamb would, and she took him out into the hall.

"What do you think of it really?" I asked Colonel Primrose, chiefly because he was looking intently at me and I thought I'd better say something.

"Oh, I always enjoy good theatre," he said, with a lift of one eyebrow.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Mrs. Sherwood. What do you suppose?" he replied calmly.

"What makes you think it's theatre, may I ask?"

He smiled.

"You, largely, my dear. You're very transparent, Mrs. Latham, you know. I'll tell you about it later."

Ruth Sherwood was coming back. I heard Captain Lamb out in the hall. "Looks like somebody's done a good job of polishing up. Take it whether there's anything there or not."

Colonel Primrose was looking at me. I only hoped I wasn't so transparent that he could see Sylvia Peele's after-image

on my mind—though of course other people would tell him if I didn't.

"When did you notice the dagger there, Grace?" Ruth asked. "Or did you at all?"

"It wasn't there when Mr. Thatcher and Corliss and I came in," I said.

"It was taken between the time you came in here with the ladies and the men came in from the dining table," Colonel Primrose said.

Ruth Sherwood nodded.

"And consequently, it could have been at the dinner table that some one definitely decided to kill Marshall."

He looked at me, and looked away again. Captain Lamb came back in.

"How many of your guests know about this dagger being used, Mrs. Sherwood?" he asked.

"Only Mrs. Latham and myself—and whoever it was that . . ."

Captain Lamb looked at his watch, and glanced down at his open note-book.

"How about it, Colonel?" he asked. "If we could see them all separately before it gets around . . ."

"We can try it," Colonel Primrose said. He took out his own watch and looked at it.

As he was getting up there was a subdued racket in the hall. I heard the detective's voice growing out of it, heavy with sarcasm.

"Sure, I know all about it, wise guy. You're the next of kin. You're not comin' in, see? To the morgue if you want to —but stay outa here. Sure you was here to dinner. You don't have to tell me. So was I. Funny you don't remember."

Colonel Primrose looked at Captain Lamb, who was out of the door in a flash.

"All right," he said. "It's O.K. Come in, Hamilton. Just getting in touch with you myself."

Ruth Sherwood's hands folded in her lap contracted sharply, her breath came as if she'd held it much too long. I didn't dare look at her. What possible reason she had to be concerned about Pete Hamilton I couldn't figure out for the life of me. But concerned she was, without the shadow of a doubt. She turned her head expectantly toward the door. If it hadn't been for her hands and that long steadying breath I should never have noticed she was upset. I'd never seen so many people who could conceal their emotions, of one sort and another, as I'd seen since eight o'clock that evening. I began to have the uneasy feeling that I'd spent some hours

in a churchyard quite full of whited sepulchres—with Colonel Primrose, sitting quietly on the edge of the desk, a notable addition to the rest of them.

Behind him on the desk I caught a glimpse of the photograph of the problem child. Ruth Sherwood must have taken it out of the drawer before I came back from my apartment.

"What's this about Marshall?" Pete was demanding.

I tried to figure out from the sound of his voice whether he was shocked or . . . or what. Though why I should have thought he was any more open-work than the rest of them I wouldn't know.

"Suppose you tell us, Hamilton," Captain Lamb said. "Like to know ourselves."

Pete came into the library. He gave Colonel Primrose a surprised stare and glaced briefly at Sergeant Buck. I remember thinking that Buck was standing, like a petrified wooden Indian, in front of the greenish headless female nude by Degas with the definite object of covering it up—because there are certain things Sergeant Buck does not approve of. Pete came quickly over to Ruth Sherwood.

"I'm dreadfully sorry about this. If there's anything I can do——"

"There is," Colonel Primrose said evenly. "You can tell us how you found out about it."

"—What do you mean, 'found out about it,' Colonel?" Pete asked. "Do you think Corliss Marshall can die without anybody knowing it?"

"I'm asking you how you did know it, Hamilton."

"It was a confidential report from a usually reliable source, Colonel," Pete replied coolly . . . and when Pete is ostensibly cool it means his adrenalin content is rising sharply. I wondered if Colonel Primrose was deliberately making him angry.

"—The reliable source," he said slowly, "is what we're looking for, in this case. No one else, Hamilton—except Mrs. Sherwood and Mrs. Latham, and the police who are in the house—knew anything about it so far as we are aware. Except, of course, the murderer himself. That's why I'm asking you who told you—if that's how you did find out."

"You mean, unless I knew already?"

"Yes."

"I see." A grin that was not amused twisted Pete's big mouth. "The old Army game, Colonel. Everybody knows I hated Corliss Marshall's guts. Therefore it was me that spilled 'em. Then I barge in on the scene of the crime and give

myself away red-handed. No soap, Colonel. Too easy. Try again."

"All right, Pete. Now you've had time to think up a story, let's have it. Who did tell you?"

"Nobody," Pete said coolly. He was self-controlled, but I could see the tell-tale lines still sprayed out at the corners of his eyelids. "Believe it or not, I figured it all out for myself. Corliss left before any of the rest of us, but his coat and hat are still out there. They were there when we all went. I was down in the lobby when Lamb and his Gestapo came in and asked the number of Mrs. Sherwood's apartment. I didn't put any of it together until I called up Marshall's hotel and found you'd been there and he hadn't. After that it was easy. Homicide squad—homicide. Marshall's coat and hat, no Marshall—Marshall's homicide. Simple, after ten years of reporting politics."

"What did you phone Marshall for, Pete?" Colonel Primrose asked.

"Just to say good-night to him. That's the way I spend my early mornings. Calling up all my old friends."

Captain Lamb was looking increasingly bewildered by all this, I thought.

"What made you come back here, Hamilton?" he said.

"To find out what did happen. And that's what I'd like to know," Pete replied promptly. "I take it he didn't just pass out, the way they're fingerprinting everything out there."

He turned back to Colonel Primrose.

"I also figured maybe Mrs. Sherwood might need a little help. That's another reason I came. And another is what I just got through saying. I'm the Number One suspect, and I know it. There's no use sugar-coating the pill. I thought I'd save the taxpayers the expense of having you guys run me to earth."

Colonel Primrose was looking at him with quiet interest.

"What's the matter, Pete? What's on your mind?"

Pete hesitated for a bare instant.

"Plenty, Colonel. I've just found out, about fifteen minutes ago, that I'm the guy that's writing 'Truth Not Fiction.' All my friends have been keeping it from me. It's the old gag. The husband's the last one to know."

"And that's why you killed Corliss Marshall?" Colonel Primrose asked.

"That's the idea, Colonel."

Captain Lamb looked from Pete to Colonel Primrose, and back again.

"What's that?" he demanded.

" 'Truth Not Fiction,' " Pete said. "Or 'Fiction Not Truth' —if anybody thinks I write it."

"Well, what the hell is it?" Captain Lamb exploded. "Who does write it?"

"That," Colonel Primrose said calmly, "is what the F. B. I. has been trying to find out."

"—Did Marshall know?"

"He said he did," Pete said sardonically.

Colonel Primrose's "—When?" was shot out so abruptly that all of us started.

"—Tonight at dinner," Pete said, blankly. "He said he was going to the F. B. I. tomorrow. He told Bliss Thatcher that."

Colonel Primrose put his hand in his inside coat pocket, took out a telegram, unfolded it and handed it to Captain Lamb. He read it through twice before he handed it back, not further enlightened so far as I could see. Colonel Primrose took it and handed it to me—rather to the surprise of everybody else and certainly to Sergeant Buck's silent but granite displeasure. It was addressed to the Colonel at his house on P Street.

"Have inside dope authorship of Truth Not Fiction," I read. "Will you undertake verification as public service. Personal angle makes it inadvisable my name be connected with public exposure. Can meet you my hotel Washington Tuesday night."

It was signed "Corliss Marshall."

Colonel Primrose took it out of my hand, folded it again, and then apparently changed his mind. He handed it to Pete and waited, looking at him very casually, which meant he was seeing straight through him. Pete's jaw hardened and the anger smoldered in his eyes as he read it. He handed it back.

"You think Corliss's fine feelings wouldn't let his name be connected with a public exposure of a friend, Colonel?" he asked ironically. "It would be the first time in his life he didn't want all the publicity he could get, at whoever's expense. Or was he trying a little anonymous blackmail?"

"Or perhaps he was . . . afraid something might happen to him."

It was Ruth Sherwood who said that. There was something about the way she said it that made even Captain Lamb look at her sharply. It was as if she knew very well what that kind of fear was like.

"And something did," I said.

It frightened me—not so much for her as for that girl

asleep behind the easily opened door of my apartment. Maybe that was what the matter was.

Colonel Primrose nodded. "I don't understand why he said he was going to the F. B. I. when he knew he was meeting me in less than an hour."

"Because it sounded better," Pete said promptly. "It made a bigger guy out of Corliss Marshall."

"Or possibly he wanted to frighten somebody," Colonel Primrose said. He looked at Pete for a moment, and took a step forward from the desk. "If you don't write 'Truth Not Fiction,' Hamilton," he said coolly, "I think it's up to you to prove it. Corliss Marshall—if that's what he thought—isn't the only person in Washington who thinks it. For one very good reason, I'll advise you to do something about it, and do it quick. Good-night."

If he'd slapped Pete Hamilton across the face he couldn't have given him a more stunning shock. Pete stood there, his mouth open, his cigarette burning to a long crazy cylinder between his fingers, staring after him long after he'd followed Captain Lamb out the door and closed it behind him.

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I suppose it wasn't more than a minute that he stood there rooted to the floor, but it seemed like an age. Then he strode forward, the door slammed shut and he was gone.

I turned blankly to Ruth Sherwood.

"For Heaven's sake," I demanded, "what *is* going on?"

She was sitting there with her hands in her lap, just as she'd been before, but the most extraordinary change had come over her. She looked as if she'd been sick for years. There were deep shadows under her eyes, and her skin was the color of dirty water. She shook her head.

"I don't know," she answered painfully. "Just what Bliss Thatcher told me last night. They've had to cancel all press conferences in his division. This newsletter's been printing off the record information. They don't know who it is. It's dangerous—for the press as well as the country. If they can't trust accredited correspondents, they'll have to put in censorship."

"But that's not the press!" I protested.

"It's some member of it—Bliss says."

"But not Pete Hamilton!"

"I don't know," she said. "He didn't mention any name."

She raised her head slowly, listened a minute and closed her eyes. "The detective's going to stay here. You'd better go now. Will you see that Betty gets off first thing in the morning? I don't want to run the risk of seeing her again."

"—And you'd better go to bed," I said. "Have you got something to make you sleep?"

She nodded. "Good-night. And thank you, Grace—thank you so much."

The idea that Pete Hamilton was writing a newsletter designed to upset and terrify his country seemed to me so utterly ridiculous that I'd forgot all about the fact that Corliss Marshall was dead . . . until I got into the other room and saw the detective standing in the terrace window looking out curiously at the place where we'd found him. It came as a shock, and I glanced around at the sofa. His hat and coat and fringed muffler were gone. He was gone too, of course. I had a queer empty feeling inside me, realizing how gone he really was, and that I'd never open the paper again and be annoyed by the strident arrogant partisanship of "Marshalling the Facts."

I hurried up the stairs. As I got half way up the buzzer of the telephone on the table sounded discreetly. It sounded again as I reached the top step. With Ruth Sherwood in the library the thing to do seemed obvious. I reached out and picked it up before it could buzz again and bring the detective dashing back. As I raised it to say "Hello" I heard a voice saying—and not very pleasantly—, "Why did you have that woman there tonight, Mrs.——"

It was so completely to my astonishment that my arm was too paralyzed to move before I heard Ruth Sherwood's sharp, almost frantic whisper breaking him off—and then I couldn't move.

"Stop it! The police will hear you!"

"The police?"

"—Corliss Marshall was murdered here tonight. I can't talk to you now. I didn't know you knew Alicia Wrenn. Good-bye."

I put my finger quickly on the bar, holding it down while I slipped the phone back into place. I don't think I ever got through a door and closed it behind me as fast as I did just then. I was completely flabbergasted. What possible right Kurt Hofmann had to speak to her that way about a guest at her table I didn't know. It seemed to me the most insolent thing I'd ever heard in all my life.

And that wasn't all. She'd said he'd come to her with a letter of introduction from a friend, and yet there was an assumption of familiarity in his demand that was unmistakable. It was in her reply too. It just wasn't the way people who didn't know each other on any except formal terms would speak.

I started slowly along the corridor towards my apartment door. About half way there I saw the red down light of the elevator go on, and heard the whirr of the opening door. A man got out. My heart sank to the pit of my stomach. It was Colonel Primrose, and he was coming down the hall. I should have known he wouldn't let me get off as easily as I had so far that evening. And I didn't know what to do.—What if Barbara hadn't gone to sleep? I thought anxiously. What if she was as bright as she looked, and knew something had happened, and was just waiting up to ask a lot of questions?

I got to the door, put the key in the lock, opened the door a little and waited, smiling as cordially as I could. I glanced at the mirror over the table in the foyer that had the water bottle on it, and relaxed a little. The bedroom door was closed. Then I noticed the brandy bottle still on the table where I'd left it. The cork was out and the glass was lying on its side about an inch from the edge, a dribble of brandy running down the inlaid mahogany apron. It was a complete graphic picture of disordered haste . . . and Colonel Primrose was almost to the door.

I reached in quickly, set the glass upright, jammed the cork in the bottle and turned just as he got to the door.

"I thought I'd seen the last of you tonight, Colonel Primrose," I said—brightly, and loud enough so that if Barbara was up she'd hear me and lie low.

"I know it's late," he said. "But if you don't mind——?"

"Not at all," I lied cheerfully. "I'm glad to see you—do come in."

I knew he was looking at the brandy bottle and the single glass.

"I've become a solitary drinker since you've gone," I said.

He closed the door.

"I've missed you the last two weeks," he said. He put his hat on the table and turned to look at me. "Lilac tells me you've rented your house to Bliss Thatcher, and you're going away. And instead of my being able to talk to you, I've been up wasting my time talking to Sylvia Peele."

"Really," I said. I only hope I didn't sound as sick as I felt just then. "What . . . what did she say?"

He shook his head.

"She was stunned. I didn't realize she was fond of Corliss Marshall. I thought she disliked him intensely on account of Pete. She was in her bathrobe doing a piece about the party tonight for her column—mostly about Corliss—when I barged in. She tore it up and dropped it in the wastebasket. I really felt awfully sorry for her."

We'd stood there in the foyer while he told me that.

"So that lets her out, of course, doesn't it?" I said.

He nodded. "Except this business about Pete. That's going to be a blow. I like Sylvia. She's had a tough row to hoe. And you know, it's occurred to me several times that she's the one woman I know who wouldn't stop at murder to save somebody she really loved."

We moved across the foyer to the sitting room.

"I'm glad she is out of it, for——"

He stopped. "—What is it?"

I'd come to an abrupt halt in the middle of the doorway, my heart catapulting to the roof of my mouth.

Sylvia's smoky gauze evening dress with Corliss Marshall's blood over the bottom of it was lying across the arm of my sofa. Her bloodstained shoes were on the floor beside it. On the table was a note scrawled on a piece of paper she'd ripped off the pad by the telephone.

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"What is it, my dear?" Colonel Primrose asked again.

"Just the . . . way I've left my clothes strewed about," I answered. "You'd better turn around before you see something a bachelor shouldn't."

"A fairly experienced bachelor, Mrs. Latham?"

"You get a bottle of Scotch off the closet shelf out there," I said. "I'll pick up a little."

"You need Lilac—or somebody—to look after you." He turned back to the foyer, and I made a dive for the note and grabbed for Sylvia's dress and shoes. He was coming back, looking at the label on the bottle—to see if it was potable, I suppose.

"You'll find ice and soda in the icebox," I said, passing him to put the dress in the closet. I was getting away with it, I thought—until he spoke.

"Mrs. Latham," he said placidly. "Bring that dress over here."

I came back slowly. He took the dress out of my hand and held it up, took the shoes and looked at them. Then he looked at me.

"Where is the note that was on that table?"

I opened my hand. He picked up the crumpled wad of paper in it and unwadded it. I read it upside down in his hand.

"I'm taking your green dress. Hide these for me till morning. The child is horribly upset."

Colonel Primrose looked at me silently for a moment. Then he took a step towards me and put both hands on my shoulders.

"What child, Mrs. Latham? Whose dress is this? Who wrote this?"

I didn't answer. I was too sick to do anything but stand there looking unhappily down at the floor.

"Look," he said soberly. "You're playing a dangerous game. You never seem to realize that murder's a savage business. Some day you're going to try to shield the wrong person—and I may not be here to take care of you. Can't you understand that?"

"Sergeant Buck would be pleased, anyway," I said—womanishly, because I knew I was completely wrong.

"I wouldn't. Now tell me what all this means."

"I shook my head. I couldn't just say, "That's Sylvia's dress." Nor could I say, "The upset child's in the next room, having probably cried herself to sleep." I couldn't, possibly.

He picked the dress up again and looked at it.

"This is an expensive job, isn't it?"

I nodded. I guess he meant what he'd said about being experienced, because he turned the rose satin slip inside out without a moment's hesitation to where the label was tacked on the side seam. And there it was, and there was nothing I could do about it. The name of the Fifth Avenue shop was woven in the white tab, and under it was "S. Peele," and the date and model number.

He looked at me silently for a moment, and let the skirt fall back into place, his eyes resting on the stiff foul stain on the bottom. Then he picked up her shoe and turned it over slowly. The sole was dark brown where blood had soaked into the leather and dried.

"When did she leave here? Before I talked to you or after?"

"After," I said.

"And who is the child?"

"Look, Colonel," I began, "—the child has nothing to do with——"

"Corliss Marshall has been murdered," he said evenly. "Where is she?"

"She's in there, in bed."

He got up and waited for me to go ahead of him. I went into the foyer and put my hand on the door knob. "I wish you wouldn't do this," I said.

"Corliss Marshall," he repeated, with a sort of iron patience, "has been murdered, Mrs. Latham. I'll wait here."

I opened the door, switched on the light, and stared blankly around. The room was empty. The bedspread was folded neatly on the chair, but no one had slept in the bed. The girl's suitcase and dressing case were gone too. There wasn't a sign she'd been in the room.

Colonel Primrose was at my side in an instant.

"She's gone," I whispered. "The poor little kid."

"Who *is* she, Mrs. Latham?" he said sharply.

I suppose it didn't matter now. "Her name's Barbara Shipley," I said. "She was a guest of Mrs. Sherwood's. I'd better call her now and tell her she's gone."

He looked at me rather oddly—as well he might—turned and went back into the sitting room. I went to the telephone on the table and asked for Mrs. Sherwood's apartment.

"This is Grace Latham, Ruth," I said. "Barbara is gone."

I could hear the sharp catch of her breath at the other end. Then she said, "All right, Grace. I'm sure it's all right."

"There's one other thing," I went on. I knew he could hear me from the other room. "Colonel Primrose is here. He wants to know all about her. I told him you'd tell him—all I knew was that she was staying with you."

There was a long silence before she said, "I understand. Thank you—so much."

I went back into the sitting room. Colonel Primrose had gone to the kitchenette for ice and soda. He put them on the table and poured himself a short drink.

"You're being very foolish, my dear—believe me," he said. "I've known for a long time that you're a completely lawless individual—but it's possible to be lawless and still use your head. However, it doesn't matter.—I'll see you tomorrow."

"Before you go," I said, "would you mind telling me why any one thinks Pete Hamilton writes this 'Truth Not Fiction'? And what's so horrible about it if he does? Is it true it's financed by one of the foreign propaganda agencies?"

He looked at me for a moment. "Who told you that?"

"Bliss Thatcher told Ruth Sherwood."

There was a little flicker in his eyes. "That's interesting."

"But is it true?"

"Nobody knows," he said deliberately. He hesitated. "We do know that since the ill-timed attempt to expose foreign activities in this country last November a number of them have gone underground and come up in various disguises. This may be one of them. It's published in New York. The man who ostensibly pays for it is a well-known American citizen who thinks it's wrong to take life of any sort. Won't eat eggs because they're potential chickens. It's the belief of the Department of Justice that he's been sold a bill of goods, but they don't know who sold it to him."

"And where does Pete come in?" I demanded.

"If you'll stop being so belligerent, I'll tell you," he said patiently. "And just get it out of your head that anybody's trying to sell Pete down the river. The man who told me about it first is one of the best friends Pete has in Washington —also the most useful and highly placed. He'd give his right eye to know Pete doesn't write the thing. If he does write it, for another thing, this man's ruined. He's interested in a book about Washington that Pete plans to write, and he's talked frankly to him."

"You mean that sort of talk is what's in 'Truth Not Fiction'?"

Colonel Primrose nodded.

"Every correspondent in Washington is given secret background information, confidentially," he said quietly. "Their standing as reporters depends on their sources—and their sources depend on the confidence that important people have in their integrity. Whoever writes 'Truth Not Fiction' has the sources, and he's betraying them. He's also betraying his country, at a very crucial moment."

"I—I just *can't* believe it's Pete Hamilton," I said.

He shrugged. "I can't either. If I didn't know the facts and the people I'd think it was a frame-up. I'll tell you this—strictly off the record: whoever writes that newsletter has published stuff that so far as we know only Pete Hamilton has access to. I'm telling you that because I want you to understand Pete's on the spot—and for reasons. Corliss's murder is another part of it. And that's why I want you to keep out. Murder means nothing to people who don't believe in the dignity of the human being."

"You sound like Kurt Hofmann," I said.

He nodded rather grimly. "He ought to know."

He picked up Sylvia's dress and shoes.

"I'm not going to tell you not to phone Sylvia the minute I'm out, but I'm *asking* you not to. I'd appreciate a little cooperation at this point. And don't look so stricken, my dear."

He closed the door, and I stood there between conflicting loyalties. He knew, of course, that normally I couldn't refuse a request where I could disobey an order. Still . . .

That was as far as I got. There was a rap on the door, and when I opened it he was standing there, with Sergeant Buck, no doubt materialized out of the fireproof concrete of the corridor floor, just behind him.

"I've changed my mind," he said. "I think it would be safer for you to call Sylvia and tell her. Do it now, please. I'll wait."

It was my old friend the Colonel in an unfamiliar guise. He wasn't being amusingly paternal—he was as grim as I'd ever seen him. I went into the bedroom, picked up the phone and asked for Sylvia's apartment. He stood calmly in the doorway watching me.

"Sylvia," I said. "This is Grace."

"—What is it?"

The quick alarm in her voice made me realize how much like doom my own must have sounded.

"Colonel Primrose came in with me tonight, and found your dress. He's here now—right here." I went on quickly to keep her from interrupting me. "He's on his way up to you, I guess. I'm sorry."

I could almost see her struggling to control herself. I'd started to hang up when I heard her say, "Grace—what about Barbara? Can't you get her up to me as soon as he's gone? I'll phone you. There's a room next to mine I use for guests. She'll be safer here."

It was like her, when she must be almost out of her wits about herself, to manage to think of somebody else.

"Barbara's gone," I said. "He knows she was here."

"Oh, how sickening!" she gasped. Then she said quickly, "But he didn't see her? Does he know who she is? He can't hear me, can he?"

"The answer is No," I said, hoping she'd understand how inclusive it was. She did, apparently, because she said "O.K."

I put down the phone and turned back to Colonel Primrose. He was watching me with a very dispassionate intentness. Obviously whatever affection he'd had for me—and I'd begun to take it more or less for granted—was like the foreign propaganda agencies: it had definitely gone un-

derground. And unlike them, it wasn't likely to come up again.

"Good-night, Mrs. Latham," he said.

He closed the door, and I stood there, rather unhappily, for a few minutes. Then I thought that Sergeant Buck would be happy, anyway, and my crown could do with one star in it, even if it was made of granite. I went slowly out into the sitting room, turned off the light and bolted the hall door. Then I came back into the bedroom and started to undress, wishing very much I'd never gone to Ruth Sherwood's. I put on my dressing gown, went to the bathroom, opened the door, switched on the light and stopped dead in my tracks.

13

"Barbara!" I said.

"Has he gone?" she whispered. She was sitting on the plastic top of the clothes hamper, her feet propped up on the side of the tub, her jacket and hat and handbag piled in a heap on the top of her suitcases inside it. It would have been very funny if her face hadn't been as pale as the towels and her cheeks stained where the tears had dried a long time ago. And it wasn't funny—it was heartbreaking.

"Has he gone?" she repeated urgently.

"Yes, he's gone. He won't be back tonight."

She pushed her bright tousled hair back from her forehead.

"I heard you come in, and I thought I'd better hide. I was afraid to go to sleep. I heard what you said. What did my mother say?"

"She thinks you've gone back to New York, I imagine," I answered. "You'd better get undressed and go to bed. I'll get you a glass of milk. Here's a towel. Wash your face."

When I came back with the milk she was sitting on the bed, her hat and coat beside her, looking as tragic as a refugee child from Europe waiting alone on the dock for some one to come and claim her.

"Why doesn't my mother want me here?" she said, without looking up.

"I don't know," I answered, as gently as I could. "All I

know is that right now it's better for you not to be here. One of her dinner guests was—murdered, last night."

She didn't blink an eye, and I realized—without knowing how—that she must some way have heard already.

"But it was before that that she didn't want anybody to know who I was," she said. She raised her sherry-colored eyes to mine.

"I know," I said helplessly.

"Is it . . . because of that man in the picture?"

"I shouldn't think so, because he's awfully nice," I said. "But I don't know. Let's go to bed. We can talk about it in the morning."

She shook her head. "No, because . . . well, you see, Mother is . . . I don't know how to explain it."

Her voice faltered.

"She's frightened about somebody, and she's never been frightened before. Not even when my father died and left us without any money or anything down in South America. I heard the lawyer talking to her and I was so scared I couldn't go to sleep. He said there were a lot of debts, and wasn't there some relative we could go to. Mother said, No, there wasn't, but she'd manage some way. She was wonderful. That's why I'm so worried now. She was crying last night when she came up."

"Tell me this tomorrow, darling," I begged. "Go to bed now."

"I'm going somewhere else," she said steadily. "That man will find me if I stay here."

I looked at my watch. It was already two o'clock. "If I can get you up to Sylvia Peele's," I said.

"She was here, wasn't she?"

I nodded.

"She's nice. She said I mustn't be upset—nothing is ever so awful if you can go to sleep and forget it a while.—What's the matter with her? Who's Pete? Why did she call him up and tell him about . . . what happened? And why did she say he had to get to Corliss's room before the police got there?"

I was too appalled at that to think coherently.

"I don't know," I said. "But forget it, darling—please. And don't let anybody else know you heard that, will you? Promise?"

She nodded slowly. Then she said, "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "But do. And finish your milk while I phone."

I got Sylvia's apartment again. Her voice was so dead and colorless that I hardly recognized it.

"Yes, Grace—what is it now? I can't stand much more tonight, darling, but go on."

"It's Barbara," I said. "She is here. She's coming up. Can you leave the door open so she doesn't have to go through your apartment? What's the room number?"

"639 E," she said quickly. "Tell her just to go in as if she lived there—not to bring her bag. I'll give her a toothbrush. It's the third brown door on the left of the elevator."

I put down the phone. It flashed through my mind that this was the most utter and total nonsense—two grown and presumably intelligent women smuggling an eighteen-year-old girl in and out of apartments in Washington's most exclusive residential hotel like something out of a third-rate movie. It just didn't make any possible sense.

She was standing there with her hat in her hand, her eyes opened very wide.

"Do you suppose it's the same thing they're worried about at school?" she asked. I must have looked blank, because she went on quickly, "I mean, they always say, 'No, there's no Elizabeth Sherwood here,' when anybody calls me up, as if they were afraid somebody was trying to kidnap me. They don't do it for anybody else except a girl whose father is trying to get her away from her grandmother."

"I don't know," I said. The almost hostile reception I'd got earlier in the evening came back into my mind. "I don't know, really. Leave your bags here."

I told her what Sylvia had said. She nodded.

"Wait till I see if the coast is clear—then go down the hall."

I explained how she could get to the other side of the building and up to Sylvia's apartment. Then I went out into the foyer, unbolted the door and opened it.

"Oh," I said.

Sergeant Phineas T. Buck was standing there.

I said, "Oh," again, blankly.

He gave me a fishy-eyed stare. "Is something off color, ma'am?"

"Oh no, Sergeant," I said. "Nothing at all. I was looking to see if the milk had come. Is there anything I can do for you? Or are you just waiting around?"

"Colonel's orders, ma'am," he said. He spoke as usual out of the corner of his iron-rimmed mouth, so that it sounded as if the firing squad was cleaning its guns just around the corner. "I got to look out for you—see you don't get into no trouble."

That Sergeant Buck would have preferred a week in the guardhouse was only too painfully clear.

"Well, good luck," I said. "And good-night. I'm going to bed."

He didn't say "Oh, yeah?" nor did he expectorate over his shoulder . . . but both were definitely implied.

"No offense meant, ma'am," he said.

"And none taken, Sergeant," I replied sweetly.

That was the form we'd established to wipe the slate clean of personal animosity, which is just as well, because there's a limited amount of slate in the world.

I closed the door, bolted it firmly and went back. "You'll have to stay here tonight," I said. I picked up the phone and called Sylvia once more.

"She can't come, dear," I said. "The Iron Guard's taken over the Palace."

If I thought I was being funny I was wrong. When I opened the door to get the paper next morning, there he was—still or again, it didn't matter much. Though I saw immediately that it was again, because he was dressed in the black suit I'd never seen except when he went with the Colonel to a military funeral or to the White House. His lank undistinguished hair that I'd never noticed particularly before was plastered down across his iron dome like the pictures of saloon keepers in the gay Nineties, and he had his gold nugget stickpin in his black tie. I was sure that nothing short of a field marshal had died.

He handed me my papers.

"Good morning, ma'am," he said, as bleakly as if the snow was up to the rooftrees.

"Good morning, Sergeant," I said. I went back to the phone and ordered breakfast.

"Service for how many, madam?" room service inquired. It was reasonable enough, since I'd never ordered cereal and bacon and eggs and milk and buttered toast before.

"One," I said.

It was very awkward, and probably very futile. As soon as the maid came to clean the room Sergeant Buck would know Barbara was there. Still, he didn't know now, and as it might be a morning funeral there was no use crossing that bridge till I came to it.

I sat down to look at the papers. Sylvia's column had been written the day before and was the usual sort of thing. So had Larry's. I glanced at "Shall We Join the Ladies?" casually, and then came sharply to attention.

"Shush stuff," it said. "Rumor creeping around town on

rubber soles. An international news syndicate has to go on paying for a certain well-known column until the contract runs out in April, but nobody is going to see it except the janitor who empties the office wastebasket. Reason—aid and comfort to the enemy. Same with his radio contract."

I put the paper down, completely stunned. The waiter knocked for the third time before I managed to let him in. When he'd gone I picked up the paper again. A name in the rest of the column caught my eye.

"Corliss Marshall is making his first Washington appearance since his return from South America at the dinner the glamorous Mrs. Addison Sherwood is giving for Kurt Hofmann, visiting the Capital, tonight. Señor Delvalle, owner and publisher of a string of newspapers, also radio stations, South of the Border, will be there. Prophecy: ex-Congressional War Horse Sam Wharton's pipedream of an important inter-hemispheric public relations job will sink back into the dust bowl. Effie might as well give up her Spanish and start brushing up on her bingo for the long winter nights at home by the range.—If Corliss Marshall gets Señor Delvalle's right ear before We Join the Ladies."

I poured a cup of coffee and let it sit there. As I started to drink it at last, the phone rang. I picked it up and said "Hello."

"Have you seen the papers?"

It was Sylvia.

"Just Larry's column," I said. I hadn't even glanced at the front page.

"That's what I mean."

"Is it true?"

"I'd heard it, but Pete hasn't said anything," she answered. "Would you go around with me to see him? I'm afraid to go alone, with the police following me about. And how's Barbara?"

"She's still asleep," I said. "How soon do you want to go?"

"Right away. Will you come up?"

I woke Barbara up when I was ready to leave. "Look, my dear lamb," I said. "There's some food out there. You can phone your mother, but don't go out. She can see when the coast is clear and come here if she wants to, but you stay in. And don't answer the phone."

She nodded sleepily. "I'm a lot of trouble, aren't I," she said, sitting up and trying to blink the sleep out of her eyes. She looked more like six than eighteen.

I kissed her forehead, "You're *very* sweet," I said. "Remember about the phone, won't you?"

All that was a mistake. I knew it the minute I got out into the corridor, because Sergeant Buck wasn't going to a funeral at all. He was going with me. That was why he was all dressed up. I stared at him with my mouth open.

"Colonel's orders, ma'am," he said grimly, out of the side of his mouth, his face turning the color of tarnished brass.

"Very well," I said. There wasn't anything else I could say. And as a matter of fact I look back on that day with quiet pleasure. I didn't have to have my hair done, but seeing Sergeant Buck turned to a pillar of salt outside Henri's while I sat for hours under the dryer was wonderful. I didn't need any lingerie either, but I knew I'd never again have the pleasure of seeing Sergeant Buck really unhappy. It cost me a lot of money, but it was worth it. But that was later.

"I'm going to see Miss Peele," I said, as we got out of the elevator and turned down the hall. "I won't be long."

Sylvia let me in and closed the door.

"Did you bring the Iron Horse with you?" she demanded.

"No," I said. "He came. He's The Shadow."

"Oh," she said.

I followed her into the sitting room and stopped. And I said "Oh." Larry Villiers was standing by the table. The handsome smiling face that had looked up from the upper left-hand corner of the column I'd just read wasn't smiling now. He looked about as unhappy as it was possible to imagine him looking.

14

You certainly did a nice job this morning," I said, pleasantly.

"Shut up, will you!" he said savagely. "I've had enough of that from Sylvia. How the hell did I know this was going to happen? I don't want to get old Effie of the dyed red hair in trouble. Good Lord! Thank the Lord they've killed it in the late morning edition."

"Yes," Sylvia said bitterly. "And what about Pete? They're going to kill that, are they?"

"I can't help that." His voice was as bitter as hers. "If you'd let me tell him what everybody was saying two weeks ago, this wouldn't have happened. The trouble with you, Sylvia, is you believe he writes that tripe. I don't. You're a friend of his and I'm not. He doesn't take cracks at your

stuff the way he does at mine. And still *I* don't think he'd sell out, and you do."

He flicked the ash off his cigarette onto the floor.

"Of course, darling, you know him better than I do. If you believe——"

Sylvia's face was white. "Stop it, Larry! I *don't* believe it!"

"Oh yes you do, darling," he said calmly. "You should have seen yourself last night every time somebody brought it up. And there's no use getting sore at me about it. That's not what I came here for."

"What did you come for?" she asked coolly.

"Just to suggest that maybe Pete wasn't the only person at the party last night that might be interested in Corliss's untimely demise."

"What do you mean?"

She turned quickly from the mirror where she was putting on her hat.

"Then you do think Pete did it, don't you?" he said easily. "Well, as I say, you know him better than I do."

"I don't think Pete did it, Larry," she said. "And if you imply I do in that filthy column of yours, I'll——"

"You'll what, Sylvia?"

"I'll never forgive you, Larry—that's all."

He looked at her for an instant and ground his cigarette out in the ash tray.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that. I didn't come here to make you feel worse. What I came for was to see if I could do anything to help. You see, they've been laying for Pete for a couple of weeks. My apartment's in the front of the house and I can see them. The telephone girl just told me the other day all his calls are checked. She wanted to tell him, but she didn't have the nerve. She's afraid he'd fly off the handle, and she'd lose her job."

"What do you mean? Who's checking on him?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, darling. There was a new janitor in the building last week. He was keeping Pete's wastebasket separate from the rest of them. I know because he goes out earlier than I do."

"Why didn't you tell him?" Sylvia demanded.

"And get my nose punched?"

"You could have told me."

"Not in the state you've been in lately, old girl. Not without having all my hair pulled out. But as I was about to say, Pete wasn't the only person on the terrace with old Corliss last night."

Sylvia turned back to the mirror.

"—Effie Wharton was out there, for instance," Larry went on coolly. "Bliss Thatcher was there. He's out, because he wouldn't murder a willing tool. Delvalle was out for a minute, the same time Pete was. And Alicia was out there too. She was out twice, as a matter of fact, and so was our hostess."

"Anybody else?" Sylvia asked quietly.

"Not that I saw," Larry said. He looked her steadily in the eyes.

"Have you told Colonel Primrose?"

That blank expressionless stare of hers came over her face, and I knew she was herself again.

Larry nodded. "He was in while I was eating breakfast this morning."

"What a shame you didn't tell him you saw me go out there too," she said lightly. "Because he knows it. What's worse, he knows I came back literally steeped in blood. Did you know it too, darling? Why didn't you tell me?"

Larry didn't say anything for a minute. I thought his hands were shaking a little.

"Look," he said then, unsteadily. "You're not going to take the rap for that guy? You're crazy. You can't do it—you'd be a damned fool. He's not——"

"Worth it?" Sylvia said. "We'll see. And we have to begin now. Your dear friend Alicia called me up this morning. She's in a frightful stew about something. Any idea what it is?"

He shook his head.

"Well, good-bye," Sylvia said. "Be sure and put the cover back on my typewriter, won't you."

"—I hope," I said as we started to open the hall door, "that you don't mind having the Sergeant along."

"Oh, on the contrary," she answered.

But he wasn't there—not until we got into the elevator. There he was, standing at a sort of attention, his black hat across his chest, staring brassily in front of him, completely unaware, as far as I could tell, that we were in there at all. Sylvia started to say "Good morning," but it was so like accosting the Washington Monument that she gave it up.

"Is your car here?" she asked me instead.

I nodded. We got out of the elevator and walked through the lobby to the semi-circular drive in front of the hotel, Sergeant Buck shadowing us discreetly ten feet in the rear. Outside I turned around.

"We're going to Alicia Wrenn's, Sergeant," I said sweetly. "Would you like to come in my car?"

The brassy patina went a couple of shades darker.

"I'll go in my own car, ma'am," he said bitterly. He turned his head, and this time he did spit, very neatly, into the laurel bushes bordering the drive.

"This, I can see, is the end of a beautiful friendship," Sylvia remarked as we got into the car.

"Mine and the Colonel's?" I asked.

"No. The Colonel's and Sergeant Buck's.—And a lot of other people's. Do you happen to know where her ladyship lives, by the way?"

"The Phillips' house, isn't it? Just down on Milbank Terrace."

She nodded. We turned down into the maze of narrow lanes that wind in and out on the edge of the Park.

"She was really in a state this morning, when she called," she said. "It gave me the creeps. I don't know why it should have, but it did. Maybe I'm psychic. Lady Alicia is. She told me so last night."

I suppose that should have warned me. If being psychic is being extraordinarily sensitive to people and tone and atmosphere, then Sylvia certainly is. But even her "creeps" wasn't the word for it. It was more than that. It was terrible, really—and it still frightens me when I think of it.

We stopped on the side of the hill going up Milbank Terrace. The Phillipses built the house after Lorna Phillips had spent a year in Vienna being psychoanalyzed, and had learned her soul was allergic to light as well as to her husband. At least that's what people said, and certainly very little light ever got into the place even after she'd divorced her husband.

"It's a dismal hole, isn't it?" Sylvia observed as a dour gaunt-faced Scottish woman showed us into the drawing room. She pulled the heavy red wool curtains across the door behind her as she went to fetch her mistress.

Sylvia sniffed the air like a pointer in the field. "What's that?"

"Lady Alicia's tweeds, probably," I said. "Aren't they smoky when they're good?"

"She didn't sound very tweedy this morning."

In a moment the maid appeared again between the red curtains.

"You're to come up to the library," she said ungraciously. I looked at her a little surprised. It was plain she didn't like our being there at all, and wasn't trying to conceal the fact. She reminded me of a female Sergeant Buck—or did until I saw her eyes. They were sea-blue, and behind their sullen

offensive stare was almost unbearable tragedy. And that should have warned me too.

"What's the matter with her, do you suppose?" Sylvia whispered as we followed her up the dark zig-zag staircase that had reminded Lorna Phillips of a Tyrolean hunting lodge. Animal skins were draped over the banisters, the head of a wild boar grinned down from the top landing.

Sylvia sniffed again. The servant opened the library door at the end of the hall. It was dark too. What light there was struggled cold and jaundiced through narrow panes of amber glass in the arched window at the end of the room.

Lady Alicia was sitting at a table under it. A greenish candle was smoking in front of her, filling the room with a pungent unholy kind of smell. She was playing solitaire, I thought, and so intently that she didn't look up until the maid said, "They're here, my lady." Then she turned and looked at us.

I must say I should never have recognized her as the same woman who was demanding her gin and tonic the night before and holding up dinner till she got it. Her long face was haggard and actually the color of mustard thinned with milk, her eyes were hollow and desperately unhappy, and the smoke from the candle had made their rims red and moist. She had on a long robe made out of a black-bordered Paisley shawl tied around the waist with a gold-tasselled cord. It was as extraordinary as she was.

She got up. "You may go, Mary. Close the door, please."

She turned to Sylvia without the least preliminary.

"I wanted to see you," she said painfully. "I want to know how you knew."

She put her hand sort of wildly to her head and pushed back her hair.

"Knew what, Lady Alicia?" Sylvia asked. She was genuinely bewildered.

"What you said last night. That I . . . am a coward. That I ran away. Because it's true. I am a coward, and I did run away—but not from what you think. Not from the bombs. I'm not afraid of the bombs. It's something else. Something that follows me wherever I go. That's what I was running away from. And you know, don't you? That's what I have to know. *How* you know!"

Sylvia moved a step closer to me.

"I—don't know, Lady Alicia," she said unsteadily. "I didn't mean to say it. I really didn't. I just get annoyed at people coming over here and telling us what we should do. I was just being very rude. I hope you'll forgive me."

Lady Alicia shook her head.

"No, no. It's not that—you don't have to say that," she said quickly. "It's that you do know it. You could see it. That's what I want to know. How you could see it. Was it me, myself, or somebody else?"

"But I've told you. Really——"

The woman's hands dropped to her side.

"Don't go on," she said helplessly. "You knew, but it's very likely you don't know how you knew. It's there, you see. It's everywhere I go. I've tried to run away from it, but it's here now, waiting for me."

She turned to the table and picked up a card lying on the center pile of the game she'd laid out. It was the six of clubs.

"It's always there. It always comes up. The knave of hearts is there too, but this is always in between us."

It wasn't a game she was playing at all—I realized tardily. She was telling her fortune. I glanced nervously at Sylvia.

"Oh, I'm not demented, if that's what you think," Lady Alicia said sharply. "That's what my husband thought. It's not true. It's here, here in the cards. It's getting closer—every day it's closer. I thought if I came to America . . . but here it is. Don't you see? Even Mary knows it's coming closer."

She looked at us with such helpless appeal in her eyes that my blood chilled.

"Maybe . . . the cards are wrong, Lady Alicia," Sylvia said. "Maybe they might come out differently if you tried them again."

She glanced at me, helpless herself. And there was obviously no use telling the woman to throw the pack in the fire and get out in the sunlight. She was in no state to tolerate common sense.

"It's no use," she whispered. "Nobody will ever believe me."

"I believe you," Sylvia said. "But what can I do?"

"I don't know. If I only did!"

She gathered the cards up in her hand, bent over the table, closed her eyes and shuffled them three times. Then she cut them, twice, and turned the center pile over. Her hand was trembling and so was her body pressed against the table. Still she didn't open her eyes.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Sylvia looked quickly at me. If she could have changed the card I know she would have.

"You don't have to tell me," Lady Alicia said softly. "It's the club six." Her voice sank to a whisper again. "It's death. It's always death."

She opened her eyes slowly, nodding her head. "It's death," she repeated quietly.

She picked the cards up and dealt them out in an intricate order into three rows of five cards each, her eyes closed again and her hand faltering before she laid the last card down. I stared at her, fascinated, believing for an instant in spite of the fact that I knew it wasn't true. She opened her eyes.

"You see," she said. "It's always the same. Even when I change my queen it's still the same. He always comes between us."

"Who?" Sylvia asked.

Lady Alicia put her forefinger on the knave of diamonds. It lay above the death card, and next to the queen of clubs.

"That's my queen." She pointed to the jack of hearts. "That is my heart's desire. And this knave"—she returned to the jack of diamonds—"always comes between us. He brings death."

She put her finger on the six of clubs again. "It's never been so close before."

She was silent for a moment. Then she picked up the red jacks.

"I don't understand. Mary doesn't understand either. They're not the same. They're not aspects of each other, as I thought once. Because the ocean still divides us."

She pointed to the nine of spades. I didn't ask her how she knew it was the ocean, because I believed implicitly, at that moment, that that's what it was. And it did lie between the queen of clubs—her queen—and the heart jack.

Lady Alicia looked at us earnestly. "But it's not true. He's here, you see; he's not on the other side."

She pointed to the eight of spades. "And this is his letter. The letter I understand."

She went over to the secretary and pulled out what some people still call a secret drawer because it looked as if it's part of the frame. She took three letters out and held them in her hand.

"These are letters he wrote me a long time ago. This is the one from France written before he got away."

Sylvia looked quickly at me. The idea of Kurt Hofmann as the jack of hearts was a little bewildering to me, but then I'd never been in love with him, and Lady Alicia had, and still was, apparently, extraordinary as it might seem.

She put the letters back in the drawer, pushed it shut and came slowly back to the table.

"If you could only tell me who this is," she said, picking up the jack of diamonds and holding it out. "He's the same

color, but he represents evil. He brings my queen the death card. They always come together. That's what you sensed. Or perhaps it was just my own fear, like a living thing, a dark flower I wear in my hair. But if you can tell me . . . or afterwards if you will make them understand."

Her voice had sunk to a whisper again, but the appeal in her eyes had changed to tragic certainty, a kind of stoical fatalism that made it useless to try to say anything.

"Oh, I'm so desperately sorry," Sylvia said, holding out her hands. "I wish there was something——"

Lady Alicia shook her head. She stood looking down at the cards for a long time. Then she said slowly,

"When they came last night and said that man had been killed, I was almost mad with relief. I thought I'd read the cards wrong. I thought perhaps they could have meant that. That this was for him."

She touched the six of clubs.

"I called Mary. We ran up here and laid them out, and read them together."

Her body went limp and helpless again.

"It turned up immediately—the first card I uncovered.—And I don't know why it terrifies me so. I'm really not afraid to die—not really afraid."

15

I'm still not quite sure how we got out of that room and down the stairs. I know I'll always remember the maid looking at us as she closed the door, and my almost sickening sense of relief seeing Sergeant Buck's square granite figure standing there looking up at the house. He executed a sharp about-face and got into his car. Sylvia and I got into mine.

"It's terrible!" Sylvia whispered. She was as shaken as I was. "Just think, the two of them living there with that ghastly fear always around them. She's so terribly *sure* of it, isn't she?"

The pale wintry sunlight and a modern motor gathering power under the pressure of my foot, together with Sergeant Buck's realistic presence, began to have its effect on me. "It's crazy," I said. "It's just plain mediæval witchcraft."

"I know, but if you think things hard enough, you can

make them happen," Sylvia said. "You really can. That's what she's doing."

Then her own voice cleared. "And who *do* you suppose that jack of diamonds is? He's not her Kurt Hofmann anyway—and isn't *that* something! Who were the other blond gentlemen there last night?"

"Well, there's Larry," I said. "And Sam Wharton. He must have been blond before he was white. His eyes are blue. And——"

"I know," she said quietly when I hesitated. "Pete. But that means we believe in witchcraft too, doesn't it?"

I didn't answer, and we didn't say anything else until we came out of the Park on the P Street Bridge and turned back toward Massachusetts Avenue. Then I said, "Sylvia, what is this book Pete's writing?"

She turned her head quickly.

"What book are you talking about?" she demanded sharply. "Who told you about it?"

I was so surprised I didn't stop for the red light on 21st Street. Fortunately the car on my left had good brakes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't realize it was a secret weapon. Colonel Primrose told me about it. Last night."

"I'm sorry too," Sylvia said. "I didn't mean to snap at you. It's just—well, the less said about it the better. Let's skip it, shall we?"

I nodded and drove along. Pete Hamilton lived on 16th Street not far from the White House in a brownstone mansion that had been converted into bachelor apartments. The switchboard operator eyed us a little suspiciously as we went in.

"Mr. Hamilton hasn't gone out yet, so I suppose he's up there," she said. "The back apartment, third floor. His mail's just come—would you mind taking it up?"

She handed Sylvia a pile of letters and newspapers.

We went up the staircase that had seen Washington in perhaps not more opulent but certainly more formal days. The janitor was emptying the trash on the third floor. Sylvia glanced at me. One wastebasket was definitely set aside, the others being dumped into a big brown paper carton.

She knocked at Pete's door, the janitor watching us out of the corner of his eye. I could hear Sergeant Buck's iron tramp on the stairs. From inside came a shout: "Come in!" and Sylvia opened the door.

"Who is it?" Pete shouted.

"It's me," she called. "And Grace. Can we come in?"

"Sure, come ahead. Eyes front—the maid hasn't come yet today."

We went along a narrow hall with a bedroom on one side and a tiny kitchenette and bathroom on the other to a big room at the end, across the back of the house, overlooking the garden.

"What do you mean, today?" Sylvia said. "It looks more like a week."

Pete grinned. He was working at his desk in the middle of the room behind the sofa littered with papers and his dinner coat and shirt from the night before. He had on an old gray sweater and he hadn't shaved. On the gateleg table behind him was a coffee percolator and the remains of a self-made breakfast. The drawers were hanging out of his filing case, and papers were piled on top of it.

"It's a mess, all right," he said. "If I was a beachcomber I'd have a native girl to look after me. That's the trouble with civilization."

He turned to me.

"You know, one of the things I like about Sylvia is she doesn't come in and first crack out of the box start picking up and washing the dishes."

He looked at her critically.

"Only I can't figure out whether it's self control or she just doesn't give a damn."

"I thought this was the way you liked it, dear," she retorted serenely. "After all, you can get a native girl for three dollars a week. —One that'll come in, I mean. —What's the matter? Why didn't you let her stay? Aren't you going to the Commissioners' press conference this morning?"

Pete shook his head. "I've been asked to stay away," he said quietly.

She stared at him. "Oh, *Pete!*" she cried. "When?"

"This morning. —I guess the Colonel was right."

"And what are you going to *do?* You aren't just going to sit here and take it, are you?"

"I haven't decided yet."

There was a long silence. He sat there stuffing his tobacco into his pipe, looking down at his typewriter.

"Pete," Sylvia said after a moment. "Have you seen Larry's column this morning?"

"Me? Lord, no. I get my social items out of the *Police Gazette.*"

"Well, you'd better read it."

She picked *The Chronicle* up off the sofa, opened it to

the society page and handed it to him. He shifted his pipe to the other side of his mouth and tilted his chair back, the paper propped up in front of him against his typewriter. His chair came slowly down to the floor again. He took his pipe out of his mouth and looked blankly up at Sylvia.

"This—is news to me," he said. He looked down at the paper again. "Nice crack at the Whartons too. Ought to cheer Captain Lamb up."

Sylvia was watching him with a kind of tense anxiety. She looked back now at the table by the door where she'd put his mail, went quickly over, picked it up and brought it to him. He looked through the pile and straightened up abruptly as he came to the last letter. He ripped it open and read it, his face going as tight as a steel trap, a slow hard flush darkening his cheeks. He looked at it a long time and handed it to her. Her hands were trembling as she read it.

I saw that the letterhead was that of the news syndicate that handled Pete's stuff.

"Then—he's right," Sylvia whispered.

"Straight from the horse's mouth. Larry sure gets the dope."

She put the letter down on the desk. "Pete," she said unsteadily. "You don't seem to think what all this means!"

"Oh, yes," he said. "It means I'm a dirty rotten traitor. It also means I'm out on the sidewalk on the seat of my pants. That's what it means."

"You can do something, can't you?"

"Sure. I can get a job digging ditches, if they aren't all dug."

"I don't mean that, and you know it. I mean, can't you stop all this? Can't you *deny* it? Can't you——"

He got up, came around the table to her and put his hands on her shoulders, gripping them tightly, looking down into her face. Any idea I might have had that he was taking what had happened lightly, or that he didn't know clearly what it meant and what it involved, was gone from that moment.

He looked at her with an expression that I'd never seen on his face before.

"Look, Sylvia," he said, his voice hard and his eyes steady. "You don't think I write that stuff?" And that's not the word he used. "Do you?"

Her eyes searched his just as steadily for a long moment.

"No!" she said, with a sudden almost passionate triumph. "No, Pete—never! Oh, Pete!"

Suddenly his arms were around her, crushing her to him,

his mouth pressed against hers. He raised his head then, pushed her hat off with one hand, still holding her, pushed her hair back from her forehead, still looking steadily down into her eyes. "Sylvia," he said. "I didn't know—I've never known—how much I love you."

It was obviously no place for me, and I got out as quickly as I could, interrupting Sergeant Buck's quiet heart-to-heart with the janitor over the garbage. I felt a lot better. I didn't know who wrote "Truth Not Fiction," but I did know now that it wasn't Pete Hamilton. And I didn't seem to care much, at the moment, who'd killed Corliss Marshall. I say that because otherwise there's no possible excuse for the chase I led poor Sergeant Buck that afternoon. The hairdresser was first, then the lingerie department of a woman's specialty shop, and then—I suppose I ought to be ashamed to admit it—I left him for at least half an hour outside a Ladies' Room while I wrote a couple of letters admonishing my sons about their grades and did the day's telephoning. And not least, as I was going back into the Randolph-Lee I met Señor Delvalle. Sergeant Buck, by this time permanently dyed the color of glacial brick-dust, was the usual ten paces behind me.

"How charming, madame," Señor Delvalle said. He bent over my hand and kissed it.

Sergeant Buck cleared his throat—and if the Randolph-Lee had had walls like Jericho, they'd have gone down with a crash. As it was, his square-toed size twelve boot was in dangerously near proximity to Señor Delvalle as he was bending over my hand. I was a little alarmed, frankly. I pulled my hand away quickly, probably, because Delvalle straightened up and looked around, and back at me with a questioning lift of his eyebrows.

"It's just a member of the Elite Guard, Señor," I said. "He goes wherever I go."

"Does he have to have tea with us?" Señor Delvalle inquired.

"He'd love it," I said.

When we were settled in the cocktail lounge, with the Sergeant practically at the table with us, I said, "I suppose you saw your name in the paper, this morning."

"Yes, I did," he answered. "It's very interesting. I understand Mr. Wharton would like to go to my country. Mrs. Wharton, I mean. Perhaps you can tell me, Mrs. Latham, why women are so much more determined not to return to private life than men."

"I guess it's deadly dull back home after Washington," I said. "You don't find Washington very glamorous?"

"Not until I met you, madame."

Sergeant Buck cleared his throat again. The waiter came out so fast from behind the bar that you'd have thought an evzone had appeared there. I'm sure I don't know how long this would have gone on, or whether Señor Delvalle, who was enjoying it quite as much as I was, would have got out alive, if Colonel Primrose hadn't come in.

Sergeant Buck saw him first, stood at attention, did a veritable squads right to the door, reported and left—very fast. I can't think he was ever relieved from any duty with greater satisfaction.

The Colonel came over with a twinkle in his eye. He smiled at me. "May I join you?" Señor Delvalle wasn't as Latin after that, and by the time we got up to go I was beginning to be a little worried. It didn't seem so amusing now as it had before. I remembered that Corliss Marshall was dead. And that Barbara was somewhere, unhappy and frightened—and that her mother had cried the night before. And that Pete Hamilton—even if love had risen like a phoenix from the ashes—was ruined unless something happened. Lady Alicia Wrenn, haggard-eyed and ashen-cheeked, and her cards—the death card and the knave of diamonds—came back to my mind too. And I'd been making Sergeant Buck wait outside the Ladies' Rest Room.

"What's the matter?" Colonel Primrose asked after Señor Delvalle had left and he and I had decided to stay and have dinner where we were.

"I was just thinking," I said.

"You're not the type, really."

Then he looked at me seriously.

"What did you go to Lady Alicia's this morning for?"

"That's what I wanted to tell you," I said. "You'll think it's a lot of nonsense, but you see, she called Sylvia . . ."

He listened silently while I told him what had happened. When I came to the end he was still silent.

I said, "Of course, I *know* it's nonsense, and all that——"

He shook his head. "Fear is never nonsense, my dear," he said. "I'm glad you told me."

He sat there thinking about it. "There are, or could be, some very remarkable things about that," he said, and then he was silent again, just looking down at his dinner.

"You know," I went on when he didn't say any more, "I was thinking if you would go down and talk to her, maybe

you could do something. You're so appallingly sane, and rather comforting at times."

He smiled. "Thank you, my dear."

"What I mean is, if you'd find out what's behind it, or just give her a pack of cards that hasn't got a six of clubs so slippery it always comes up first——"

He nodded quite seriously and called for the check.

"Why don't we go down and see her together? You know her. It won't look quite so officious as if I went by myself. Shall we walk? It's just down in the Park, isn't it?"

We went out across the terrace, bleak and so empty now that it was hard to remember how gaily crowded it was in the summer time. It was dark too, down the sloping lawn to the road. The brilliant arc lights on the Connecticut Avenue Bridge made the street lights scattered through the trees ahead of us very pale and ineffectual.

"By the way," I asked. "Do you know anything about a newspaperman named Gordon Lacey?"

He thought a moment.

"Vaguely. He used to be around the Central Police Station here a long time ago. Liquor got him, if I remember correctly. Why?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just happened to think of him. Because Pete doesn't write 'Truth Not Fiction'—I'm as sure of that as anything in the world—and last night Corliss brought Lacey's name up. He'd seen him in South America. Pete objected to what Corliss said about him, and Corliss said something about Lacey's not being a friend of Pete's, and I just wondered. Here we are. It's the funny dark house in the trees."

We went up the walk. The wind had blown the dead flowers across the flagstones. They were sere and brittle under our feet. Colonel Primrose lit a match to find the door bell and pressed it. I heard a high peal come back faintly from the kitchen, as if there were no human sounds in the house to absorb it. We waited a long time.

"Perhaps she's gone out," I said.

"You'd think she'd have left the porch light on. There's a servant, isn't there?"

I nodded. "A very dour Scottish woman. She believes in the six of clubs too."

He waited a moment, rang again, then took hold of the door knob and turned it. The door opened. The hall was black as pitch.

"Stand back a little," he said quietly. "I don't like this."

He reached in, ran his hand up the side of the wall and found the switch. The light sprang on. I saw that one of the antelope skins had fallen off the banisters and knocked a vase of red roses off the hall table onto the floor. It had rolled under the table, but the roses were still in the middle of the hall, their heads crushed in where somebody had trod on them.

We went in. Colonel Primrose opened the heavy red curtains and switched on the light in the drawing room. He came back.

"Maybe she's upstairs," I said. "In the library."

We stepped over the trampled roses and started up. At the top he stopped.

"Toward the back," I said.

He felt around the wall for another switch. The grinning boar's head leaped out in the angle of yellow light from a shaded lamp on the wall table. Colonel Primrose took a step along the hall. Then I saw him run forward and kneel down.

In the shadowy recess beyond the vestibule that led to the library I could see an overturned chair, and under it, lying as motionless as death, the gaunt figure of the Scottish maid. A trickle of blood glistened, still wet, on her temple, matting her thin gray hair, and her eyes were closed. Colonel Primrose had his fingers on her wrist.

"She's alive," he said curtly as I came up. "Quickly. Where's the phone?"

"In the library," I said.

"Get the police. National 0532. Hurry. And be careful."

I stepped over the woman's black-clad motionless body and ran to the library door. It was dark in there and still as the grave. I felt blindly for a light. And suddenly my fingers froze motionless. There was something in the room. I could hear it scratching against something hard and smooth. I felt frantically for that light, more terrified than I've ever been before in my life.

Then I found it and switched it on—and then I must have screamed, because Colonel Primrose was at my side in an instant. He took one look, turned me around quickly and thrust me out into the hall. But not before that picture was printed so indelibly on my retina that I can still close my eyes and see it. The dead branch scraping against the narrow amber panes, the fitful flicker of the candlewick in that pool of green wax . . . and Lady Alicia Wrenn sitting at the table, her head thrown back, her eyes staring dreadfully at the ceiling, the black and swollen tongue protruding from

her broken lips, her hands hanging limply at her sides. On the floor, as if she'd dropped them there as she died, were two cards. I knew what they'd turn out to be before I saw them . . . the six of clubs, and the knave of diamonds.

16

I dimly remember hearing the police come to that fantastic house; and then the slow siren wail of the ambulance taking the unconscious servant to the hospital, with two detectives to guard her day and night, died away up the hill. I was in Lady Alicia's bedroom, waiting to tell Captain Lamb what I'd told Colonel Primrose before we'd come down after dinner. Outside the snow had begun to fall, powdering the police cars in front of the house with a fine dry coat except where the radiators melted it to a shiny black. A detective walked back and forth under the street lamp glimmering feebly through the leafless trees.

Lady Alicia Wrenn's room was full of photographs: her father—I suppose—in his Coronation robes, a vine-covered Tudor manor house, a tennis party having tea under the marquee, a stodgy-looking man who was probably her husband. In contrast to all of them was another picture, in a worn green leather travelling case. Blond and handsome and young, with that sabre cut already down his cheek Kurt Hofmann had the air of a Teutonic Byron. I could see now what she'd meant when she said success had changed him—success and years and the new philosophy. It was hard to believe that the man I'd met was the shining knight who'd written the faded love poem in the other half of the folder. Or indeed that Lady Alicia was the romantic English rose plucked by the shining knight in the garden of the inn by the river. It was written on the inn menu—Liebespein and Schinkenbein dangerously intermixed—and dated May 20th, 1914, when she must have been eighteen or so and he not much older. I put it down when Sergeant Buck came to the door to get me.

The library was empty and forlorn now she was gone. The dry branch scratched still, drearily intermittent . . . dead fingers trying to write their tragic history on the amber panes. The two cards still lay there on the floor where they'd fallen out of her lifeless hands. I sat down on the sofa. Cap-

tain Lamb and Colonel Primrose listened silently while I told them about Sylvia and me coming down that morning, and what Lady Alicia had said. When I got to the part about the letters I turned to the secretary, and stopped. The drawer was open, and there was nothing in it.

I looked at Colonel Primrose.

"They were gone," he said. "I looked for them first thing. Continue, please."

When I'd finished he and Captain Lamb sat there silently for a while. Captain Lamb said then, "Did she leave that here this morning?"

"Who?" I asked blankly. "Leave what here?"

He pointed to the high-backed Spanish chair flanking the hall door.

"That bag."

On the red velvet seat was a black suede envelope with a large gray "S" on it.

"If you'd look in it," Colonel Primrose said, in his suavest manner—before I could make my mind what to say—"You'd see it must have been left here after two o'clock. There's a telephone report in it from the cable office, stamped 1.55."

I think he said it to keep me from perjuring myself just then. The atmosphere seemed a little strained all of a sudden, as if no two of the three of us were seeing eye to eye about something.

"—All this looks pretty far-fetched to me, Colonel," Captain Lamb said irritably, after a moment. "I don't like this fellow, Hofmann, personally, any better than you do."

He hesitated again, and went on vigorously. "But in the first place, he's on the right side—and in the second place, I can't see him coming in and strangling a woman just because she's still in love with him after twenty-five years and he's not in love with her. Good God, Colonel. And if he did, why would he walk off with the love letters—after she'd told everybody at the dinner she still had them? He's not a damn fool, is he?"

"I agree," Colonel Primrose said. "It . . . doesn't seem to make sense."

His black parrot's eyes rested on me for an instant.

"Furthermore, Miss Peele——"

He stopped for a moment.

"I'm going to see Miss Peele. We might learn something from that woman when she comes to—if she does. I'd like to take that bag along, if it's all right with you."

Sergeant Buck was in the downstairs hall. He had a green florist's box in his hands.

"In the garbage can, sir," he said. "It came from up at the hotel."

Colonel Primrose nodded. "I'm going there. I'll check on it."

The detective on the sidewalk brushed the dry snow off his overcoat and looked up through the branches at the tarnished leaden sky. "Looks like we're in for it this time, Colonel. There's a car here if we can take you anywhere."

"No thanks, we'll walk," Colonel Primrose said. He took my arm. We'd got down the hill and over to the other side of the road before either of us spoke.

"—Does Captain Lamb seriously think Sylvia had anything to do with last night, or with this tonight?" I asked when we'd started up the slope to the hotel.

"Sylvia would have been arrested this morning," Colonel Primrose said calmly, "if I hadn't persuaded him to hold off. Lamb thinks she was trying to gain time for Pete. And now this handbag . . ."

He stopped, shaking his head. "What do you think?" I asked unsteadily.

"I don't know," he said. "Pete is just the man to do his own dirty work. He's got a violent temper. He and Marshall were bitter enemies."

"Why, actually? I've never known."

"Pete came to town before he was dry behind the ears, and said publicly that Marshall was an inflated pompous ass. Marshall invited him to the Press Club for dinner to make a fool out of him, and Pete made a fool out of *him.* Everybody was delighted but Corliss. He couldn't ever forget it. Consequently, he's always knifed Pete when he could."

"And this was his big chance, I suppose."

"Precisely."

"And that implies that Pete really does write that newsletter."

He nodded. "—That Corliss Marshall was convinced he knew who wrote it, at any rate. And everything he said was aimed at Pete."

"I'd like to have just one good reason you've got personally for thinking it," I said stubbornly.

He cocked his head down and looked at me, very seriously, for a moment. Then he hesitated for a moment.

"I'll give you one," he said. "You may remember an issue of 'Truth Not Fiction' about a month ago that described a

mixup in the Navy Department? One reserve officer was ordered to report for active duty when he'd been on active duty for two months. Another was asked if he'd serve when he'd signified his desire to do so a year before. There were several other instances of that sort of thing—none of it that wasn't due to an enormously increased clerical personnel. Well, the way it was pictured showed such an appalling lack of efficiency in a very efficient department that the flood of letters and telegrams was staggering."

"I remember it," I said. "But what's it got to do with Pete?"

"The officer on active duty who got the letter asking him to report told Pete about it," he said quietly. "Just as an amusing example of what can happen when you quadruple your clerical force overnight. He told him some other stories too. He can't remember that he told anybody else—and he was horrified to see all of it in 'Truth Not Fiction' a week later. He reported it, of course, Navy Intelligence started work, and that's when Pete came into the picture."

"Is that what you call *evidence?*" I demanded.

He nodded coolly.

"Just believe me when I tell you that everything that's appeared in 'Truth Not Fiction' that's a betrayal of off-record confidence was something told to Pete Hamilton."

"And nobody else?"

"Not in all instances. But his name stays there, regularly. —There's also another point, which may or may not mean something. The typed copy of the thing is sent to the printer's office by the man who sponsors it. He reads it and okays it. He says it's written by a man named Smith who lives in Washington and admits that's not his real name. He says he doesn't know who 'Smith' is, and he regards the investigation as an attempt on the part of the Government to muzzle the press."

"Have you seen the copy?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Then the typewriter can be traced?"

"That's been done, Mrs. Latham."

My heart sank. I knew perfectly well from the way he said it what was coming next.

"It's typed on several different machines. They've tracked all of them down but one. All of the others—except one—are in the Press Club in the room the members use . . . you remember, with the double row of tables near the women's restaurant?"

"And it?"

"It's in Pete Hamilton's apartment on Sixteenth Street."

We had stopped on the brick terrace outside the hotel. Inside there were lights and music and people. I had a dull sense of unreality as if I were watching the mob scene in a fashionable comedy of manners, alone and unreal myself in a dark and empty amphitheatre.

"Now if you can see any way around all this, I wish you'd tell me," Colonel Primrose said.

"If you found the other typewriter?" I said tentatively.

"That's only a detail. It won't be hard to recognize. The small 't' and the capital 'L' are out of alignment and the tail of the small 'a' is very dim. The whole thing needs cleaning. The type is pica, and the roller's loose so that the sentences run up at the right-hand side. It's the information that's important, really."

"Isn't there any way——"

He nodded without waiting for me to finish. "I shouldn't tell you this."

"I won't tell anybody, really," I said.

"It's Bliss Thatcher who's chiefly interested in this book of Pete's. He thinks a detailed picture of what men like him are up against in Washington will be a valuable record. He's responsible for a lot of the inside information Pete's got about the defense program. He trusts him implicitly, and he refuses to think he's got anything to do with this business. He's agreed, however, to make a test of it."

I looked at him anxiously.

"Last week," he went on slowly, "Thatcher made up a story—out of whole cloth. He hasn't told it to anybody but Pete Hamilton. If it comes out in 'Truth Not Fiction'——"

"When does the next issue come out?" I asked unhappily.

"Tomorrow. And Lamb has agreed to wait till tomorrow—unless the woman at the hospital comes to before then."

He put his hand on the door knob.

"Just one more thing, Mrs. Latham," he said. "What's happened to Mrs. Sherwood's daughter?"

I don't suppose I was ever caught more off guard. I must have stood there fish-like, silently opening and closing my mouth, gasping for breath.

"Not having had to worry about you today I've been able to get a little work done," he said pleasantly. "I went to the State Department among other places. Mrs. Sherwood and daughter Elizabeth Anne have had foreign residents' passports for fifteen years. They came back to this country in August—on different ships. The daughter's picture and her description—age, height, coloring—correspond to the girl who came in just before dinner. Not to the photograph on

the desk. —And by the way, I can understand Mrs. Sherwood's not wanting the girl to be there after Marshall was found—I don't understand why she introduced her as Barbara Shipley . . . presumably before she knew Corliss was going to be murdered. Do you?"

"No," I said. "I don't."

"Well, where is she?"

"I don't know that either."

That was true too, of course. I hadn't been back to my apartment all day. She might have gone to the moon for all I knew.

He shook his head a little. "You can't back the whole field, you know, my dear," he said. "Think it over, will you?"

We went inside and up to the second lobby. I saw Sylvia and Señor Delvalle at the top of the stairs just beyond a palm tree in a gold tub, waiting for Larry on his way over to the newsstand.

"I've got to get in touch with him some way," Sylvia was saying urgently. "He left Panama City last week. I got a cable this evening from a newspaperman down there. Have him arrested if you have to—or I'll fly down—but I've got to get hold of him. It's Lacey with a c-e-y. He'll be in the nearest bar."

Colonel Primrose glanced at me.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," Señor Delvalle said earnestly. "You must understand my position. There is so much Fifth Column activity in my country that any doubt at all in the mind of any member of your government would make it impossible for me to send him down. He has got to make a very firm denial of all this, Miss Peele."

"But he won't," Sylvia said. "And as I know he doesn't do it, I'm out of my mind. But I know from what Corliss Marshall said that Gordon Lacey's got something to do with it."

"If he is in South America, I will find him for you, Miss Peele."

We went on up the steps. Larry Villiers was coming back from the newsstand opening a pack of cigarettes. He saw us and stopped, looking at Sylvia's bag in Colonel Primrose's hand with raised eyebrows.

"Don't tell me, Colonel," he said politely. "The latest in Army circles? 'What the Retired Officer Will Wear.' I must make a note."

Sylvia and Delvalle turned.

"Oh," Sylvia said. "Thanks, Colonel. I was just going down to get it."

She held out her hand. Colonel Primrose shook his head.

"I'm going to keep it a while. I wonder if I could talk to you a minute, if you're not busy."

She looked at him with her blank stare. "Surely. Shall we go up to my place?"

"If you don't mind."

Señor Delvalle was smiling at me, just by my side, so I couldn't give her any kind of warning.

"Good-night, Colonel," I said. I wanted to get upstairs and see about Barbara before he decided to pay me another call. I nodded to the rest of them and started away. Just as I did, the assistant manager of the hotel came across the lobby.

"Oh, Mrs. Latham, I want to apologize," he said, the way assistant managers of hotels do. "I hope we didn't disturb the young lady. We phoned before the boy took the flowers up. He didn't know she was there. She——"

"I'm sure it's all right," I said hastily. But it was too late. Colonel Primrose had stopped and was looking back, his head cocked down and twisted around and his black parrot's eyes resting on me. He shook his head a little.

"—If you'd register your guests, Mrs. Latham," the manager said.

"Of course I should have."

Delvalle and Larry both looked at me.

"Not the girl that came last night, Grace?" Larry inquired suavely. "Young, of course, but awfully pretty. I missed her name in the dramatis personæ this morning."

I got away before I said what was on the tip of my tongue. At the elevator I glanced back. Colonel Primrose and Sylvia had stopped before they had got to the elevator in the other wing, and she was waiting for him outside the florist shop.

17

It really was a curious thing, I thought as I stood there waiting. It hadn't occurred to me before Colonel Primrose said it that there might be a connection between Ruth Sherwood's desperate appeal to me to help her keep Barbara from coming and her conduct later about Corliss Marshall's death. Yet none of it made sense. She couldn't possibly have known it was going to happen, unless she'd done it herself and invited him there for that purpose . . . and she didn't know

him, she'd invited him sight unseen by cable—or that's what she'd said. And while it was obvious enough that there was some one there who she was desperately anxious shouldn't know she had a beautiful daughter, it couldn't possibly have been Corliss. He was Washington's leading perennial journalistic bachelor; his lack of interest in women was notorious.

I got into the elevator and out of it and started down to my apartment. It was the first time I'd seriously tried to figure out just who it was at her party that she didn't want to know about the girl. If she wanted to marry Bliss Thatcher, she certainly wouldn't want him to think the child in the photograph was hers. That it was Sam Wharton was absurd on the face of it. Then there were Larry and Pete and Sylvia, and she hadn't been very much upset when I told her Sylvia knew. That left Corliss and Lady Alicia Wrenn—and they were both dead, and anyway, what possible connection a titled refugee and an eminent stuffed shirt could have with an eighteen-year-old girl born in South America was beyond me. And of course it also left Señor Delvalle and Kurt Hofmann. I began to think of Delvalle with a new interest, remembering that all three of them were from South America.

My apartment was dark. "Barbara," I called. There wasn't any answer. I switched on the lights and went into the sitting room.

On the table was a vase of American Beauty roses, like the ones trampled on the floor in Lady Alicia's hall. There was another one on the mantel. I picked up the card that had come with them. It was from Señor Delvalle with a suitable inscription and an invitation for me and Sergeant Buck to lunch with him the next day. It was gay and amusing. I couldn't believe the hand that had written it could be a menace to anybody. Señor Delvalle was too civilized and too worldly for that sort of thing.

I put the card down and went into the bedroom. The child's bags were gone, and there was a note propped up against the dressing table mirror. It was printed, in the absurd kind of script now in vogue in the better finishing schools, and some of the spelling was equally familiar.

"—Dear Mrs. Latham, I'm going to mother's apartment. The boy came with the roses and then the maid let that funny square looking man in that talks sideways. He was more embarrassed than I was. I didn't mean to, but I told him who I was and everything about me. He was awfully sweet and I liked him a lot but maybe I shouldn't have told him everything the way I did. He says it will be alright for me to go to mothers because he has his eye on a south American

because hes sure that's who mother is afraid of. Thank you for everything, love, Betty"

"Ps. He said the south American hadn't ought to send you roses because *somebody* wouldnt like it. I guess he read the card. B."

I put the note down. Just what it is about Sergeant Phineas T. Buck that makes young people immediately break down and completely unburden themselves to him is utterly beyond me. Weeping on the rocky bosom of Mr. McKinley I could manage to understand, but on Sergeant Buck's, no. Still, there it was. And as for Señor Delvalle, it would take Mr. Hull and a dozen Pan-American conferences to get back a favorable press if Sergeant Buck wasn't stopped.

I stood there and thought as sharply and quickly as I could. There were two things I had to do. One was to get hold of Colonel Primrose and have him call off his troops, and the other—and it seemed to me the more immediately pressing—was to see Ruth Sherwood at once and explain Sergeant Buck's status as unofficial agent.

I hurried out of the apartment, looked at the upstairs door down the corridor and decided I'd better go down to the proper entrance so I wouldn't look like the third conspirator if the police happened to be there. As I got out of the elevator I saw coming towards me the tall distinguished figure of the great anti-Totalitarian author Kurt Hofmann, complete with monocle and stick and white carnation. He quickened his step, recognizing me and smiling cordially.

I glanced hastily down the corridor to the left. A bellboy with a package was in the middle distance, and beyond him, just letting herself into the apartment, was Ruth Sherwood. There was something hurried and indeed almost frantically single-minded about the way she got in and closed the door behind her without a backward glance, as if she had to get inside as quickly as she possibly could. The package boy continued on, and Kurt Hofmann had got within speaking distance.

"This is a pleasure, madame," he said, bringing his heels together and bowing, and coming on. "I was afraid I was not going to have the pleasure of seeing you again before I left your most amazing and interesting city."

"Are you leaving soon?" I asked politely, something inside me registering a sharp warning to be careful of what I said.

His cool, hardly short of offensively appraising glance took me in just about from head to foot.

"This evening, I'm afraid," he said, letting his eyeglass

fall. "Alas, my time is not my own. You have a song your Salvation Army sings. 'Work for the Night Is Coming.' It is truer than they know, Mrs. Latham."

"I'm sure it is," I said.

"You were going to Mrs. Sherwood's?"

He glanced down towards her door.

"I thought I saw her get out of the lift."

It was too late to say I wasn't going there, with his cool arrogant gaze resting on my face.

I nodded.

"I am going also, to pay my respects and say adieu," he said.

The package boy had got to Ruth's door and was waiting. As we started along the hall the suet butler opened the door, took the parcel and signed the book. He started to close it, saw us coming, put the package down and waited. He seemed to recognize Kurt Hofmann.

"Good evening, sir," he said, bowing. "Madame has just come in. She is in the library, sir."

He took Mr. Hofmann's hat and stick and laid them on the chair. I had the oddly disconcerting impression that this was not an unfamiliar but an honored guest. Kurt Hofmann did nothing to dispel it. He started for the library without waiting to be announced, rather giving the impression of rubbing his hands together. I found myself just following him, my eyes glued to those hands—Lady Alicia Wrenn's staring eyes and swollen tongue someway superimposing themselves on the blunt powerful fingers that had lost the calluses of his concentration camp days in the ease of his life as a distinguished refugee. One of those hands reached out, took hold of the library door, and then closed on it sharply.

Kurt Hofmann stopped, his body coming to attention with the kind of lithe stealthiness of a great jungle cat.

From inside Ruth Sherwood's voice rose, vibrant with fright and anger. "—I've told you all I'm going to tell you!"

My heart froze in my throat. It wasn't anger at all in her voice, really, I recognized instantly—it was despair goaded on by frustration and terror.

"Go upstairs and shut the door and stay there, and don't come out till I call you. My God, it's you I'm thinking of! If it weren't for you I wouldn't be doing this! I can't tell you anything else! Bliss Thatcher has nothing to do with it. I've told him all about you. Oh, Betty, Betty!—please don't make me tell you! Try to understand it's because you *are* my child——"

Kurt Hofmann straightened up slowly. In the mirror top of the table I caught a glimpse of his face. For an instant it turned perfectly livid, the sabre scar standing out on his cheek as if it had been pasted there. Then the blood receded slowly, and he smiled—a kind of smile so faint and yet so cruel that my blood turned to ice. He turned his hand on the door knob and went inside without so much as a glance behind him at me. I followed automatically, too numb to be aware of the difference between the tiled floor of the middle room and the soft deep pile of the library.

Barbara was standing in front of the desk, her face as bloodless as marble, her great sherry eyes dark now as mahogany, her lips parted. She turned slowly toward the door. Her mother, in the middle of the room, her hat and coat still on, flashed around. If I'd really needed still to know who it was she'd been afraid of, I didn't any longer. Her face, flushed with anger, went ashen white. Her eyes, burning with some kind of passion, were suddenly dead and really awful. And it was all as instantly as if a bolt of lightning had struck her, searing and paralyzing every nerve in her body.

"So this is your daughter, Mrs. Sherwood," Kurt Hofmann said quietly.

He took a step forward and bowed, raising the girl's shaking hand to his lips and letting it fall limply to her side again. He put his glass in his eye and looked at her with cool appraisal.

"Charming, my dear, charming," he said.

He turned back to her mother.

"How could you be so callous, madame?"

He picked up that photograph on the desk, looked at it, dropped it into the wastebasket as if it was something old and foul, and brushed his hands lightly together. "You amaze me, Mrs. Sherwood," he said.

Ruth Sherwood was like somebody pulling herself back to life out of the grave. The girl was staring at her, frightened and uncomprehending, and I must have been too, I suppose, in just the same way.

"Go to your room, Elizabeth—at once, please," she whispered. "Please go!"

Kurt Hofmann went to the table and picked up the telephone.

"Room clerk, please," he said. "—This is Mr. Hofmann in Room 232 E. I have postponed my departure. I shall be keeping the room for a day or so longer. Thank you."

The sound of Betty's feet going slowly up the stairs came

back like the toll of some far-off small bell. Ruth Sherwood closed her eyes, steadying herself against the back of the fireside chair.

Hofmann bent down and took a cigarette from the table in front of the fireplace.

"Perhaps Mrs. Latham will be good enough to call another time."

He said it coolly, looking at me through the feather of smoke he sent upward slowly from his lips. The same warning I'd felt at the elevator flashed inside me like a red light going sharply off and on. I stopped abruptly from saying what it was on the tip of my tongue to say. "—I just came to tell you they found Lady Alicia dead, about an hour ago." I didn't say it. And the reason I didn't was that Kurt Hofmann, waiting coolly there for me to go, had put his hand in his coat pocket and drawn out three letters. He glanced at them casually, turning them over in his hand, took a step forward and dropped them into the fire, watching them curl and leap into blue-tipped flame as he'd looked at that picture he'd dropped in the wastebasket. One of them was in a thin blue envelope, unstamped, and they were the letters from the drawer in Lady Alicia's secretary.

I heard myself saying something, I don't remember now what, and I managed to get the door open and get out into the center room. I caught hold of the glass table to steady myself, my knees suddenly as weak and unstable as water. Ruth Sherwood's voice came through the door, sharp and taut and abrupt.

"You lied to me! You promised you wouldn't let them use his name! You lied!"

"And you, my dear lady—you also lied," Kurt Hofmann said calmly. "Why did you do it? I wonder that you dared, my friend."

I will really never know how I got back to my apartment without the elevator boy or somebody reporting me to St. Elizabeth's. But I did, and I got inside and bolted the door and raced madly for the telephone. I wasn't aware of the Grand Rapids Queen Anne or the dancing nymphs and Rheims façade that better-class hotels go in for. All that was in that room with me was Lady Alicia's face bent back over the chair, and Kurt Hofmann's smile in the mirror top of the console table in Ruth Sherwood's hall, and those letters curling up in flames and dying in black flakes of carbon up the chimney. They swirled around me like a horror scene in the movies.

I clicked the telephone rod up and down frantically.

"I'm sorry, madam, Miss Peele's apartment doesn't answer," the operator said patiently. "Do you want me to keep on ringing?"

"No, no!" I said. "See if you can get me Michigan 3084."

Maybe Colonel Primrose would have gone home. And I had to get him. I'd never thought the time would come when if I didn't get him I'd be almost out of my mind. I could hear the phone ring at the other end, and ring again and again before a frail and incredibly ancient voice said, "This is Colonel Primrose's residence."

"Lafayette," I said. "This is Mrs. Latham. Is the Colonel there, or Sergeant Buck?"

I knew of course that neither of them was, or Lafayette wouldn't be answering the phone.

"No, miss, neither of them has come in yet. I'll tell them you called, miss, when they come, if they do come before I go to bed."

There was no use in my leaving a message, for Lafayette told me a long time ago that he neither reads nor writes.

"Listen, Lafayette," I said urgently. "You must stay up until they come, and tell them to call me. It's dreadfully important. Do you understand?"

"Yes, miss, I do."

I put down the phone. The idea of trying to get Lamb presented itself to me, and I rejected it. I sat there trying to think where else I might reach the Colonel. Then the possibility of that florist's box at Lady Alicia's occurred to me. I asked the operator for the shop.

"This is Mrs. Latham in 306," I said. "I wonder if you'd help me. Colonel Primrose was inquiring about some roses a little while ago. Could you tell me——?"

The girl cut me off in the middle of the sentence.

"Didn't I put the card in the box, Mrs. Latham? It was that South American gentleman. He's a guest in the hotel. They're the only ones I've sold today, except the ones Mrs. Wharton and the Congressman bought. They took theirs out with them, and——"

"Thanks," I said, cutting her off too. I let the bar up again, said, "Mrs. Wharton's apartment, please," and waited as patiently as I could. I was on the point of hanging up when Effie Wharton's voice said "Hello." It sounded strained, and immediate, as if she'd been there all the time but hadn't at first dared to pick up the receiver.

"This is Grace Latham, Mrs. Wharton," I said.

She didn't answer—just waited for me to go on.

"Is Colonel Primrose there, by any chance?"

"What makes you think he'd be here, Mrs. Latham?"

She almost snapped it at me.

"I just thought he might be," I said.

"Well, as a matter of fact, he was."

I knew she'd had her hand over the mouthpiece and had been whispering to some one standing there beside her. I could hear the tail-end of a man's voice as she turned back to speak to me.

"—He left about fifteen minutes ago. She was perfectly all right when Sam and I left her—we couldn't tell him a thing. It's simply incredible. There must be some mistake. Why should he have come to us of all people?"

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't——"

"Well, I should hope *not,* Mrs. Latham," Effie said acidly, and I could have bitten my tongue off. "You'll be interested to know," she went on, "that Sam has a wonderful offer to go to South America on a lecture tour. Your newspaper friends will be very much interested in it. Mr. Hofmann is making the arrangements. The friend who's backing his work in this country is anxious for my husband to make the trip. They're just as interested in staying out of war down there as we are. Mr. Hofmann was so pleased. We're going down together. It's such a *splendid* opportunity."

"Is Sam pleased?" I asked.

She gave a funny sort of laugh, as if Sam had jolly well better be pleased or else.

"As a matter of fact, Mrs. Latham," she said, very complacently, "I've just this moment told him. Of course, he's simply delighted. Nobody realizes better than Sam does the fallacy of our present economic policy in South America. Anything that can be done to make people understand has his most vigorous support."

I knew all about that already. What she meant, of course, was that anything to keep her from going back to her home town had her most vigorous support. That was so obvious that she didn't really need to add the next.

"—Do tell Mr. Villiers when you see him that I'm sorry to disappoint him. I shall continue my Spanish and leave bingo parties for people like him."

"I'll be glad to," I said.

I put down the phone and sat there, thinking how appalled poor Sam would be when he found Kurt Hofmann wasn't going to South America. Not right away, at any rate —not if I could get hold of Colonel Primrose. I tried to think where else I could find him, and finally I picked up the

phone book, turned to the "H's" and called Pete's number.

"Hello."

His voice was abrupt and belligerent, as if I'd interrupted him in the middle of something important.

"This is Grace, Pete," I said.

"I'm busy, Grace," he said shortly. "A great light is just beginning to dawn. What is it you want?"

"I want Colonel Primrose," I said. "Have you seen him? I've got to find him."

There was a silence at the other end.

"What for, and I'll tell you," he answered coolly.

"It hasn't anything to do with you," I said. "And I can't tell you anyway. Where is he, Pete?"

"Wait a minute, sister," he said evenly. "What goes on here?"

"Nothing, Pete. It's just something I've found out that he ought to know as soon as possible."

There was a silence again. "Look here," he said. "Is it—has it anything to do with 'Truth Not Fiction'?"

"No," I answered. "It hasn't."

"Sure of that?"

"Of course. It's something else entirely. But I can't tell you—honestly I can't. Anyway, I should think you'd be delighted if it was."

"You'd be surprised," he said bitterly. "In fact, it's me that writes it, Grace."

"What are you talking about!" I demanded sharply. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No," he said, very sardonically. "I've just found it. One thing more. —Is it about Sylvia you want to see the Colonel?"

The silence was at my end of the phone this time. I couldn't believe my ears. If it hadn't been for the catch in his voice before he said her name I'd have been sure I'd imagined it.

"Of course not," I said unsteadily. "What makes you say that?"

"Forget it, then. Primrose was here. He left about four minutes ago. He's gone over to your house to see Bliss Thatcher. He was stopping somewhere on his way, but he ought to be there pretty soon."

"Oh," I said.

"What's the matter, Grace?" he demanded. "You sound as if you had a first-rate case of the jitters."

"I have, I guess. I'm scared out of my wits, to tell you the truth."

"Look—do you want me to come over and take you to find him?"

"I'd love it," I said. "I'll be downstairs. Hurry, won't you?"

"Right," he said.

The phone rang just as I'd put it down. I picked it up quickly. Colonel Primrose might have stopped by his home on his way to my house to see Mr. Thatcher.

"Hello," I said.

"—Mrs. Latham?"

My heart froze in the pit of my stomach. It was Kurt Hofmann.

18

"Are you alone?" he said. His voice over the line was formal and pleasant. "I wonder if I might come up and see you a few moments? I really think you deserve some kind of an explanation, you know."

The red warning light inside me flashed on and off and on and off. I tried desperately to keep my voice calm and matter-of-fact. Lady Alicia's staring eyes were there in front of me, burning into mine.

"I'm so *sorry*," I said. "There are a lot of people here, and we're just going out. Couldn't you come tomorrow?"

"Thank you so much. I'll be happy to. Or perhaps later, when you come in, you might give me a ring?"

"Of course," I said, pleasantly. "If I'm not too late I'll be glad to."

"Splendid," Kurt Hofmann said. "And may I count on your heart being as lovely as your face, madame? Will you not mention our little drama until I have had a chance to tell you my side of a rather romantic story?"

My heart was beating like a triphammer.

"And would you like me to keep our proposed rendezvous a secret too, Mr. Hofmann?" I managed to ask demurely.

"You are as discreet as you are charming, Mrs. Latham. It is a rare gift in a woman."

As I put the phone down my hand shook as if I were in the last stages of jungle fever. I grabbed my hat and coat, and if the fire had already spread to the living-room door I couldn't have got out of that place quicker than I did. I thought the elevator would never come. When it did the boy looked at me seriously.

"Do you feel all right, Mrs. Latham?"

"Oh, fine, thanks," I said. I looked at myself in the mirror. I was as white as a ghost and I looked quite as scared as I was.

I got out on the main floor and hurried along the arcade to the big lobby. Larry Villiers was there, talking to a dowager in wild mink and diamonds. He excused himself rudely when he saw me.

"Hello," he said.

He stared at me oddly. "What's the matter? Alicia's ghost stalking? That's the most ghastly thing I've ever heard of in my life. She was really a pet, you know. Zany as they come, but a real aristocrat."

I nodded mechanically. I didn't want to talk about Lady Alicia, not to Larry, and Pete hadn't had time to get there yet.

"I've got a message for you," I said, remembering it. "From Effie Wharton. She's got Sam a job. Mr. Hofmann's backers are financing a lecture tour South of the Border."

His brows raised. "You don't tell me," he said. Then he said, "Well, I'll be damned. Is Sam going?"

"That's what she said."

"I'll bet a hundred dollars he doesn't."

He hesitated an instant, looking at me queerly.

"Sam's going back home. He didn't want to come here in the first place. He only did it to please Effie and because the governor appointed him. He wouldn't ever have come back if she hadn't told him he was afraid he wouldn't be elected and the people needed him. Sam likes it back home. He's one of the people that never had their head turned by being a public figure."

"I think he's swell," I said. "And he deserves some peace and quiet."

Just then a bellboy came up. "Mr. Hamilton is outside, Mrs. Latham."

Larry's eyebrows raised again.

"Beating Sylvia's time, Mrs. Latham?" he inquired coolly. "And what's happened there, by the way?"

"Weren't you pleased?" I asked. "I was."

"No, I wasn't," he said. "If he was too busy, he could take time anyway to call her up and tell her he wasn't coming. It doesn't take as long as it does to send a telegram."

"What do you mean?" I demanded, staring blankly at him.

"He's out there—ask him."

I went on out.

"I got here as quick as I could," Pete said.

In the bright light over the portico he looked haggard, as if he'd been through a private hell all his own and wasn't by any means clear of it yet. I got in his car.

"What's the matter, Pete?" I asked when he turned off Calvert Street into the park.

"Nothing. Why?"

"Has anything happened to you and Sylvia?"

His eyes were fixed straight ahead of him. "Did she say so?"

"I haven't seen her. Larry seemed to think you've been pretty rough on her."

He didn't say anything until he slowed down to go under the arch of the new bridge they're building on Massachusetts Avenue.

"Let's skip it, shall we?" he remarked.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you were in love with her. And she's been in love with you so long that . . . oh, well, it's none of my business."

"What do you mean, she's been in love with me for so long?" he said shortly. "I'm the one that's been in love with her, only I wasn't smart enough to know it. I thought the reason I was always getting sore at her was because I had—ideals, I suppose . . . about the job, and all that. It was just because I was in love with her, and thought she was hunting a rich husband."

"Didn't you know this morning that that wasn't fair?"

"I thought I did," he said bitterly.

"Pete!" I said. "What on earth's happened to you?"

He stopped the car by the side of the road.

"I've got to tell somebody this, or I'll get drunk and God knows what I'd do. Do you tell that retired beau of yours everything you hear?"

"If you mean Colonel Primrose, the answer is no," I said.

"Well, I'll tell you something. Keep it to yourself, and don't be surprised at anything you hear. There's nobody else I *can* tell."

"Go on, then."

He sat there hunched down over the wheel, grim and bitter, and with something else in his face that I didn't know how to describe. I felt horribly sorry for him.

"I told you I wrote 'Truth Not Fiction,'" he said evenly. "Well, that's right. I do."

"I suppose you'll explain," I said.

"That's what I'm doing. —I take it you've heard I've

been collecting stuff for a contemporary history of Washington?"

"Colonel Primrose told me so," I said. "I asked Sylvia about it, and she almost snapped my head off."

He made some kind of sound at that. If it didn't sound melodramatic and stupid I'd say it was more of a sob than a laugh.

"Well, I thought it was important. I mean, really a contribution. You hear all sorts of inside stuff that makes all the outside of this crazy place have some kind of sense when you know about it. It makes you believe in democracy. I don't mean lip service. It makes you see the country's sound, on the whole, and—well, it's something I believe in like hell. And I believed in this book, and . . ."

"Go on," I said. "I know what you mean."

"Well, I told you I had a system of shorthand," he said. "I thought I could take all the dope down verbatim, and I'd have it some day. I wouldn't have to depend on memory. And a lot of it was the sort of thing you couldn't risk letting get in anybody else's hands."

He stopped again. I waited.

"I told Sylvia about it. She was as excited as I was. We talked about doing it together, then. She'd do the social comedy, and it would be a complete picture of Washington. There was none of her stuff she couldn't keep in her own notes, but we were doing it all together and I taught her my system of shorthand."

I didn't say anything.

"And I keep it all under lock and key except the current record—about a week at a time."

He stopped again, and went on quietly.

"Well, that's it. That's what comes out in 'Truth Not Fiction.' Word for word. I told you I didn't read it at first, and that's right. I've been checking the last two months of it with my own notes—got 'em out of the bank this noon. Well, they're right. I'm the guy, and that's all. They can't prove it, but they don't have to. And I'm—well, I'm washed up, Grace. And I don't care about that. It's—oh, hell, I didn't think she'd let me down. I really—had my heart in this thing."

We sat there on the roadside, the cars coming slowly by, their chains clank-clanking rhythmically on the snow-covered drive.

"It just *can't* be, Pete," I said at last. "It just *can't*."

"That's what I've been saying all day. I'm going crazy saying it."

He put his hand out and squeezed mine hard for an instant.

"There's no two ways out of it, Grace. And it's okay. Maybe she needed the money for something. Maybe she just thought I was too smart. It doesn't matter. I'll just pack up and take my carcass somewhere else. Now let's go find your Colonel."

"No," I said. "This isn't fair, Pete. You can't do it this way. You've got to tell her—see what she says."

"No, sister," he said. "It'll just stop, you see. She'll be O.K., and nobody'll ever know the difference. It's finished——"

"It's not," I retorted. "What about Corliss Marshall? Colonel Primrose is sure that's why he was killed. Captain Lamb is sure Sylvia did it."

"I thought it was me," he said shortly.

"It was Sylvia's dress and shoe that——"

I stopped. If he thought she wrote it, I was telling him she was a murderess too.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Finish it," he said curtly.

"Blood, that's all," I said.

He looked at me, his face turning paler in the glare of the snow under the park light. Then he let out the clutch without a word. The chains caught and the car moved slowly under the Q Street bridge and then the P Street bridge, and up the hill to Georgetown.

"I don't believe it," he said as we stopped at the top to let the cars come by.

I suppose that being a woman makes me volatile and unstable. At any rate, by the time Pete and I got to my house and rang the bell the terror that had brought me there was dim in the background.

Bliss Thatcher opened the door himself.

"My dear Mrs. Latham, you've come to——"

He stopped abruptly, seeing Pete behind me on the steps, his smile vanishing as if some one had wiped it off with a cloth.

"Good evening, Hamilton. —Will you come in?"

It's always odd seeing your own house being lived in by somebody else. Even Colonel Primrose standing in front of the fire in the back sitting room was one of those familiar things become suddenly unfamiliar. He glanced from me to Pete and back at me again, his face a little troubled.

"I'm glad you've come, Hamilton," Bliss Thatcher said. "It saves me the trouble of coming to you."

He turned to my desk that he'd had moved in front of the garden windows, and picked up the folded salmon-yellow sheet lying there. His face was hard and his eyes steely. Pete's jaw tightened. I knew, of course, inside of me, that he didn't know exactly what was coming—but he did know the nature of it.

"I've refused to believe you were connected with this thing, Hamilton," Bliss Thatcher said grimly. "I told you this—last week—in order to see. I told no one else, and no one else could have got it from any other source . . . because I made it up. And here it is. My name included."

He held the folded sheet out. Pete took it and read it. I thought his jaw went a little tighter, as if this came as a shock in spite of his being ready for it. He handed it back silently.

"What have you got to say, Hamilton?"

"You've proved it, sir. I have nothing to say."

Colonel Primrose took a step forward.

"You can say you didn't write it, Hamilton."

Pete looked at him. "I obviously do write it, Colonel," he said coolly. "If I said I didn't, earlier, it's because I'm apt to forget these things I just tear off in my spare time."

He turned back to Thatcher.

"I'm sorry. It was a low filthy way to repay you for all your kindness. There's nothing else for me to say. —If you're all right now, Grace, I'll leave you."

I held out my hand. He gripped it hard for a moment.

"Good-night."

"Good-night, Pete," I whispered.

I stood there, and so did Bliss Thatcher and Colonel Primrose, until the door closed quietly and he was gone. And then none of us said anything—for hours, it seemed to me.

"What does this mean, Colonel?" Bliss Thatcher said at last. "I still don't believe that man writes it. I'm damned if I do."

He tossed the salmon-pink sheet down on the desk while Colonel Primrose was giving the impression of a man nodding his head and shaking it at the same time.

I picked it up and opened it. I didn't read all of it. The first sentence was enough—something to the effect that Bliss Thatcher had admitted to this correspondent that he had used his present position to ruin at least two small competitors. I put it down quickly.

"It's quite false, of course, but I was so sure of him," he said simply. "And I don't know why, but I still am. What's going on here, Colonel?"

Colonel Primrose did shake his head, this time, very

thoughtfully. And I remembered what I'd come for, just as we were leaving. I suppose it's because dignity and faith are fundamentally more important in human relations than murder is, really, that the whole business of Kurt Hofmann seemed an anti-climax when I finally told it. We'd gone outside and got into Colonel Primrose's car, Sergeant Buck standing guard, and sat there in front of my house while I went through it. I don't know whether Colonel Primrose thought it was an anti-climax, but he didn't say anything for several moments. Then he said,

"Have you told anybody else?"

I shook my head.

"Then Buck can take you back to the hotel."

"I'd better stick around there tonight, I guess, sir," the Sergeant said. It was the only time I'd ever heard anything come out of the side of that lantern-jawed dead pan that made me think he'd care whether I lived or died. And then he said, "I wouldn't want anything should happen to Miss Sherwood. She's a mighty fine little girl."

Nevertheless, it was my door he stayed outside of—or at least he was there in the morning when I opened it to get the papers. He handed me my mail, glacially as ever.

"Would you like some coffee, Sergeant?" I asked.

"No, thank you, ma'am," he said, just as always.

I went back and ordered my breakfast. There was a letter from my younger son concerning a bargain in skis. Their owner had broken one leg and one arm and two ribs. They would count as a birthday present in July if I'd send the check that day special delivery, before the offer expired in favor of the boy's roommate. I wrote the check and a letter about anatomical breakage and looked around for an envelope. There was none in the desk. Just as I was about to call the maid for some the phone rang. It was Sylvia.

"Can you come up here right away?" she said. Her voice was flat and lifeless. "I've got to see you."

There's no use saying all the things I thought as I got dressed and went out. I was on my own again, I noticed—Sergeant Buck was gone. I remembered the check as I started toward the elevator, went back and got it and my letter and went on up.

She was sitting at her typewriter, just finishing a letter. She pulled it out and put an envelope in without more than nodding, her eyes lost in deep circles in her white face.

"Be an angel," I said. "Address that envelope for me to my son Scott, will you? Scott C. Latham."

"He's at St. Paul's, isn't he?"

I nodded. She typed it, pulled it out and handed it to me. The phone rang just as she'd started to speak. I was standing right by it and picked it up. She watched me almost desperate-eyed, I knew hoping against the bitterest possible hope that it was Pete. But it wasn't. It was Colonel Primrose.

"It's Grace Latham, Colonel," I said.

"I'm glad, my dear. Hoped I could get you. I wanted to tell you that Kurt Hofmann is dead."

I caught the back of the chair to steady myself. Sylvia started forward, catching something of what had happened from the look on my face. "It's Kurt Hofmann," I whispered quickly.

"Was it—suicide?" I said into the phone.

"No, my dear," Colonel Primrose answered calmly. "He was shot by some one. Not suicide. I'll be up in a few minutes. I want to see Sylvia."

I put the phone down.

"He was shot," I said. "Colonel Primrose will be up here in a few minutes. It wasn't suicide."

I took the letter with the check in it out of my pocket and put it in Sylvia's envelope, hardly aware I was doing it. I moistened the flap, put it down on the table and moved the side of my closed hand across the face to keep from getting my hand sticky. Then I stopped, staring down at it in slowly dawning fright.

"Scott C. Latham," it read.

As plainly as if he were in the room repeating it, I could hear Colonel Primrose saying, "The small 't' and the capital 'L' are out of alignment and the tail of the small 'a' is very dim. The whole thing needs cleaning . . ."

I turned slowly and looked at Sylvia. Then my eyes moved gradually and came to rest on her typewriter.

19

As I stood there staring down at that typewriter, Sylvia got up suddenly, too absorbed in something else to pay attention to me, stood for a moment by the window and turned abruptly. How I'd ever thought her face was a mask to conceal anything I couldn't imagine . . . or how it could have changed so, from that radiant instant she was in Pete Hamilton's arms yesterday to what it was now.

"If I could only get hold of Gordon Lacey," she said, with a kind of quiet desperate intentness. "He must be somewhere—he can't have dropped off the earth completely!"

If I looked blank it wasn't for the reason she thought, because she said, "Don't you see, Grace! Don't you remember what Corliss said about him that night! Corliss *must* have found out—something—through him! He *must* be the person who knows about this!"

I couldn't say a word. It had come into my mind how odd it was for me to be sitting there with two opposite interpretations of what she was saying in my consciousness at the same time. For if she herself did write that wretched newsletter—perhaps even had murdered Corliss Marshall to keep him from telling not on Pete but on herself—then that would explain her almost frantic anxiety to get hold of Gordon Lacey, just as easily as it was explained if she didn't write it, and truly believed Pete didn't, and thought that finding Lacey would prove who did.

"I don't understand this, Grace," she said more calmly, and with a definite effort to be calm, as if she realized how important it was that she should be. "Corliss is killed because he knew who wrote the thing. Colonel Primrose insists on that. And Alicia Wrenn's killed. But she *couldn't* have known who wrote it—she didn't know anything about it. And I'm sure she didn't know who killed Corliss. And now Hofmann's killed."

She turned away, her hands thrust into the pockets of her yellow wool dress, trying to control herself.

"There must be some other reason. Colonel Primrose *must* be wrong."

"Pete," I said quietly, "told Colonel Primrose and Bliss Thatcher last night that he writes 'Truth Not Fiction.' "

I hadn't meant to say it. It didn't really follow, the way I said it, what she'd said. When I did, I don't know what I expected exactly—whether I had a remote idea that she'd do something dramatic and confess then and there, or what. She didn't, at any rate. She just looked at me, her face going blank, the way I used to see it, and her body becoming suddenly quiet.

"Oh," she said. She didn't speak for some time. Then she said, "It *is* true, then, isn't it?"

"That . . . he writes it?" I asked steadily.

She flared up like a box of matches thrown into the fire.

"No! That it's his stuff they use. That's what I've been afraid of, and that's what I haven't had the courage to say to him! He loved it so, he was so proud of it. I couldn't

say 'Pete, it's too dangerous.' He was so sure nobody else could read it. And now it's happened—and that's why I've got to find Gordon Lacey. Don't you remember what Pete said? He's the *only* other one who could read it—it *must* be coming through him!"

"—The *only* other one, Sylvia?" I asked.

The words got out of my mouth before I really knew what I was saying. I shouldn't have said them in any case—and here, apart from everything else, I was certainly breaking a solemn promise.

She just looked at me. So slowly that I wasn't sure I wasn't imagining it, the blood drained out of her face, and her eyes that had flared up so passionately went as blank as an empty sheet of paper.

"Grace," she whispered. "Does he think . . . Oh, how awful, how horrible! Oh, he couldn't think I——"

She closed her eyes.

"Oh, Grace, how he must hate me!"

Then she just stood there, the color seeping slowly back into her lips and cheeks. When she spoke next I didn't think I could believe my ears.

"—I'm not sure I don't hate him too," she said softly.

I couldn't say anything. In a moment she was just like she used to be, blank-eyed and expressionless, very young-looking, with only a deeper pallor than usual to show that she'd been different.

I got my voice. "Don't be a fool, Sylvia," I said sharply. "If Pete does think that, just think what he's going through! It's because he's so much in love with you——"

She shook her head slowly.

"If he loved me, he'd come and ask me—he wouldn't just take it for granted I'd . . . I'd betrayed him. I see it now. I thought last night the reason he didn't come and didn't call me was that he was just too upset. Oh, well. If that's what he thinks of me, the sooner I know it the better."

The phone on the table by her buzzed. She picked it up. I could see her body go taut. She didn't speak for a moment, and I could hear the operator talking again. Then she said quietly, "Tell Mr. Hamilton I'm awfully sorry. I'm very busy just now. I don't know when I'll have time to see him."

"Oh, Sylvia," I cried, "—don't! Please don't! Don't be such a stupid fool!"

She put the phone down, stood with one hand out for a moment, and then broke away and ran blindly across the room. Her bedroom door slammed. I heard her throw herself down on her bed, and a heartbreaking sob before she

buried her face in the pillows. There was nothing after that.

I sat there unhappily. I was thinking about Bliss Thatcher and Colonel Primrose. Both of them refused to believe that Pete wrote "Truth Not Fiction"; and yet Pete could believe Sylvia did, and Sylvia could believe it—or something—about him. I suppose the truth is that if two people are in love with each other, they're more instantly ready to doubt and mistrust each other than anybody else ever is.

Gradually, as I sat there, I became aware of the typewriter again. I'd got up and started over to look at it more closely when there was a rap on the door. My pulse quickened instantly. It was just the sort of thing I'd expect Pete to do. I ran to the door and opened it, and said "Oh."

"Who did you expect it to be, my dear?"

The flicker in Colonel Primrose's eyes was gone instantly. He was sober-faced and serious.

"Where is Sylvia?"

"I'll call her," I said. "Come in. She's dressing, I think."

I knocked on the bedroom door. "Sylvia—Colonel Primrose is here."

I turned back to him to say she'd be out in a minute, and my heart sank. He was looking thoughtfully over at her typewriter. I thought he was going to it, but he didn't. He went to the window, and came back and sat down.

"This affair's getting rather interesting," he remarked, a trifle grimly. "Lamb and I thought we'd wait till this morning to see Hofmann. The servant's showing signs of recovery. Lamb wanted to be sure just what he was doing. When he didn't answer the phone the manager let us in. There was a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on his door. He was sprawled on the floor between the beds, shot through the head. No gun in the room. The couple next door hadn't heard a shot, and the heads of their beds are just through the wall. There was some fairly loud talking about ten-thirty, when they went to bed. They complained to the desk, and the desk called Hofmann. It was quieter after that and they went to sleep. Which, of course, means a silencer, unless they just don't want to be bothered giving evidence."

He looked up as Sylvia came in. She wasn't quite herself, but I don't think even Colonel Primrose could have guessed the storm she'd been through.

"Good morning, Colonel," she said coolly. "I hope you don't think I murdered Hofmann too."

Colonel Primrose frowned. I thought he was a little irritated, which he rarely is. He spoke placidly enough.

"Hofmann came to see you last night," he said. "A few

minutes after ten. The elevator boy saw him knock at your door. He stayed about ten minutes. What did he want?"

"You'd be surprised, Colonel," Sylvia said. Her voice was direct and matter-of-fact. "He wanted me to tell Mr. Hamilton that if worst came to worst he thought he had a friend who'd give him a job. I told him I understood Mr. Hamilton had a job, and if he didn't he could probably get one for himself."

"What kind of a job?"

"I don't know. I suppose he could do most anything. He couldn't drive a taxi, because he hasn't ever learned about red lights."

"I'm referring to the job Hofmann's friend had, Sylvia," Colonel Primrose said politely.

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask him."

She got up at a tap on the door. "Excuse me." She went across the room.

"Oh—good morning, Señor Delvalle. Do come in. Colonel Primrose is just telling us about poor Mr. Hofmann."

Colonel Primrose got up and nodded politely. Señor Delvalle stopped just inside the room, or did stop until he saw me. Then he came over, bowed and kissed my hand.

"Good morning, Mrs. Latham," he said. "You have not told me whether I'm to have the pleasure of taking you to lunch."

"She can't," Colonel Primrose said calmly. "She's in protective custody, as they call it."

I looked at him blankly. It was the first I'd ever heard of it.

"You see, Delvalle, I can't let anything happen to her. Under the circumstances I'll be happier if she's where I can keep an eye on her."

"I can understand that perfectly, Colonel," Señor Delvalle said. Colonel Primrose himself was not more urbane. "Except that it was my own happiness I was considering. However, I am sure the Army takes precedence."

He bowed to me again, a deprecating smile on his dark mobile face. He turned to Sylvia.

"What I came up for, Miss Peele, is to tell you that your friend Lacey has been found. In fact, he has been found, and poured—is that what you say?—into a plane. His property has been labelled and arrangements made to explain to him, when he can understand. He will be put off here in Washington, and he arrives here at half-past six tomorrow morning. I shall meet him for you if you like. I can recognize him, I take it?"

"Quite easily," Sylvia said. "Thank you so much! It's very kind of you."

"It has been a pleasure, Miss Peele. Good-bye."

She closed the door and stood holding it for a moment, her eyes closed. I thought she was going to come out of the mummy case she'd closed herself up in, but she didn't. She came coolly back and stood as if the sooner both the Colonel and I left the better she'd like it—politely, of course, but unmistakably.

Colonel Primrose sat down.

"Will you tell me why you're so anxious to get hold of Gordon Lacey, Sylvia?" he asked.

"I'm not anxious at all. I thought it might clear up all this nonsense about 'Truth Not Fiction.' This holocaust just can't have any connection with it. Lady Alicia and her six of clubs, for instance. I think you're being frightfully far-fetched."

Colonel Primrose nodded, to my surprise.

"I would have been if I'd ever thought of that. I happen to know who killed Lady Alicia. And you're quite right about that part of it. It had nothing to do with 'Truth Not Fiction.' "

"Who did it?" she asked evenly.

"Kurt Hofmann—in a sense," Colonel Primrose said.

"How do you know he did it? And what do you mean by——"

"I know because the servant he thought he'd killed too is a very dour and tough Scotswoman. She's conscious this morning, and very lucid. She says he came after you and the Whartons had come and gone. She tried to keep him from seeing her mistress."

"Why?" I demanded.

He shrugged.

"She believes in the cards. Her story is that the minute she saw him she knew there was something wrong about him. Of course—she usual—she's reading her present knowledge back into those things."

"What *do* you mean?" I asked.

"It's quite simple. Lady Alicia was killed because she knew—or had known—Kurt Hofmann. She was the only person here who did. You remember Hofmann rocketed into fame on one book. Up to then, nobody here had ever heard of him. Nobody but Lady Alicia."

"But just that——"

" 'Just that,' " Colonel Primrose said, "was what made killing her imperative. That and the fact that she had three let-

ters in his handwriting. The point being, you see, that the quite dead man downstairs is not Kurt Hofmann."

I started to speak, and couldn't. Sylvia said, "Then who is he?"

"It doesn't matter in the least," Colonel Primrose said, very placidly. "The important thing is that he was passing himself off as a distinguished anti-Totalitarian exile."

She nodded slowly. "No wonder, then. You remember, Grace—he said that after he got her letter the little man in Chartres was arrested, or dead, and then they'd got on to the underground railway and no more prisoners escaped?"

I nodded, looking back on all sorts of things. His oddness about the old love affair, which of course he didn't know anything about; his demanding of Ruth Sherwood over the phone, "Why did you have that woman there?"—I stopped abruptly, wondering what this meant in terms of Ruth Sherwood. The whole thing seethed dismally around inside me as Colonel Primrose went on.

"That's the F. B. I.'s job. Ours is to find out who killed the fellow calling himself Hofmann—and who killed Corliss Marshall. That's where 'Truth Not Fiction' comes in, Sylvia."

"—I don't believe it. I can't."

I couldn't help wondering, with a little chill, why on earth she'd come out of her lacquered shell to say that unless she really knew.

He looked at her inquiringly. "If you have any information, you'd be doing yourself and Pete a great service by telling me about it."

"I haven't. I haven't any at all. —You're absolutely sure about Hofmann?"

Colonel Primrose took a small box out of his pocket.

"Hofmann's distinguishing characteristic was that sabre cut," he said. "I have it here."

He opened the box. It contained a thin ridge of plastic material about three inches long, clamped to a piece of white cardboard.

"This is one of three he had behind the lining of his dressing case. The one on his face has peeled. That's the first thing I noticed about him. Lady Alicia called him on the phone when I was in his room yesterday morning. His face turned color as if he was violently angry, but the color of the scar didn't change."

Kurt Hofmann's face in the mirrored table outside Ruth Sherwood's door flashed into my mind. I'd seen the same thing, without knowing what I'd seen.

Colonel Primrose got up. I picked up my letter from the table and put it in my pocket.

"I meant what I said about your protective custody, Mrs. Latham," he said. "It's not—as Delvalle assumed—just because I like to have you around. I'd rather not, today, but Buck's mutinied."

"All right," I said. As we went out I turned back to Sylvia.

"If I see Pete can I tell him you're not so busy now?" I asked.

She turned unhappily away without answering and closed the door.

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"Pete?" Colonel Primrose asked as we started along the hall.

I nodded.

"I thought it was. He thinks she writes it, doesn't he?"

"Did he tell you?"

"It was pretty obvious last night, wasn't it? If you'll give me that letter, I'll mail it for you."

We'd come to the mail chute by the elevator.

"Don't be recalcitrant, my dear. I know all about Sylvia's typewriter. I spotted it the night she handed me her stuff about Corliss to read. And don't look so upset."

"You make me tired," I said. I gave him the letter. He dropped it in the chute without even looking at it. "And I'm going back to my apartment and stay there."

He shook his head.

"If I could trust you, that's exactly what I'd like. But with a two-fold murderer around here, and the unfortunate way you've meddled in everybody's affairs, plus the well-known fact that I can't trust you, I'm going to hang on to you. Or you can go down to the police station."

"You're not getting ready to assume the dictatorship, Colonel?" I inquired sweetly.

"I'll tell you about that later, my dear. —Third floor, please. —We're going to see the Whartons now."

I didn't ask what for and he didn't say.

When we got down there, the Congressman opened the door. He was in shirt sleeves and suspenders, and his splendid white mane was a rumpled mess that hadn't been combed that morning. He had the fey look in his eye that a horse gets just when the idea of tossing you into the ditch occurs to

him. He glared at me, and glared still more at the Colonel, and I thought he wasn't going to let either of us in until he subsided suddenly.

"Come in," he said. "I'll get my coat."

We came in. As he went into the bedroom I could hear Effie crying. He certainly didn't bother to try and stop her, because he was out again in an instant and had the door shut. And as he came out I stared at him, open-mouthed and speechless.

He had his coat on, and his hat, and he was carrying his overcoat. And it flashed into my appalled mind that he thought Colonel Primrose had come to arrest him.

I managed to close my mouth.

"Take it easy, Sam," Colonel Primrose said placidly. "What's the trouble?"

Sam Wharton glared at him again, and at me. Then he dropped his overcoat on the sofa and his hat on top of it. He was so mad that he couldn't really talk. He paced up and down the sitting room half a dozen times, and at last pulled out a chair and sat down. I hadn't realized what a turbulent sort of person he was, he'd always been so calm and Olympian when I'd seen him. And he quieted down eventually now, Colonel Primrose waiting with his usual urbanity.

"Well, let's have it, Sam," he said patiently, after a while. "—You went down to Kurt Hofmann's last night, and as far as I can make out you tore the place up a little. What about?"

"Why, it's Effie," Congressman Wharton said heatedly. "You know she doesn't know anything about politics or economics. All she's concerned with is fixing up some way so she won't have to go back home. *I've* let her down—*I* haven't any ambition—*I'm* content to go back home and vegetate. And she's right, by Gad. I *am*, and that's what I intend to do. She can come with me, or she can stay here. I'm tired of living in this two-by-four place, eating restaurant food, never having a home or a minute's letup. I've stayed here because she wanted me to, but I'm through. I told her last night I was through before she pulled this Kurt Hofmann South America business on me, right after you left."

If I'd thought Congressman Wharton was heated at the outset, he was violent now.

"And I meant it, by Gad! I still mean it!"

He brought his fist down with a sweep on the table. The lamp bounced up and had danced just to the edge before I caught it.

"I just found out this morning she's even been high-pressuring Delvalle!"

He took out his handkerchief and mopped his forehead, and made a strong effort to control himself.

"This business last night. The first I heard of it was when she told Grace here over the phone. She'd fixed it up with this son-of-a-gun Hofmann. He had a friend interested in South America. I was to go down there and lecture, and what it boiled down to was I was to hamstring all the economic co-operation I've worked like a dog for all the time I was in Congress. That's all Effie knows about what I believe! It wasn't stated in so many words, but that's what it meant. That so-and-so—excuse me, Grace—talking to Effie and a lot of other people around here got it into his head that I was disgruntled by my defeat in November. He thought I'd be glad to go down there . . ."

Sam got up again and paced the floor. Then he came back and sat down again.

"It makes me so damn mad I can't see straight. I went down there and told him if he didn't get out of this country and stay out I'd tar and feather him and run him out on a rail. I didn't give a damn whether he was a distinguished author or what he was. Then Lamb comes this morning and says he's been killed. All I've got to say is whoever did it performed a public service, and if he ever wants to run for office I want to vote for him!"

He glared at us once more. Colonel Primrose nodded very gravely.

"All right, Sam. Excuse us, will you? I don't want to talk to you any more."

"—It's curious," he remarked to me when we'd got out and were waiting for the elevator, "how long a man and woman can live together with no real knowledge of each other. They've been married say thirty-five years. I don't suppose it's ever occurred to Effie that Sam *believed* the things he stood for up on the Hill. It certainly's never occurred to Sam that she's anything but an amiable rattlebrain. Of course she thinks she made him—and if Sam had been personally ambitious, and not quite as smart as he is, this could have been a pretty serious kind of thing. And Hofmann believed the European legend that all the men in this country are run by their women."

We got out of the elevator and went through the main lobby. Señor Delvalle and Pete Hamilton were just going out the front entrance. I saw Sergeant Buck disengage himself from the punchboard on the newsstand counter and move along after them with iron deliberation. He seemed to me to have been badly equipped by Nature for the role of The

Shadow, especially of any one as keen as Delvalle, and I said so to Colonel Primrose. He just smiled.

"Excuse me a minute," he said. He went over to the desk, and I nodded to Larry Villiers, who'd been talking to Delvalle and Pete before they went out. He came over to me.

"If that guy was in a plane wreck, he'd land on his feet with a bottle of cream in a strawberry patch," he said, not enviously exactly but certainly without enthusiasm.

"Who? And why?" I asked.

"Pete Hamilton. Delvalle has just offered him a swell job down in the pampas."

"I thought he couldn't, because of this so-called cloud. With all the Fifth Column and what not."

Larry looked at me with his faint smile.

"Don't be naïve, darling. I'm sure the Colonel finds it charming, but after all— Was Sylvia up and around, by the way?"

I nodded, and he broke off as Colonel Primrose came back.

"Good morning, Colonel," he said. "Are you responsible, by any chance, for the interest the gendarmes are taking in me?"

His small delicate blond face turned from one to the other of us.

"Because if you are, I wish you'd tell them to put my things back where they find them. I had to hunt half an hour this morning for my stuff. —I'm flattered, of course. If I could write 'Truth Not Fiction' do you suppose I'd scrabble along on fifty a week, licking the snoots of all the swine gathered at the public trough?"

He spoke with such distilled bitterness that I was appalled.

"Or do you think I like having people like Corliss Marshall and Pete Hamilton always taking cracks at me? I know I'm a second-rater. It's no news to me."

Colonel Primrose listened politely.

"Your Captain Lamb comes up and fixes me with a beady eye and says, 'What were you doing last night between 10.30 and 1.00, young man?' What the hell *would* I be doing? Just what I'm always doing—listening to some third secretary glamor boy bleat about how difficult life is. However, let's skip it. I guess the champagne was worse than I thought it was."

He turned away.

"It must have been," Colonel Primrose said. "Come along."

He shook his head a little.

"It's too bad that fellow can't do the job he's cut out for and let it go at that. He's Effie Wharton on another level."

"Delvalle thinks he's in love with Sylvia," I said.

Colonel Primrose smiled.

"I'd be happy if you'd quit quoting Delvalle to me, Mrs. Latham," he said.

"Sorry. I thought you'd be interested in the idea. What do we do now?"

"Mrs. Sherwood," he said laconically.

I couldn't help feeling a little chill when Ruth Sherwood's butler took Colonel Primrose's hat and coat and put them beside some one else's across the back of the sofa—just where Corliss Marshall's had still been, two nights before, when all the others had gone. The some one else was Bliss Thatcher, I saw when we'd got to the library. He was pacing back and forth, tense and tight-jawed, and he looked as if he hadn't slept for a week.

He nodded to us.

"Sorry about this, Thatcher," Colonel Primrose said. "I thought you ought to be here."

Bliss Thatcher didn't say anything. I had no idea of what was going on—whether Colonel Primrose really thought Ruth Sherwood was concerned in the murder of Hofmann or not—but I knew that it was something very serious, and that Bliss Thatcher knew it too. And Ruth Sherwood. When she came down she was wearing a black dress with a gold-and-topaz clip at the throat. Her skin was pale gold like the topaz and as bloodless, and she had the look on her face of one who'd come along a road with no turning aside or back, and nothing but some sheer blank precipice ahead—and no choice but to meet it without flinching.

Betty was with her, looking so deeply bewildered that whatever fear there was in her face was numbed and secondary. She sat beside her mother on the sofa, folding her hands in her lap the way her mother's were folded.

"I've asked my daughter to come down too, Colonel Primrose, if you don't mind," she said quietly. "And I'll ask you to let me say what I have to say at once. It isn't easy, but it's easier than you may think . . . because I've been on the point of doing it for several weeks now.

"I'll begin at the beginning—not in extenuation, but so you'll understand. My husband died twelve years ago in South America. I found after his death that we were penniless and in debt. Betty was five, and I was at my wit's end. I had no training and no relatives to turn to. My husband's lawyer brought a friend of his to see me one day—he was also a lawyer, the representative of European concerns in South America, he said. They wanted a civilized cultivated

establishment where they could unofficially entertain important people from all parts of the world. They'd pay me to do this for them—all I had to do was go on living as I'd always lived. From time to time I'd be sent lists of people for dinner or houseguests, and the only restriction I was under was to submit my own list of additional guests when I was entertaining theirs."

Her eyes rested on Bliss Thatcher for an instant.

"It was supposed to be an unofficial commercial embassy, and I think it was, until the recent regime abroad. I knew, of course, that it was in opposition to American commercial interests, but they were private. I wasn't the only American employee of foreign companies, and I wasn't doing anything treasonable—then. And it was only two years ago that I began to understand the change that was taking place down there. I realized that I was involved in the very spearhead of the Fifth-Column movement there, that my house was cover for the important meetings of people who expected to take control of governments."

She hesitated a moment.

"Betty had been at school in Baltimore since she was twelve. I visited her twice a year. The new people who'd taken over knew I had a child, but they had never seen her. I began to realize, still vaguely, that it was important they didn't see her, and I moved her to another school in New York two years ago. I wanted to give up the house at that time. I won't go into it, but I found I was no longer a free agent. It wasn't until this summer that I was allowed to . . . to retire. I found then that the house I thought was mine was only mine as long as I was there. And I realized—though I was given the opportunity to change my mind in the most agreeable way possible—that I was worse off than I'd been at my husband's death. —I was older, I still had a child to support and I had no friends left after fifteen years abroad."

Bliss Thatcher took a cigarette and lighted it, his face flushing angrily.

"I was told, very pleasantly, that even the clothes I had on my back were not my own. Nevertheless I . . . considering the changed status of my own country, and knowing what I was now doing, I felt I hadn't any choice, and I came home. I thought with my knowledge of languages I could get a job of some kind, and Betty could go to public schools, and we'd manage. I . . . I didn't realize what a long arm destiny has."

Colonel Primrose was looking at her very intently. I had the feeling that he'd known all this, and that it was what was coming that he was interested in.

"I almost got several jobs, and each time I was told there'd been a mistake, that some one else had been appointed. I don't know whether you've ever suddenly realized that you weren't going to eat in another week—and not only you but your child. I was almost desperate. Then, when it seemed to me the gas stove was the only way out, Kurt Hofmann—that's the only name I knew him by—came to me in New York. He said they needed some one in Washington. They'd pay me a lump sum and make all the arrangements. It was purely social and propagandist—a chance to get some new concepts before the proper people. I'd never be embarrassed in any way—nor my government. Well, I came. I tried to convince myself I wasn't doing the wrong thing, even though all the arguments I used during the day would haunt me at night."

Colonel Primrose said, "What about 'Truth Not Fiction,' Mrs. Sherwood?"

"Kurt Hofmann told me about that. He said some one in Washington wrote it and he'd found an innocent angel to finance it. He'd convinced him it had to be done secretly because of fear of reprisals. I saw a few issues after I came down here. I knew it was the old story. If people can be made to believe industrial leaders are working against the government, and any man who speaks his mind is in league with the enemy, and the government is dishonest and nothing is secure—the Army and Navy incompetent and ill-equipped and democracy decadent—then half the battle of dividing and ruling is won."

She stopped a moment and went on, looking ahead of her into the fire, her voice no longer steady and composed.

"This is very difficult for me to say. You see . . . coming up on the ship I'd met Mr. Thatcher. I was alarmed because of the position he was in. Hofmann promised me that his name would never be used in 'Truth Not Fiction,' nor any information that ever came from him. But he insisted that I have him to dinner the other night."

She hadn't looked at Bliss Thatcher since she'd first mentioned his name. He was sitting forward in his chair, under some extraordinary emotional compulsion, never taking his eyes off her. It flashed into my mind that the fact that she was talking about him was of secondary importance to the fact that she was also explaining herself.

"When I got Betty's telegram that she was coming, I was almost out of my mind," Ruth Sherwood said. "Kurt Hofmann had asked to meet her, and I said she was away. I'd told Mr. Thatcher about her, and I knew that when he saw

that photograph in Kurt Hofmann's hands he thought I'd been lying. But I had to. When she came, there was nothing I wouldn't have done to keep him from knowing who she was . . . nothing. But yesterday he found out . . ."

"And this morning, he is dead," Colonel Primrose said.

"Yes—this morning he's dead."

There was a long silence. Then she said:

"I told you I'd been trying to get courage enough to go to the Justice Department and tell them about all this, for the last three weeks. I decided last night. That's why I called you both this morning—before Captain Lamb came to question me about Hofmann's death."

She rose unsteadily. "And now, if you will excuse me, please——"

Colonel Primrose and Bliss Thatcher got up.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sherwood," Colonel Primrose said gently. "I have to ask you one question, I'm afraid. When did you first hear of Gordon Lacey?"

"Who?"

"A newspaperman named Gordon Lacey."

"I have never heard of him, to my knowledge."

"He helped the real Hofmann write his book."

"I've never heard of him," Ruth Sherwood repeated.

"He was discussed at your dinner table the other evening, at considerable length."

"It must have been when I was out of the room, or so desperately worried about Betty that I wasn't listening."

"Thank you, Mrs. Sherwood," Colonel Primrose said.

We started out. Half way to the door he stopped. "There's one other thing you haven't told me. —Who writes 'Truth Not Fiction'?"

She looked at him blankly. "It's . . . Mr. Hamilton, isn't it?"

"Did Hofmann tell you that?"

"No. Not exactly. He said——"

She stopped, trying to think.

"He said I needn't worry about it not being true and accurate, and then he said Pete Hamilton was a first-rate newspaperman."

Colonel Primrose nodded. "Thank you," he said. He went on.

I shook hands with Ruth.

"Good-bye, Grace." She turned to Bliss Thatcher. She didn't hold her hand out. "I'm sorry. I hope you'll try to forgive me. Good-bye."

She went back to the sofa. Betty was sitting there, star-

ing pale-faced into the fire. She looked up as her mother sat down by her.

"If it hadn't been for me, you wouldn't have done it, would you?" she whispered.

The suet butler closed the door behind us and we started down the hall. None of us spoke. Bliss Thatcher moved automatically, as if he was too intent on something to be conscious of anything else.

Half way down to the elevator he stopped. We stopped too, looking at him.

"I'm going back," he said steadily. "She needs somebody right now. I don't care what she's done. Any one of us would have done the same."

He faced about and went down the corridor to Ruth Sherwood's door. Colonel Primrose stood there looking after him.

"Well, he's old enough to know his own mind—if anybody is," he said.

21

He ordered lunch sent up to my apartment. While we were waiting for it Colonel Primrose paced up and down my sitting room until I thought I couldn't stand it any longer. He did sit down to lunch, but he was still so preoccupied that we ate in Trappist silence. Finally I couldn't stand that any longer.

"Look, Colonel Primrose," I demanded. "Are you trying to find out who murdered Corliss, and Kurt Hofmann, or is it just this 'Truth Not Fiction' business?"

He looked puzzled for a moment.

"I thought I told you," he said then, blandly. "They're one and the same."

"And was Hofmann killed because he knew who murdered Corliss, or because he knew about the newsletter?"

"Both," he said.

"Then—what about this Gordon Lacey? I should think all you'd have to do is find him. That's what Sylvia's doing."

He looked at me silently for a moment.

"I know she is," he said at last. "In fact several people seem very much interested in this chap Lacey all of a sudden. Including myself. Sylvia and Delvalle chiefly."

"Are you implying . . ." I began.

"I'm not implying anything, my dear. I'm sticking to the

few things we've got that can legitimately be called Facts. Corliss's murder, for instance. And Hofmann's. It's also a fact that Corliss was in South America. In fact he was there because I persuaded him to go. I did it for a rather curious reason, all things considered."

"What was it?" I demanded.

He gave me a rather twisted smile.

"I thought he was writing 'Truth Not Fiction.' One of the foreign correspondents here was talking about it before it began to be taken seriously. He said, 'The style is the style of Hamilton, but the ideas are the ideas of Marshall.' I had a sneaking notion that Corliss might be taking this method of settling an old score with Pete. I didn't know about Pete's shorthand and his notes for his book. Those are facts too, Mrs. Latham."

The phone on the table buzzed. He started to pick it up, and stopped. "It's probably your friend Delvalle," he said. "Perhaps you'd like to answer it yourself."

Then, as I started to take it, he changed his mind and put out his own hand. "Hello," he said.

He listened an instant and straightened, abruptly wary.

"Hello."

There was no answer at the other end. He pressed down the bar and released it. "—Can you tell me where the call you just put through here originated? Thank you—ring her apartment for me, please."

I heard the phone ringing, unanswered.

"Maybe the call was for me, private-like," I remarked. "Maybe they didn't want to talk to you."

He didn't seem to think it was amusing. He waited intently for a moment, then got up and went over to the window. I watched him looking across the roof of the lounge and terraces up at the lighted windows of Sylvia's apartment.

"Don't you think you're being a little silly?" I asked.

"Very possibly, my dear," he said equably. "This happens to be one of those times when I'd rather be silly than sorry. Just offhand I don't know why anybody who wants to talk to you shouldn't want to when I answer the phone."

I suppose it was because I'd been thinking so intensely about it that I woke up a little before six-thirty next morning. I could either hear the great sleeper plane come zooming in or I imagined I did, and in any case it must have been there. In a minute or two it would land. I tried to imagine what would happen then. I hadn't any doubt at all that Colonel Primrose and Sergeant Buck would be there at the gate waiting, and maybe Captain Lamb too, and certainly

Sylvia. I could almost see Gordon Lacey, his frog-face still blurred with sleep, barging down the runway, shivering with cold after the tropics, wondering what it was all about. I tried sleepily to picture the rest of it, and finally gave that up and also trying to go back to sleep, and got up and ordered my breakfast.

It must have been about ten minutes past seven that I heard a knock on the door. It was Sylvia, terribly distressed and hopeless.

"What is it, Sylvia?" I asked. "What happened?"

"He didn't come," she said dully. "He wasn't on the plane. I can't imagine what happened. Delvalle said he was on it at Atlanta—he phoned me at six o'clock."

I stared at her uncomprehendingly. "Was Colonel——"

She nodded. "He was down there. I couldn't ask anybody anything, with him around. That's why——"

The phone buzzed. I picked it up. It was Colonel Primrose.

"Is Sylvia with you, Mrs. Latham?" he asked curtly.

"Yes," I said.

"Tell her to stay there. I'm coming up at once."

When I let him in he went past me into the sitting room without a word. His eyes were snapping and he was tight-lipped and angry. I don't remember ever seeing him so far from his usual suave placidity.

"—Where is Gordon Lacey, Sylvia?" he said shortly.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Colonel Primrose."

For a moment he didn't speak. "Look here, Sylvia," he said then. "I've kept Lamb from arresting you for three days. He's in your apartment now, waiting for you to come."

She got slowly to her feet, steadying herself against the table.

"Let me tell you a few things," he went on curtly. "It happens I'm pretty sure you didn't kill Marshall. For one thing, the sole of your shoe and the hem of your skirt show you stepped out onto the terrace long enough after he'd fallen so that a pool of blood had gathered. But you've obviously been trying to shield Pete Hamilton. You've had reasons of your own. You had them that night when you wiped all the fingerprints off Mrs. Sherwood's glass table. You had them yesterday when you radioed Gordon Lacey to leave the plane in Richmond."

Her lips were suddenly white around the scarlet outline of her lipstick.

"That's not true!" she cried. "I didn't! Why should I stop

him when I've been trying so desperately to get him here?"

Colonel Primrose pulled a crumpled paper out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"That was sent at three-thirty this morning. It was phoned in and delivered on the plane, and found under Lacey's seat this morning—after he'd got off at Richmond."

I looked at the radiogram in her hand. "Washington Airport dangerous," it said. "Alight Richmond. Meet ten-thirty as arranged. —Sylvia Peele."

She looked from it to Colonel Primrose.

"I . . . don't understand. I didn't send this."

He was looking at her steadily. "Who else knew what plane he was to be on, Sylvia?"

"Nobody. We lost track of him, until he wired Delvalle from Atlanta just after the plane landed there."

"Did Pete know he was coming?"

She nodded. "But not on this plane. I didn't want him to know at all, but Delvalle thought he ought to."

"But neither of them met the plane?"

"No. I tried to get Delvalle. When I couldn't I called Larry. He went down with me."

Colonel Primrose was still watching her intently. "Sylvia," he said, more gently than he'd said anything up to then. "I'd like to tell you that I'm sure neither you nor Pete killed Corliss Marshall, or the fellow who called himself Kurt Hofmann. Furthermore, I don't believe either of you writes 'Truth Not Fiction.' That's why I want to find Lacey, Sylvia. If you know where he is, you've got to tell me."

She shook her head slowly.

"I don't know. I really don't. I wish I did, Colonel Primrose."

After he'd gone she turned and came slowly over to the sofa, and picked up her fur beret. Her face was so lifeless that I was badly worried about her.

"What *is* the matter, darling?" I said.

She looked at me hopelessly.

"When Lacey didn't get off that plane I . . . well, I just thought I might as well die," she said. "Even Larry felt so sorry for me that he said he'd marry me—believe it or not—and we could go some place else if it would do any good. You can imagine the mess I was."

I was a little staggered. "Are you going to do it?"

She managed a smile.

"Don't be silly. Larry was just being kind, for the one time in his life. But I am going away. It's foolish, of course. There's no use ever running away from things. But Delvalle's giving

me a job. He's wonderful—I don't know what I'd have done without him. It's the job Pete turned down. He thought it would look as if he was running away because he couldn't take it. I'm willing to admit I can't take it—not any longer, I can't."

I don't know why, but I had the same vague feeling that Colonel Primrose must have had when he kept looking at her so intently.

"Look," I said. "Do you know who killed Corliss Marshall?"

She shook her head.

"You did think it was Pete, didn't you?"

She nodded. "I heard him talking to Corliss out on the terrace. He came in and stood there by the window talking to me. I went out right after that and Corliss was lying under the tubs. I was so appalled that it didn't occur to me that some one must have gone out the other window. I didn't know the balcony runs all around the dining room."

"If Pete didn't do it, Sylvia, somebody did," I said.

"I haven't thought about that. It's something I just don't want to think about."

She was just putting on her hat when the telephone buzzed sharply. She looked up, her face brightening for an instant until she remembered.

"Hello," she said.

Her body went instantly as taut as an electric wire.

"Oh yes!" she gasped. "Where? —All right."

She put the phone down quickly. "It's Gordon Lacey, Grace. He's here, at Pete's! Get your coat—hurry!"

22

I suppose if I get to be ninety and some one mentions Sylvia Peele, I'll see her as she was there in the corner of the taxi on our way down to Pete's apartment on 16th Street that morning, looking forward desperately to each traffic signal, closing her eyes, her hands in tight knots as we missed it and waited interminably for it to change. We didn't make a single green light, and she didn't say a word.

We got out in front of the brownstone house and hurried up the steps. The girl at the desk looked at us curiously.

"Mr. Hamilton's just come in," she said.

Sylvia glanced at me and ran up the stairs. I followed. The door of Pete's apartment was open. She ran across the outer hall and inside. I saw her stop abruptly, just as I became aware of a familiar acrid odor.

"Pete!" Her voice rose in sudden sharp alarm. She ran on to the living room and stopped again. "Pete!—Oh, Pete!"

The last was just a whisper, but there was death in it . . . just as there was in the pungent smell of cordite lying heavily in the cold motionless atmosphere. I ran breathlessly down the hall and looked past her.

The body of a man lay crumpled on the sofa in front of Pete's desk, his lifeless face staring toward us. And one look at that face was enough. It was oddly foreshortened. The hair parted in the middle flattened it even more. The eyes bulged, the mouth stretched clear across the face. Even in death Gordon Lacey looked very much like a frog. And he was quite dead. A thin trickle of blood flowed from a small wound in his temple.

On the floor beside the sofa was a small evil-looking gun. I stared from Gordon Lacey's body to it, and then at Pete Hamilton, moving around the sofa toward the telephone. He picked it up.

"Get me the police, please," he said calmly.

It seems like a nightmare now. I remember standing there in the doorway watching them. Sylvia went slowly into the room and stopped, staring down at Gordon Lacey. Then she went over to Pete. The two of them stood looking silently at each other.

Then she shook her head.

"You didn't do it, Pete," she said. "I know you didn't. He phoned you, didn't he—just a few minutes ago."

As he nodded gravely she went on like somebody in a trance.

"He called me too. Only I know now it wasn't Lacey who called. He called me 'Sylvia,' and Lacey never did. And whoever called wanted us to find him here dead . . . wanted one of us to find the other here with him, so we'd think——"

She broke off abruptly, and I turned, at the sound of hurrying feet in the outer hall. It was Colonel Primrose. He stopped for a moment, seeing me there, and came quickly on, Sergeant Buck and another man behind him. I moved aside for him to go past, but he came to a halt in the doorway by me.

"Good God," he said.

"He was here when I came in, less than five minutes ago," Pete said quietly.

Colonel Primrose went on in. He touched the limp hand hanging beside the sofa, and looked up at Pete and Sylvia standing there.

"The last man who *knows* who writes 'Truth Not Fiction,' " he said. He turned to the other man who'd come with him and nodded down at the gun on the floor. The man picked it up carefully.

"Skoda," he said laconically. "Best silencer there is."

Colonel Primrose turned to me. "You and Sylvia go in the other room. —You've called the police?"

Pete nodded. "Lamb's on his way. Go on, Sylvia."

He took her arm and led her to the door. "It won't be long," he said gently. "I know what's up now. And I know how to prove it. You know too, don't you?"

She nodded slowly. "It's my fault poor Gordon's dead. I never thought of him. It was just you I was thinking of."

They were oblivious to any of the rest of us just then. He put his arms around her, held her to him for a moment and kissed her.

"Just wait a little while."

He closed the bedroom door on us. Sylvia stood there by it, her eyes closed, listening. It was maddening, being in there, hearing those footsteps, light and heavy, going back and forth. I recognized Captain Lamb's voice, and then, to my surprise, Bliss Thatcher's. As Sylvia heard it I couldn't tell whether the blank unsurprised look on her face was real, or the old mask slipping back again. We both stood there by the door listening then. The coroner had come with Lamb, apparently, and had gone, and they'd taken Gordon Lacey's body away. After that I heard Larry Villiers come up the steps and start for his apartment, and then come across the hall instead.

I could hear him say "Good God!" And then, "Hello, Delvalle. What are you doing here?"

Sylvia moistened her lips and brushed her hair back from her forehead. "It's all my fault," she whispered again.

They were all there still when one of Captain Lamb's men came to tell us we could come in—Bliss Thatcher, Larry, Delvalle, Colonel Primrose and Captain Lamb and the quiet man who'd come with the Colonel. Pete was at the desk talking to Colonel Primrose, the others standing by the window. They turned abruptly as we came in, apparently not having known we were anywhere around. As Colonel Primrose moved away from the desk I saw Pete pick up a pencil and the scratch pad by the phone. He wrote rapidly for a minute, tore off the piece of paper and slipped it into his

pocket, and moved back a little, leaving Colonel Primrose standing there by himself.

"I want to introduce Special Agent McTeague to you," Colonel Primrose said. "He knows all of you already. He is here because espionage and alien activity come under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. He has agreed that you have a legitimate interest in knowing what's been going on, and he has given me permission to tell you."

He looked around gravely.

"I needn't say that all this is entirely off the record."

I saw Larry's cool sardonic glance at Pete, and the slight lift of his eyebrows.

"The so-called Kurt Hofmann's name was Albert Voegler," Colonel Primrose said. "He was substituted for the real Hofmann after the arrangements for Hofmann's escape had been discovered. What his purposes here were must be plain to you. All we are here concerned with is that he arranged for the publication, and dictated the trend of the newsletter called 'Truth Not Fiction.' And as that is in the hands of the F. B. I. it concerns us only as it's connected with the murder of Corliss Marshall and of Hofmann, as I'll go on calling him."

I could sense a sudden atmosphere of alarm in the room, as sharp and acrid as electricity. I couldn't possibly say who had created it, but some one had . . . some one who just at that moment had realized that there was a purpose behind all this, who'd just then become aware of a slowly tightening net cutting off all escape. I glanced around at the faces in the room. They seemed to be thrown into some curious kind of high relief against the nondescript background of Pete Hamilton's apartment. Señor Delvalle was the only person there who appeared completely at ease. The rest of them—even Bliss Thatcher—were tense, their nerves on edge.

"It has been plain from the beginning," Colonel Primrose went on evenly, "that Marshall was killed for the simplest possible reason—that he said he was going to reveal the authorship of 'Truth Not Fiction.' It's plain also that his information came from Gordon Lacey. Lacey had sold out—and he was killed here, of course, to keep him from telling whom he'd sold his and Hamilton's shorthand system to. It was to get that information that McTeague and I came here this morning. Like Hamilton and Miss Peele, I got a whispered telephone call supposedly from Lacey. I have no doubt he was dead at the time. He was shot with the gun that killed Hofmann—Hofmann's own gun."

There was no sound in the room except his voice, going evenly and steadily on.

"Under our laws, 'Truth Not Fiction' was not treason. There were no legal steps that could be taken against it. All that could be done was to cut off the news sources of the author. Which brings up—in connection with the murder of Corliss Marshall—the matter of who has been writing it. The interesting thing about that is something that so far no one has said anything about. While the whole thing was done in Pete Hamilton's style, the items that were directly traceable to his shorthand notes virtually never had any relation to the propagandist message in the rest of the letter."

His eyes moved around the silent room, resting for an instant on each of the faces there.

"In other words, while 'Truth Not Fiction' was being written for propaganda purposes, it was also—and I know now, primarily—written to ruin Hamilton. It served both the purposes of the persons who were paying for it, and the person who wrote it."

I saw Pete Hamilton quietly take out of his pocket that slip of paper he'd written on before Colonel Primrose began. He leaned over and handed it to Bliss Thatcher. Thatcher opened it, looked down at it for a moment and looked blankly back at Pete. He folded it again, reached across the table that separated him from Larry Villiers and Señor Delvalle, and handed it to Larry. I saw Larry stare for an instant, take it and unfold it. He'd been watching first Colonel Primrose, and then Sylvia.

"Four people could read the self-invented shorthand that Hamilton had written the notes for his book in," Colonel Primrose was saying quietly. "The first three of them were Hamilton himself, and Gordon Lacey, and Sylvia Peele. The fourth . . ."

He came to a stop, his eyes resting steadily on some person there in the room, and I turned, my blood freezing, and sat there quite motionless, my heart hardly beating.

Larry Villiers had started slowly to his feet, staring down at that paper in his shaking hand, his face ashy white. He opened his mouth to speak, and opened it again, and then sank back into his chair and looked quickly around at us. And only then did he look across the room and see Colonel Primrose's eyes resting steadily on him.

"The fourth person who can read that shorthand," Colonel Primrose said, and I have never heard his urbane voice more steely, "—as he has just shown us—is Mr. Larry Villiers——"

I sat there, my own hands shaking as terribly as Larry's, a cold dread gripping at my heart. And Larry looked across the room at Colonel Primrose, his eyes like the eyes of a trapped animal and his face a dreadful white. He tried again to speak, and then he rose slowly to his feet, swaying as he stood there, and flung the paper down on the floor.

"It's a lie!" he screamed. "You're framing me! You're trying to——"

He stopped, staring down at the paper, and then at Colonel Primrose and at Pete Hamilton, his hands still shaking violently, his delicate handsome features contorted with an incredible terror and despair. He stood there for an instant, still swaying, and then lunged frantically across the room toward Colonel Primrose. Sergeant Phineas T. Buck took two giant steps, and I saw his great hands come down on Larry's elbows. The F. B. I. man moved quickly. I closed my eyes, sick with horror, as Captain Lamb followed them, Sergeant Buck's ice-bound visage unchanging as he carried a writhing screaming figure out of the room.

23

Sylvia's face was as blank and bloodless as an ivory mask. She stared straight ahead of her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she whispered. "I . . . I never dreamed of it!"

Pete took a swift step around the sofa, took her in his arms and held her close. "You couldn't help it. It was my fault, not yours. I should have known it."

"Weren't you both a little blind?" Colonel Primrose asked, very placidly. "Or perhaps all of us have been. I'll admit it wasn't until he began to be nervous, and phoned Mrs. Latham from your apartment yesterday, that it was clear to me."

"But why?" Sylvia whispered. "Why did he do it?"

"He hated Pete," Colonel Primrose said. "That's all. Pete was everything he wanted to be. He hated the kind of stuff he had to write. He hated to be laughed at. He knew he could write, but no one would take him seriously. And not only in his profession. He was in love with you, and you didn't take that seriously. You were in love with Pete. Pete

had everything Villiers wanted. That was his only motive. His bank balance doesn't show any profit. He didn't do it for money. And when everybody thought Pete was writing that thing, he felt he'd succeeded. Pete was ruined. Consequently he was through with Hofmann, and he wiped Hofmann out. It was Hofmann, of course, who'd bought the secret of the shorthand from Lacey, on Villiers' suggestion. I imagine it would have been a hideous shock to Hofmann to know that the man he thought he was using was really using him—for a purely personal and private revenge."

He went across the room and picked up the slip of paper that Larry had flung down. I saw as he held it out in his hand that it was scrawled with half a dozen lines of curious stenographic pig-tracks. He nodded to Pete as he put it in his pocket.

"It was a good idea. And one thing, Sylvia—why did you go to Lady Alicia's again, that afternoon?"

She brushed her hair back from her forehead, hesitating.

"I . . . I don't really know," she said unsteadily. "I'd got to thinking about that jack of diamonds. I . . . it seems silly . . ."

Colonel Primrose nodded soberly. "The false Kurt Hofmann, of course—odd as it seems. And when did you first suspect Villiers?"

"Just—all at once," she said. "He'd used my typewriter when there didn't seem any particular point in it. He'd done all the build-up for Mrs. Sherwood. He lived here, right across the hall from Pete. He knew all about my trying to get Gordon Lacey. I don't know . . . it just came all at once when I thought about that voice whispering 'Sylvia' over the phone. I really knew we wouldn't find Gordon alive. I knew it was either Pete or me—or both of us—he was trying to destroy."

I came into the Randolph-Lee the next afternoon about half-past five and stopped at the newsstand for the evening papers. It was all rather dreadful, on the outside. Larry was still front-page news, and so were Lady Alicia and Corliss Marshall. "Kurt Hofmann" was curiously out of it—in the interest of public policy, I suppose. I turned to the inside and looked at the society page. Sylvia looked up at me, blank-eyed, from the box at the right-hand top of "Peelings." I glanced through it until I came to the end, and I read that with more interest than I'd read anything for a long time.

"This column has it for true, as they say, that Bliss

Thatcher submitted his resignation as member of the Defense Commission yesterday, and that it was politely but ever so flatly returned to him. The Commissioner, they said, could marry the lady and take his wedding trip later—in June, probably, when his lovely new daughter, whose name is Elizabeth Anne Sherwood, is out of school. Elizabeth Anne has been visiting her mother, Mrs. Addison Sherwood, at the Randolph-Lee the last few days. We're delighted with the Commission, because with Sam and Effie Wharton gone back to Berryville, Washington couldn't afford to lose any one else just now. And with that cheerful note, dear readers, Peelings is signing off. Hereafter all the peeling we'll ever do is potatoes for The Capitol Calling."

I turned to the space where Pete's column had been until the day before. There was a box in the lower right-hand corner. "The Capitol Calling," I read. "The distinguished analysis of Washington news by Peter Hamilton will appear on this page as usual, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday."

I came out of the newsstand into the lobby and started over to the desk to get my mail. Coming up the palm-lined stairs from the lounge was Señor Delvalle. Coming along the corridor from the elevator was Colonel John Primrose. Behind him the regulation two paces was Sergeant Phineas T. Buck. Señor Delvalle and Colonel Primrose, both smiling, converged on me at about equal angles. Sergeant Buck converged too, but visibly congealing. His viscid fish-gray eyes set glacially in his granite dead pan were fixed on Señor Delvalle.

Señor Delvalle bowed and kissed my hand. I knew, without the slightest doubt, that at that moment Sergeant Buck would clear his throat gigantically. He did. Señor Delvalle turned to Colonel Primrose.

"I was under the impression, Colonel," he said, with faint reproach, "that you were a little suspicious of me, for a while . . ."

Colonel Primrose shook his head, smiling.

"That was my Sergeant. Who furnished you, incidentally, with a water-tight alibi—as I suppose you know."

Señor Delvalle smiled too. He turned to me.

"I was about to ask you to dine with me this evening, Mrs. Latham," he said. "But under the circumstances . . ."

He glanced around at the great granite figure near him. His shoulders lifted in an elegant Latin shrug.

". . . Perhaps it might be safer . . ."

"Perhaps it might," I said.

Colonel Primrose's manner was his most urbane.

"I take it you're dining with me, Mrs. Latham?"

"It . . . seems so," I said.

Sergeant Buck turned and spat neatly, and with apparent satisfaction, into the gold palm tub at the top of the stairs.

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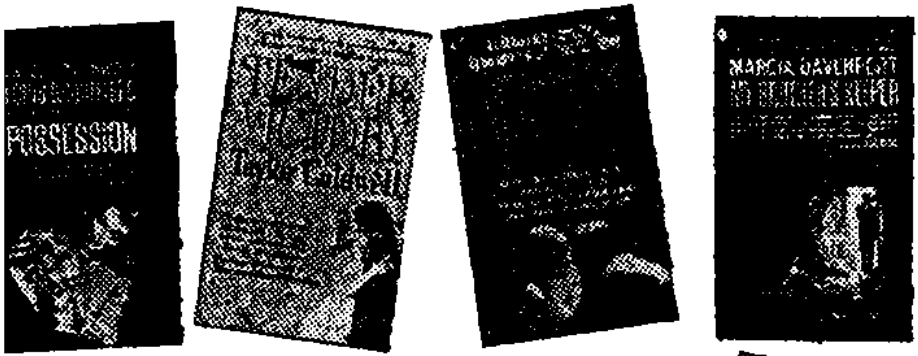

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